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Along a Shoreless Motorway

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ALONG A SHORELESS MOTORWAY

By

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In memory of His Imperial Majesty Joshua Norton I (ca. 1815 – 1880), Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico; and for my parents
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ABSTRACT

I wrote this collection of poems from a fascination with both the Cosmos and the mythology that illustrates its elusiveness and integrity, its ability to accommodate the entirety of the Unknown as well as the already beloved. These poems – when considered holistically – may be understood as a model that mimics my own experience at consciousness and dreaming, as a map of the author’s nervous system. Taking as a vehicle the character L. M. Fish, the series seeks to explore and re-imagine the mythos of the contemporary West.
The Wandering Jew
Prologue: The Winding Ring Jew, in which He
Sails West on an Eastern Wind

Onward to the West. ‘Where I came from, / where I’m
going. Indian country.’ Gold. – Frank O’Hara, “Alma”

O City, your axles need not the oil
of song. / I will whisper words to myself / And put them
in my pockets. – Hart Crane, “Porphyro in Akron”

And so I am, in Brooklyn, here
to parse the coal hammer parole

of Brighton Beach, her hundred kibbutzim
bound for Lake Galilee: they will toss rye

into the soil that enshrines King David,
herdsman David, his offspring scattered,

diffracted — as I am, in Seaside
Park, in Crown Heights: sunken, napping N-Y

City underneath the Mermaid Avenue
line, beside the trestlework of this Coney

Island Railroad, far-flung — the kingdom
of Judah misspent, atomized, and I, below
the Thunderbolt rollercoaster, as prominent
   as a map of our world with Jerusalem

   at its center: *umbilicus mundi*,
navel of the entire cosmos — an anchor
tethered as the tongue has its burrowed
   rootstock of bone: and I, dialing Majestic-

   five-eight-three-eight-five, shall collect my ticket
and be put to sea — taking ship on the tide, sailing

always in the direction of the Mount
   of Olives: toward the middle of my own

   interior riverscape, but also in transit
to the Old City — westbound, west-about, west
to reach east: as Drake plowed the unnumbered
deepl, as do I, gone to chase the solar

   promenade across nations: into
the West — in passage to the unearthly West.
L. M. Fish lies anaesthetized,
    the skin of the chest peeled
back as to permit entry
to the crestfallen monarchy
of his cardiac organ — stretched

across an operating table, as stiff
    as a saint’s finger-bone — *grand mal*
bedeviled by the assembly
of surgeons that carve from his fractured
ribs a seascape of curling, red-tipped

whitecaps — this fleshy tide rises
    and falls with each kick
of his mule-legged heart — outer
walls swabbed sinless, continents of fat
bathed in antiseptic; the muscular

Sergeant-at-Arms laid-out, guileless,
    simple, a waxing gibbous
moon — roundabout, the operating
theater unable to contain Mister Fish
in his most holy of holy forms:

gentleman caller to the Lunar
    Mansion, that colossal magnet — Fish
falls away from Her, hovering
fixed above the Pacific Basin,
its ground swells soaking

the machine-sewn hem of his surgical
drape, the sea a mimeographed portrait
of Magellan: blustery — L. M.
is ensnared by the algal bloom
of the circumnavigator’s whiskers,

and lowered, lowered until the value
of Her coin-like face passes
into an illegible hodgepodge of glowing.
The patient’s chest cavity fills
with brine and, immersed, floating mildly
toward Manila; farther westward
and into the path of the Tet
Offensive — tumbling along the peaks
of seamounts — She, unable
to hesitate, draws a tidal current over him,
a submarine river that presses
his displacement — obliged by Her
magnetic thrust — soon, his heart
will be restarted, and, the sutures
will keep him whole, and, Fish is sewn

from east to west — Oriental
to Occidental — lungs aerated,
blood siphoned-in to satiate
the aorta, rambling through
the four chambers, rambling when called.
Two: Transoceanic, Mr. Fish Makes Landfall, in which His Wallet is Tossed into the Fleeing Undertow

My right foot has run ashore to tow the heft of its companion, whose hucklebones slide along the coxcomb of an ebbing wave — newborn lengths of suckling eel nip and strike at the ribs of a rattan basket — tethered to my dawdling foot, it slips away with the receding tide, with the coming-apart and coming-back-again — an argosy of glass-nosed unagi, a knotted hodgepodge of tail-biting, all loosening and tightening as their woven lockup makes landfall — Dearest Mama Dukes,

Was robbed the evening last by a native boy flashing a bayonet. He took-off down the beach with my billfold and coonskin cap. Please send what you’re able. I love both of you, LMF – Okinawa Prefecture, December, 1952 — mending my ship’s turbine engine — I dutifully revolve the hand-wheel of a pipeline that chokes on a gutful of dim petroleum — the gasoline hesitates, still, sheepish as a basketful of captive eels tipped seaward — to return — again, again, once
more, again.
Three: Entombed in the Company of Bodiless Echoes, in which He is Lauded By a Long-Buried Titan

