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ROOTED DOWN

by

Wesley Garrett Dunning

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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December 2010

ABSTRACT

Dunning, Wesley Garret. MFA. The University of Memphis.
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These poems recall a forgotten place—the old Buntyn neighborhood in Memphis and its outlying country, filled with ancient oaks, gospel songs, chattering bluebirds, but also the dilapidated row homes and overgrown grasses of a town nearly dead. It's the town of my grandparents, here modeled in Nelda and Wyatt, their grandson Clay, old neighbors and friends from Marston Drive, and three generations of family, whose histories have crawled somewhere inside me and made themselves at home. These poems examine the distances between familial relationships. They aim to show my family roots and how, for better or worse, we can never break free of the places we're from.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
Part I	1
Wyatt Remembers Home on Marston Drive	2
Nelda's First Home	3
Wyatt as a Boy	4
Nelda Remembers Her Father	5
Wyatt's Father Sings	6
Battle Scene	7
Careful to Leave	8
Wyatt Tells about His Father	9
Nelda's Wedding Day, Winter 1948	10
Nelda Writes Wyatt a Poem in the Park	11
Wyatt Sees His Father	12
Nelda Wonders about Wyatt	13
Nelda at the Cemetery	14
Wyatt and His Girls	15
Nelda Tells about the Pinecones	16
The Day the Radiator Died	17
The Fluttering Moth	18
Wyatt is Followed	19
Nelda Loses Wyatt in the Trees	20
Part II	21
Clay's Deep in Trees	22
Breach	23
Clay's Thoughts on a Fish	24
Fig Tree	25
Bamboo Grove	26
Wyatt and Clay by the Fire	27
Elder	28
Beneath Flower Beds	29
Clay Climbs Inside a Tree House	30
Clay's Thoughts on a Bird	31
Clay Takes a Ride	32
Wyatt and Clay Visit a Grave	33
Nelda and Clay Walk Through Her Garden	34
Circus Arena	35
Clay Goes to Church	36
Clay and Nelda in the Ocean	37
Rabbit Holes	38
Lane Has a Visitor	39

Clay's Palms are Read	40
Lane and Clay Row a Canoe	41
Clay Remembers a Bluebird on Marston Drive	42
Clay Fishes	43
Rooted Down	44

Part I

Wyatt Remembers Home on Marston Drive

Shudders on shotgun homes, bald cypress
saplings, among my imaginary friends
and their old dogs, a blue songbird followed me home.

It must've been curious
to see a shoeless boy alone that young.
If his feet were small enough that bird

could tightrope a branch without a sound
home to its nest. Maybe, I told myself,
the bird would protect me

like a father should protect,
would mushroom as big as a house
and fly me from rooms my father

stumbled into with flushed
eyes and oafish fists.
I heard him breathe in his sleep,

a quiet sound like a cloud
that lumbers down blue sky before it pours
cats and dogs. The house filled with hot breath,

and I would sweat myself
to sleep. Hearing a bird on the windowsill pecking
to satisfy itself,

I raced imaginary friends
under a burning sky, through
crazed yelps and distant thunder.

The sharp stop of tires—
my father's headlights shutting off,
the cracking of branches in wind.

Nelda's First Home

Her pine home once grew deep in back woods
proud as climbing trees where children stood.

The sap ran streams between little plates
where young lips would sample and fingers trace

the path woven down to father's work boots
or up where beetles slept in dark golden chutes.

The wildness ran slowly through wooden threads—
sprang leaves from newborn sprigs quicker to shed

their bark for strong boughs with needles that teased
their limbs into organs filled with harsh seeds.

When Nelda is old, she dreams back her house
unsawed from logs where the fox and the mouse

surrendered their homes and scrambled unseen
through halls, crawlspaces, and rooms between.

She dreams even deeper, past memory
before men became fathers, sawed down trees;

or fire carouseled around her pine home.
The smoke from the embers through hair did comb

her back to the woods before she was born
to sense in the wildness the pine trees reborn.

Wyatt as a Boy

His home had a blackbird nest
in the chimney. He heard them sing
as wind ripping over rock stacks,
the hollow pierce of wind swimming
through stone threads. Quick. Quick.

