

SOFT
LABOR

Contents

1. Open Milkhole No. 1

2. Instruction Manual (Optional)

3. At Length

4. Love, Imperfectly

5. Conventicle (So Called)

6. Open Milkhole No. 3

7. Mountain

8. No One Is a Devil

9. Corkscrew

10. New Color

11. Desperation LITE

Open Milkhole No. 1

So then you stand there and wait for it
It only hurts if you react
They only see you if you move
It's only over if you breathe
So you stand there still and know it's all fine,
Everything's fine until it isn't
But you wouldn't glance up to see the sky dimming overhead
Or feel the first drops on your flushed skin
But every time it rains it rains
Pennies from heaven
Which, accounting for terminal velocity,
And the incredible heat of atmospheric re-entry,
It turns out are often fatal

Instruction Manual (Optional)

Make some food, make some cash, make sure the lawn's not on fire.
Open your home to migrant families.
Open your heart (create unlimited waste).
Review your last place of employment for posterity:
 PROS: no paid vacation
 CONS: everyone was nice to work with
Drag your exhaustion out to the woods and find yourself a nice cave
To sit in and wonder where to plug in your phone charger
I mean it's not like you knew what you were doing (excuses, excuses, excuses),
But not everything can be glorified retrospect.
You've heard it loud and clear: you're sick of uninspired proselytizing
You're sick of acceptable insect content
You're sick of hearing about the end of the world
And never actually getting what you paid for
You're sick of the way you keep sweating the stamp off the back of your hand
And they won't re-admit you to the Rapture,
Which was just getting started when you had to step out for a smoke
You're sick of hearing what you're sick of from unreliable sources
Citing outdated statistics in a land of ceaseless progress
You're sick, just sick sick sick
(My guess is probably that it's mono).
But still there's hope, a backlit screen in the vacant bathroom stall:
We can start by celebrating the advent of microwaveable dinners
That don't have to have the film peeled back
Or be stirred during cooking
Despite the uncanny fact that, as far as anyone can tell
No actual improvements have been made
To microwave technology itself.

At Length

So, we could sit here and watch the waves break (on a phone
(on your couch (in slo-mo at 30,000 frames per second))),
or cat videos (classic for a reason amirite), or separately google
the same mundane factoid until we've compiled enough disparate
information to hold a meaningful conversation again.

Or, we could take a walk, hold riverside baptisms, phase through
the trees entwined, see time in color in stone.

We can plunder scholarly articles, tree leaves, tea leaves,
the cracks between your couch cushions, the skin that cradles
your eyes, the kink in a wrist, the crinkle of wrappers, the weight
of a laugh, for all the precious vignettes they contain as an afterthought.

We can buy now, pay never - it's the American way.

We can tear apart the bedsheets in a fit of broken skin and later study
the way the fabric folds and bunches, holding in warm dampness flecks
of spit and strands of hair, an eyelash asleep on the pillow - we can split
a cigarette and probe the damp remains, like dueling haruspices.

Maybe, we can find what you're searching for:

When you look at the clock then back again, and again, when you pull
out your phone click the side give it a pass with glassy eyes and slip it
right back into the void, when you walk into the kitchen and stand
with the refrigerator whining in the darkness only to turn around
and shuffle back empty-handed; what do you really want?

The television says grease slabs are two for one

The internet says all the things you never knew you'd want to hear

Are one click away

And you won't believe number nine

Jessica Werk says that galaxies are just like you and me

(They live their lives in a constant state of turmoil).

So, I dunno. Whatta you wanna do?

Love, Imperfectly

I want all of the opulence with none of the guilt;

I want everything gilt with none of the baggage.

To live in an endless subterranean hallway

Lined with saffron, or velvet, or soap bubbles, love letters,

Spliff ashes, fortune cookies, wine corks, hairless nipples.

It spans the length of New Jersey,

Where time exists but never intrudes,

And everything is in perpetual transit,

Nine hours lasts an eternity,

And I never have to get to where I'm going.