[I]n the wide-pathed earth, [...] the Titan gods are hidden under misty gloom, in a dank place where are the ends of the huge earth. And they may not go out. – Hesiod, “Theogeny”

Their courtesy heliotropic, following the westward dawdle of the sun, a gaggle of Chinese irises gesture to the mouth of a cave — to its unhealed gash,

an aperture that bows to the exiting fruit bats, mumbling its salaam in undertones of numbed air while they peel from stalactites and flowstone — the thresh of their wings

overwhelms the warble of lulling applause for Mister L. Mahoney Fish, who collapses drowsily against a clotting notch of calcite, a column that hoists the ceiling skyward — hung with limestone draperies, the ribbed vault redoubles his ovation — plus ultra — a wayward Titan venerating the coarseness of his travel-wise footbottoms; the way Fish pitters his fingers against the carbonate architecture with patience, as a pious nun bricked-up in the walls of a priory; magnetic hematite handclapping for the hours atop hours L. M. has pressed his lips, silently truthswollen, or belch-
swollen — the diagnosis: *senile dementia*, astray

from the tour group — his recollection mislaid, a lonesome mastodon tooth at the bottom of a subsurface pool — tusks sounding each calcium-rich formation

as if a bell: the mammoth bucks her ridged spine against the cave’s dome in panic — the elderly Fish passes forth a soft-tongued burble — feeble — the unsteady half-whispered yip of a sleeping pup.
Four: Lipping Chocolate Cigarettes, the Mathematician
Shakes a Fist, in which His
Pal Archimedes Abandons Him

A Poem in Dedication of Voyager 1 Escaping Our Beloved Solar System, May, 2005

Waking to a thunderclap un-tethered over the Ionian
Sea, I button my snoring trousers, windstorms raising a caterwaull
from the east — I am navigating the Earth’s equatorial

cummerbund. Inside, my porthole depicts an ocean awash
in Cinecolor: its greens dampened by the hurry-scurry of rainfall — and I,
elephantine in my cabin, imagine myself seaside

with Archimedes at Syracuse — Archimedes and I laying
in the surf, gowned and noshing Walnettos, malted milk balls
and licorice pipes — we weigh upon the Sicilian

cost like a pair of elderly Monk seals: he, drawing a triangle
in the sand, and around that a curving parabola, an arch — and I,
tracing within his, a scalene triangle of my

own, and then he within mine, until sand and reeds seem
no longer delicate enough — inadequate for inscribing even one
granule with further figures and arcs; he, confounded

by the divisibility of sand into atoms — and further,
farther — Archimedes as a host for molecules, quarks, antiquarks
and nucleons: he gives me the eye — more-or-less John

Wayne at the corners of his mouth, snarling, the mathemagician divides an envelope of Sen-Sen breath powder in-two and into fourths, and onward: his palm a boundless quarry,

each finger a jointed crane — I watch his sleight-of-hand with care, Archimedes crafting dozens of hand-cradled piles from the confection — breaking each mint fleck into smidgens

and smidgens into specks, specks into trifling jots of sweet starch — his hand thrown into routine as though sliding the beads of a school’s abacus, east to west — only

a fine dust remains, an indivisible hodge-podge: chuffed, Archimedes turns and strolls the beach to dry his gown, and that is the precise distance between ancient and modern — O!, rocket-ships, O!, vulcanized rubber.
Held buoyant by two hundred feet of water, the ferry

*Andrea Contarini*

fires cannonballs into Lake Como — the splayed basin shelled with round shot to rattle a drowned carcass free — moored by sea-grass, each bombardment rouses the limbs to salute, methane parts the lips; restful, submerged, murmuring — L. M. lolls atop an oaken dock, half-grown, sketching this tableau: the fuse burnt-out, a deck hand trolls the boathook in a deep arc from the bow, to gather, as a sickle swings to harvest grapes across the inlet — a boot-flask breaches the sparse waves. The far shore shaded with his thumbprint, Fish solidifies the surface of the lake
in charcoal, impassable,
an oubliette — the docile corpse
absent from his vellum sheet,

unseen, but perhaps seated amid
a subaquatic dynasty
_of Pisania snails: even they
haven’t the patience to wait — Lieber

tucks the drawing pad under-
arm — another cannonball
is issued to resurrect this
subject: his Christ of the Deep.
Six: London Suite, in which He  
Crosses the Metropolis as if the Coxswain of a Clipper Ship

1.
To transcribe the heaviness 
of Petticoat Lane, he marks  
on a A-to-Zed map:  
*Asleep in the East End.*  
And of toothsome Whitechapel:  
*A College of Automatic  
Knives, of toad-stickers and switchblade  
laceration — gouging-at  
kidneys, killing by inches.*

2.
The Elgin Marbles must  
be hung by the grace  
of an entire loving  
pantheon: Poseidon invisible  
and carrying his limbless stone likeness  
through the halls of the British Museum,  
his temple in a temple, and Athena,  
with goatskin shield, directs  
cold charioteers who pay no mind  
to the queue of taxis on Oxford Street.

