Where You Were Going Never Was

poetry by
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Things Never Done

Going to Taulkinham. Don't know nobody there, but ... I'm going to do some things I never done before...

You feel life careening by,
want to grab on somehow, slip

into its jet stream and cling,
think what the hell, tattoo a reminder

to yourself on shin or scapula,
come inside a stranger or let him come

inside you, not careful, no Plan B,
drink recklessly, puke over the bridge rail

leaning so far out, you may plummet
like a dark angel into water

black as asphalt, then stagger, head ringing
carillon to the floor of someone

whose name escapes you, always going
to Taulkingham but never

arriving, the city shimmering like a desert
mirage before dissolving

in the flat light of morning, you awakening
alone with a mouth full of ash.

Where in Time and Body?

In yourself right now is all the place you've got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and your body can they be?

Petals refuse the sun, pigeons tuck mute
heads beneath their wings, the dog scratches
a hole deeper and deeper, spraying clods
all around. You look at me as if I had
an answer for everything, but I am just
a shirt flapping on the line, a toy soldier
forgotten in a hedgerow. There's Jesus,
and there's too much Jesus. You can
hear him in the crows harrying a hawk
from its updraft, berating its joy in rising.
Fall, Redemption, and Judgment curl
in us like a fetus. We can't feel them,
but they're there, threaded to us, eating
what we eat, swelling for a time in secret.
Set your emptiness on a fence and blast
it full of holes. The wind will gust a sad
music, which you'll echo without
realizing as you go about your business.
In yourself right now is all the place
you've got. Rain pools at the edge
of your tarp and seeps in. At night
through the gaps, you can see clouds
scudding across the moon's pale distance.
I watch from my own tiny plot, staked out
against interlopers. Now that I've come

here, I'll die here. You will too. There's
no helping it. The fence posts will slice us
into shadows, and we will scatter. We
pray for hands to gather us up. Where
in time and body can they be?

Divided

Enoch's brain was divided into two parts. The part in communication with his blood did the figuring but it never said anything in words. The other part was stocked up with all kinds of words and phrases.

That unseen sneak of me machinates
in its dark pulse, always

hinting, wanting, but letting me fumble
for what. Someday,

I will take a tong to its tongue, pluck it out
and nail it to a pole.

Then we'll see which way the breeze blows,
what stories flap.

Always it fingers my doings, telling me
like a rosary, making me

voice its dark prayers. Once, I took a knife
to it, but we both

bled. At small desks, I learned my letters,
each a perfect noose

for some neck. My blood points, and they hang,
and then it sends me

for the scraps. I have tried to talk it out, vomiting
words in torrents,

but it battens in my core like a flea, endlessly
reproducing. Even now

it wills this word and the next until finally
whispering *stop*.

Foisted

"I ain't any preacher."
"You look like a preacher. That hat looks like a preacher's hat."
"It ain't. It's just a hat."

I

The label sits to the left of the object,
framing what we see and contextualizing.
When handed a baby, we ask after genitalia
to dial in a voice, adding treble or bass.
We demand a poem be about something,
if only language—too much ambiguity,
and we're resentful, excluded from the joke.

II

Sometimes we are caught out, clothing exposing the gap
between inner and outer—what we found jaunty,
proclaimed eccentric, what we thought carefree,
called slovenly.

III

No hat is just a hat once it leaves the house.
Culture demands spin doctors,
like those who preceded
the naked emperor, claqueurs
who praise invisible fabric.
"*It ain't only the hat...*
It's a look in your face somewheres."
If enough people say so,
it is. Maybe you didn't wake up
a preacher, but by day's end,
you stand behind a pulpit,
congregation with their hands
in the air, all yelling
halleluiah.

Patrimony

Enoch gripped his arm again...He pointed down through the trees. "Muvseevum," he said. The strange word made him shiver. That was the first time he had ever said it aloud. A piece of grey building was showing where he pointed...A concrete band was over the columns and the letters, MVSEVM, were cut into it. Enoch was afraid to pronounce the word again.

Our artifacts
have been stolen,

locked
in the MVSEVM.

We fear
even the word.

(What if
we mispronounce it

as it glares
above tall columns?)

We need permission
to enter,

following cowed
behind a docent

who tells us
what each thing means,

estranged in its case.
Attribution, period,

school, circa,
all encrypted,

made so alien
that, exiting,

we cannot shake
the chill.

What the Blind See

"Some preacher has left his mark on you," the blind man said with a kind of snicker. "Did you follow for me to take it off or give you another one?"

People you don't know
will lay claim to you.

inhabiting you,
squatting in your shadows.

When you stammer in protest,
you will not recognize your voice.