Conventicle (So Called)

Like, the woods are my church, y'know
And he said it so earnestly
But then how can a church be so narrow?
The woods are my church as well
But then so are the drug dens, the southern tier expressway,
your displaced mattress, abandoned hospitals, sweltering port-a-potties,
small-town libraries, fragile hip joints, inner-city waffle houses,
the boundless dimensions of space, the starlit hilltop where
long-distance phone calls hang from their weathered crosses,
the incalculable subjectivity of every moment spent in trance, in wait,
in waking dreams, sometimes even in 'real' churches,
long after the last service ends;
My church rises through every radiowire, it fills the space between
scattered bluetooth transmissions and my own clenched throat,
it hangs soundless in the firmament and swirls down every dusty toilet bowl
My church knows no heretics (who could not save themselves)
My church is old but never antiquated, it is visceral, primal, voracious
Come to pray or scoff or spectate, smoke cigarettes in church, or crack,
carry crosswords, tear pages from used books
and fill your swollen mouth with motes of once-loved dust -
Do your thing
I fix my hair to perfection, I don my sunday morning best (or thursday
afternoon, or bars after midnight, or river-fording pseudo-safari gear,
or nothing but pale white skin)
But why do you?
I do it for the transcendent decline
I do it to feel you strip the product from inscrutably parted hair
When it catches between your teeth,
To feel the earth press to my feet,
To lose the top button of my favorite shirt against the rough brick alleyway
In a fit of teeth and neon,
To be bruised by errant stones,
Unbalanced by absolute devotion,
Love-bitten into [tranquilized] oblivion,
To feel the sweat soak through my neatly pressed button-down
And let the blackflies or sinners or whomsoever chooses to
Burrow down into the soft hollow of my collarbone,
And bite and bite and bite.

Open Milkhole No. 3

Chain-smoking is not a peacetime activity (pastime, or obligation)
Neither is the prediction of a war, whether it comes or not,
whether you intend to participate or observe or commentate
or keep score or burrow down or lock up
or commemorate after the fact
or brood with soulful, lightless ardor;
You can't see the future - if you predict it, it is here
It comes in the shape of a Speedy (Mega) Stuffer
It stuffs fresh grapeleaves with pink slime aggregate
And tender beef (now that's some morally unsound shit)
And hijacks tornado sirens to spread the word
To shake a leg for impending doom
It swaggers in, festooned in trophies:
The limp noodles of overdone pasta that hang like tassels
From exposed and heaving breasts,
The soft open eyes of couples who communicated effectively
That fasten its shirtcuffs
This is not 'Nam
This is not the Jersey turnpike
This is not the time to recreationally experiment
With copious amounts of veterinary anesthetic
It holds you down
Coughing milky skeins of pot-smoke
It whispers with hot breath, it curls soft fingers in your mouth
It slides the grunting tonguetip against the inner curve of your cartilage
"Sodium Erythorbate," it breathes,
"Is love."
It comes in the shape of a cold and hairless hand
That reaches out from the immaculate Darkness beneath your bed
To breathe heavily and grasp at your ankle
And all you can do is roll your eyes
And think to yourself
Oh my god, fucking finally

Mountain

At the foot of the mountain, our feet were wet
And we didn't know what was up there.
On that first night, we stopped at an outcropping
And made a fire from twigs and brambles and pairs of ex-lovers' underwear
We threw in our cellphones and watched them bubble,
We sat on the cliffside, dangled our bare feet over the tickling breeze
Of the void,
And licked each other's faces clean
The sky spilled for days, filled with milk and lightning
And turned our ascent into a sloppy mess,
Wiggling through quicksand, up to our necks in the milkshake,
Dodging lethal panes of sheet metal as they whistled down from the heavens
My spirit was lifted, but my feet were stuck
Squelching in a pair of bright yellow rainboots, sockless and starting to prune
We hit dry ground above the clouds, our hair standing all on end,
And stripped back to bare feet,
Cut the ponchos from each other's bodies with pocketed X-Acto blades,
Peeled them off right down to skin, shucking layer after layer,
Wondering if you'd pull a key from under your tongue
Like the magician's lovely assistant,
And finally get me out of these handcuffs
While we shivered on the sunless rocks
I thought, I could probably trap the heat, if I just hugged you hard enough,
But I knew I couldn't do that without breaking a couple ribs
Reshuffling the deck
And dying of exposure
When the sun fell
The moths would flurry around our heads, tangle in our hair,
Vibrate like silk lips against our ears and send tingles down our spines,
Wondering where all the fireflies had gone
And at night we would hook our tender fingertips inside the curl of our mouths,
And pull them open wide to let them in,
Glued to that dim light in the back of our throats.
Nothing will grow here, and its growth is profligate.