3.
Tipped, the Velvet Cup
empties into Shaftesbury Avenue; I, wassailing
against the monochromatic and stodgy gloam of dusk-tide.

4.
   — And the Post Office Railway?
   What of it? What of that?
   —Ten-and-a-half kilometers of track
to tow London’s mail from East End to West.

5.
The course of the Thames hobbles,
the haunt of two hundred skeleton keys and sixteen burgling harnesses that have confounded the constabulary in their decades-long evasion; the Thames hobbling, and coppers, leaning: upstream, Oxfordshire.

6.
Roundabout Twickenham, the Eel Pie Hotel hosts embalmed jazz: Mister Fish inextinguishable,
gliding on the maplewood
dancefloor, he coasts toward Wales.
Seven: An Abridged Oration on the Fall of Atlantis, in which He
draws a Bath in the Ocean

[T]he great Atlantis was utterly lost and destroyed: not by a great earthquake [...] but by a particular deluge. [M]arvel you not at the thin population of America, [...] for there was so much time between the universal flood and their particular inundation. – Francis Bacon, The New Atlantis

You may be reassured that the centermost cavity
of the Atlantic Ocean is inhabited, an open
pit full of the leavings from abandoned sea-cities and ghost
towns, Chichén Itzá, the towers of Avalon and El Dorado

pulled into the sea — and the great Atlantic has sampled skiffs
and sloops, U-boats, icebergs, conning towers, pirate
republics; its sediment must be stocked with the jawbones
of obsolete predators, an entire ichthyosaur. Atlantis,

thinks L. M., must’ve surely sunk into the ocean — bathing
at Cork Harbor, in the west of Ireland, he soaps his backwoods
moustache — and Atlantis, Fish considers, plunged ten thousand
years ago — he doesn’t suppose the other swimmers at the Quay

mind the soapsuds — perhaps, he thinks, perhaps Ireland
was Atlantis, perhaps this same island — he dunks his head
under, a breaker falling over him like a hood — perhaps the ocean
was involved in a cover-up — and his uneven feet are buried in sand, one

an inch-and-a-quarter deeper than the other, an undercurrent sucking
at his ankle-bones — perhaps Atlantis can be sighted
from space, from the first few inches, he thinks, of space beyond
our Earth’s atmosphere, perhaps it looks like a pupil suspended

in an iris, there, at the bottom — the final dollop of lather
washed away by the surf, his scruff still hanging out, unshaven
and taking-on water — and you may be certain, presumes Mister
Fish, that Atlantis has simply relocated, pulled out of port,

immigrated — he has lost his knob of shaving soap to the harbor
and feels the seafloor for his American-made razor, L. M.
loses his balance — as sailors navigated into the West,
he observes, the lost continent slipped deeper into the New

World — and the aging gentleman cannot judge which direction
is the most Up, the harbor opening around him, water
getting chillier — first it was to be found beyond the Straight
of Gibraltar, Fish lectures — nearly caught in a sea-trout net, his arms
rolling with the outpour of the Atlantic — and then farther,
Atlantis, thinks Fish, was said to be in the Canary Islands,
or the Azores, in Bimini, Atlantis uncovered in the proud
Yucatan — floundering, he is pulled into the downflow

of the harbor — perhaps, he considers, perhaps Atlantis
is beyond the Americas, farther west — soon, Lieber
Mahoney Fish will be sighted off the coast
of Skibbereen, battening his hatches, setting the skysail
westward to gather the tradewinds — into the West, yes.
Pre-negotiated, the Southland dayshine
ambles across first thing, charging the cloistered
dark to collect its final alms — the plate

passed to me, my turbojet haircut greasing
unpicked bulbs of Vidalia onion: I sleep
out-of-doors to watch the whole apparatus
circumrotate and reappear:

dragging wobbly hoboism across
county lines. Rising: my palms held outward
to the shuffling mendicant night as if playing

a Theremin, an Aetherphone: held to gauge
my brother’s pacing, to prefigure his
huff-and-puff at my furlough — months ago,
   by wire, news of his son’s nativity:

no turbojet reply: not yet. Fretful
and rabbity, I tucked the telegram
into a vacant tin of saddle soap, burying

that between rows of tobacco in Workman,
South Carolina — my response awaits
a spade-and-bucket — I’ve grown so thin, I will tap-out
correspondence on my hips, I will not write:
for bashfulness: at daybreak, dining on filched eggs with the very poor, the hangdog — this morning, the cavalcade of dawn-light finds me gnawing raw onion: it’s sobering to think of you, small one, waking next to your father, as I did, Mr. Pants: a nickname I’ve chalked onto the tempered ribs of railroad bridges:

*Mr. Pants Will Inherit a Kingdom*  
*of Adoration; Mister Pants, I Regret*  
*Missing Your Arrival — to mollycoddle*

you, correcting your comb-over; I’d like that: to promise I’ll come for your exclusive company — my grizzled boots cast-off at the street — your thin-spun hands, my nephew, must be matchless: folded within your father’s lulling palms — one morning, smallest, I’ll come to you in the grizzle of plain-spoken noon-light.
Nine: What Will Be, in which He
Begins Again, Baja California Sur, México

And a man slumped, / attentionless, / against pink shingles // o sea
city) – Charles Olson, “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”

Abloom in the east:
the Sea of Cortés, the Sea
of Cortés and Bay of La Paz, love-lilt and glissading
between serenata and symphonic
billowing — a concussion,
breakers brought forth by the dormant surf.

Westerly: L. M.
Fish is chaperoned along
by an apostolic choir

of garland-crowned saints, a doting
presbytery of care, they parade
toward the shoreline, calling upon
a motorcade of his death-struck

companions and schoolmates: specters each,
they wait at the waterfront — all
ectoplasm, dust-bunnies, and motion-
picture shows — for his first steps

into the brine, drifting from current
to crosscurrent to outflow. His milk-toothed God
is so attentive: God the adoring
and unfinished frontier of what-will-be.

Neptune imperial:
the Pacific Ocean ferries
Mister Fish atop its coronal
robe-of-state, the clinging and un-muzzled
sea — and gulls and phantom-gulls
spy his watery longboat, its descent
toward the parlour of the sun. Radiant
gentleman, he isn’t lost or passed-on:
the Ocean and its vulturine shifts in mass
pilot him — in transit, abidingly, to the grandfatherly
West — L. M. Fish is washed to sea ——.
Mannahatta
Upon Arrival in this Metropolis — They Would Like
to Vivisect Him in Baggage Claim

His lower lip could be mistaken for a rasher of belly bacon — afraid of walking in the City alone — premonitions of pistol shot, of thieves harboring unwashed and gnashing teeth; his organs of speech dangle chapped and streaky — L. M. Fish,

a man who would like to take vows some day, boards the number 22 bus into Chinatown to look for work — to Pell street and into the Toy Apple Barbershop, Paper Tiger Restaurant and the True Love Wedding Center — to the roof of the Niagara Hotel, a brick-and-mortar cataract that plummets to the walk below, spilling over those who roar on bottles of Thunderbird wine at the hotel’s exhausted feet — 1956, jobless, reaching into a pack of Taiwanese cigarettes, Long Life brand, their filters encircled by rings of inky crows’ feet that rub-off on his fingertips — L. M. Fish who plucked himself right out of Savannah, who’s rented a canvas bunk seven stories below — the Bowery circling him, closing in — flophouses dug-in to lower Manhattan as fence posts, corralling their ruined swarm as teeth detain the tongue — distant, the neon arches of the Chrysler Building’s glassy crown rise from the static of this city — its spire loaded with German steel — a single fleshless spine — no hope for the Bowery — none for its nation possessed by brass knuckles and tarry steps. Mister Fish moves among New Yorkers, those who hold claim to this place, clinging to its hips — along Wall Street with ink spread across his index and middle fingers — presses them to his gentlemanly lips as he imbibes each passing building — a southerner recalling the decades-old myth
of stock brokers flinging their bodies from the ledges above — Black

Monday, 1929, suit coats flailing in the building’s updraft — the heels of their fine leather shoes make first impact, pressed to the sidewalk at terminal velocity, wallets spilling forth — lonesome Fish pictures dozens of them in mid-jump held aloft by the zephyr overhead — wonders if his rising breath would’ve lapped at their neckties on the way down — for him, modern L. M., justice and reprisal.

The Chrysler Building’s four eagle-headed gargoyles gaze in each of the cardinal directions — looking away from this metropolis, from its well-inked boundaries — beyond, the passenger liner Jacksonville Star that carried Fish here pulls out of port, beyond, the harbor, the Atlantic — he has not yet come to value the awkwardness of his step in this place — among the Bowery boys and bankers, beloved L. M.
I, Hornswoggler:

An Aeronautical Salon

As Mr. Fish tries on seersucker slacks, he notices that his feet resemble those of an alligator:

watching the nails curl over his toes, he doesn’t think of his fiancée pacing their bridal suite at the Hotel Cannonade — of the radio’s chimes that lend definition to the passing of hours — waiting, Janine dabs her thumb into a pot of Rosebud salve, smearing it onto the patches of psoriatic eruption that make a duotone map of her hands — Janine, lopsided and chapped; L. M., his ox-heart stare launched at the tailor’s assistant, cooing in the girl’s ear as she measures the breadth of his tapered arms — he promises satsuma tea and dancing at the Five Spot, to the Luxurious Champignon for quiet and bourbon, to coax her with his Southland drawl and Semitic chinwag — as Janine Lesser sits astride the windowsill, a small pile of her gown wafting toward Brooklyn, she waits for him — for L. M., Lieber Mahoney,
in his belatedly fitted duds — the suite’s transistor radio
dislodges president Kennedy’s address
from its germanium diodes: The exploration of space will go

ahead, whether we join in it or not and her
marriage is just the same; the ceremony merely launches
them into parliament with a caboodle

of catholic innamorati, past lovers — those entangled
in the orbit of each, they hover near
the ceiling as Sputnik and Vostok — a pair

of steely globes circumnavigating the suite’s cracked plaster ceiling,
they thrust

toward each other in concentric paths, nudging and petting
as they pass — soaked in radio transmissions
of gentlest mutual delight — they broadcast in twenty megahertz

crackles: Your machinations are velvet/You
mustn’t leave again — and as Sputnik withdraws from orbit, Janine
watches her fiancée pull himself up

the front stoop and into the hotel — standing as to receive
the groom in her wedding dress, its sunbursts
of lace blushing across Janine’s chest; she’s unready for him —

in the hallway, her mother barks
about the danger brought by seeing the bride early, struggling
to wrangle L. M.’s gin-drenched tongue
into order — the president asserts to the room: *Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it* — the groom’s electric copasetic swagger proceeds his nettle of eyebrows upon entry; L. M. Fish deployed into the gravitational pull of his wife’s laughing cradle of arms — sent aloft by the pull of the other, they splinter the roots that have held them terrestrial — fetters, gravity — both notice the invasive aroma of satsuma stewing amidst lace and sugared velvet; that it tempts him isn’t significant, not now — they ascend — ringlets of clouds form below the couple, obscuring their view — above, the operatic bellow of open space; the president rises: *as we set sail we ask God's blessing* — kisses, kisses.
To Inhabit a Vacuum — At the Other End, She Reveals Every Inch

Manhattan squats down around the beverage attendant — she adds eggshells to clarify the coffee in its dolphin-nosed dispenser — the Horn & Hardart Automat, late September, nineteen hundred and sixty-three, half a casserole of macaroni and cheese — stooping over to pick up a broken mug, her feet remind me of buttered dinner rolls — of the way my wife

Janine folds her toes in against the balls of her feet while dancing the tarantella in the kitchen — she does it alone — I watch — puts on a show for me in her flamenco dress — red polka dots on a white ruffled field, dancing lessons with an Upper Westside paddy named Finnegan — she dances it for me, to appetize, to whet — all legs and fattened ankles, tells me It’s meant to cure the dancer of tarantula bite, to force the venom out through her pores — I ask who’s bitten her, smoking a Chesterfield with no hands, the corners of my mouth curling in around it — a sleeve of her poplin dress falls down, revealing more than she’d like me to see — my proposition cleaves her face apart like kindling — she hasn’t been balling anyone else, not Bill Finnegan, not the kid delivering groceries from Lowell’s. I remain her husband, L. M. Fish, vacuum repairman — haunting one end of a mile-long tunnel — she dances at the other, well-lit as the fringe of her dress tickles the lips of others — she can’t see me, can’t drink-in my scowl. The attendant places the shards of coffee cup into a dustbin and I would like to disassemble her many-layered bouffant, leaving bobby pins
beside a claw-footed tub — I sit still as lemon pudding — offering to court her with a quiet sip from my own mug, I swallow even the grounds — raising it to draw her attention — the pressure of my stare breaks across her cheeks as a wave — the drag of its trough loitering around her knees, escorting her into open water — she is washed from the Automat and into Eighth Avenue — and I remain, loyal, upright, true-blue.
If He Makes for the Door — She’ll Drop Her Spoon,
She Won’t Follow

I troll a fork through my creamed spinach; folded into the Horn
& Hardart Automat — 977 Eighth Avenue, New York, 19 hundred
and 64 — no checkbook, no good haircut, 57 cents, name’s

L. M. Fish — the low brim of my porkpie hat slopes softly towards the buffet — my
wife sits over there, away from me and finds the time to separate the carrots from her
beef stew — we came here together, she doesn’t glance at me — I look away

from her — today she let me know that when we walk down Broadway, my one leg
longer than the other, that it’s embarrassing the way I look — she once sent
me a postcard from Miami Beach with an open box to fill-in the day’s

temperature — 84 degrees, strong bodies flung against a blue field — that was
years ago — now she’s leaving me and sucking the tapioca from her bowl
of pudding — I fetched it — I watch her — she grips the spoon in her lips

and allows its bowl to cup around her chin — looks at me briefly to see if I’m
watching her — of course I’m watching you — if the lights went out, I would stand,
my legs uneven, and I’d walk away — leave you here in darkness, sucking at that spoon.

