Poetry Series

Ben Paynter

- poems -

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Ben Paynter

and everyone wants to be discribed as the guy with the eyes that burned like rocket fuel, eyes that burned like a jealous sunset or a lonely hell and no matter what he did, it couldn't be hidden

(fate)

it’s there you
know it, i know
it, hell
it’s been there
since who knows
when was
a young
boy out
the back door
screen porch
a
night
sky
laughing
at the
turbulence
the stars
chattering
with lonli-
ness, all the
lined up
prophets
pointing
to
etc…

Ben Paynter

3: 20 a.m.

you wake up
to darkness, find
you've fallen asleep
reading again
the 3: 20 train
rattling away
towards memphis
towards st. louis
to new orleans
the night goes
on and on and the
train rolls
heavy past, all
rain drops
falling from
a greedy sky
you wonder
when it all
falls
and fades
and withers
will they
remember
me

Ben Paynter

5 a.m.

a clutch of nothing, you wish
for the dream to return, to
feel the tip of touch and let
the fingers dance mad once

again, it's night and I am
climbing stairs to the attic
of my mind, where you visit
from time to time, I have

pictures wrapped in cherry
cloth and stones to throw
your way if you ever chance
to visit this place, again i

wonder where dreams go
to die, picture a room of
stone with one chair, a mirror
facing it, growing old, and me

repeating, repeating, wake
up, wake up, with lips and
mouth and how the mind melts
at this, just a moment

it begs to breathe and
coughs and I am four years
old and running to the river, you
see yourself in ripples, water

droplets pinned to earth, see
yourself calling out, wake
up, wake up,
the meter's running.

Ben Paynter

a blueprint of how it was

photograph this now
because I don’t think it
will last for very
long.

paint this picture with
night and a hint of
gray,
and hope
that it will stay for
morning.

record this moment
so I can play it back
tomorrow
when everything
goes back to how
it was.

and now
do not wish upon
my
star
unless you wish
to become it.

Ben Paynter

a form of looking

were you to know me, as I have known myself
to watch the night moon fall heavily alongside
the river, let the current take you anywhere as
my heart has led me by a tattered string, you

have not found me, why are you looking for
a part of me in the old churches, the dust books,
the lined stores and poor lit basements, I am
no longer there, but look for me at night-

time when the windows are curtains to the soul
and there is firelight where all the lamps are burning.
look for me in the quiet morning when the eyes
just waking from sleep, see only a portion

of my sins, I will not be where you have looked before
not in the doldrums, not in the cold bed I rose from
this morning, not in the whiskey, rum, or beer
I am not there, though I have been many nights.

It is a road, old cobblestone, a smooth blacktop
night running helter skelter into a blue morning,
to know me you must become a part of me,
the moon is down, the river's running mad again.

Ben Paynter

a goodbye

it was a black night it was
full of everything that fear
is made of or wishes to.

i asked for a chance to hold it
all like a spoken word in
a thunderstorm. it left with-

out leaving a note, even the
way the door slammed said
nothing, i felt a piece of me

break off i did, it's an old cold
town where you were, it was
sometimes a dark road other

times it was a sunrise on a
quiet water, there is now a
puddle dripping through the ceiling

after the rain came and went
and came again, i came and went
and now it's yesterday and you

are making the bed and there
is sunlight coming trhough that
smile of yours, it was a goodbye

day it was, the way you took
the paintings off the wall along
with the pictures, we were boxed

up we were, it's dark in here
without you and the madness
pours down like rain

Ben Paynter

a memory of

we learn
with mouth
teeth tongue
the way
it’s done
always we
are touching
the ice
smoke mirrors
swallowing
trying to
digest
the hopelessness
praying to
the sun
statues, gods
of our
fathers
all the
stones falling
from mountain
tops
i’ve got one
and it’s
you

Ben Paynter

a mockingbird, it isn't

It isn’t much I’ve seen,
just a couple sunsets
in the great grand
scheme of things.
Tonight I ask
where has the moon
gone off too.

It isn’t much I’ve heard,
just a city writing songs
on cracked apartment buildings;
it’s metal bow and streets of violins.
Tonight I ask
why have the birds
not returned for spring.

It isn’t much I’ve felt,
not shame for anything I’ve done
not guilt for anything I’ve said.
It’s bitter cold outside
there is a mockingbird
at my window blowing smoke.

Ben Paynter

a night spent unalone

leave me to my silence
and I will leave you to your laugh
leave me to my darkness
and I will leave you to your past
or let the silence take you
and let me share your smile
while the darkness is around us
if only for awhile.

Ben Paynter

a phone call

a moment of silence
the phone rings, you
are answering it
there is never time enough

to say hello, how are
you doing, the family
is alive, as am I, you
are walking out the

backdoor, a screen slams
onto wood, a frame you
were once a part of, where
are the candles lit, who

blew them out, silence
swallows another moment
words are perched on
the dry tongue, sullen

at the culmination.
three years and it’s
the click of the receiver
the connection running

through the wire into
the wall and the heart
is not a something
that loves any longer

operator, how much does
love weigh? a dial-tone?
a scale full of dust
collecting in my chest

Ben Paynter

a riddle

i picture you
on an old swing
writing mad poems
about leaving this
place

it’s all a matter
of who can
hold their head above
the water for
the longest

look little girl, it’s all
a goddamn joke, laugh
and it’ll all hurt less

the riddle of it is
the less we care about
it all, the more it all
seems to matter

we can’t have that
can we?

Ben Paynter

a seed grows without

you plant the seed, deep but not
too deep, water it enough, but
not too much, sit back and watch
the word alive take root, become.
the presumption is that without
can not last forever, the presumption
is that one word must lead to the next.
the progression, the life, the blood.
you make sure the seed has sun, but
not too much sun, shade but not too
much shade, the balancing act, the
way you pull the hat low over eyes.
the explanation is the want of
everything to a certain point, want
of nothing to a certain point. until
you have it. the irony, the cold. the
way the weeds grow tall without
anyone, how life goes on without
you, are poking holes in dirt, testing
the density, checking the water, look-
ing for stones, you are realizing you
were too careful with it all. you be-
came a fossil, buried too deep, down
too dry, too dark, you have practiced
yourself away. there is rain coming in,
you are watering seeds anyway, as if
to say, hurry
break out, break out,
I have not spoken in three days,
and need to.

Ben Paynter

a statue's dream

I walked a street I'd walked before
a road that led to home
and watched a lonesome bystander
who's face was hard as stone
impassively he gazed at me
and I stared back at him
and saw the answers dancing there
along with aging sin
I asked him, "Please where have you gone,
you have what I have not.
your eyes they sing a dreamers song
of answers I have sought"
he looked at me with hardened eyes
and spoke, but not to me
but muttered to the passing wind
of a place where he'd been free

now even when I too have aged
and cracks begin to show
as mindless rain gently erodes
I will withdraw below
to find this place where silence lies
and dreams are dreamt in vain
where knowledge makes no difference
and nonsense is a game
this place is not so far from here
not so distant after all
just past this moments fleeting thought
behind a hidden wall
where women dance and men they sing
about the days of old
where jokers jested laughing kings
and smiles weren't so cold

Ben Paynter

a study in gravity

and o my dear
the ears lay low, you're
humming the song of cold
feet dancing down
the street to keep
warm, it’s ok, all a
dream the closed eyes
you touch, the heart falls
down and around the
bottom of it all, the
great big well of wishes
there’s little to be left,
dried up with words,
night falls,
stars fall,
eyelash falls, we
only wish
when falling.

Ben Paynter

a walk through Withrow Park, and on

And in the orchestra of Withrow Park,
I've searched for meaning in the violins.
Within the strings I've held my breath,
within the breeze that tosses scarves

around. I've held my lungs closed tight
enough so only I can hear
not any sound of air or even
my own breath upon this life.

But here the night is slowly rent
and all the questions I have asked;
Is there meaning in this life?
Is there silence in a sound?

Bare themselves upon myself;
it's you I think of in this place.
Beneath the trees and city lights
and question more and more and still,

But do not ask a stranger what
he fears the most, not even that.
But ask him all he's ever loved,
and that will be a greater answer still.

Ben Paynter

a way of farewell

saw you walking by the blue bridge that crosses the river
not far from the dockyard where the boats come in
from Louisiana, from Mississippi, from Missouri, they were
low in the water and full, full, full. you were walking and it's been
four years now since it was I and you and this and that, all
done up with plans and ideas, grandeur got the best of us dear. I was
reading Kerouac and watching you like the old days
when we'd sit in bed and make plans until we got tired and
read till sundown. you were always reading romance novels
and I was always telling you that's not how it happens,
that's not how this world is designed, it's a dream and
you knew it, knew it better than I maybe, still you read
them and I read Johnson and Okada and Palahniuk
and you told me I was too bitter sometimes
when you kissed me. it ended after we walked by the
lake and you were picking up only the ugly stones and
throwing the smooth ones back. you were saying
the ugly ones were the only honest ones "they got guts" you said
and I told you I had to be honest and needed to leave. we
talked for a while after and you told me you were
in love again and I told you be careful and then I said I
was in love again and you said be careful and we were
both so careful that we ended up alone again for awhile.
so it goes and we kept in touch, then less and less until
it was a wave maybe a whispered hello in passing a
blush or glance when in public. it was what happens
when no one is sure what to say, what happens when
everything is gone, it was the sound of leaving. now you are
off I hear, heading east and making plans. you're in love again,
I want to say be careful but we don't exchange looks or
waves or breaths or sighs any longer. it's been four years
and I am sitting on a hard backed bench reading Yeats, reading "growing old" reading
"never give all the heart".
it's been four years and
I'm finally saying goodbye.

Ben Paynter

accusation, the

do not tell me how i feel inside
i have masks and masks
and many masks for my masks
and what you see is rarely what i am
were you to see me as the inside
of the mask sees me
touch my honest sorrow with cold
wood or stone or obsidian
as black as the soul that i am somedays
you would shiver and look away quickly
no soul can handle the deep honest
truth if seen so close at hand
you were talking today about
how i am never as sad as you
on the day our child passed away
you are sleeping when i am working
on the many masks that day takes
you were looking at my face
when you said it when you should
have been glancing at the ground
seen where the mask leaks
ten thousand tears
sizzling in the sand

Ben Paynter

all my pen ever says

there’s been many a night
in the darkness of
alone
where I sit with
the reaper's hand on
my shoulder

and before he leaves
he always says
see ya someday
but I never much
care because
he tells a mean
joke

and the lights of the city
are dimming
and the leaves on the trees
are changing
and the bell in the church
is tolling

and I can’t stop it

so many nights
dueling the shadows
and changing seasons
and all my pen
ever finds
to say is

is this it?

Ben Paynter

an old friend

nighttime comes, an old friend
moonlight on piano keys smile.
I do not know how long it’s been,
other than awhile.

let the dogs bark, let shadows
come and go to bed and rise.
there is nothing more than
washington street.
no yesterday,
no next time try.

the shops are closing,
now the lights are turned down low.
all the moths have found their death
I walk where I’ve seen others go.

the cities gone.
disappeared in all its metal rust.
the moon went round the river bend
the bitter clouds all vanish into dust.

this is an old cracked trail friend,
I walk
to walk
with you again.

Ben Paynter

and all the king's horses and all the king's men

the secrets out with a bird song.
this morning rose like a sunset
and everyone agreed that
something was ending.

and a red breast robin sat
high in a tree, preened his morning
coat, looked down on the world.
imagined himself a hawk.

and there’s a child outside my
door, begs to come in because
I haven’t smiled in some time,
and he misses kite flying.

and everywhere quiets slowly,
imagines itself somewhere, the
sun imagines itself a moon, this
hand imagines yours.

but nothing flies today, the
robin does not fly, the kite
does not fly,
and in a dusk down field
a hawk kills his prey.

Ben Paynter

and her face and her words and her promises

she says that my face
is the last she sees
before sleep takes her,
and she cannot sleep
without it.

but I know that
there are other faces
that float above
her eyes.
and the stars are out
tonight and I
need them to dance.

“have I said too
much” she says with
a halfhearted question
of love.
no, but you have not
kept your promise
and your promise
has not kept
me.

and all the while
the clock spins circles
on the wall
and a dog barks
at the moon.
and her face sits
resting on my
heart.

I say I need to go
I am tired
and her face
and her words
and her promises
will not let me
rest.

