

HIP AND THIGH

I've never told the time I saw an angel—
at a dive bar, as convention demands.
I almost passed him, but he looked strangely
familiar, blinking as his protective hands
mangled a tequila shot. "Say, friend,"
I ventured. "Have we ever met?"
His puss was pestilential. "Don't pretend!
Bethlehem, PA. Aught six. Our fight
went thirty-seven rounds. I say in sooth
I bear the scars today. Here, here. A bite
mark outside my thigh. You lost a tooth
and wrenched your back. It hurts on rainy nights,

I know. I feel it too: a mystery.
I can't believe you don't remember me."

But as he spake this, parts of it came back.
The moonlit strain and strategies, the hiss
of battered breath. I asked, "But why did you attack?"
He gaped, agog. "You started it, you ass!
You whacked first with a fist-big rock to bust
my haloed head. I don't know why:
Cussedness or hubris, youth, bombast.
I was just a messenger—some guy
you picked to poke. I've always wondered." I
remembered then. I said, "It wasn't planned.
But when I saw you, stern against the sky
pure and glowing, crisp new robe unstained,

it felt unjust. I couldn't let it stand.
I must have found a rock to fit my hand.

Yet past is past. So why, sir, were you there?
What message did you have for me?" He: "Man,
I *could* tell you, of course, but it's been years
and I still bear a ringing in my ears. I *can*,
But fuck you and be on your goddamn way."
That changed things for forever. When I heard
the angel say the f-word,
my hip hitched. I knew things would be okay.

XYZ

1.

Strike
ten
times
the eye of a dead
stick-figured man

2.

Y is a slingshot
in a child's
damp clutch Y
is the bone in
a gone turkey's
throat Y is the
steering wheel's
heart the split spine
of Mercedes-
Benz Y is the male
chromosome
different from the
female's Y is the thing
we solve for the thing
we never understand

3.

Let z be
the path; let
z be the
wrong turn; let
z be the
red-faced jerk
back the way
you were, but
lower now;
let z be
itself as
you are you:
lost late in
deep slumber
trying not
to picture
your wake

ONBOARDING

Yes, this is the way that life is done
And no, from hour to hour it's not much fun
But the chairs are really comfortable and
The details are extensively preplanned
So all you have to do is find a role—
Some office with a necessary hole—
And learn things that you never dreamed you'd know
(Like ROI or how French markets go)
And occasionally thrive
On weekends; after five;
At lunch when there's a lulling summer breeze
(Barring catastrophes)

Eventually you'll wake yourself to find
Swift years stretched out identically behind,
And see, with eyes diminished
That the banquet's mostly finished
With nothing but a coffin for dessert.
But at least it didn't hurt.

CONCRETE POEM

Every metered poem, or a least every one with balanced lines is a concrete poem in the sense that it's in the shape of concrete: the concrete of a wall in some massive ugly building; a pillar of the Pantheon; also Hoover Dam; Brutalist architecture in general. As poems, too, are constructions, this fits to an extent, save that good poems are never ugly and rarely massive. I like to consider instead the concrete of a sidewalk: a thing to stand on in new boots; a path someone intended for use in one direction, but which we all feel free to improvise across. We overleap cracks, we funambulate the edge and tumble, breathless; we note of course the imperfections: that curve around a tree or hydrant; the exception of a swerve; initials; scarred surfaces; the corners that cracked beneath skateboards—all expressions of what happens when a theory of what concrete can take faces actual gravity, weather, and untoward circumstance. It's trying to tell us, this concrete sidewalk, that the plan was never going to be perfect, but that it was admirable to plan. We aren't mad to love paths. And if we weren't so practical, if life itself were not a limitation, then this walk could go on, we could go on both of us, we'd talk late and the concrete could just go on forever

(Inspired by a road sign on I-10 in California that reads "To Indio and Other Desert Cities." All words and phrases in this poem are names of desert cities in the southwestern U.S.)

OTHER DESERT CITIES

Eden. Orchard. Paradise.

Truth or Consequences.

Angel Fire. Hideaway.

Deport. Surprise.

Eureka. New Home.

Prairie View. Mountain View.

Hope. Loving.

Jolly. Carefree.

Buffalo. Deer Park.

Lake Arrowhead. Indian Wells.

Big Spring. Big Lake. Big Wells.

Log Cabin. House.

Manor. Mission.

Temple. Cathedral City.

White Settlement.

Whitehouse. Superior.

Commerce. Industry.

Mount Enterprise.

Midway. Uncertain.

Moody. Needville.

Needles. Hooks. Spur.

Gun Barrel City. Cut and Shoot.

Point Blank. Bangs.

Red River. Redwater. Redlands.

Victorville.

El Mirage. Rancho Mirage.

Sour Lake. Marble Falls.

Earth. Globe.

Snowflake. Winters.

Mammoth. Tombstone.