Wyatt climbed high in a pine
until he was too scared to move.
His old man stole a switch
from a low branch, stripped its bark,
blew him tobacco smoke,
and commanded him down.

Blackbirds hurried from the flue, their speech crackling.

On the porch, his father's voice was a wheeze.
His hands clenched thin arms, the burn of fresh pine
on young legs. In Wyatt's mind, he embraces him,
his speech not slurred. The blackbirds quiet
in the trees.

When his mother sees him he says he fell
from a tree in the cold, black night.
He sits by the fire his father stoked,
and stares down the coal embers
until all the smoke plumes
softly up the chimney.

Nelda Remembers Her Father

My father lives in the lazy brown river
where he fished the water black. The smallest bird
in the world told me. I raced him to his nest
in the pines and he hid even higher where I was scared
to climb, whistling his one long note
like a lifeguard when someone goes out too far.

The river is filled with hot rain today.
I know it's foolish to follow this bird;
he left me alone just when I got close.
Patrolmen pulled father from the water
on an rainy afternoon like this. I used to believe
the bird sang to make me feel better.

Still I want it to talk real sweet to me,
whistle like father when it was time
to come home, tell me he'd rise from the water
early with the sun. The pines all seem smaller.
That bird doesn't sing for me,
but for something else he's lost.

Wyatt's Father Sings

He tuned the guitar until mother forced a smile—
his fingers explored their path to chords
where he plucked the woods behind our home
to midnight blue. He played to trick himself
that we wanted him around. The pitch dark played tricks
too—persimmon trees wreathed around us
to keep our family close. I pretended not to notice
the shine off the bottle when he stole swigs of whiskey.
Within my chest his song swelled the slow swell of smoke clouds
and my spine felt thick as old oaks.

Then the stars sank low. His fingers
fumbled for the right chords. He sent the family
to bed but held me back; told me to snatch
a simmon for him. It was nearly gone
when he huffed his breath in my face.
I lied like always and told him
he couldn't smell any sweeter.

Battle Scene

Wyatt is young inside the picture show.
Grave men canter horses speckled and black
from a burning village, from words that settle like loaded clouds
before rain. At night, they squint right through him.
Someone sings a prayer until the fire
dies. Coyotes sing too, the slow hopeful
howl of redemption. A weak sun matures
the badlands to gray.

In the theater the usher approaches.
He's checking the tickets. He tells someone
You don't belong here.

In the battle scene before someone dies,
Wyatt sees himself in a small stream older.
He wants to know who dies; he wants to hear
a happy ending.

Careful to Leave

One summer morning was careful to leave
a red robin nesting shy in snug wings.
Nelda in her window-bed was slower to grieve

than younger brothers with sharp tongues hiding in trees.

They climbed to the crowns, unforgivable curses they'd fling.

One summer morning was careful to leave.

Shadow grew longer then clearer to see
Father's empty chair, his lectures never ending.
Nelda in her window-bed fussed slowly and grieved.

For songs became mournings if just make believe
still Nelda suffered to hide her feelings.
One summer morning was careful to leave

delicate grass beneath an elderly tree
to quiet rash fears when a robin must sing.
Nelda in her window-bed blistered slowly and grieved.

When night shot through her window, pictures deceived.

Their father buried—her finger small for his ring.
One summer morning was careful to leave
Nelda in her window-bed slower to grieve.

Wyatt Tells About His Father

My father's hands are bruised today—
a black July Sunday morning.
So humid I can taste the river
in the air.

We're close to each other
but he's squinting to read
yesterday's paper. He's broken
his glasses again.

The water heater moans,
sends a soft quake below us.
In his suit breast pocket, the weak
silhouette of his flask.

Near the back door he has me hide
a hole with caulk and foil tape.
When the night slips away
we are surrounded by blue smog.

Someday you'll be where I am, he says,
grips the back of my neck, then reads.

Nelda's Wedding Day, Winter 1948

At the sole church in town, itself not fully grown,
my white scarf knotted around the chin
settled my wild brown hair. It flared
as brushwood behind my shoulders.
The chapel radiator purred
when his voice wrapped me like a winter coat.

Those first nights we spent apart, wishing
to pull together our childhood homes. I prayed
with my head out the window toward his, my first
deep secret. In the dark, everything had a face.
Daddy stayed up late; his fingers rifled the study Bible.
He was always angry at losing his place.