Ben Paynter

and the nights go

The rock a by
The babies in the treetops
Singing bird songs
Back and forth feeling
The moon glare on and on
The light becoming
A window
A wall
Two eyes staring
Up at it all

The rock a by
Of the wind in and out
Of the screen, in
And out of the lungs, the
Mouth, up and
Over the tongue
The taste of dawn on
Your lips

The rock a bye
The call of the whippoorwill
The footsteps of all
Your ghosts pacing
The sigh
The cackle
The laugh
The sound of a shallow
Breath.

Ben Paynter

and the sun slept on

And the sun slept on into the day
and lay buried deep
where the wisemen say
its gone to find some peace.

O hand me this, this tired star
and let it be thrown
with a spiteful toss so far so far
so far from home

Throw it to night and the darkness it craves
hurl it into endless space
watch it as it slowly fades
with an upturned face

O hope O hope you treacherous dawn
that promised light would come again
but you've grown dim and now are gone
Come night my cursed friend

Ben Paynter

and the world keeps on breaking

bricks break, spread patterns around picture
frames, spider webs leading up, down, in

and the sidewalk breaks below, with pounds
of tip toe run walk feet, the glass breaks

to a window down the street outside, inside
a heart takes a last breath, and everything

breaks or breaks away from something, I hold
on, watch swallows dive from rooftops in their

mad love making fall, plummet towards
where everything ends in a stone breath goodbye, I

look up from cracked pavement, over soot rooftops
the night breaks into dawn

Ben Paynter

and we watched as the moon turned to stone

Please smile your eyes to the rhythm
Of your heart and your heart alone
Watch as the night grows darker
And the moon turns into stone

You’re the dream of a dream of a dreamer
You’re the spell of a wizardly man
And the curse of a star that’s fallen
Into a dreamer’s hands

But a flower is only a flower
As long as the color can stay
And the morning comes in storming
To chase the night away

So sleep the sleep of the children
And steal the wise of the old
Then love with the fire of summer
And die with the winter’s cold

And you can curse the world for being
You can love and always regret
But don’t love for the sake of loving
Or love to simply forget.

But there was never a smile worth cursing
When the night was a light shade of blue
And there was never a time worth doubting
That the night was inside of you

Ben Paynter

and, i write a poem

I write a poem, cross it out
write a song with no melody and hum
to myself and make up a story
where a character steals the sun

and

I watch the jilted star swing low
get caught in a black satin bag
carried away to a jail cell with
no windows, and rats in the corner

and

I write a new poem, erase it
write a song with no melody and hum
to myself and make up a story
where the sun swings back my way

and

I watch the next night, hope everything
has listened to my words, hope that
the sun swings low, swings hard
lights up the shadows on the wall

and

the shadows lengthen from the light
cast by the streetlamps, cast by the
passing headlights, watch them made to dance
by anything but my locked up sun

and

the bars on the windows cast heavy shadows
the rats on the floor run at the first sign of
light, and this iron chair holds no tender touch
and the world turns again

and

I have no song for it

Ben Paynter

another night on the mississippi

The night’s a teacher and a song
A note held soft but not for long
That taught me quietly to lie
When night is humming lullabyes

When night is asking, have you seen
A nickel colored ocean dream
Within the night then have you stood
Within a cloud, within a wood

Then did you climb with silence down
To walk upon the melting ground
Then climbing deeper tried to find
The hole that is inside your mind

There is a riverboat tonight
Beneath this sky and lemon light
That does not come from anywhere
But travels on a breath air

There is a way, the captain spoke,
To see and sift but not to look
There are some nights, he quiet said,
The Mississippi runs ahead

To where, I needn’t ever know
Past New Orleans and all it’s glow
To where a nickel colored dream
Is everything that I have seen

Ben Paynter

as the days go

These words should not be read beneath
the light, not even the moons for fear
that they will not be seen as they should.
These words should be read in a quiet corner,
on a bench in the middle of desert
where the bus comes only once a year.

I have written these words in father's workshop
when I was small and all the world could be fixed.
The old rocking chair would rock again, the doll
with only one eye would see one day soon, at
night he worked and kept the night owls alive.

This part of me is not for the near sighted, the far
sighted, the seeing or the blind but for you who
have seen today and how it washed up on
the shores, how the shells and stones were not
as brilliant as yesterdays. It's all the years and days.

Gone all gone, out to sea on the ship that sank
in the harbor. You were on it and I called to you
for days and years and still there are nights
that you are next to me and the wind is always
whispering, "this one cannot be fixed", and
as the days go, it still has not been fixed.

Ben Paynter

A-Z

you lose a fight
then two, then three
tongues throw words like tiny stones
you drag home tattered bits of hope
and wrap your wounds with them

nights pass by
you lose another fight, lose
another friend, another night
the sky spits shooting stars
that never grant a wish

you go on
keep walking, burying bits of you
in basements and empty bottles
you hold a hand to your chest
make sure the heart’s still beating

then you win a fight
then two, then three
cement sets inside, no more soft
you wonder how anyone could be so weak
how cement could ever be liquid

how soon you forget
those stones have made
a mountain

Ben Paynter

before nightfall

sunset crashes down
on houses, I hear voices
of the day around me
the alarm clock from
this morning

“have you found
where you are going
to get gone, will you
go, choose wisely
this day is nearly ending”

I can’t choose
this day is over, the
voices are only
leaves falling
from trees

I walk into the sunset
still crashing down
into shadows, I hear
your voice above
everything

the sky’s on fire dear
we should run while
we still can

Ben Paynter

birds have wings of longing, i

the birds pinwheel across the morning sky
no songs today, no sharp melodies of theirs
spring has gone, and will not be back for
some time, and they demand a reason why

go inside, close the door, where winter has
already bitten the cold metal handle, watch
the sun try to warm the ice, try to regain
its control, try to shine more brilliant than

the ice that hangs from the rooftops, than
the headlights that pry at the coming night
while the birds pinwheel, try to escape sky
while the winter tries to overtake this land

and I cannot hold this season tight enough
I cannot make this feeling, this weathered thing
stay, it is too much at home being anything
but home, but love, but the place where birds go

Ben Paynter

blue

yesterday you said you dreamed
of swings and a carriage,
a little blue balloon
like a cummings poem, while
the sun lit up like a bar sign.
all gone.
the sun comes up, a dream.
and there is breakfast on the stove
she is saying what happened
the way no one is ever sure
what happens.
cut string.
lone balloon in the sky,
blue against the blue background
she lost it.

Ben Paynter

bridge burning

the campfire eyes
spin circle flash dance
and little sparks and stars
colliding with the brush
of long forgotten shoulders

remember when’s drop, down
like fall leaves, shake the dirt
with little bits of laughter, I leave
pieces of me to the wind
burnt ash and cinder smiles

pass the stories around
first times, college times, last chance
for no regrets and garage roof
dances with lightning rods
pointing up to darkness

I’ve held them for hours more
than anyone, praying for
a flash of utter
brilliance

Ben Paynter

broken feet footprints

my first step was a stumble down
back to where I'd come from, the
ground was the only place for me
it held the nothingness, now

I walk soft on boardwalks, tip
toe slats, light cracks ground
sinks the night with moon beam
song, sings lullabyes in darkness

it's the roads I've walked, the gravel
country, dirt paths, tree lined with
old picture frames, faces smile,
a grimace with crinkled toes

mother said pick one road
father said try many
I've picked this one

tonight there is no one, not her
not I, not a face that smiles, cries,
laughs to be held, there is steps and
steps falling into steps of past feet

broken feet walking broken ground

Ben Paynter

but i have grown and have forgot

you feel it in the down of up
and how it never hits the ground
how very early close it seems
and hovers softly with no sound

in thinking this, I'm thinking now
of this and that and friends of theirs
of those and these and all what ifs
balanced on a sad breaths of air

what little is, is little does
you were in and then were out
like all the up that then was down
like all the trust that then was doubt

it was the way you held your head
when speaking of your dreams again
the birds and gravity and flight
the way that it was this and then

the way that up fell softly down
(it seemed to be a bitter sight)
the way you said that all things change
the way your left became your right

I cannot say I did not see
the day these words were said begot
it was a sunny fifth of May
but I have grown and have forgot

Ben Paynter

but now i cannot stop the dawn

It's dawn again, I heard you say
Your tired voice spoke volumes with it's tone
I think you meant the world is black
When you called the moon a worthless stone

I know the light has left our day
I know the night has slowly touched our eyes
But all the seasons ever say
'paint quick, paint quick, this scene, before we die'

And I have painted on so many nights
Your face, your smile, at least what's left of late
Upon the ceiling's faint white tile
With a sky and a moon and a barren slate

But now I cannot stop the dawn
New days will come; I have no say in this
The sun will rise with another look
While the moons all die with a frozen kiss

Ben Paynter

but when the flames of fires touch your eyes

The leaves are gone; the world’s gone to sleep
The grass is brown the earth is dark and bare
And if you look beyond that silent peak
Silence is there

Then in the morning when the world’s young
When all the children still sigh in their sleep
Before the fog is lifted from the ground
Silence creeps

But when the flames of fires touch your eyes
When everything you’ve loved leaves you alone
When even moons refuse to wax and wane
Silence moans

So I will walk upon this sidewalk loud
And sing old songs that have no melody
In hopes that with this lonely clamoring
Silence leaves

Ben Paynter

create me a world

Create me a world with words my dear,
with pen and hand.
Where we can read love on river bed so clear,
written in sand.

Verses you create with ease my dear,
but without song.
Your words of love were carried off I fear,
and now are gone

For water falls and falling rain it seems,
are beautiful.
But to the falling drops and raging streams,
so horrible.

So slowly your created words wash out,
love from the riverbed.
Leaving love to flurry, fly like doves,
fleeing with dread.

Like all created worlds before, they,
fade to dust.
Leaving ne'er a word to say
about us.

Ben Paynter

dance quickly now

-
Dance, I said to the boy in the glass
Staring back at me with a darkening mask
Dance, I begged, with love and pain
Dance, please dance, oh dance again
-

Dance with the moon in the child’s eye
Circling the middle as black as coal
Dance quickly now, its leaving soon
Light of the moon and the child’s soul

Dance with the sun in the child’s laugh
Bouncing round off sinister things
Dance quickly now, with crystal prism
Scattering wisdom, melting wings

Dance with the rain in the child’s tear
Watching the clouds attack then stop
Dance quickly now, the storm has shattered
All that mattered, with a single drop

Dance with the hope in his stuttered speech
Holding it close for a later year
Dance quickly now, before he serves
Nonsense words, in a busted mirror

-
Though the moon may spin and the sun revolve
Though love still waits and the rain still falls
Though the child may laugh he glares inside
Exhaling life with a sudden sigh
-

Ben Paynter

day one hundred eighty three

said the calendar I flipped
through last night,
not counting the time
you left me
or the days I wondered
if you would
be back home tomorrow.

Now there’s sunlight on
my kitchen floor
a bird singing
on 14th street

a woman walks
the sidewalk below
my window, I pay
her no regard

they are clay
statues , a field of brown grass
there is no life
no passion
greater than yours
than mine

than the heart
that sings old Cat Stevens
songs at night

there is a bird
in my heart singing.
where have the days gone.

I have loved her
for some time now.

Ben Paynter

daydreamer

where did you go off to again,
out the window towards
the wrinkling hills?

a thousand years ago
they were younger and
we were not here.
there was this river,
an ocean over a
thousand miles south
of here, an eagle
with sharp talons dove madly
at fish, now there are
pillars crossing rivers,
footprints of man
dug deep, above, metal
birds are flying in
formation. there is order
and chaos and the wind
is not felt as much
in the city.

come dawn
you will find me here
in a foggy breath
of mourning.

Ben Paynter

escape

we drive miles away
gravel road, interstates fly by,
she has a tattoo of a dove
on her hip, in flight

there is nowhere to escape
to, this road is littered with
road kill, a dead dog lies
two miles from a dead cat.

death covers death, counts
the miles to my own, exit ramp
she wants some air that
isn't stale

this air is never clean, this
sun is never bright enough.
everything is trying to escape
everything.