No One Is a Devil

I woke up late this morning -
At that point not actually morning, but I'm not going to admit that
When idioms are on my side -
And had a cigarette, just to waste those first six minutes.
And then I was blank for just a moment, so I had another,
To see if I could fill myself with enough smoke to become buoyant.
To let it rise until I couldn't see through it anymore,
Until it took up all the space in my lungs
And had to seek out less conventional homes
And fill the nooks and crannies of my limbs,
Between muscles, bones, and veins,
Until it made its way up through my chest
And into the space behind my eyes where,
If you look closely enough you can see it swirl inside the milky pupils,
And finally up into my mind, where it settles in thick, lazy blankets,
Tucks itself in and goes out like a light.
But then the cigarettes are gone, and the smoke filters out like a transient,
Leaving under his overpass nothing but irritated clarity and a nest of stale filters,
To be picked apart and consumed, fiber by fiber.
I'd peel open the saffron papers and strip the cottons down into dirty webbing,
And try to read it like tea leaves or lifelines or some older kind of fortune telling,
And when the fluffy flotsam had nothing left to say I'd stuff it all inside
And feel it soak up all it touches and expand until there's nowhere left to go.

Last night, I dreamed of a tall space, a ledge at an incredible height.
The jump down wouldn't kill me, I'd made it hundreds of times.
But each time I felt that jab of adrenaline,
Each time I wondered how I'd survived the last.
And now, looking down, I couldn't bring myself to jump
For a spectacular fear that rose the fantastic distance
From the ground to the heartbeat in my toes.
Not for fear of the fall, but because I was tired of jumping.

live Corkscrew

Keep your eyes peeled (like fresh, irritated, juicy grapefruits):
You're the star of your own horror movie
And all you've got is an ancient flip phone
With one bar of battery, spotty service, and no matter what number you dial,
It will only place calls to your second-to-last ex-boyfriend,
Who is perpetually shitfaced.
If you do manage to escape the box,
Packed in against the naked bodies of people with perfect skin
Because they've never seen sunlight,
You'll find yourself in the winding corridors of a world
Where they serve complimentary absinthe
Under grim fluorescent lighting in the Do It Yourself section of Target
As a marketing ploy to get you to spend more money
On Fruit by the Foot and seasonal outdoor patio furniture.
You may find a sip from what you thought was a glass of milk
Is more of a trip into a full-blown, adult milkhole
That's charging extra for water wings
(And if you think those are just Oreo crumbs floating at the bottom,
You may need to update your prescription).
You may find that no matter what direction the wind is blowing,
Your cigarette ashes only ever land in your coffee.
You may find yourself in the Home and Garden center,
Wearing nothing but a shaggy pink bathrobe
You snagged from the clearance aisle,
Tucking your junk up and dancing rapturously to Paul Simon's
"You Can Call Me Al,"
While taking huge gulps of air from the forced-labor photosynthesis
Of a thousand wilting flytraps and mangled succulents,
And thinking that you've finally made it outside,
You're in the jungle (welcome to it),
And it's Christmas in July, just how baby Jesus intended.
So keep your heart peeled and bury the seeds
Wherever you find a plot of ground that's soft enough to dig at
With rosy cheeks and blushing fingertips,
Pull the weeds out with your teeth
And blow the fluff off store-bought dandelions,
Or grind them into paste and smear yourself with warpaint,
Bare your teeth and let that neon glow illuminate your naked chest
In hi-contrast movie-poster glory,
Because at the end of the day you're just another dead astronaut,
And that is one pink portal to hell.

DeLITE New Color

I made a new color, but no one can see it
Not because it's invisible
Or because it's an impossibly subtle variant of a pre-existing color
Or because it's beyond our ability to comprehend with the human eye,
But because I'm not showing anyone

Desperation LITE

This moth keeps buzzing around my ear,
And landing in my hair,
And beating its wings at my shirt collar,
Trying to get beneath the fabric so it can
Wrap itself in a tangle of chest hair
If I try to brush it off it bumps against my fingertips
And then it's glancing off my nose,
Or tickling the nape of my neck
And all I can think is that he must be blind
Or drunk
Or late to the party.
And he will persist until I turn to go inside,
And he will still be there when I come back,
And he may beat his wings and tickle me until the end of time,
But I am not a source of light.

THE END OF THE WORLD

The first thing I noticed when I was

born was that I was alone.

There was no one else in the world,

and I was the only one who knew.

I was the only one who could

see the end of the world, and I was

the only one who could see it.

I was the only one who could

see the end of the world, and I was

the only one.

I was the only one.

I was the only one who could see the end

of the world, and I was the only one

who could see the end of the world, and I

was the only one who could see it.