

The Conqueror's Hands

a manuscript by Scott Sherman

75 poems, ~4,775 words

Gardening

I

April, green growth through lattices,
your hands at work under roots
easing the soil beneath them.

The tomatoes ate their trellis,
swelled over the house and prayed
for you to come out.
Consecrate them through harvest,
heroes of a boundless empire.

Dryad, lead me to your oak
at the shore of the river, break
the still with our sweat.

Lay me down
guide your torrential, your rushing
into my basin,
my well
of arid vines.

II

June, we strip corn husks like bodies
swaddled by summer heat. Days stretch beyond us
held together by sunsets, amethyst and coral
flowers rise towards the soothing warmth
of sangria hair.

Moments of calm, the wind chime
catches a breeze traveling through the porch,
long days alive with gentle motion.

Bare home, nothing
but life and love.
We spend nights below a pearlescent moon,
dreaming of walls that fold towards our bed
where we wait to be pressed down.

III

October, gusts and foliage
awaken like enchanted evocations
before frost puts the world to sleep.

We open ourselves as family
to the world that flourishes beyond our door.

Autumn brings bounties,
oblations of blazing color
as rime gathers beneath us.

IV

February, growth
where it should not be.
We bury our hands in hard ground,
comfort Earth's hymeneal flame
that shivers below gathering snow.

V

May, forgotten sunflowers
erupt as medallions, oaks explode
like calescent emeralds.

These days will end, buried
in memories adrift in passing years.
We plant seeds in the crevasses of each other's chests
that sleep, waiting to bloom
as our plots stretch through time.

How could I ever miss you
when every flower, every fruit
felt the heat of your radiance?

deer

confess your dream, tell me
about the emaciated fawn, frantic
to find its balance on the steep cliff beside the highway

the cars lick at the air like it's meat,
engines humming, ready to roll through bone

her pallid eyes hurt but you are empty and needy and hungry
to ruin restraint

Greenhouse

Rush over your body, draw out your sweat with breath
on the nape of your neck,
sanctuary behind a waterfall of red hair.
Your skin dimples beneath my teeth
before it rises back into place.
Nails push red valleys into your sides while I search for the spot
to hold you up like an offering to the empty parts of me.
Hip bones fit into each other like toes in spring mud.
You could kill me and the key would still open
the door to my greenery, exploding towards the sun.

Hometown

Chain link fences, gates
planted like arborvitaes.

our street was long
our street was damp
our street was still

Nobody visited, nothing stayed
in the ground but pachysandra
snatching space left by rocks.

our lawn was hard
our lawn was dark
our lawn was broken

My brother told me horror stories
about a building with halls so long
they could reach around the neighborhood
and split its ribs with a flinch.

our house was quiet
our house was humid
our house was closed

limb length glide down roads
of town tasting air for panicked
hearts that

need to get out need to run

our room was dense
our room was hungry
our room was strained

hide your face deep beneath the quilt
listen for the passing breath of a monster

Brick Beds

Too many nights you sit up
ready to die, grabbing for your mouth.
You ramble about a box of tongues,
that were begging to be put back.
They spoke Hebrew,
you didn't know what to do so you called out
they screamed
stories you'd never heard,
about how dead foxes in the road weren't run over,
but strangled and dumped there.

Orchard

You are an orchard of green eyes
to be eaten, to be seeds, to be yours, to drain
my emptiness into.

I dream phosphorus lips, red and ripe against my neck.
I want them there but you don't
roll on top of me when I'm so still and hungry
for emeralds from the trees.

i want to wake
but will you be there
waiting

Snow in November

If it snowed all night and all day
would you let me drive your skin underground
to keep it warm?

Winter Foxes

You wipe the crows from my eyes
like an ancient Nordic tale, trying
to stay afloat in molten iron.
Names frame the sea, wings
beat away the water below.
This is the dream I pretend I have

not the one where I'm creeping down our street at night,
something screaming in the woods.

Norwalk

Wind rises like a barn on fire,
heaven lost somewhere in the pines,
sycamores calling names of childhood friends.
A wishbone you wanted to snap with your brother

it's oily,
you slip,
he's leaving,
you try

to promise there are more bones to break.