Ben Paynter

everyday night, an

the window’s open, it’s
another night, a baby cries
from the heart of a house,
a dog barks,

seconds fall into seconds
hands hold with tick tock
patience, the neighbors
walk the block again

the window’s open, it’s
another night, the TV
plays war stories it’s
all played out before

seconds fall
into seconds
the streetlights
form shadows

Ben Paynter

experience, a religious

At church again for the first
time in nearly a year I watch
myself when I was younger
as if it’s me without the years
and how intently I listened
to the stories back then. It was
always a miracle. The fan spins
on the ceiling above
it’s hot as hell, the air sits
quietly refusing to move. A man
sits with his wife and son two rows
ahead of me, he is occupied with
the sight of a young woman wearing
a low cut dress and sin dripping
from her still damp hair. The pastor
is talking about judgment day
but can’t stop looking out
the window. It’s all coming
back to me.
A loaf of bread, a goblet of wine.
The world came from nothing,
it makes sense
when you think about it.

Ben Paynter

explanation, an

it was a feeling
in the way the wind
slip trickles
through your hair
crashes lovely on
your face, your eyes.
ebs quiet down
the spine, the soft flesh
of the tongue
the bite of the
teeth that
gathered up and
whispered how
very quiet it's
gotten to the point
i needed noise to clear
the head,
the heart,
shake loose
the words again.
it was a feeling
in the way
the ceiling stares back
with love, with anger
you trying to sleep
next to me
the words are
there,
but
tortured
heated and cooled
and pressed,
packaged with no
good way of
saying any
of them, what
to say, it
didn't leave, not
the love, the
passion, the
past that got
us here, it is
a feeling
in the way
the clouds
cover the moon
and the darkness
it surrounds me.

Ben Paynter

far enough

It was the lamplight
the taciturn shadows mocking
each other.
The long gone looks of everywhere.

It was how the moments became
chalk marks on sidewalks, colored
life unframed.
Painted concrete painted with cracks.

It was the sound of your footsteps
walking away into shadows
of everything.
The stars looking on with old light.

Can you run forever dear, or at least
for as long as “far enough”
means.

Maybe just this once.

Ben Paynter

father reading the morning paper

haphazard photographs flash smiles in black
and white, show old men smoking life away

I read news printed in dark ink
pasted across nothing paper, filled space

of all the world's emptiness, tied up with
strings, placed on doorsteps, framed for

a later year's wall, no gray, that's all
I've ever cared about, either all in

or nothing at all, smoke and smoke
and die, or don't and live awhile longer

don't just smoke two, don't just print
a lie and dress it up with color, go

with all the grace of a jackhammer
pound the world home with a pen

yes sir
no sir
i will never be a you
sir

Ben Paynter

fleeting time

The night it came,
and I came too
Like falling rain
or morning dew
And slipping down
I found a seat
To set and rest
my weary feet;
The chair it rocked
and as I sat
The ticking clock
went forth and back
The silence came
and listening I
Played at this game
with noisy lies;
Until the time
in circling round
Wasted this life
without a sound

Protesting I,
rose from the chair
With but a sigh
to rend the air
But not a word
from mouth did come
No silver truth
from rusting tongue;
No say had I,
in silence time
Save simple lies
professed in rhyme
I sat back down
and breathed back in
Made not a sound,
and danced with sin;
The night it passed,
as someday I
Will deftly wave,
as time flies by

Ben Paynter

for a girl

there's been many days when all the world's black
when i have hid it with a breaking smile
and you have shown me just for what i am
a broken child

but now i thank you with a summer grin
for all those days you weathered through the rain
knowing that it's you who gave this heart
a brighter flame

Ben Paynter

for the little boy who makes me feel old

There’s a young little boy in the old town square
Who sits so quietly
And looks at the sun and the dust in the air
And he never smiles for me

And if I could I would wish for that little boys face
To break into a grin
But it cant, and it wont, let the little boy pray
O lord let the smile win

And his face is a cloud and his eyes are the rain
His hair a shade of night
And he bats at the smiles with an old mans cane
And wishes the stars weren’t bright

And I’ve tried and I’ve tried and there’s others that tried
To open his eyes and his mouth
But for reasons unknown and reasons beside
His heart was the one stayed south

And its south where I sit on many a day
On a bench by the river park
And I wish and I wish in horrible ways
For a single breath of dark

And parts of me sit with that boy in the square
And they sit so quietly
And look at the sun and the dust in the air
And neither will smile for me

Ben Paynter

forgive her, she knows not what she does

You are anger now and have
become anger through anger.
The tight-lipped woman blowing
smoke into my lungs
and soul. It’s foggy now
and sits silently inside me.
You are what I hate and what
I love, a cloud that hints at rain
but never does, a woman with
two mouths and two hearts
to match them, growing
always growing, a small tree
inside me where leaves fall.
Seasons change dear, but the tree’s
still there and so to the anger
quiet as a virgin bullet, I cannot
chop it down myself before
it pushes out and through
eyes, a nose, and a branch splits
the tongue and there’s a knot
growing into a hard heart. You
are the axe, the down swing, the
feeling of letting go, the burning
fire that ate up the anger
in the night.

Ben Paynter

forgive the little things

forgive the little things
that hold no consequence
like the
cold feet
and raindrops
that tip toe
on wet pavement

forgive the rainbow
after the storm
for smiling too
brightly

forgive the glare
of a jealous man
without a heart
just like you forgave
god

forgive the little things
like the flowers
forgive the drought
and the clouds
and the romantic man

forgive the little things
the large things
the nothing things
the barely anythings

and I'll forgive your eyes
for stealing mine

Ben Paynter

from behind this dusty window

yesterday unraveled into a sky that looked like
a bruise, and we call it today because it lacks
originality and life, and the sun still tries to shine
from out behind this dusty window pane

say dormant is a good word for life, and I call the
door that, the dog that, the people walking past
beneath my window that, and everything is
just a little too much like last season’s weather

call the dog back from chasing the squirrel he
won’t catch; as the sky bruises more darkly
while the sun begins to hide behind the world
while I begin to hide behind the world

Ben Paynter

funeral eyes and goodbyes

the world's last look
at it all, will not be
the way we tend to
look at something
for the last time

it's always a drawn
out affair, these goodbyes
these hands shaking
other hands grasping
at other hands

where they go you can-
not follow them to that
place in the sky or
down below, tears
can follow a river bed
but you cannot

what was it you were trying
to accomplish with that
kiss of death

when the world ends
there will be a bright flash,
an honest sigh from inside
a blind man seeing light
for the first time

Ben Paynter

god of wine

you stink of wine
where is the sweet breath
of the gods the poets
speak of, write about
how the wine is worshipped
like a golden calf.

flowered words to match
the ivy covered walk-
ways no one saying
“you have never loved”
in their poems with
sweet breath.

climb the mountain, the
greeks worshipped it, held
it in such reverence they
drank to it, poured out
a drink for the god’s each
time they kissed.

honor me with the way
you take a drink, hold
it between your teeth
and your soul, it's how
the angels said
goodbye.

the lights are out, I
climb the shallow steps
there is a red stain on the
carpet, these walls are
broken glass, I have never
loved and don’t plan
on it.

Ben Paynter

grandfather's advice

Maybe had I never lied
And spoken only truths or parts
And in this then deceit had died
Still faith would battle doubting hearts

Maybe had I never loved
And risked my heart in fate’s romance
Or maybe it is just because
Life asked of me a simple chance

Maybe had I never fought
And let the world toss me about
Then what I am and then were not
Had found in me a weaker route

Maybe had I never learned
And let fill mind with ignorance
And life with furrowed brow concerned
Had swiftly turned indifferent

Maybe I were not so old
And life would laugh at death again
Instead it is, or so I’m told
That death will soon become my friend

Or maybe I had never lived
And wasted life on these what if’s
So with remaining breaths I give
Advice, the words, don’t end like this

Ben Paynter

he smiled, i

eventually I think we will sink from
all the tears the icebergs leak from the polar
caps, and the radio man will say “today
we’re sinking with a chance for sunny

skies later”, always later while the land
gets smaller and smaller and the time grows
later and later, until the face grows weary
with wrinkles, take the advice of the

beggar, hold your cup, ask for a little change
hold that face straight, hope the others don’t
see that hint of a smile at it all, hope the
others don’t ever see that imploring smile

Ben Paynter

here again

I am barefoot.
There is ice between my toes
so hot it's cold, so cold
that flames have begun
to flicker below me.

There is a porch
and sunset on the horizon.
A dagger forms on the
brim of my hat. In the back
of my mind,

I am here because of you.
At the edge of it all

there is a cliff and beneath
a step to a path that
I have walked before.
It's all a matter of what
the voices will say today.

There is a question
buried here in this eye
a picture of a month
ago, a step

arms thrown out grasping,
legs alongside the ground.
A man falling into
an imprint.

Ben Paynter

here in this silence, i

I like the shops when everyone is gone
the library when no one is reading
the church when nobody is praying
I walk in, tip toe, careful not to disturb

my friend, and it is all a silent poem
a novel about to be written, a blank sheet
a prayer to no god because the soul
is empty, the page is empty, the stores

are empty, this heart is empty, but
in the silence of these, these bits of home
these pieces of life, these desperate
graspings, something in me, shouts

Ben Paynter

honesty

the only honesty
i ever saw
was a blind man
giving the finger
to the sky

Ben Paynter

hush

What is your name life,
I have asked this of you
in the silence after the storms
while the rain still falls
but not as angrily, nor with
such hatred that it whips the
stones to sand.

What is your name life,
it’s this word and the next
line of a poem that gets to me.
The way the meaning is always
one letter away from slipping
into the deep down depth
of it all, an infant ocean.

You have not answered
though I have held you
on many nights while the moon
is eyeing the world inside me.
I have howled in my own way
a whisper, maybe, to some
it is a song to me now,

sing along once, I dare you
to sing once, it’s a devil’s dance
to hold this question alive
with hands that do not obey
the mouth. I hold it now
without feeling, a choke hold
so no sound comes out.
Your name is silence.

Ben Paynter

i

have followed, not wanting to
the bitter man that traces telephone
wires across the land to the hills
that wake the sky each morning

and walking i have seen more dust
than a man should, drank more than
a man should, felt less and more
than anyone should, the stars

are always out, that fact
hit me hard and made me
wish that it was always night-
time in the low down country, so

i call home anything that feels
like walking up a gravel path to steps,
any waking moment where the moon
is full of all the answers to the bitter

man inside of me questioning it all.
i will tell you, at the end of the road
the wires travel to a small house high
in the stone snow mountains, a hermit

is hiding there, he will not talk
to anyone, nor will he call to you,
there is a silence
that cannot be spoken of.

Ben Paynter

i am but not

I am staring out the window
it is not a window but a
view of the house next door
and you are in it but not
there by choice. There are
ways to say things without
saying them. The glass
is fogged by heat, it is
not a burning warmth but
a gasp, you were a year or
a day. A white hot moment
that passed quickly. How the
mill turns and you are singing
I think, not a song, but a thought
and it’s a long ways from
the dirty floors that are not
covered in dirt but with
old dreams long since dreamt.
I am watching you but it is
not you I am watching
only myself, this time, holding
the bible in a limp hand.

Ben Paynter

i cannot write when all is well

i cannot write when all is well
i need the grins that miss a tooth
i need the tolling of a bell
and for a little blackened truth

so sad the worlds bright today
so sad that words will never come
without a darker shade of gray
and the setting of the sun

but let this go this brilliant sky
this will not help me fill this page
and give me storms that never die
and i will write with brilliant rage

and leave me be this love you say
what will i write if all is well
i need a darker shade of gray
and distant tolling of the bell

Ben Paynter

i have believed and yet have not

I have believed and yet have not
and felt the bullets from both sides
who say it's harder to believe
while others say it's truth denied.

And I have sat in churches old
with prayers and with folded hands
and watched the weary faces bow
in honor to a greater man.

While later on in later years
in lecture halls I tried to find
a reason for each breath I took
a piece to fill my darkening mind.

But it wasn't Gabriel who came
nor Darwin with his evidence.
Just silence in the shape of this
a head in hands with reverence.

And what, what really can they say?
That a man has tried with all he is to pray?

Ben Paynter

I Love You Most when I Do Not

Today I cannot love, today
there is a wall that's built, I see
and toss a brick myself.
One atop and mortar it.

Today I cannot love, today
the wind is strong and blowing me
away, the birds are flying backwards.
Forth and back, I follow them,

and standing, still not moving here
or there. No movement even
had I wanted to, it's here
I see you walking towards me.