I wouldn’t like for you to watch me leave — the turn of my heels — into the city’s
exhaust — if I could go quietly — go unseen away from you — I wouldn’t
pause to look back over my shoulder — we are not here together — I sit.
Portraits
My Wife as One of Many Mammals

A Sketch of Missus Fish

_Hush_ — the play of lights, of common
daylight and early evening
owl-light, is pitched onto
her knees,

against the palm of the Empire
sofa — our windows thrown open
to Stanton Street, bamboo shades
half-drawn

to dim the avenue and dull
its hustle-bustle — _hush_ — soundless,
Janine slumbers, her child snoozing inside.

They should be fashioned in marble
here: her stock-still chin cordially
stippled from stone, the luminous
chisel

tunneling for unborn promise,
O! what a scene to study upon
waking every day, for months; _but_
_hush_ — _hush_ —
It seems too much: the quietness
demanded by pregnancy, waiting
for soft entrance — the twilight now
a dark

gown — mother-and-child at rest,
iced-over, unmoving, breathing
like two petite beasts — one within
one more.
Without anyone sending
warning from the future, I’ve aged:
  the cuff of my shirt
rounds the arm, hangs hunkered — low,
as though escorting onlookers
  from forearm to wrist
to metacarpals: the five spines
  of the hand — unsteady
Ionic columns.

Over the span of days
composing a bridge of years,
  I’ve grown familiar
with mornings — with the gradual
  and routine
encrustation.

At fifty-four years, my arms
terminate in tributaries
  of digits — each
having developed its own
principality of flowerage
    and herbage,
leaking droplets — just droplets
    onto the drowsy
corridor.
Janine Lesser Hides Out in the Sacred Heart
of Daughterhood

*The Taxidermic Crows Digress, She May Soon Be as Her Father*

*At once;* she must return her father’s blunderbuss at once
to its rack above the mantle; *He’s on his way, Janine;* between
the two elephant guns; *Hurry!;* and below the javelina trophy
hung with its buttered gut of a neck exposed to the emptied
and re-wrought regime of mounted pheasants, Old World
hogs, a tortoise and feral swine

who lumber across the living room and into their walnut
wall-plaques each school day; *If I have to hear about this from
your father;* playing deaf, Janine takes counsel with her sawdust-clogged
companions; a hodge-podge of grouse holler on either side of the Great
Hornded Owl, huddling within reach of his feathered combustion of
wings the piecemeal jackelope

that forewarns her as she blows across the bell-shaped muzzle
of that weapon; she has no interest in its trigger, but; *Listen,
he is coming up the drive, Poodle;* she minds her mother, fitting
his rifle, his tool for scrambling the muscles of fowl, to its cradle
next to the bamboo-framed photograph of Vice Admiral Nagumo
and Commanders Fuchida and Shamazaki; she can’t imagine
their distance from Long Island
from everything *hers*
and pictures them sipping at cups of red tea in the kitchen, their
chinoiserie hanging droopily from carefully-constructed
mustaches; Mitsuo Fuchida would stand for a moment, stretch
himself out and dial the aircraft carrier Akagi, his jaw moving slack
around the words Tora, tora, tora! before returning to nibble at the edges
of daifuku and to discuss the Emperor’s hairline; nowhere near
the toppled masts

and horizontal bombers, the reach of their Tiger, tiger, tiger!; G’d
aft’rnoon Janine-bean, daddy tucks-in the label of her dress, Stay away
from those, and fits his hand firmly around hers, dusting the psoriatic
waste from her knuckles with his thumb; You know that’s not my name; she
takes her hand back, he leaves; Janine cups her hands together and imitates
how her father’s ship Oklahoma rolled
onto its belly, Leviathan stunned
with armor-piercing

shells, its radar mast flailing among schools of tuna, cables flailing
against leatherback turtles; just four years ago, he swam away
from his assigned ship, pressing his chest to a floating fuel line
as sailors burn and curl like trout, surrounding him; he begins
to speak before entering the living room, Y’know, Janine, I
would appreciate it if; but now she conceals her powdery
knuckles in the pockets