Dimples

Headlights in the fog, amber moons
abandoned by their skies.
There's an omen about children born with wings
without the strength to leave.
It sounds serious,
a warning grandparents dripped over wet leaves
from the lonely gardens behind their homes.

I miss stars that look down, tearing up,
begging to stay like the last apples of October.
We made something up there, lost
between a dozen different apartments.

I'm not done with you,
the mirror my face wore your neck into
the smell of lavender in your hair.

My nails are picked too low
To carve messages into the drywall.
Instead, I have postcards
of dead terns floating like water lilies.
We clean their bodies
and hang them from the stars like laundry.

Pockets

One

loose pieces of my skull shake,
rattlesnake tail
keeps rhythm of your dance,
shutters open into a humid night

time hangs itself in the corners of your dress,
pulls at moonlight made from mirrors

do you deserve to know how slow the streetlights ate me
outside your aura, could you talk so much of darkness
but hide it between your turns?

One

When you smile, your eyes squint
into gold rush, your cheeks
float through me like sleeping buoys.
Press me into
sheets, hidden pockets, make us
lost and late for everything.
We will get drunk, deep
in the folds of autumn, never come out.
Why give anything to a moon
waiting to replace this lavender sun?

Sycamores

There's love in learning you,
the breadth of your name, how your chain-link fence
tangled in mine.

Veins of sycamore trees and Christmas lights
growing together, hiding
maps in our marrow.

Sprawls at Night

The caskets we picked are antiques,
emblazoned with our favorite sea monsters
that told us stories during our nights adrift.
We sailed so far, waiting
to kiss the walls beyond our maps.
We found them vile and violent, creeping
towards landfall.

Coal Mice

There's silence before tears
a redhead in the corner of a jazz bar, staring
with no pupils. Little things wrong, glitches
waiting for us to eat through rough skin.

We're lost in a world of firewood
and burning templars, panicking
like a family of mice suffocating
in a sealed bag of food.

Red Plaid

Plaid shirt wet hair, your smell
lived inside my hands for days
too much to put down.

Glass Fires

Tell me about dreams where you chew glass
that turns out to be ice bladed like glass.
Tell me about long drives that never end, bleeding
anxiety into the open road.
Tell me I look good in bed, without my shirt on.

Tell me you woke up to see me. I know
I'm a charred and ruining the sheets.

Tell me about the campfire,
the one we sat around while it blew
ghosts and we laughed.
Tell me you waited for me.
Tell me you knew I'd come
in one dream or another.

Excavations

Whatever it was, I'd go first.
You made me close my eyes,
eat things out of your hand.
There are stories where that's cute,
when it's not earthworms and hearts.

We grew up scarecrows spooning,
pines escaping the hills built around them.
We drove, never arriving,
rattlesnake boots pressed down a car's throat.
There are biographies of flowers licking wounds
in our chests, but we're too selfish and young
to let them out.

I haven't written in years,
the skin where I cut stories from is marble.
We spend nights tracing square states on our skin
so it sinks in that we're home.

Counter Tops

I spilled the sun like an egg.
Two yolks came out, parents
arguing about stained granite
and the dog hiding under a table.

I grew up dreaming of orange trees
planted in the backyard out of the books I hid in
I lived in a bed with words, begging me
to dig, look for a home with a family
that wasn't a landmine planted
in a sink of dirty dishes.

Pull apart my skull, drain the water
from a lifetime of cold sweats.

Feeling Bad About the Names We Gave

I know your suicide like the start of a drum roll,
the smell of stars rotting in pockets,
rolling around between fingers.

The wind played against your body
brutally, like fields of razor wheat
leaving behind the smell of sour sweat.

The sun hurt, the moon hurt more
artillery hid behind growling clouds,
that moved in ways you can't explain,
like a brain overrun by blood.

This isn't a poem about you leaving.
It's an admission
about how I found your ribcage
and ate it.