Today I cannot love, today
it's battlegrounds and blood
and words and bullets
circling the heart.

In one of us the ears
sit crying in the corner.
The other lost his tongue;
it killed itself in spite

But I am sure the moon has asked
to leave the world and go off
to be its own, but what my love
would night be like without a moon.

Ben Paynter

i loved a lady of the night

here it lies in the city streets
where candles lit atop their posts
sit with the vultures in the sky
it's what i fear and need the most

what can you say to when they ask
when the strangers cast their glance
and mothers quiet walk away
and even gypsies stop their dance

'where will you go when we have gone
when all you are a hollow stone
that holds a promise deep within
a promise held and kept alone'

it's not the silence that i fear
not dark nor any shade of night
but all that you have left me with
an empty bed in the morning light

then to the gypsies who don't dance
and to the mothers far away
and to the strangers with their glance
their withers here a lonely day

now here i sit on concrete stoops
while moons and suns are circling round
alone i sit with all that's left
the dawn is breaking from the ground

Ben Paynter

i nearly married an actress once

The actresses
talk Shakespeare
on park benches
with their cigarettes.

But I find them
all too monotonous,
all too clouded
with smoke.

They say, “look
today I am
someone else”.

I wonder,
tomorrow
who will you
be,

A child?
A queen?
An image of a woman
With an apple?

Ben Paynter

i shot a bird with an arrow once

I shot a bird with an arrow once
one sad and sunny day.
It wiggled a bit and jumped just twice,
and then lay still as May.

I sat and wished it live again
until I saw it's note,
it said 'Dear sir, you got me good'
and that was all it wrote.

So when I pass you'll find my tomb,
engraved when I have gone,
will read ' Oh Death you got me good,
whats taken you so long'.

Ben Paynter

if forever had a face

spent last night
alone
reading all the old poems
I’d written
her.

one said “I love you”
another
”where is the sun”
and on
and on
until
the bottom
of the pile.
where
the final poem said
“goodbye”

and if forever
had a face
its hers.

Ben Paynter

i'll let the winter blow

It’s a cold cold morning out there
But I, I wouldn’t know
My door is locked
My windows shut
I’ll let the winter blow

And there’s ice this time of season
But you, you will not be
The winter winds
The raging snow
Or ice inside of me

And I’ve heard my heart is frozen
But I, I wouldn’t know
My door is locked
My windows shut
I’ll let the winter blow

Ben Paynter

in all of this

these roads are empty now
swept brushed up by the
cold running wind, there
isn’t any soul to speak of

or sing, the black birds laughing
on dew dropp wires I am
playing the court jester
entertaining thoughts of you.

it’s just like anything, the
blues guitar sings softly
in the background of my
mind’s eye the curtain tears.

sew it quick, sew it quick
don’t let them see the dew
drops slip sideways off
the wires, the jester in

sack cloth, mourning, mourning
the smile ran off dear birds
these streets are empty and open
enough to swallow you whole

Ben Paynter

in ice lies fire

this floor is frozen with cold
and
the windows have
jack frosts
artwork
written all over
them.

while the people outside
my glass
walk like icicles
taking their
first steps
and the trees stand like
brittle statues
forever on
task.

my world is ice
and cold
and a shivering
hand.

but

there is warmth here
though
and they will never
know
that.

buried
way
down
deep
in the glow
of my sputtering ember
heart.

lies fire.

Ben Paynter

in the midst of my sins

i wanted a poem
like some book
taken down and
dusted off opened
up like torn pages
from some script
“it should have
been written” like
this', I wanted a
poem with thick lips
big eyes and a
dove tattoo, early
words rising from
a throaty voice, two
drinks in, I wanted
a poem like this, hands
twisted sweaty
with praying, eyes
tight shut from
the light, I wanted
a poem that said
“it’s all been done, you’re
just sinkin ships son”
photographs, floating dead
in bathrooms, bedrooms
my sins pulling at
my coattails, i
wanted
a poem.

Ben Paynter

ingredients

i've smoked, drank
been with and
without women
been back and
forth across the
dry country
dusted off
my shoes and
went to school
settled down
with a nice
girl, read
the news on
war and politics
stayed up all night
writing
everything I learned
but that
don't make me
a poet.
nothing
does.

Ben Paynter

isolation

watch the floors long enough
they become crystal balls,
watching feet walk in
and out of lives
a dropped necklace, a child
crawling till he stands.

watch the walls long enough
they become windows
and doors to other lives.
the photos from a year ago,
cobwebs forming shadows,
a bolted door is just another wall.

watch the world long enough
it spins itself dizzy
and circles, circles like madmen
dancing, a plane trying to land.
bubbles rising, from down deep
a scream.

Ben Paynter

it always rains in Brooklyn

there are matters of the mind
that twist and bend and leak
like old pipes long patched
and rusted yellow through.

I have tied and retied, patched
and repatched, held a bucket
to collect my sorrows, told
myself it always rains in Brooklyn.

you are my lady of the rain that
no patch held and lept
like a waterfall in the back
of my mind, down beautiful

shadows clinging together
past the pails of years and the
sorrows of a tired man, the
ceiling fan’s a thundercloud.

what you are is matters of
the mind and all that matters
is the romance of a boiling rain.
pipes burst, a heart beats mad.

Ben Paynter

it is rain

rain on down and in-
to the tin roof soaking
up walls and cracks
an open window
stayed with an old
bible I kept for just
this reason, open, open
the old sap wanting
to run with the water
I let you in, in-
to the book, the window
even the cracks, what
I wanted was the sound
of rain come tumbling
on down into it all
the darkness filled with
musk and mold, cracks
forming new cracks
I let you into all this
the genesis, the black
rot inside you saying
"we filled what we
wanted and left a
hole, but we made
sound brother, we
brought the moon
on down."

Ben Paynter

it was

Well after midnight
driving highway 89.
The night was in and
out through my window,

I thought of Creeley
“what is emptiness for but to
fill” and turned
the radio up all the way.

There was the stop sign,
the old cattle shed,
the river walking it’s way south
it was, that kind of night

I learned all of it then.
In that brief moment
when the wind stopped
and retreated out the window

I thought of you. And how
sometimes when you least
expect it,
a flower blooms.

Ben Paynter

it was a lonely realization

it’s the small things that create, otherwise
this morning is inconsequential, the sun
is only rising to sink again, an anchor
a falling star, its curse, repetition

it has rained now, ever since when
and the drops fall in patterns, beat
morse code letters into rooftops
the heavens cry their tears, forever

would not be forever without a day,
this morning would be nothing without
the sun, everything needs everything
or else it isn’t, there

is congruence in the faces
of unimportance, the line is drawn
with water slipping down the window
with this hand tracing your face

Ben Paynter

it was a very nearly lie

where all seeds grow within without
whatever may sat there to pout
and rest in silence as the sun
told stories of the things he'd done

while everything was this and that
and worlds went by while whatever sat
the trees began to dream of truths
but bore whatever useless fruits

the red green apples tasted sky
and purpled pears began to lie
and man begat what words he could
from twisted branches made of wood

whatever he was, was made of gold
or so the story has been told
or so these words have twisted round
like sighs that settle, lonely, down

he was a mountain than a cloud
he was whatever wasn't loud
and heard the wind and silent breeze
learn to lie from the orange leaves

whatever he was, a man or beast
a tiny pea at a wedding feast
who heard the fork lie to the spoon
who swore he heard it from the moon

he watched seeds grow within without
block the sun and spread their doubt
and tried to pick these clever weeds
but roots grow deeper than the seeds

this part is true, or maybe not
like stories of the stones that talked
like all things whispered quietly
whatever may got up to leave

it was a very nearly lie
that everything flew by and by
and whatever was left of right and wrong
was made into a lilting song

where all the ever dreaming trees
fell down the mountains breaking knees
and all the truths of men fell out
from pockets sewn with threads of doubt

Ben Paynter

it was love that let you wither

To have them know that even
When it pours down rain there’s
Still dry patches down beneath
The cloth and skin and bone

And you can tell them, where
Or when they ask why all
The world’s soaked heavy through
And they are dry as desert lonliness

You can tell them young ones it’s not
That I didn’t want you to grow tall be-
Come some green eyed beauty with a
Way about her, a him or I, it was

The fear of too much rain, the drown-
Ing of a soul at sea, the misery of
Watching a smile sink beneath the
Waves is why I held the tide at bay.

To have them know that even
Though a body floats it’s only after
The life’s gone and the heart is
At the bottom of the sea.

Ben Paynter

it was my uncle soul sifting

it was my uncle soul
sifting in a leaned back
all the way chair down
by the old family lake
taking trout we spent
all day chasing through
reeds and lilies, dodging
loons and other birds
trying to outmaneuver
them in their own home
it was my uncle soul
sifting, lifting trout
entrails, rinsing off
blood and fish and dirt
in the cold lake water
telling me it used to
be a game of his, how
many fish he could trick
before the sun set.
it was my uncle soul
sifting, telling me his
favorite night was years
ago and how he had
only caught one lone
rainbow and was
sitting there, gutting
the heart out listening
to the radio the night
Roy Eldridge died.
it was my uncle soul
sifting, saying he forgot
how many fish he caught
just sat there listening
to old dead Roy play
while the fish cooked
over his burnt coal fire
it was the only way he
knew how to say
goodbye he said, and
tonight it’s me out
there soul sifting, lifting
bits of crumbled dirt and
dust, feeling a part of me
is out there still, the
big blue welling up
inside you, the hole
gone and filled up
with sky.

Ben Paynter

it's in the blood

you want me
only because you
wanted me
a year a month
a day ago
it’s in the blood
the way it
boils up
and tells us
go for that
one, it’s in
the blood
the way
it beats and
goes on beating
how you said
I’m not sure
anymore
and
knew

Ben Paynter

kind of love poem

there is the way
you sleep soundly
by the window with
the moon haphazard
crawling in between
the blinds. I asked you
before falling off to
sleep to please close
them "I can't sleep
otherwise" I told you
"it's too bright", now
I can't close them, it
would mean waking
the dead, instead I
am looking at old
pictures from the time
you told me, this
wasn't a forever kind
of thing, now I'm
turning off the light
pulling up the covers
to your chin, thinking
irony, thinking another
February come and
gone, thinking
thinking.

Ben Paynter

left with the night and the known

A tired man on a bench once said
all that once was good in life lies dead,
dead as sun in the setting glass
cold as the dew on the morning grass.
And the bottle in the bottle, of the bottle of the man
whispered to him and held his hand.

I need some sleep the man then said
with a heavy sigh and a shake of the head.
Dead as the weight, the weight in his eye
the look of the cursed before they die.
And the voice of the voice, in the voice of the man
spoke to the bottle of the bottle in his hand.

And the birds about took up their flight
flying from here and out of sight.
Leaving the man with the night and the known
and then I got up, and left him alone.
Goodbye waved the hand of the hand of the man
to the shadow of a dream that had got up and ran.

And many a time, a time or two,
I've stopped on a bench to tie my shoe.
And the birds all around have up and flown
to all the places that they call home.
And the soul of the soul, in the soul of the man
has reached for the stars with a faltering hand.

Ben Paynter

lesson, this

I was told growing up
to make sure and read
the classics, least one time
before you die, mother said
this all while cooking oat-
meal for breakfast, father
tying his tie for work at
the counseling center, then
it was make sure to learn
your numbers well, this
said while father counted
out the bills, making sure
there was enough for
the next week, years
later it was both of them
sitting at the kitchen table
lecturing on love and how
to find it, this after talking
with father the previous night
about a man who couldn’t
stand his kids and was on
his seventh wife
and counting.

Ben Paynter

let the fog roll in

Let the fog roll in I say
From the mountains, and no tongue
Has told a lie it didn’t like
Nor sang a song it hasn’t sung

Let the fog roll in I say
I’d rather have it here than there
Atop that mountain with the snow
Where only birds can cut the air

Let the fog roll in I say
The sun has grown a boring tone
The streetlights make the shadows dance
And make the streets seem less alone

Ben Paynter

letter #1

if they ask
what made me
split town, run away
down here,

it wasn't
the November weather
the birds all flying south
how our words became
nothing more than
smoke, a breath
of morning fog, no
nothing so poetic
as that,

this was a new cold
fear, that wrapped
itself around me,
a dark room, a hand
with a steely glint
of knife.

it was the talk
of settling down,
waking up in
the same bed, setting
two forks, two knives,
lighting a candle
for some light.

can't you see
i can't see
more than a piece
of tomorrow, shadows
of yesterday that
made some sense.

if they ask
what made me
split town, run away
down to here
tell them I have not
written enough
mad love poems
to die
by the book.