of her gingham dress so that he won’t care for her; neither of them say
anything, and he doesn’t finish his sentence; they are each tangled
in the worries of the other, of schizoid daughters and fathers who evade
capture daily; Janine will move away in the coming years, and, returning
home from City College she will light the gasoline heater in the hallway
and, after an hour, Please don’t light that again, her mother sighs the length
of the house, both drawing it into her
and pushing it away; *It reminds him* of the burning bodies, but she doesn’t say exactly that, rather she tosses
her head back as if a mare, towards her husband, sleeping, his nose
dividing a copy of Caesar’s *History of the Gallic Wars*; she extinguishes
the flame, its wick exhaling an unholy mustache of black smoke; as Janine
places the heater near the back door for disposal, briefly, faintly, her father
snuffles as to say
*I would have their cities in ruin, the remains*
salted as to pillage even sustenance, but I’m no Spartan:
it shows, in the way he tends to the dustless photo of those Japanese officers
before she wakes each Sunday morning, his veneration for the grand
design of their military barrage kept untarnished; in the way the taxidermic
caribou has been given voice as of late; her antlers have begun to grow
again; she dips her sweet old head as if to buck and calls out
for her herd; they have passed
from her; she whines
and the old man is awake.
Savannah, Georgia in the Manner of Saint Vaast

Patron of Children Late in Learning to Walk

To subtract his son from the hotfooted urgency
of the distant
crowd, Mortimer Fish clinches the leatherette
collar of the boy’s
plaid cruiser jacket — shoving as to propel the young
buck back up the stoop
and into his spot at supper, father’s head turns, surveying
the corner of Saint
Julian and Price, composed — steadfast as a golem.

Charging down the walk with Pops, the fawn of a boy
drags his uneven
legs along — a neighbor snatches him in her flour
spotted apron, held,
easeful within the ruffles of that house dress — the mass
of gazers scuttling
down Price Street — out of sight — Old Mort’ rounds the corner
at their tail, his boy
guarded in chantilly — L. M. peeks: the street is emptied.

At the crossroad: only a warm pair of high-heels, one
turned on its side, cast
away — vacated upon concussion — their owner keel-
hauling by the baleen
plated grill of a Studebaker — paired hopelessness
rising from the lane
as a sateen archway — founded in the saintly
light of his kitchen
window — deadlocked, young Fish is graced with timidity.
Hospital Suite
A Poem at Odds with A Number of Pathogens and Bacteria

L. M. Fish is Admitted to Grady Memorial Hospital, Atlanta

Night-time in this hospital is nearly stagnant and opaque
   enough to accommodate the swimming

   of sharks through the overgrown corridors
   of the neurosurgery ward, my room

a tidal pool — and, waterlogged, a nursing assistant peers
   over the mesh-topped privacy curtain, my

   very peepers falling across his mutt-faced
   pair of eyes: he’s come to check the vital

   signs — beside me, a helter-skelter knot of intravenous
   tubing, and my mother, who staggers in-

   and-out of waking — the nurse stares right
   at her, clamping down on the hand-pump

and allowing the blood pressure cuff to tighten, he lets
   my mouth warm the thermometer, two

   fingers at the wrist: measuring my pulse
   against that of the clockworks mounted behind

the bed, out-of-sight — also hidden, between trays of pudding
in the cafeteria, is the light that will

come to fill the next day, tomorrow, slumbering
well through the graveyard shift — and the nurse prays

over my veins — may they not give — leaving a bag
of saline at my feet, he lumbers

toward the hospital’s chapel, which hums
lonesome on the first floor, isolated, un-stirring:

a cold-water flat — and I stretch each eroded leg muscle,
every ligament to kick the IV solution

to the floor below my mother’s well-forged
bedding of borrowed chairs, to wake her — coarse

and thick-bodied, the night-flying twilight loiters at the sill
and, inside, I watch her: immobile in sleep

as my gowned body, sickly and mawkish, charges
against its long-pregnant infection — septic,

kinetic, penniless; colonies of staphylococci founded
to overthrow their host — I’ve become

contaminated — and as the small hours
are unwound from the clock’s springs, I’m unable

to make any noise, to wake anyone from anything — let them
rest, let my skull fill; I’ll hang a canvas foresail

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between the coattails of dallying Twilight
as it leaps from the sill, hoping to sail only few feet

behind — to escape, I’d fold myself into the passing of hours that mark
the day, just to get out of here, but Dawn wipes

the drool from its mouthcorners and raises the bathing flag
for the youngish wave-particles of light, who overfill

the dome of the heavens — they declare our solar system heliocentric,
and I — I, among the farthest-flung luminance, the most

faint glimmer from the center of the galaxy, I can
still hear the scraping of gills along the blindfolded corridor.
A Poem Lest We Forget That the Cosmos Seem Partial

“We know very little about the effects of wind, about fever, or generally speaking about nature and life. There seems, however, to be some reason to suppose that this particular wind and the particular fever to which it gave rise, must have been more than usually pernicious, because the chill turned to inflammation of the lungs.” – Marcel Proust, Jean Santeuil

“Possibilities for paranoia become abundant.” – Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49