When the River Ate Itself

There is one part to a river.
At the mouth I dig through faces looking for yours
to clean the driftwood from your dimples.
You are a better color
than the cold cobalt water vile parents tried to feed you to.
There are two parts to a river.

There are three parts to a river,
mouth, body, tributary,
hunger.
There are four parts to a river,
calling you into the rapids,
to feed you to a great unconscious.
There are five parts to a river.

We give names to the strongest that swallow skies and stars.
I cut water until I find the beast's neck,
this killer, eater of myths.
There are six parts to a river.
My nails are shovels
digging away the mountain's belly to bring you home

seven parts to a river
seven fingers on your hands
seven toes on your feet
seven pupils in your eyes

Fishing with Anchors

The shore was littered with gulls,
spines snapped, casualties
of a fading god, barricaded away
behind an emptying ocean.

Turkey Vultures

Turkey vultures guide us to the shore
where ships drink themselves bloated
and sink with splintered bellies.

We used to climb the masts
alongside morning rays of spiced honey,
reaching as high as we could
so the sky would notch our heights on the clouds.
The breeze was clean salt, for miles
we could see blue houses and shops with white trim
sleeping on the coast.

That was before the water was clear to the bottom,
before we could see lonely predators
beckoning those of us with the juiciest hearts
to come and meet them.

Echoes in France

Your rings make music against glass
like water dropping into marble,
constellations falling from the sky,
summer days dwindling towards September.

We spent nights listening to cars shifting
on the freeway under amber stars.
Spells, miracles stored in the runes of your eyes
make their sounds tender,

I still dream about fall thunderstorms, your face in the window
holding each drop of rain, gently placing them down
like they deserved

Brine

Watching ships in the harbor from our apartment
rock amidst waves like lost children.
It's one of our favorite games,
second to seeing how long we can hold our hands over candles.

The lighthouse's beacon stalks the shore
an anxious parent betrayed by her babies
who snuck out to the hungry ocean.
Her light passes our window and beats back drunken corpses
gathering in our faces.

We heard the same story growing up,
how the sea stumbled through apathy,
blindly throwing himself into rocky shores,
ship hulls,
lighthouses,
homes
until he splintered the bedroom door
eyes running with salt water.

Comfort Seasons

Some nights I stay up later than I should,
watching the rain roll down the window, held up by the light
of a lamp post, bright as a child's blood
in the sticky days of August.

#108

There is a dream:
I'm walking to a holy mountain wearing a halo of okra.
The land around me is flat, wheat orange.
I am in love and can taste pioneer wind.

#341

darkening maple leaves sift summer rain,
grapefruit sun turns from slipping beads
terrified to sleep in dry dirt

remember the love i saved
for myself in a june without its moon,
our town caught under warm porchlight
given by the lord

days come back to me,
illuminated house
full of dinner spills across a fading lawn.
i catch drops of water,
let them dance like golden glass

Mojave Swing

There is threat born in our blood,
the nightmarish charm
of children lost in deserts.

Slot machine lights tuned to the sky,
lanterns in the Mojave wind,
leeching an overstretched world, draining neon.
The water here is brown,
like the car we abandoned
somewhere along US 50.

They Used to Talk About Burning Cities

My parents whispered about a burning city at dinner,
a metaphor for my brother.
The legs of the glossed wooden table rose up to four points,
the corners of a battered, cooked coffin.

I can't remember how sick anger made me,
or if any medicine was strong enough.
I hated how fast they forgot him,
their stone faces pushing mercury through my thermometer.
In children's stories about dogs the medicine made it warm little towns
but never the metropolis that cooked in the night.

Everyone forgot about its streets
but films still played in empty theaters
charcoal homes still dreamed.

We washed our hands after dinner, scrubbing fingers
until red, raw flesh looked like blood escaping through sore skin.

The subway doesn't run there anymore,
routes crossed out with permanent ink
They took the him off the map, begging:
please forget.

Five

I'm five. sitting in the sunflower field outside my house
waiting for you, brother, to come out.
We have to hurry, the sun will be home soon
too drunk to be reasoned with.