Ben Paynter

like a man to alone

the sounds from outside mix with the
hammer in my head, mix with the rain
on the roof, tap, tap, drip, drop,
so much noise the robin can’t be heard

and I’ve got a nail in my head for the hammer
a song in my head for the rain but no
place for the silence, no place for that
robin, no place for anything of color

so I pace the floor, lie up late restless in
my bed with a spring in my back with
a broken string in the rains orchestra
and I make up for it, tap my feet on the floor

until the foot grows tired but not tired enough
for sleep, not tired enough for the robin song
I lay awake with an open ear pressed to
the pillow, inside another string snaps

Ben Paynter

little milly

Little Milly with her
ancient dress and hurricane hair,
walked with a limp
and talked with a smile
as big as the moon.
Little Milly danced to
the sad faced stranger
picking a penny from
the walk where she'd walked
a moment ago.
Little Milly with her
waning smile and melting
eyes, spoke to the wall.
'You're lucky', she said
'if you're lucky at all'.

Ben Paynter

living, too late

bridge jump,
that's what she did
when she was just
a little girl

me, I read books
on war, on politics,
tried to be old
when I wasn't

run away
with me, that's what
she said three months
from a year ago

me, I stayed home
planned life down to
loan payments
and picket fences

now what, I can't
save her, not even
god can
she is already
gone

Ben Paynter

marney, the story of

In the suguargum forest of the wandering way
Ran helliums and helvums and wasters at play
And all of them talked in the same sing song way
And all of them, all of them, all of them played

Some called it heaven and some called it life
Some called it sugar and some called it spice
And laughing and laughing they all called it nice
All of them, all of them, but Marney's wife

Wellfore and hereto the happiness ends
The devils come round and round and again
And Marney is dry as a long dead friend
And all of it, all of it, all of it ends

And dear Marney's wife she grieves with a sigh
She plants her flowers on hills near sky
And she speaked to the gubberfly up in the high
She speaked, she speaked, she speaked with a sigh

Said hellium to helvum "it's a sickening sight
Watching this beauty that isn't too bright
It's darker, he said, than a garbled moon night
And laughed and laughed and laughed at the sight

But Marney's wife stuck her thin nose in the air
Peppered her floor and salted her hair
And gave not a thought to the way that they stared
And none of them, none of them, none of them cared

He isn't a saint she would sing before bed
While painting her lips a deep purpled red
While watching the door with her pretty eyed head
But Marney, but Marney, had up again fled

And moonbeams went by in the sugargum wood
And everyone aged as everyone should
And everyone played as much as they could
All except Marney, Marney just stood

It wasn't a thought that crossed Marney's mind
Not chopsticks or seashores or old father time
But a song she had sung with a lilt and a rhyme
And she sang and she sang and she sang in his mind

It wasn't the heart that had made him run out
He said to himself while choosing his route
But all of the years, the losses and doubt
O the whose to keep in and the whose to leave out

It had taken him years and taken him long
But he'd chosen his path with a skip and a song

Known all the moons he had spent with the wrong
But he knew, but he knew, he knew all along

So he stumbled on down the old dusting path
That felt of dead flowers, clay and ash
And stared through the windowing frilly sash
For a glimpse of his wife, his love, at last

But all that he saw was one plate and one knife
She’d set the table for the rest of her life
And some call it sugar and some call it spice
And nowhere and nothing, nothing is nice

And moonbeams went by in the sugargum wood
And everyone aged as everyone should
And everyone played as much as they could
All except Marney, Marney just stoo

Ben Paynter

maybe in some far and foreign field

Oh maybe in some far and foreign field
There sits a star that never liked the sky
That much prefers the barren soggy ground
Just as I

But here dawn breaks into a busted smile
The pastel clouds soon cover up the sun
This morning is a sad and perfect song
That’s never sung

Oh here there’s mourning in the falling rain
And in the birds that sing there soft cuckoo
And the wind will never understand this face
Nor will you

Ben Paynter

mayfly hatch

it was and then wasn’t
and the mayflies were
hatching on the miss-
issippi, hungover drunk
and dry heaving mud
water rushing the
humming wings towards
louisiana, sitting
bedrenched a lone
bystander watching
the flies frantically
make love on street
corner light bulbs
fall flapping wings
and lie on concrete
struggling for life, I
had to laugh at
the way things unfold
all wet and frantic in
the darkness, how
madly the scramble
that ensues from
lustfull wishing, none
of us avoid the
light and barges
carrying our pretty
faces and swollen
hearts are always
floating down the
river, the captain
yelling
we did this
we did this

Ben Paynter

memories breathe, again

it was a thought, the way that
the moon is a star to a child
who sees the night for the first
time, it was a line drawn by

stone between two people who
hated both stones and lines, it
could not be more than what
it was but it was everything in
the way that a breath is.

had you seen the way it happened
how it became what it was you
would have thought it ugly
and barren of any life, it

would have not held that against
you, it was a catspaw moon that
reminded me of how to love and let
go and still I thought of you.

Ben Paynter

miles from the moon

The moon arose and showed it's face
and blamed its light on a brighter place,
and an aging child on the ground below
dreamed of the things he will never know.

While another looked to the moon and the sky
and promised his god a blatant lie,
and a girl sat on a cracking stone
nowhere near where she calls home.

And miles to the right of the aging child
down by the sea where the waves grow wild,
not too far from the girl and her stone
I sit wishing, all alone.

For over the years I've wished to be
over the years and over the sea.
For over the sea I've heard theirs a place
where sits your smiles warm embrace.

Ben Paynter

mississippi moon

there were sea gulls then, the
night the moon fell, on the pier
the man, could only watch
the water darken

there are words that are alive
in there, the water, ink in
the book that tells us where
we're headed, you

will find the heart in it
just out past, the bottom
where you can touch a
world and not know it's

already in your hands,
that's today, and this is
where the water's headed,
it's, the secret they

won't ever tell, if the
moon's out, it means, loved
ones, they're listening
to the way you listen

all he said, " this'll be
the last night I'll be seeing
the Mississippi moon", every thought
is a dream and he's waking

Ben Paynter

morning run 7: 00 a.m.

Leaves fall, the wind
no longer chained runs wild
a mad dog on the loose
Cerberus is laughing
underneath it all.

It all falls down, a branch
below my foot, a leaf
onto the ground, a raindrop
onto dry cheekbones

“where are you going? ”
the wind says with a laugh
“and what will you do
when you get there? ”

A hammered nail,
a foot pressed
to the ground
is not falling.

I press on

Ben Paynter

mother father, somedays

some days I wait for the fog to roll in
wait for the river to carry the clouds home
wait for the bridge to turn invisible
I walk and watch the bell tower disappear

into nothing, the world has gone into nothing
and somewhere a poet describes it as beautiful
somewhere an eye wanders; tries to match horizons
night comes in with a dagger, sits by the fire

stone clock strikes ten, then eleven, then eternity
I sit, cold bench, cold hands, cold face
warm my hands together, stare like Peter
hear the clock toll like a dying rooster

mother where has all the light gone to
father why did god turn off the city

Ben Paynter

mother, this graveyard

hip bone high I'd water mum's flowers
when days ended in little shadows
and picket fences held all the world
at bay

wet e'm good but don't drown e'm
she'd yell, the porch stoop looked down
white steps, white house, half a whiskey
barrel holding a sunflower

next night same thing, the next as well
as it goes, I grew, but not away from
words spoken to a small boy, words
hummed to rafters for lullabies

this is not what I wanted to be
I feel coal, soot on bare feet, I trace
footprints away from those nights
ten black toes on white steps

don't drown me mum, I will never be
anything I want to be, tried that, ended
up here, dry as a desert, brown as
sun baked clay

your promises I watered
found them to be plastic flowers
in front of gravestones

Ben Paynter

much ado about nothing

Keep an eye and an ear out
You might just hear a scrap
Of love and
It’s the wary bird that gets
The worm
The life
The woman

And I sit by the window
While the cars pass on the freeway and
They do not know that
Tomorrow will soon come with:
This same look
This same dawn
This same sin
And I do not understand

This rush

Ben Paynter

my fault

it was inevitable
the frost crept
in and one morning
you wake up
shivering.

that was a week
ago, now it’s
been four mornings
where I’ve woken
without wanting to,
held a pen
without wanting to,
written
without wanting to,
and knowing
the whole time
exactly what I
want.

Ben Paynter

no need to shiver now the storms have left

I’ve never whispered much about my life
Nor have I offered up this veiled soul
To anyone, save maybe once, a love
With eyes like burning coal

But oh this hate, that sad and sullen tear
That never once did find a way to cry
That searches for a way in which to flee
From out behind that fire eye

It wasn’t I that opened up the curse
But other storms that never quite sat still
And even though the birds sing that it’s over
I doubt you ever will

Ben Paynter

now a flattened penny, you

I have held before a brilliant penny
that shone like a moon, and glinted
with fierce fire, mimicked the sunsets
that bounce off of the bluffs

I watched the train cars pass
watched the sunsets come and go
like a film with no end
like a dream that blurs with dawn

and now the bluffs stand like stone statues
I hold a cut bronze heart
face carved stern, metal on metal
a song scrawled out in graffiti paint

this sun is setting now, this light
does not shine on metal frames
I take my fairytale, dulling penny
clutched in dusty hands

and I left it there as the moon broke free
as a new light spilt into the dark
the train came, covered sounds of night
covered the lines of a sculpted pose

you are forgotten now
a dull rust moon
as the night circles round
and takes your place

Ben Paynter

Now I Say Things Like Tomorrow

these streets are clogged with ball and chain,
faces walk with owl eyes, carry
bags of last kisses and goodbyes on telephones,
“tonight” they say, “love will break these chains”

so they go in doors, out doors, into
new beds with messy sheets
searching for little stars on ceilings
and a summer goodnight kiss

they search, I search, all search
for little promises spread on scrabble boards
for weaknesses in brick walls
for love which none have ever known

now I say things like “tomorrow”, I watch
suns rise, suns sink, children walk
down alleys in the dusk, come back
saints and devils, thieves and bible bangers

I have found nothingness
no breaks in brick walls
no prophecies in scrambled letters

father god, this earth is your ball
you walk in circles round the sun
“love” you say, “I have never quite
figured it out”

Ben Paynter

nursery rhyme

I now find myself singing songs
like when I was a child, when someone
would say quiet now, time for quiet
and I would sing, and sing

now I have her, next to me at night
warm body, warm soul, warm eyes
and I sing to myself about wolves
because it makes the moon come alive

and outside the snow is deep and cold
this bed is deep and full of icy sheets
I say enough, she moans, I moan, and
we all fall down

Ben Paynter

o i've

lived a
life filled with
nights, all kinds
in rockers
held by wrinkling
hands, been in
and out of many
beds all sizes
shapes and
places, had
mothers and women
sing lullabyes
and drifted off
to a million different
dreams, tossed
turned and sweated
through them, all
of them even
the ones I don’t
ever mention. then
there was that
silver slivered night
that tip toed by
snuck in and cut
the rug
danced all the
night away to
no one and noth-
ing, I am
always searching
for that sliver
of silver, and you
can’t tell
me no.

Ben Paynter

of love and mr. hyde

you are hungry, I know
because I am you, the
wolf is alive and well
inside of us, the sky

turns blood red, you are
pacing the kitchen. hall. stairs.
I am watching you, I know
we are back again, full moon

eyes. She’s got them and
us in their spell, the heart
beats blood into a pulp,
a howl is caught again

in the throat. The thrill
is this, I will not let
you out again to
pillage us forever.

You are hungry, I know
because I am you, and here
before drunk the bottle and
gone on with it, not tonight.

There’s a whisper from
the conscience saying
don’t throw your heart
away, a whole year to the dogs.