You will wave a stranger's arms,
hear an unfamiliar heartbeat.

They will insist they know you better
than you know yourself.

Even if they borrow your own lips,
your own raised eyebrow,

don't trust their mirror. Coward that you are,
kick these impostors to the ground.

Draw blood. Once you fatten your own lip,
purple your own eye,

they will know you are serious. From one exhale
to the next, they will flee,

Lift yourself by your own strings. You will be wiser,
scarred by your own hand.

Bottomless

If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more.

We live in horror of bursting at the seams,
our treasure scattering,

and so line the pools of our eyes with rocks,
the world sitting shallowly.

The thought of too much suffering streaming in
makes us blink,

the children covered with blood
and plaster dust, the dogs cringing

on too-tight chains. We insert false bottoms
to lift us.

Otherwise, we'd blind ourselves, and how then
would we fill the hours

with only us
reflected in our darkness?

This Nefariousness

His face behind the windshield was sour and frog-like; it looked as if it had a shout closed up in it; it looked like one of those closet doors in gangster pictures where someone is tied to a chair behind it with a towel in his mouth.

You bite hard on the towel, tamping down the shout inside. If one took it out, you would scream bloody-murder about big box stores. No one would understand your fear of sameness, of streets so indistinguishable it is as if someone were hurriedly packing up each featureless building and unfolding it again just up ahead, this nefariousness hidden behind the horizon. No one would understand the terror that you will forget your address and not be able to find your way home, one door like the next, the family greeting you behind it having to do, the husband as good or bad as any other, the kids like any teens, like paper dolls with tabbed clothes that barely mask their neutrality. You keep your shout behind the towel behind the door, get to work on time, press the buttons that must be pressed, move the muscles of your face in ways that people understand, insert the right key into the holes that correspond to your goings and doings. But the whole of it is barely glued, like an arcade prize, 3,000 tickets for slapdash that won't last the night. It looked different high on the shelf. In gangster pictures, someone comes to the rescue. You are losing hope. No one knows you are here.

Apostasy

I don't have to run from anything because I don't believe in anything.

Those first ideas work like beaters in a hunt,
shoulder to shoulder, flushing us out of the
safe dens in which we curl, still wet from
birth. In the ragged breath of flight, we taste
their rust on our tongue. The long shadow
of the cathedral falls on us even if we never
enter. My ancestors knelt beside open pits
whether I believe in anything or not. Right
now, someone's blood worship is rushing
at me, dragging its shroud. I can refuse to
run, kneel, or profess, but certainly I will be
made to wear my apostasy in my own flesh.

Spitting in Wind

"Mr. Motes...what do you walk on rocks for?"
"To pay," he said in a harsh voice.
"Pay for what?"
"It don't make any difference for what," he said.

Doors both invite and close
against the knock. Walls exclude,
but ask for scaling. The smell of rot
brings vomit to the throat even
as one seeks the source. Scabs
hide the body's business.

You imagine yourself a sullen river,
swollen with violence,
scouring growth on either side.
Any who lower their heads to drink
get sucked in.

You cover mirrors
and avoid windows, yet still
you look at yourself, intimate
with your landscape. Even
in darkness, what you can't see,
you feel.

So much mortification—
Do you really believe
the barbed-wire snagging your belly
and the shards in your shoes
will bring God down?

A God with Big Titties

What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts.

Anybody tell you about a reward that ain't here and now, you get shed of 'em right quick. You need a God with big titties you can squeeze, a body broad as a beach to break against. No angel choirs but ice cubes clinking, the cold glass sluicing drips between your fingers, hooch hammering your skull like the apocalypse. We ain't got nothing on our tail we didn't sit in. Don't look 'round back—ain't no devil there. Even your shadow would rather snuggle into Leora's dark places, a halleluiah of funk. The only eternity's between here and the last second of what you pay for. Leora don't care what kind of hat you wear, how trouble's creased your face. She'll look away till each red-slashed help-wanted crushes to trash, then lay her weight right on you, smoothing you almost good as new. Open her door come morning, and the wind will lift you right up. That's right. Heavenward.

Regular

Enoch felt for his stick and laid his change on the counter.
"I got to be going."
"Don't let me keep you," she said.
"You may not see me again," he said, "–the way I am."
"Any way I don't see you again will be all right with me," she said.

Why is it so hard for you to believe that God has filled me
to where
my skin splits wings? What do you think Redemption
looks like?

Even that horse's ass on the last stool shines like a puddle
reflecting
neon, hair tufting wild inward jubilation. You think you know
things,

but what you don't rattles shutters and rips shingles, a
powerful wind.
I haven't got time for your back. I can call disciples from
stones. I won't

be the first. Somewhere someone lies on a mat, too far from a
miracle. I
got to be going. You may not see me again—the way that I am.
You laugh,

but morning will catch you still here, refilling the salt, face fallen
into ruin.
When the screen door slams behind me, a bird som
where will break into song.