Today

mom cried
when she left the grocery store
and the bags ripped.

mom buried
her head in her arms during dinner
while I conquered my food

mom yelled
to play outside when the phone rang
and she said dad's name

We Dead

When we dead awaken
 we come as the crow
you gave to the earth
 in a hole-punched shoe box.

When we dead awaken
 we come as the dog,
who tried to pull himself out of the road
 back to you, a half-empty roll of toothpaste.

When we dead awaken
 we come as the father,
whose heart boiled your brain, whose hands
 sent you into the backyard with a shovel.

When we dead awaken,
 we come as the fall days
you buried away, deep
 in the woods of Connecticut.

Geometry

young and in motion, boring bad decisions
and bad math into the pillars of the world.
girls and boys paint each other with honest dirt
found in the ground with a path

into mountains

to a cavern

where the shape of wrong waits
after dragging geometry by the hair to the darkness
of a night that needed to end hours ago.

Caelifera Whispers

We make windchimes from the teeth of dead family
dogs. They sound like rattlesnakes, gyrating
against themselves when the wind dies.

Grasshoppers leave our yard, wind carrying them over
the trees to other children
where they can whisper secrets.

*The moon is the sun, turned around.
Boys live there, never homesick.
If you squint from worlds away
you can see their curled-up cheeks, still awake
late on a warm night.*

The Sun Sheds its Leaves

Asleep in the passenger seat,
your chest moving in unison with traffic lights
and turkey vultures caught in the wind,
looking for a carcass to pluck free of meat.

When we dream, are we walking down a shore,
our voices lost in waves?
Do we walk in, letting the stars push us under?

Or are we home, the dog digging up
the few colored leaves from a gray October
planted deep in fields of fall, blooming for us
on our Friday walk to town.

Diner Food

New Hampshire –
i find your face with hands
that tickle like smoke
rising to fill some sky

my name is fire in your cheeks
but it glows
like a diner, open late into the night

25 Hour Days

I threaded blades of grass
over my veins so the pain grew into
Connecticut
is Lyme disease,
crow bodies stacked like mountain laurel
beaks open in bloom

Illinois blues,
your face is everything
gums too big
squid nose

when you feel
please let me
touch

#178

9th of October, your rapture
ascending into the night sky,
surrogate for a blood moon.
I was your suicide note, left
to explain the intricacies and weight
of the night sky.

#297

house surrounded by the ghosts of dogs
all hips and ribs

they see me through the walls

the doors are opening for them

#288

grass growing in our knuckles
borrowing water from blood to build
fields for migrant suns,
flushed from their homes by men
that came in the night,
looking to sew stars into skies
they don't belong to

This is an abstraction.
There is no grass in us,
but
there are souls
that could be dirt.

#286

born with a slow heart,
full of summer fields and sneezes
too much grass
too much sun.
you sing
without meaning to scare away the fall.

Joshua trees buried in your voice,
treasures forgotten in gorgeous deserts
built by stories about a girl who turned the air into nectar
for her favorite season.

#290

We bought our house not knowing
the trees behind it would grow out metal,
angry electronic crucifixes.
The seeds were all the soil had.
We never thought to check for warm fruit
beneath our grandparent's rugs.

The dreams we lived in are smoking,
left alone on an overgrown highway
broken by wrought iron weeds.
We follow our parent's path
coated in red light and coffins, lids open and staring.

voices in the kitchen are melting
walls and bodies are crawling
free towards town from the hot pinch
of arguments and white noise
you can slam a door over and over
but it won't beat away the shouting

#294

strung out on highway between
 moments of saying the wrong things
 and stressed families, cluelessly cruel.

dreams of living from the car
 packed with clothes that barely fit
 grabbed in a rush from a childhood home
 before figuring out what kind of trees
 were planted around the property.

chasing hummingbirds
 made of honey bees fleeing
 air and hands reaching for stories
 of stolen siblings. the land is full
 of verdant tombs baked into hillsides
 found on maps drawn by children
 searching for folklore that fits.

past growling thickets
 full of bloody shredded fabric
 where warm wind blows home
 in rocking arms of undertow.