Ben Paynter

off ramp

the wrecking ball sun
swung out towards the west,
and I raced it on the highway
window open, radio on,

wind whipping
past hair and eyes and a desperate grin
that held no countenance,
while the bitter lights
From the city behind, shone
with a little less sparkle,

a little less welcoming, a little
more of a “what could you
have possibly hoped for? ”
and there it is, the exit,

that little blue bird, that little ray
of light that never quite leaves, just hides,
and begs to escape,
and I wonder,
will we ever escape

Ben Paynter

old bill

park bench, three down
from old bill playing chess
with himself

the birds sing summer song
old bill mumbles, “rook, king
castle”

children run past, mad young
crazy with life lungs, the birds
fly away

old bill doesn’t glance up
seems to say, “I’ve seen where
you are going younguns,

“laugh before life
takes your queen”

Ben Paynter

on a thief

abandon is reckless
and so is the beat of a
heart that is truly
in love.

she has her smile on
the one that loves
mystery
like in a movie
or a novel
and she has no intention
of solving
it.

her face is aflame
with blush,
her lips blood
red.
while her eyes
scream thief
and murderer
at the
moon.

she is both my
dawn and my
sunset, and a
thief
and I do not
know if she wants
to be either
night
or
day.

“over there”
I remember
she said
then reached inside
and stole everything
while I looked
the other
way.

Ben Paynter

on the eve of a storm and a love

When all the world is dark, and air
is heavier than it may seem,
and you are everywhere but where
I dream.

When clouds roll in and breathe a sigh
and gray has overlapped the blue
the colors differ from the sky
I knew.

When thunder nears and rain spills down
and everything is washed away
I wish for you without a sound
and pray.

To lose the world I had sought
and place your sky so high above
everything I once had thought
I loved.

Ben Paynter

on the west bank of the river

beyond that river:
a red balloon jumps in a little boy’s hand
and a diner sign reads breakfast for one dollar
this is home to me and I mean this;

if there were no bridge, no stone walkway to
that other side, I could never be that boy
across that swirling river

but it’s on this side where the shadows flee first
where the cars leak oil onto sidewalks and
ladies flaunt bodies and men their suit coats

here is where the youth end up
fake smiles plastered on with
a dash of regret

and it's most days, for his sake,
I wish the bridge were out

Ben Paynter

only ashes are completed

Only rain can tumble slowly
Plummeting towards the ground
Laughing at the fate before it
Dancing softly falling down

Only sound can meet the silence
Half between a fleeing squall
Mending fissures silence opened
Building up the fallen walls

Only embers fight the coolness
Washing round and spreading doubt
Wearing down the fight within them
Hanging on the edge of out

Only wind can make the stillness
Tossing all the calm away
Making leaves like little children
Fleeing from the school to play

Only ashes are completed
Dying they have nothing left
Having given all for brightness
Even this their final breath

Now only firelight will soothe me
Only cold will calm my heart
Only hope will shatter meaning
Beginning me again at start

Ben Paynter

Out, Inside

Far ahead I've felt
little bits and pieces
of me. Have found
myself inside

of me. A piece
has broken off and now
calls itself a different
name. Yours. Now

what to do, keep
loving, like this,
from inside of
everything.

Or leave
and call it fate,
who can argue
with that.

Ben Paynter

Perpetual, This Life

sometimes the Madhatter has his way, when
chaos walks the streets with a new suit and
a grin that cries “there’s no tomorrow”
you hug the walls and pray for sundown

walking home you envy the homeless bum
and his everyday routine, envy the streetlamps
for their simple tasks, envy the closed signs
on dusty window panes on Main Street

you want a life to breathe, to sit and not
have to think about breathing, to walk and
not have to worry about where you are going
but simply right, left, right your way away

but then the world falls with a crash
you lose a love, lose a promise, lose your
last bit of hope, and then you drive, you
slip on shoes and run like a swallow aflame

you get home breathless, with a new seed
in your heart, a new breath in your lung
a new kiss on your lips, and you think
today would have been a bad day

to sit still

Ben Paynter

Plato

we do not see it
we see images
of it played out
puppet shows
on cave walls

there are trees
growing through cracks
brick walls
being built through houses
words searching
for words in my dry mouth

perception
is nothing
love
is nothing
more than this
hand on yours
is nothing less
than two planets
colliding

Ben Paynter

practice makes perfect, or something like it

a symphony practices
outside my walls,
in the park where the
pigeons gather for children
one two
skip too ma loo
a little girl lost
her red left shoe
there is laughter mixed with
violins, a cymbal crash, a
little boy holds his breath
one two
skip too ma loo
little boy Jon
is a deep shade of blue
the conductor slips, a
note falls sideways off
a swing, the world
grinds to a halt
one two
skip too ma loo
nothing is perfect
not even you

Ben Paynter

primacy effect

there are thousands
maybe millions of them
across the great wide
nowhere field while
the sun sets silent.
always.
I am the little bit of
madness that is the love
of you set deep
and blooming into smoke.
I am the welled up wish
begat and rubbed down
into flat metal. the song
caught in the lungs
of anything that sings.
always.
the dark nights you
see them all as fireflies
thousands maybe more
than can be fathomed.
it’s still the first one
you remember.
always.
and how none
are as bright
after that.

Ben Paynter

reasons for wakefullness

there was the
slipstream moon
falling sideways from
unlevel clouds,
stars rolling around
in water blackness, I
said to you
this is the end
of it all, time’s run
it’s course
planted its seed
and its reaping time, the
rooster done crowed
its final tune, I've
been waiting in the
dirt green weeds
for when
they all call it quits
chewing my
fingernails
to the white bone
of the question and
told you
that its love.

Ben Paynter

reciprocal

This is what we had wasn’t it.
A slow sad song that was stuck
in my head for weeks.

Like the time the sink broke
and dripped water till the city
stopped. We were young

and young is what we had
clenched tight in soft fists
from soap and formaldehyde.

The way we never agreed on
whether a sunset was greater
than a sunrise and how very

wrong we all were, but we had
this and that was all that was
needed. How to explain it.

This was not a that or a poem
like any other. It was the way
you talked about how Plath

made you feel alive and the
irony in that statement. There
was always the irony we had

along with the beat of our own
drums. An orchestra could have
never kept up. We always agreed

on that.

Ben Paynter

run river red with sunset

we age no more than the river
each day wears away at us all
and the river runs red with sunset
away from the shadows call

but high on a bridge in the evening
the waves form pictures below
in a rippled frame i saw you
in a place where i can't go

the years and the miles have shown me
no matter the when or the where
it's our heart we give to the ocean
and our words we leave to the air

and no matter the why's or the couldn'ts
the shouldn'ts or wouldn'ts or can'ts
our best words are only reminders
that our love is a lonely glance

now my hope is the hope of a dreamer
to find you adrift at sea
where the lonely souls come sailing
to see where the winds blow free

now run river, red with sunset
i needn't the pictures tonight
i've hid my dream in a bottle
and buried it far from sight

Ben Paynter

said i to the girl with midnight eyes

Can you take this loneliness from me
Will you walk with me down to the lake
Where the birds all fly into the moon
And cattails sway and try to touch the sky

I know this is a silent starry night
But can you help the phoenix catch the sun
He needs a heart to speed him on his way
And Icharus is just a ways ahead

Ben Paynter

said the sparrow to the night

If you believe the sun is growing black
And sparrows flee the wind because they're small
Than there is more that you have left to see
Beyond these walls.

But all birds fly because they hate the cold
And all the stars and suns are shining bright
And hearts are silent in the distant darkness
Of the night.

And still you say your heart is growing wise
Enough to buy all that it's ever sold
Then I, this sparrow, am too small
And the sun is cold.

Ben Paynter

she is always asking now

is this poem about me, what
were you thinking of, whom
were you thinking of when you
wrote these words out, it
wasn’t you this time girl.

not this time nor the last time
I sat down to write was it your
face that came to mind but the

look of the sky before the thunder
comes and chases out the sun
was what came to these eyes
as well as the way you looked at me

when you told me you loved me
but couldn’t and I loved you but
couldn’t just the same and it was
all the same for awhile as you

got dressed and made your face up
into a doll of girl of a woman of a
mannequin and addressed the world
with that tart smile of yours,

what can I say but it is still you that I think
of sometimes at night even though
I haven’t wanted to, this poem
is about you

Ben Paynter

she sits

writing in her notebook
headphones on
returning the favor
to an oblivious world

reminds me of
the carousel when I was young
the first time I read Kerouac
the first time
we made love

it's a puppet dance girl
and you've always
danced it well

Ben Paynter

she was late

I count the cars as they drive past the window
Four blues since you said everything was fine
The rain flows from the street into the gutters
Over both the yellow broken lines

One red, one black pass by into the distance
Words come much slower than the falling rain
And deep below where pipes have dreamed of reaching
I wish I called you by a different name

And now I think that cars are always driving
To somewhere while their wheels still can spin
Fourteen have passed in total since my asking
Where have you been?

Ben Paynter

snow bird

How will the bird come back,
fix the feathers, it’s getting
cold out, there’s ice in the bones.
The child is pacing inside of me.

This cold is a promise as good
as a word, a shake of the hand
that sits and rots inside you.
Your soul is but a whisper now.

It is a nothing to hear a promise
let it become a faith, a tiny flower
buried in snow, the bird
still sitting on the windowsill.

It was a blind face that saw
the bird fly, deafness fled with
a pair of wings, a heart left numb
was clawing at the pane of glass.

She’ll be back if the winds
are right and the weather’s warm
enough for the taking. I am without
A word for saying, “promise me”.

Ben Paynter

some days

there's just
no good way
to go about
being sane

Ben Paynter

some will say the flower bloomed too soon

The colors left a month ago and now
This night is cold and dark and filled
With the crack of trees and crunch
Of frozen footsteps

A man walks, ponders how much cold
He can take with a smile, with a balled up fist
While the snow falls, hides
His gritted teeth

While deep deep down a flower sits
Beneath the snow and ice, beneath
The balled up fist and gritted
Teeth, it blooms

And some will say the flower bloomed
Too soon, to hope for survival, to hope for
Warmth, but the man stoops down
And says, “not soon enough”.

Ben Paynter

someone has died

down the street, cars
are pulling in, tears
are walking out
looking blindly for him

the old man who read
a book for every time
he cursed and smoked
for every kiss, he wasn't
any sort of saint.

that man hadn't been
that man since the wife
passed and let the weeds
grow over the garden

do not mourn your
father now, he's been
gone for years

and years from now
sitting in the park
your kids at play
on the carousel

he will be there
and you will recognize him
inside of you

he's not so
old now.

Ben Paynter

somewhere, a blue glove

Your face, it reminds me, of a puddle
Of gravel I passed yesterday that half
Covered a lone glove with a tattered
Ring finger, and lay, a faded blue flag

And I wonder on those cold dark nights
Will this flag be seen, will that tattered
Gaze you cast this way be visible or will it
Be passed by for lack of a matched pair and

It wasn’t the blue, the tattered, or even
The ring finger that caused me to picture
That blue glove, but the fact that somewhere
Someone, something, is desperately alone

Ben Paynter

still point, you

I found love on breaker beaches
on city streets filled with strangers
on nights that spun with drunkenness
and later on forgot

it was always “end this night” and
“onto the next” and the world flew
a thousand miles an hour, ten years
at a time

I was torn apart, stitched, torn again
dressed in pieces of myself
holding on with two hands, slipping
into nothing, then

I found you on a broken night
and a broken moon split the sky
and the world broke down hard
and stopped

Ben Paynter

the 56

Listen to me. I miss the creativity
of the clouds and how you always
had a shape for them, a man fishing
in a bathtub was my favorite and you
painted it with your finger and even
let me touch you. How were we so
young back then, it was only a year
days and days ago and it feels like
I've lived and died and tried again. You
are not alone. I told you that every day.
You believed it sometimes and told me
how you used to pick flowers and dry them
and you had boxes and boxes of dead
colors and how they made you sad enough
to cry but you didn't because someone
had picked you and you were dried up
and had only a little color left. Listen
to me. Your color was my favorite and
I told you this too and you kissed me
underneath street lamps and above us the
moths died in hundreds and I believed
that's how love was born. Listen to me.
I have been down to where the ocean
is only a puddle and the waves are breaths
from children's cheeks and I have
felt the pain of the constant hunt for
the fox that means something. Listen
to me. There are monsters inside
of the truth. There are no ways to
become a part of someone only words
can. A cloud comes, a hat pulled low
over the eyes. Listen to me. I am alone
and this bus is far from home, still
50 miles more to Tallahassee.