Un-American

"Mr. Motes," she said. "Here's a dollar bill and some change in this waste basket. You know where your waste basket is. How did you make that mistake?"
"It was left over, he said. "I didn't need it."
She dropped into his straight chair. "Do you throw it away every month?" she asked after a time.
"Only when it's left over."

The thought that someone might be indifferent to it steams us like sitting next to a teetotaler at a bar when we're tying one on. How can you not want to plunge your head into the champagne fountain then make yourself puke to clear space for more? To avert is un-American. Your lack of attachment grinds the assembly line to a halt, leaves dad slumped in his recliner while mom pulls double shifts washing invalids. It's like having two hearts while those on the transplant list are dying for one. Take your monkish indifference elsewhere, dig a den with the foxes. The rest of us raise greyhound heads at dawn and get running, lapping the track after the mechanical rabbit. We prick ears to the silent whistle, salivate, and whine. I wouldn't want to be you—the only dog out of harness—while the laden sleds skid on runners. You don't pull, you don't eat.

Wreck

He had the sense that the road was really slipping back under him. He had known all along that there was no more country but he didn't know that there was not another city.

You will never be anywhere else.
Open your front door, and the road

rolls itself up. The clouds rattle back and forth
over your head like ice cubes sloshed

in a glass while an unseen bird unfurls the same
three notes before dragging them back

into its beak. You emit and emit from your black box,
but no one knows your plane

fallen from the sky, where to search for wreckage.
Windows darken all around you.

When the last one blackens, you will lose
even your reflection.

Where You Were Going Never Was

Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it.

You have been belled. You try to sneak up
on the moment, but you jangle like a shop door

and all you see are tail feathers in the far distance.
Your car won't start. It hiccoughs when you

pedal the gas, then chokes in indecision.If only
you had wheels. Life won't wait.

Just over the horizon, people laugh and moan like in
a whorehouse on a Saturday night.

You don't even have enough change for a hand job
and are turned away at the door.

Come back when you're a man, son, they tell you,
not realizing you might never grow up.

This is all there is. Your ma has tossed your things to
the curb. You bindle them up and

they sit on your shoulder like a second self. You talk
to this hump, but it snickers and doesn't answer.

If You Don't Want the Yowling

"Listen," she said, "...from the minute I set eyes on you I said to myself that's what I got to have, just give me some of him! ...That innocent look don't hide a thing, he's just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is I like being that way and he don't. Yes sir!... I like being that way, and I can teach you how to like it. Don't you want to learn how to like it?"

You wave your guilt around like a white flag
on a pole. Aren't you tired of being shot at

by people too far away to see? Stop hunkering
down in the closet with its plastic shrouds and

balls of naphtha. Each of their tight folds will
be shaken and sent to the Goodwill. No one

cares what you get up to. They're all too busy
tying themselves to their own bedsteads. Release

the prisoner from solitary. Come, trembling,
and slip his chain. You are not the worst.

Someone will love just your kind of damage.
If you don't want me here, circling your house

and yowling like a cat, then open your window
and let me in, a perfect haunt for the space of you.

Found Out

I followed her to say I ain't beholden for none of her fast eye like she gave me back there...

Sometimes you look and get caught looking.
The pulse of you gets going and then it's too
late, your hunger as easy to read as a back lit
window in the dark. Betrayed by your body
you accept humiliation, the laughter bright
as flaying knives. At night you dream of
lips eager for your own, a nuzzling without
shame. Come morning, you are chilled and
spent, like a possum flattened on asphalt.
You thread your guts back inside and rise,
let the door bang behind you, eyes cast down.
All around you, women's voices swell like
ripe fruit. You cannot believe the orchard
fenced, guarded by dogs. You would even
take windfall, but the wind carries your
scent, and the dogs growl. Surely, there
is no one lonelier. Your eyes spill yearning
like marbles from a bag, how loudly they
clatter, no way to gather them quietly back.

A Wild Figure Motioning

...he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.

the mysteries sing to us naked
we want them with our whole being
but know they dare us
to leave familiar skins
draped over a chair
and risk meeting day
stripped somewhere
with no public self

we straddle sills
keeping one foot on worn boards
letting one dangle
leaning out to catch what melody we can
storing them away to fortify us
as we chew food with no taste
then muck out stalls

every night
we await gravel
against glass
spent
before the sun ever rises

Pinned to Your Hat

He had on a pair of dark glasses and a black beard which a keen observer would have said was not a natural growth but was pinned onto his hat on either side with safety pins.