#289

cement moon catches fire
as we float from fluorescent city lights.
dreams move behind tall grass,
called homed by spring peepers.

we are voyeurs, watching
them duck through bramble like banshees
before the moon crashes into the horizon,
covered in oil.

nothing makes sense and we don't know
if sunlight should fall towards ghosts hiding by the shore,
or if the sky should have hugged the moon tightly
and let the world below sleep.

#170

We choose people like fruit,
pick our shells off early, neurotic cicadas
complaining about the cold.

You beg to carve our names into electric skies,
hoping
the legacy will outlive our narcissism.

#85

Dreams about darkness, jazz lounges, chocolate air.
I've known you for fifteen years and every night is another life
kept warm inside a drawn-out note.

There is no sun like our moon, no eclipse we don't deserve.
We've slept inside the rib cage of every planet,
told them each a different story about how we met.

There is light ahead of us,
but so much darling dark
stretched before it.

#171

Coyote kisses hidden under your pillow
the night you left.
No note, fight, signs,
just an advent calendar with your empty bed behind the 3rd.

The hallways grow longer,
light leaves rooms that grow sinister.
There's no revelation, nothing tidy
just a lonely home with the moon
bearing down brutally.

#86

I will die inside the hum of a planet
covered by dunes, acid rain
a tomb with only complacency to loot.

There are gods buried deep
in every world, every vial of time.
They miss each other,
but none are willing to make the drive.
Orbit is infinite, there's always time
to call tomorrow.

#174

God of grasshoppers,
king of crickets, crowned
by summer overcast, threatening
to end the season early.

Inventor of mountains and yearly lust,
swooning over postcards and old cartoons,
daydreaming of heat sticking to me like it used to.

#169

There's blood in your mirage,
an omen of glitches, a decoy
as you tunnel away to the hive
where our fantasies are buried.

Light-Headed Years

i know everybody is wrong
i know everybody is wrong
i know everybody is wrong
light-headed years
dayweeksmonthsstretchinglikeskin
blood bordering words
smearing everywhere.
there is a brood of wrong
so deep within, i pick into my hands
down to marrow to map it out

#72

In the cinnamon warmth of summer dusk,
you fill me from a memory.
There is no prettier way for your body to unlock mine.
Any moment you fill is sherbet.
I love you
I love you
from a memory I know you have.

#77

Five years
your smell won't come out of the shirt I lent you.
I know it better than your face,
obscured like tattoos on comatose skin.

I never wanted anything more
than to read childhood stories
until there was no blood left in my scabs.

Olympus Mons

Side of a Martian road,
wreck freezing in pheromone dust.
Dragged puking to a forgotten citadel,
horizon layering the ground after a good shake.
Crumbling mecca receives straitjacket horde,
terrain releases my face, sun splits my skin
I
begin
orbit.

Nodus Gordii

All we ever see are old photographs.
1955, Brooklyn
dad's hands grasp for the fire escape.

1979, Arizona bar,
Neptune waves lap against your irises.
Meeting in a photo before volcanoes,
earthen churches of

s
p
i
bo n e
muscl e

June 1990, ripping me into skeleton dust,
reassembled into light.
Dad finally died, fuses burn under tectonic plates.
Meteorites unload pictures of families in the Martian sky.

Limbs

There is a dream.

A man's arm, elbow deep in a woman's mouth.

They mold into a crab of limbs and move down an unlit hall.

Hawks

Haunted artillery shells empty suburban kitchens.
Candy and alcohol keep well in hard dark.
Beyond the shore obsidian clouds congregate
like crows, mouths open.

East

Wrought-iron sea born on the backs of tombstones
east east east east east
towards delta of quicksand and hungry scarabs.
East
where the sun waits to detonate in the sky.

Portcullis

An owl waits in the tundra of New England.
Its eye, saw-slit irises like catatonic clocks
pointing home.

Whale Bones

there is a graveyard for heroes,
tombstones of whale corpses.
bones kick earth off like abusive sheets,
bodies seep through dirt like restless ink
they sing and vibrate.