Ben Paynter

the absurdity

i was telling sister it was
spring again even though
she knew this but I wanted
her to know it for a sure
thing, she was saying
brother there's still snow
on the ground, the geese
haven't even made their
way home yet, it was the
way sure things are sure
until someone says some-
thing, mother's already
left four messages, let
me know how she's doing
i'm sure, it's been four
months since they've
spoken, even the phones
have been silent on
both ends, it's what hap-
pens when sister keeps
going back to the stuff, she's
saying there's still ice
on the river, the trees still
crack at night sometimes,
but sister the sun's back
and I saw the color yellow
yesterday, what you have
here is an absurdity, how
to tell mother I'm stoned
with my sister and arguing
about spring.

Ben Paynter

the difference

Call it a memory
if you will, call it
a moment when
god blinked.
And a bell tolled
for days on end.
There was a moment when
I saw you
by the river
with your hair
flowing like the water
underneath our feet, there was
the world between our toes;
cold sand grit, a leech
we removed with salt.
You never
went barefoot
again.
It’s as if
this moment
is that
one,
without you.
I blinked.

Ben Paynter

the laboratory

i've been to the boneyard
with it's cold air and wintry breath
all wrapped in frost and held
the hand of a dead man cold

there were other bones crying
out for other bones and i just
sat there like an old man
in a rocking chair watching

the sun set, it's a beautiful thing
but there are old songs playing
in the back of the eyes and the
head is thinking old thoughts

the bones are growing weary
friend what will happen when
they care not to sing or dance
but only slumber, the wind is

cold outside, inside the air
is the back of my neck the
look in a dead man's eye
as he stairs into the nothingness

old bones rattle new bones
a voice speaks behind the table
a man moves his new bones
to explain the old bones

i follow with an old look
the long fingers carressing long
gone skin, there is a feeling
of deep dark lonliness when

it all gets like this and the
lights seem to flicker with madness
you are going mad but only
at the pace of the bones

and the breath keeps up with
the sighs and steps and the heart
plays jukebox tunes that no one
knows the words to, it's all gone

just like that the old man
took his life with that last breath
of his, what little choice there is

in all of this, a woman smiles
outside this room, a pair of feet
are going somewhere far away

i am blinking but the eyes are dark
and dry and the air is dark and dry
and the room is dark and dry
and the old bones are wet with formaldehyde

what hands have held the nothingness
more than now? there is a whisper
on my lips that says that life is walking
out the door the world is walking by

the door, i have wondered about
how it all works sometimes you
hold so little so much then it's all
dry dust in hands that grasp at air

and she's gone and wouldn't you know
the world's just a beach ball caught
in a current and it spins madly, laughing
madly, always madly, these bones

are tired and want some sleep
the woman is not smiling now
this man died of a heart attack
and lung cancer and the slow cloak

of age. where will the woman go
without that smile there is a coffee shop
down the street
a beggar on the corner of third

but she's never read my poetry
and i doubt she ever will

Ben Paynter

the mississippi 1: 00 a.m.

It’s a snake, dark black
look out or it will
eat you alive. I’ve
heard it said
you can drown
in a teaspoon
of water. This is
a lifetime of those.

a foghorn blast
a wave breaks on the rocks
a picture in my glove compartment
a part of me
is drowning

is that a tear?
a goodbye?
a coat pulled tight
around the shoulders?

It’s just another night,
when did everything
become so goddamn
important.

Ben Paynter

the moon has waned

no moon tonight
this earth is black
as the corners of
deep shadows,

oak trees cover
streetlights, your hands
cover the stars, I
trace nothing shapes

the sun sunk down
with your goodbye
it is a good night
to fly, Icharus

should have waited
for a night
with no moon

Ben Paynter

the night is still young

six billion pairs of eyes
and too many stars to count
in a single night

little men fight wars
while little women cry over
the hopelessness of it all

little hearts beat and little
hearts eventually die
from not enough sleep

little eyes watch
and little eyes look
for a larger picture

while little loves stare at
the moon two step in
a never ending circle

maybe someday somehow
the rain will fall up
towards god

the little men will
shake hands with each other
while the women hug hope

one, two, three, four
the night is still young
and there are stars to count

Ben Paynter

the pattern

there was meaning once
in the way
the stars were scattered
helter skelter
and you
would try and trace
patterns
the meaning was
hidden
in cryptic breaths
of air
a hand brush
hair on eyelashes
blink
they said 'where
will you find love
it isn't
up there
and i never
did find it
in the stars
a quick brush
eyelash
on cold cheek
love fell softly
into a dark ocean

Ben Paynter

the photographer

you were saying that it wasn't
very fair how some people
got it and others didn’t while
taking pictures of how trees

died. then there was the walk
into the woods and the snow
and ice and you saying it was
a metaphor for how shadows

felt. I was following your
footprints to the turnaround
listening to the click of the
lens, watching light go in

and out. you were saying
how you liked loud music, how
it felt like flying sometimes, how
it made the puppet dance in-

side of you. it was the way you
held the camera while telling me
“it’s how you hold your head”

in two hands sometimes, weeping.

Ben Paynter

the question

what is love, love
is a long night
you pacing madly
in my mind, I

have felt it, but
I have felt it carefully
held it gently
with gloved hands, this

question, I have
answered by losing
it, letting it softly
walk away, and

I have seen more
questions than stars
in the mad broke eyes
of grandfather, let

it go, pass by
the guitar man on
the corner, a mother
smiles at me, she

has already forgotten
me

will you?

Ben Paynter

the question of wings

think of the sparrow how the
nighttime withers in the face
of moonlight, it’s a missing kind
of hope that leads a lonely heart

to water, think of the flight of
the wind, the sparrows are
eating bread and holding court
of which I am a suspect, they

are taking flight and will be
eating bread in Stockholm, sip-
ping water from fountains in
the courtyards of Versailles

to have wings, my dear and
sit atop the towers, fly away
and perch upon an old tree
lonely with a hundred years

of bark, think of the sparrows
the ones that nest in my rafters
and how they are forced to share
in a young man’s sorrows

Ben Paynter

the scavenger

where you are is out in the wild
with the horses and the wind's
blowing strong I know because
you've told me, that it is not

always the way the wind blows
but how it blows and to where
and it's west today, you are on
the far side of the Mississippi

there are miles and miles of heart-
beats in between us, cities full of
them, beating away the dust of the
earth, place your ear to the ground

you can hear them and the secrets
of the earth are in there with the
worms the birds pick off the side-
walk after a rain,

dig far enough
you will find a black box wrapped
in an old flannel coat, my hearts
in there and getting colder.

Ben Paynter

the secret

I cannot tell because I do not know
but I have been to where it might lay
and walked the hands of clocks
around, till mornings stood in marching

lines. What then, what then, what then dear friend.
“This walk is long and wearisome.
This path is dark and drearisome”, you said.
A light bulb, flickers, dies, I go to bed, but

dawn will come again in fire.
Yesterday was but a coal it told me,
and I will rise and rise and go
where others go but haven’t gone

to bed. To bed, or just to die, it’s
a melancholy world with a black eye,
a chip on the shoulder, a cold streak.
An “I love you” lost in the wind

Ben Paynter

the trouble with love

It goes like this
She offers her hand
You take it, she
Pulls back, says
“It’s not that cold”

She offers her eye
You catch it, she
Takes it back, says
“Keep your eye on the road”

She offers her heart
You take it, she
Lets you hold her, says
“I’m dying”

Ben Paynter

the war

it was jon I was talking
to, when he brought up
vietnam and how he
flew planes back then

'flew em fast and high'
he'd say with the drunken
devil look in his eye
and he shot them bastards

down, now he drives a
sportscar like the one him
and dan had talked of buying
before dan was shot

down, one dream fulfilled
other dream ran lickety split into
napalm blasts and the jungle
gets bright for a second, the

door slams shut, he drives
away with a sigh, its nearly
sunset on another day
the war's not over yet

Ben Paynter

the will of a lover

Cover the ground with snow and white
Bury the town in soft moonlight
Watch the buildings flee from sight
On a lovers night

Chase the flakes with a windy blow
Wave them where they always go
Deep in wooded forest hollow
Where the trees dance slow

Lay us here, just her and I
Neath the snow and a lovers sky
Neath the snowflakes passing by
While lonely dies

Then let the trees and the moonlight sing
Let the snow and the cold wind bring
These flowers and stones to form a ring
And know that love’s not ending

Then bury us, just her and I
Neath the snow and a lovers sky
Neath the footfalls passing by
While lonely dies

Ben Paynter

the words aren't always everything

Do not read too deep and soon forget
Do not look into this shade of night
But let the wind and words pull you along
Left than right

Then let me be the canvas for
The boat you built those summer nights
With only hands and little dreams
For sight

Ben Paynter

there is a place

there is a place, i've heard it said
where the whipperwill runs mangity mang
wild down the side of the ganges
and the wild brush is orange
and red and bursts into flames
when a song is sung just right

and the light from the flames block
out the sun and the clouds and the wars
and the whipperwill sings his nangity nang
song, o there is a place inside my head

here, these days, i go instead
and the wars and the lies and the pangety pangs
can't come in here, no the doors been
done barred locked for hopes sake
and there's a chair that rocks and sits
and rocks for sanity sake

lockity lock that door forever boy, never
let a stranger in, not even a mother, brother
sister, father, it's your own place for the taking
keeping yourself down deep in something
that makes the wind mean something

and the whipperwill sings his nangity nang
and runs mad wild down the ganges with
the devil hot on his heels
and all that's green with life and envy
bursts yellow and orange, white hot,
into flames.

Ben Paynter

these empty bones are flying

Hollow, I am hollow inside and the
Sun was out and the roof was tinted
Topwise down into the wall shadows
While birds falling in love fell with

One another, the dust is growing dusty
Old man, even the wildflowers full
Of reasons are dropping golden petals
On floors of mausoleums, I am with-

Out a way of speaking fullness only
Hollow words and songs are sung
Now and ears are growing hollow
With the nothing melodies of these

It is the way the rain hits dry earth
And disappears, the way a key fits
Into a lock, how the wind comes and
Goes from nowhere, I trace your face in

Dust for remembrance, old man
You will know I fell away even before
I fell and felt the weightlessness
Of hollowness and how it’s easier to fly

Ben Paynter

These Eyes Have Grown Tired of Complacency

I promise hollow words to deaf ears
I say things like 'the sun will explode tonight'
So I sit on cold steps, face pressed west
Pocketknife in hand, carving lost stars

But the fog rolls in thick from cold rivers
Dances madly on brick walls
These clouds have put
This city to it’s
Bed

And I long for that brilliance
That explosion of bright chaos
That quiet build up of
Lost passion

These eyes have grown tired
Of quiet nights on steps
Of cloudy days on streets
Of no balls of flame inside
Those eyes

I sit with an anchor in my pocket
Gnashing heart pressed tight to chest
“burn, burn, burn” it says
Before I learn
Complacency

Ben Paynter

These Words Are Ladders out of Here

These words are ladders out of here
I've climbed them every night until,
the last rungs gone a ways from sight
and the moon is still.

Up here there is no city dust,
no lights track my shadow low,
no red light commands I stop
and so I go.

It's quiet here on balcony's
in windows that look down like god.
The world, it barely breathes from here,
a stagnant bog.

And so I climb my ladder down
to breathe again a maddening breath
of everything that this life is
as well as death.

Ben Paynter

they are saying

They have said, I have heard
it spoken now, I am obsessed
can’t stop talking, death, about it
this time, if not one it’s another.

Call the priest, they’re joking
of course, what good would that
do in the end, all’s fair, no one
can cheat the last breath out.

Call the dogs off, the cats in.
The crows are flying low again,
you can’t get an honest answer
anywhere, the where the how

on any given day. It could
be there knocking on your door
just to say hello, not today
but another and who knows when.

Preparation, I tell them, over and
under and over, tie the knots and
cut the strings that always got you,
held you too low down for good.

It’s not, repeat, isn’t, an affair, some
sort of love, that’s not, it, is how the
night has always been a friend.
Will you answer? When it knocks?