Every day, you try hard to be who you are supposed to be but your efforts show like the wizard's backside poking from behind the curtain. The pawnbroker takes one look at you then slips outside for a smoke, mouths we're not buying when you tap the glass. How do others keep the stuffing inside? Your lipstick stains your teeth. No one believes you're legal. Kids follow behind you aping your walk. When you turn on them, they laugh. Where can you learn how to insert Tab A in the right slot? No one's telling, and your directions got tossed with the box. Every night, you hang yourself on a chair back and search for loose threads. You never find any, but you know, come morning, they will snag. You will sure as sure unravel.

A Whiff of Center

...as was usual with him, he began with the least important thing and worked around and in toward the center where the meaning was.

First come mastication, micturition, and defecation, the Latinate cleansing of the everyday. And work. And the children. (I'm being honest here.) There's the loading up and desultory wiping down. Then hypochondria and catastrophizing. The mindless scrolling through ephemera, the clicking, the emoticons. And only once these rites have been enacted is there the center where the meaning is. The portal to otherness, the far off, the dimension in which time stops. The turning over of glass after glass to read the sediment at the bottom. The laying out of cards. Haruspicy. The reaching out of the hand to pull back the curtain on the Holy of Holies. Some days God blazes there, naked, some days he doesn't show his face—either way, the niceties must be obeyed, the working the way in toward the center, deferential but hungry, nostrils flared for the faintest scent.

No Guarantees

He'll be back," she muttered. "let the wind cut into him a little.

It was meant to be just a short silence,
but it grew, molecular bonds shifting
until water hardened to ice. What at
first wouldn't be said, finally couldn't
as if tongue and palate had forgotten the
shape of the vowels. The wind's faint
soughing through leaves twisted the
treetops clean off. We found them next
morning through the roof, a welter of
board and bough. There's no guarantee
of just a little. Crack the door and the
dog may bolt in a clatter of claws. He'll
be back, she muttered.

Two Valleys

Her first plan had been to marry him and then have him committed to the state institution for the insane, but gradually her plan had become to marry him and keep him.

With this ring, I've belled the cat. No more
tiny bones on the back stairs or feathers on
the mat. If we were in New Guinea, I'd boil
his skull and scoop the brains. Here I just shrink
him over time until he fits on the mantel. The
mattress shows two valleys with a mountain
between, a crossing seldom ventured. Moss has
reclaimed the blazes. All day, I refill his glass
in a steady pickling. I get him tottering until he
tips, then sweep about his feet. I was warned
marriage would be hard, but I don't see it.

Just to Be Sure

He could have been dead and get all he got out of life . . . He might as well be one of them monks...he might as well be in a monkery...She didn't understand it. She didn't like the thought that something was being put over her head. She liked the clear light of day. She liked to see things.

Why do people have to go and be shut
doors? I wouldn't need to pry them

open if they would just speak plain.
Porches were meant to be sat on and

windows wide, anything else hoity-toity.
I don't trust those who don't holler—moms

who don't smack, marrieds who smolder
like banked coals. Flame, so I can stomp

you down. I don't want to wonder if I'm
damned or saved, would rather live nasty

just to be sure. All of you quiet ones can go
to hell. Why else were we given tongues?

Sunup to sundown we've been thrown
together. Might as well pass the time.

False Friends

The patrolman got behind the Essex and pushed it over the embankment and the cow stumbled up and galloped across the field and into the woods.

Sometimes those supposed to help you, don't.
They stick in instruments, waggle them,

write on your chart without a word. If you ask,
they say it's too soon to tell. You hear

your name whispered in the hall, but can't make out
the rest. Your morphine drip

is just glucose. Even the call button withholds your need
from those who might rescue you.

You were taught to respect people in uniform, but they
have proven false.

The approaching footsteps aren't friendly. There's menace
in their linoleum tattoo.

When You Stop Breathing

"I want to go on where I'm going," the blind man said.
"You got to pay your rent first," the policeman said. "Ever' bit of it!"
The other, perceiving that he was conscious, hit him over the head with his new billy...He died in the squad car but they didn't notice and took him on to his landlady's.

You can't even die without paying up.
They rifle your pockets, yank fillings,

take your shoes. You won't need cash
where you're going, they laugh. Hellfire

would smelt a puddle from your small change.
The crack on your head is for the trouble

of having to hunt you down, po' boys cooling
in the squad car. No one notices

when you stop breathing. No one's listened
to you for years. Your soul

waits out the song playing on the radio
before wafting into drizzle.

Your landlady, left with your scraps,
jumbles them to the curb by nightfall.

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Patrimony	*Eunoia*
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