Starry Eyed Limestone

Jazz buried in pyramids, built into the limestone.
It hums for itself, long notes at night.
Such majesty must be granted,
a planet squeezing the life from its galaxy,
a cratered serpent compressing.

#120

Wake up in passenger seat of car.
Interior is murky teal,
skyline pastel inferno.
A figure, facing away
leaning against hood,
long saxophone on radio.

sound cuts
sky melts
figure turns

Obsidian Kisses

A painting of Pluto:

Obsidian ramparts leaning over ochre dunes,
petulant children unprepared
to grow into a world for anyone but themselves.
It's like them to live in isolation,
Arrakis without worms
visited only by a gazing deep blue,
looming.

Longing Days

Painting white horse heads onto trees.
They look up to guiding stars, celestial mother river.

There are no edges here, just portals bored into bark
that lead to times we were loved.

Put your ear to the dirt and listen
to splitting thunder underneath.

Charming eons shifting in the womb,
ready to be birthed into our warmest moments.

Smoking Shores

I dreamt I carved your get well soon card into the dry wall.
Flies gushed out of each serrated letter and formed around me
as our house began to burn.
I stood over you, listening to the gasps.

Staring into Brown

A bison on the horizon.
I'm the only one who sees it.
Dead grass snaps beneath us like empty bottles.
We both dread long drives, being left behind,
We hide.
I make sure.

Discs

When I was young I was taught
fun is loud, loud is annoying.
I lived in a museum of eardrums,
coddled does.

I grew up a gramophone,
needle pinched, rotor smoking.
I want to sing for you
but I was broken long before.

Wind and Wire

There's a well in the town where I grew up,
overgrown by barbed wire.
I want to believe wind rolls through the metal
and the reservoir vibrates, sings
with golden water in its mouth,
as my town recedes into a waking dream
of Celtic lore and love.

Going Home

I smell rotting wood, a cross country road trip
visiting hard corners and eyes gone sour.

We argue, stress over being lost,
dig nails into the dashboard.
White noise on every radio station,
as we swat each other's hands off the dial.
We'll turn around, go home
and convince ourselves it was the destination.

Off/On

The rain outside feels like snow
this furnace home feels like family,
stretching its roof over years that roll in like an early sunrise.
Reading each other our favorite children's books
while the kitchen smells like spontaneous love.

Whetstone

Twenty-five years beneath a family of hard stops,
boiling water. Living as a whetstone, practice
for anxious meltdowns.

Every night I heard the front door shred,
beasts wild from the scent of manipulation,
pressing their eyes against the gashes.

Twenty-five years and their smell never came out of the carpet.
There is no alchemy in the foundation of our house,
just a boy's body baked into cement and sand.

Frog Mountain

The pavement is fresh spring,
clouds duck into a bar off the road, leaving the sun with us.
The bullfrogs are out.
We climb each other like our favorite playgrounds,
or the oak tree in Redding, dressed with boards and nails.
I want this to be warm and calm,
deserts pressed down by God's thumb
except for the parts you fill.

Red Bark and Flowers

When I was a boy my mother brought me to a playground
made entirely of wood. I went back years later
to find that it was plastic. Somehow
that memory latches on to the crepe myrtle outside our house
the one that bloomed the day the dog seized up and died
after too many calculated steps.

Peppers

Wrap your arms around my waist
help me pull the length of the day it into ribbons,
tangle the sun in a purple prison
for thinking it could abandon us to tomorrow.
Stay warm with me, close the drapes and pull the wool over
Our bodies and dream that its summer at sunset,
deep south, blue bonnets
rock formations like ripe chilis, far away
from January and slate.

Cathedral Dreams

This is my church, pulling out long notes on my organs.
We had to crack the windows when I confessed too many times
about watching escaped chickens get bludgeoned
on the side of the road.

We can heal this, turn my heart over
to every apology I never gave. I'm sorry
I let the salad you made for me rot.
I'm sorry I squeezed your wrist, hard
when you were just trying.

Come into it with me,
this cathedral of failings.
I'll pray for my forgiveness,
for all the love you deserve
that I still can't summon.