Doctors Milk, Pighat, and Sturmunddrang point-out that the skull forms a natural helmet, prêt a porter, ready to be worn on a tot’s first strut away from the mama — and they ask why mine is heavy-set at one temple, about its paterfamilias,
as King Charles’ witchfinder general prompted an Englishlady to divulge the names of the imps infesting her: Pyewackett, Pocke

in the Crowne, Griezzell Greedigutt and Vinegar Tom — I tap at my own crown, a doughy overhang, which I explain must’ve been immaculately conceived, or impregnated by way of conspiracy, this queer pupa, this papilla: a junta of flagellates engineering skullduggery, schemery, connivery — the doctors sway, displeased — one prods at my head

like it’s a splayed oyster: the brainpan stocked as a bacterial jubilee, the sinus cavities topped-off with staphylococcus and yuck-yuck — a fraternal society gathers there, the Ancient
and Honorable Order of Infectious Agents, in tasseled
fezzes and jack-a-dandy trouser-pants, pantaloons — impatient,
they are breathing in unison, they meet only to overwhelm

their host — and I am, no, they are taking breaths with me and for
me — a swarm holed-up inside my lush membrane, flirting with the hoi polloi, the cranial dome warm as though a solarium.
A Poem in Search of the Greatest Soul Singer That Is

L. M. Fish Enters the Operating Theater

My bed gets to come along like a third-class sedan chair,
    the doors widened for the moment I’m passed from my room
and into the hospital’s arcade of tunnels — a surgeon
    has sent only one orderly to fetch me, to collect

my illness and ferry both of us into the operating
    theatre, one man to deliver my body to the cabal
of otologists and neurologists below — I can’t imagine
    an outside world, or even the interior of my chest

and head — and a man, who I know has cleaned himself
    for my benefit, shines his teeth and they break over my face
and he writes my name and his name on a list for reasons
    of record: how many inpatients must be lost between

the elevators and their date to be lacerated, assayed
    and calibrated — the anaesthesiologist ties
his jaw down with a mask, taking captaincy of my wheeled
    bed, and the doctors have collected as a flock, waiting

within the operating room — I slide from my bed, now distant,
    and onto a steel table — my own face is blessed by mask,
and a doctor, unseen, asks if I hear his voice, I nod, We’re giving
    you Halothane, can you hear me, say it — Halothane,
hallowed, or hollered,
    halved, hallmarked,
harpists, heavens,
    *Halothane.*

    *and the Supremes, The Temptations, The Marvelettes,
    The Chi-Lites, The Stylistics, Sly and the Family*

*Stone is good too, but the best Soul music gets*
    *is Gladis Knight and the Pips* — I am alone in the recovery room, and I tighten my cheek muscles, no nerve damage
to my face, and someone has placed my hands upon my belly — I move a finger, I exhale — and my synapses fire
and I lay here — a nurse turns the radio up, another

walks toward me, between empty beds — *Al Green* — I say — *Al Green is the greatest Soul singer alive, the best* — I’d been thinking of that for some time, my skull wrapped in gauze, she
stares right down at me and there is a world, again, outside.
A Poem Intended as a Survey of the Skyline

L. M. Fish Speculates About His Hospital Discharge Over Brylcreem

*Semper fidelis*, secret wound, *semper fi* proud
skull-opera with your post-op jangle — Ahoy, drainage; hallo,

healthful elegance — shaving my oaken beard,
which is also in recovery, I slough off the heat of entire

refineries for forging white blood cells, the dockyards
looking awful beastly, bone-weary — and I’ve hidden the soaps

and scalp lotions, the complimentary pastes both tooth
and hair, from my roommate Claude Beaucoup, his whole Yankee

head a bag of rat-fangs and anger-soot — today’s headline:
“Aerial Whatzits Buzz D.C. Again!,” which is less spectacular

UFO reportage than “Jets Chase D.C. Sky Ghosts”: I may,
myself, have been hospitalized by sky-ghosts, as surgeons

can’t quite say whatzit crawled up into my sinuses — *fascismo*
up-and-down the boulevards of my immuno-deficient organ

system, they’ve trampled all of the carriageways down
to the bedrock — though, either way, we have that bedrock

underfoot — and this is the final afternoon I’ll allow
my whisker-shavings to fall into the basin, for I shall

hang my enameled urinal from the towel rack and dress
    myself to be wheeled away in tweed-suited luxury — hallowed all day

below the stellar parasol of discarnate astrophysical
    bodies-in-bliss, and I am well-enough blessed to walk-out at the helm

of mine own feet, for the civil defense sirens to keep mum —
    in all directions, the vaulted sky looks free of flyingsaucery.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Matthew Reed Corey earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in English, with a concentration in writing poetry, from The Florida State University in the spring of 2002. He has chosen to pursue a doctoral degree in the field of Creative Writing.