Ben Paynter

this bird, this metaphor

There is the question of life and I
Questioned it again on my way to
The next town, somewhere in between
This place and wherever this road

Takes me, and I drew a bird once with
Only one wing and it flew in circles on
My page, around and around and finally
Gave up and sat just lead and lines

And now I follow these lines, this gray road
To another place where I will find yet
Another metaphor for life, it is a compass
Without a north, it is a lie without

A point, it is a grit toothed smile
It is a sunset without a moon, it is one
Step after one step, left than right, than
Circle and circle and slowly, slowly fade

Ben Paynter

this is what

we are
a compilation
of skin, the bed bugs
in the hair, our teeth
rattling on words, the
stomach full of
disrepair, birds
chew rocks, I chew
what the mind can’t
fathom, in itself
digest the words
you won’t feel it
during, after, ten
years from now
only you at the
table with a pen
picking your teeth

Ben Paynter

this life thing

rhymes i can do
with a flick of the wrist
and a somersault's done
with a jump and a twist
but this life thing is where
i always fall flat
and so here i'm writing
from the floor, on my back.

Ben Paynter

this love that lies one sided

And I,
The traitor that I am
Have not a promise kept,
Nor have the birds flown backwards
Nor have the statues wept.

And I,
The devil that I am
Have not much more to give,
Nor can I offer kindness
Nor can I let this live.

And you,
The one eyed love,
Have not a promise kept
Nor has the clock spun backwards
Nor have I wept as yet.

But I,
With you and all my love,
Have a little heart that’s left
That you have not yet taken
That you have yet to get.

And I,
The beggar that I am
Am no more saint than soldier
But begged for what I dreamt
The love I thought you were.

Ben Paynter

this morning holds enough for only one, and then

come back to bed my broken morning
I need to write down something beautiful she said
I held her while the sun came storming
onto our soft and secret bed

and if this be the last and only
time you ever write this down
I hope that all you've ever thought
to say
comes out

come back to bed this sun will sink again
these sheets will grow as cold as ice she said
and now I love all that is ever winter
and all that once was cold and dead

I need to patch a cracked and broken dream
this morning holds enough for one
but only one
and then
you will
be done

Ben Paynter

this place is haunted, i

there’s a ghost in the halls of this place
that’s what they tell me, and last night
the stairs creaked, the lights flickered
and the room smelled faintly of jasmine

I went to bed and dreamed of one, light
as a feather, softer than air, and she hummed
a lullaby, with a smile on her face, with
a beat in her heart, with a breeze in her hair

and I woke up to an empty bed with sun-
beam streaming in, with no song in my head
no beat in my heart, I dressed with a
hopeful eye, the smell of jasmine on my shirt

and its in my car three blocks from home
at the rail crossing on Third I grasped
how very hard it is to say
goodbye

Ben Paynter

this we

this thing we are
this dance we try and
replicate

i do not see it
working

i do not blame it on
the stars or on the
cold hands of doubt
that worked their way in
somehow

i blame it on those moments
when the world should have
stood explained with little
lines that say
'go here', then, 'do this'
but
it never quite happened
that way

what now

a lone kiss
goodbye
or
a farewell that will never
quite happen

Ben Paynter

three weeks from now, you

in keeping with this gray sky I walked
to the post office with a broken step and
tossed my letters on the counter and tried
to exit just as quickly as I had come in

'there's too much snow in Denver' I heard
the man behind the old wood desk say while
glancing at my letter's destinations, 'they
won't get there until at least three weeks from

this very day' and that's how it goes, I guess
snow everywhere, snow in Anchorage, snow in
Boston, but never any snow here to pale up
this gray that's etched itself so deep into this sky

what is it my father used to say, 'chin up boy
keep that stiff upper lip, can't let the world get
to you', so I look down, count my heel steps
and kick gravel along the sidewalk back to home

maybe never go back, maybe just keep walking
towards somewhere where the sky looks a bit less
like the dust that's fallen on your picture frame
like the emptiness that invented its own color

Ben Paynter

tiresome

I’ve never felt like I could
Unlock that chest
Unlock that door
Unlock that part of me

But the wind blows black
Hands me a key
Hands me a promise
Hands me a steady hand

Sleet falls like little bullets
Pierces the chest
Pierces the heart
Pierces that part of me

And one can’t always hide
In the shadows
In the corner
In that little space of night

It becomes so tiresome

Ben Paynter

to the tree hugger in times square

The rain falls and David will not win today
While his sign screams “Save the Trees”
And everywhere the world is go, go, go
And the sky is rain, rain, rain

I watch your words fall mutely
Bounce, and become raindrops, watch
The stony words you throw get brushed aside
By windshield wipers, by tight squinted eyes

Watch the brave word “change” you shout
Get stamped out by black black shoes
By men with umbrellas held like spears
And briefcases like little black shields

While the days and days and people pass
While the world spin, spins, spun the same direction
While the rain slips down windows like glass tears
While all the islands slip into the sea

You stand there, glare angrily at it all
While ten thousand pairs of legs walk past
Cross off “trees” change to “countless people”
As Goliaths brush past with closed axe eyes

Ben Paynter

tornado season

the siren sounds and the world turns to dust
the trees spin about like little brown tops
while all the leaves run frantically away
and the people yell, hide, hide, hide

it’s tornado season, time for those pictures
of staircases to heaven, where no one wins
and it will be written that it’s impossible to win
and I sit here on the stoop, count the tumbleweeds

and all that matters is when the dust settles
and they look down; see a body covered in sand
clutching a tumbleweed with a smile on his face
they will shake their heads, mumble in their safe talk

the winds are here; time to sign the will, lock up
the treasures and bury them and the key, time
to say goodbye, say hello, say anything while
my only sight becomes the shade of sand

Ben Paynter

trapped

I tried to
fly an albatross
on a string
cage a lion
between three
words

you told me
“I’ll never be a
live to love kind of
girl” and that’s the
kind of girl you
were,

I never wanted to
clip your
wings.

and it only made me
love you
more.

Ben Paynter

Tree, The

For ten years now
I've watched this tree
lose life gain life
lose color gain color
and grow
because of it.
Now a woman
sits below it
with more life
than I have known
and lost
again, all
my leaves are gone
stripped down bare.
This coarse bark
is all the I
that I am.
Hope is
a budding leaf.

Ben Paynter

try to

understand the frustration
of putting something, this
thing, down on paper and
then try to help the eyes

understand that it is not
paper, but words, and only
words, that they are alive
and moving and trying to

understand themselves as
much as any of us, then
picture the intellectuals
and thinkers trying to

understand what's behind
it all, where the meaning
lies in hiding and asking
are the demons back? try to

understand the frustration
of making a word more
than itself and sitting back.
let them be, let them be.

try to.

Ben Paynter

wait for the world, i

night waits for the last eye of a house
to close, that last light in a room to darken
but no more, I sit up, wait for dawn
wait for the street sweeper to pass Main

I burn the candle wick, burn the street light,
burn the little rays that poke through
the windows, I say “what are you doing up
it’s time for the shadows shift'

then the birds come, the sun comes and
the people come, in windows, out doors
on sidewalks, by bus, by car, by train
stomp and chase the shadows gone

and life sounds like a broken song, some-
times I catch myself singing it, shake it off
light a cigarette, wait for the street sweeper
wait for when the world pulls the plug

Ben Paynter

Warmth Has No Place Here

she has not stayed the same since last fall season
she has grown warm like an Indian summer, like a breeze
that heats the frost, and I missed the cutthroat winds
of winter, with the dark part of my insides

I missed that icy glint of passion, that murder wind
sharp as newly whetted knives, cut straight to the
heart of everything, instead we sat indoors, played
games, with words like forever and what now

I shuffle blue notebooks on dark wood desks
like many square bruises filled with chicken scratch
I drown myself in darkened basements while
snow falls inside through open windows

warmth has no place in here, no hold on me,
if this ember burns in ice, it burns in anything

let them have their summer love that blooms during
the warm times, the pleasant times, the enjoyable times
give me the winter love, that does not fade with cold streaks
place an ice hand on my heart, stop its wandering eye

do not cry
this heart
is cold
as stone

Ben Paynter

we tried to paint a fire in the snow

Red and orange, yellow
Maybe a touch of blue
Paint the sky with fire
And the snow with a barren hue

Can we catch these shadows with our hands
Or will the dusk refuse to play our game
I think the streetlamps want to breathe awhile
Before we fit them with a starry frame

The people pass and nod their vacant eyes
We paint them with a dash of loneliness
The keys for home sit anchored in their pockets
And all the words are written on their breath

The snow is whiter than the stone I found
That summer day in august at the shore
We said it looked just like a tiny moon
You held it till the daylight closed its door

But now the snow is growing cold as dawn
And all its left is pictures we could paint
That show two lovers with a broken brush
You paint a sky that I describe as faint

Red and orange, yellow
Maybe a touch of blue
I've painted love with fire
And the snow with a barren hue

Ben Paynter

what it takes to be heard

poem
after
poem
like little
raindrops
until

maybe
i make
a puddle

Ben Paynter

what morning holds

it wasn’t a pleasant dream
that made me start
awake
but an image of myself
with no head
and coal where my
heart had been

it wasn’t the rising sun
that woke me from
my sleep
but the quiet foreboding
that morning held
much worse

Ben Paynter

when all is said and done

When every word is said and done
And silence meets its fate
When all the songs are cried and sung
And time decides to wait
When rain is only lullabies
That fall on deafened ears
When heartbreak meets its slow demise
And sadness has no tears
When every flower lies to spring
And blooms within the snow
When love is an uncommon thing
When that day comes you'll know
That though the world slowly fades
Some things will stay the same
That even in the darkest days
One thing will still remain
My love, like a forgotten scent
That brings a memory
And like every single moment,
Will beg eternity.

Ben Paynter

when looking do not look

so long to believe that you have
seen it all, there is always more
behind the window that isn’t so
easily seen, the glass is always

beautiful you say when the sun
dances down on soft feet and
hits the panes just right, you
see yourself but not the boxes

and old picture frames behind
it all the luggage waiting to be
packed the typed up letter on
the bed stand sealed with a dry kiss.

it was love but love is glass
that hides and breaks with a single
glance if glanced at wrongly
you must look quickly hold with

gloved hands what you have, one
day you might open your own
shutters and she will see and think
she understands.

Ben Paynter

when those days come

I hope when those days come,
when the sun begins
its frantic dance across a darkening sky,
when clouds roll in,
and flowers bloom
without ever knowing why.
When wishing stars sift downwards
and settle down on drooping eyes
you will forget they've fallen.

But if this be my last wish, I wish
with all the stars I've wished upon
that when I'm gone you will not miss
the blackened holes I've left behind.
Instead you'll see the blinding light
of smiles twinkling in the sky
then laugh and dance with me tonight
before my last sunrise.

Ben Paynter

Where River Bank Leads To A Stream

It isn’t quiet nights that hold the key
Nor does the stony moon hold what you seek
But all you’ve loved and love holds you
In restless sleep

So find where riverbank leads to a stream
And watch the season slowly trickle by
Then in the sand and tall grass find your peace
And say goodbye

Ben Paynter

where the cracks in the stonework deftly meet

O look a ways down the sunset street
Where a sad green tree sighs beneath
A building hung down with drying sheets
Where the cracks in the stonework deftly meet

There’s an older woman with just one eye
Who cackles and winks at the summer sky
While the sheets hang low and the warm winds dry
And the cracks grow wider by and by

O look a ways down the sunset street
While you’ve still two eyes and still two feet
Neath a building hung down with drying sheets
Where the cracks in the stonework deftly meet

I think there’s a picture that you can paint
With the one eyed lady as a brilliant saint
And brush the handsome with a stroke of faint
Then paint the sky without constraint

O look past Main and the dusty crowd
Past the money and walk of the proud
Then whisper hello and wink out loud
And paint your silver on a dusty cloud

Ben Paynter

window wall

there is a person
beneath my window throwing rocks

come out he says
tonight “old man” is playing his guitar

there is a crack
in my window now that I look out

a knock at my door
but it’s locked

I have long ago
thrown away the key

Ben Paynter

you

wrote me
a poem once
that read like
something I
would have written
for a funeral.
you filled it
with black flowers,
I held no rose
my eyes wandered.
a moment
flashed by
in the window
of a streetcar,
the light turns green.
I go again
to the place we met
down by
the river.

Ben Paynter

you are

colder than maybe
a winter star that's never
seen a summer night

Ben Paynter

your hands were just a little too cold

i wished on the moon tonight
because the stars were too much
like fireflies
and your hand was just a little
too cold
for summer

the moon looked back
laughed
said
'i ain't no crystal ball'

and somewhere Hughes
glanced down and said
'that's what i meant'

Ben Paynter