Mornings I pedaled to school, wondered
how to tell him I'd already given his name back.
I hoped I wouldn't have to face him—
that he'd smolder in the house alone
where I'd prayed for approval.

Nelda Writes Wyatt a Poem in the Park

Our bodies grew from beds of grass.
The bullying sun lost interest.
The park of strangers and kites left us last.
We folded clouds into people we passed.

The bullying sun lost interest.
Our deep breaths relieved the teeming chatter.
We folded clouds into people we passed.
Orange leaves deepened to red, then scattered.

Our deep breaths relieved the teeming chatter.
Hands felt my belly. You promised never to leave.
Orange leaves deepened to red, then scattered.
I pulled you closer before the night breeze.

Hands felt my belly. You promised never to leave.
The park of strangers and kites left us last.
I pulled you closer before the night breeze.
Our bodies grew from beds of grass.

Wyatt Sees His Father

I'm caught in the lull between sermons
smelling an old man's cologne (smoky
and mysterious). For a moment, Father's
urinating in the John beside me. He's disguised
himself as a sober man in a big dark overcoat.
His musk steps into the air and I can taste him
in the back of my throat. The sweat soaks
my collar the way his did before communion.
Someone leaves a stall, says it's too late to make it.
The service already began. I tell myself I don't have to cover
for him anymore. When the old man's finished
in the urinal he tells me I look like his grown son
and I drag open the door for him on his way out.

Nelda Wonders About Wyatt

The red paint peels from my family room walls
even in my mind. Just like him to leave me
pregnant, watching our two other little girls,

my knees down in the slush and mud,
de-frosting red roses with a hairblower,
deadheading the wilters so they'll come back to me.

Wyatt left days ago hauling freight for Old Dominion,
leaving the dark clouds that roll in low overnight
to wrap our shotgun home in ice.

I finger the stems, carefully grip around the prickles,
and wonder if the walls will peel to white
while we bide our time between storms.

Nelda at the Cemetery

I tower over my father
lying beneath a sweetgum.
The marble headstone is cold.
Its glossy face captures my own—
I never thought I'd keep coming back.
In the reflection, the sweetgum's
leaves purple like bruises.

A little girl buries her father too
in the plot by the pond,
mother's arms draped around her neck.

The branches appear dark and wrinkled;
tiny finger shoots grow from larger ones.
The crimson leaf near the end of its arm
is too far to reach, so I pick up a fallen
bommyknocker to squeeze in my hand,
savor its spikes' tender stings.
Needle pins break underfoot on my way out
and I wonder if sweetgums lose their leaves early.

Wyatt and His Girls

A trio of stowaway bluebirds
filled our screen porch with shrill cries
like rain swept off glass
by wiper blades.

My youngest girl, only five,
slipped her head inside the door
to mimic their calls
of long quivers and sharp yelps.

Our porch became the birdcage
for my three daughters,
fluttering their thin arms
in the warm dead air.

They didn't see me slip away
to carry another load
up North or hear my old rig's
air horn bellow.

They were afraid of being alone.
I'm sure they called for their mother,
locked in her bedroom, buried under
an ice bag for the migraine.

A hundred miles gone, the sky's gone
starless, locks me in
my own dark room. I tell myself
I can make it through the night.

Too far away from home
to get anything but the static hum
on the radio, I picture them nested
in their dark rooms, whispering for a way out.

Nelda Tells About the Pinecones

She's not as sad as she can imagine.
Pinecones blanket the front lawns.
Their giant mother trunks diminish the home
it shades. It's a trick on her eyes. The woods
have orphaned their trees before they're grown.
There's less of them now. She used to live
sequestered in a make-believe tree fort.
It's almost like I grew purposefully slow,
she says, then I wore out my welcome pretending
to die. Even now, she believes secrets.
There's a plant deep inside me no one sees.
She never knew how small she could become.
First time she climbed up the canopy
in the dark her mother shouted her name.
Wait. She is hoping she's not old.

The Day the Radiator Died

Nelda rented her basement floor
to a retired illusionist. His face furrowed
like a cinnamon roll—as if once
he was bigger but the years
kept folding him in two. It was the day
her radiator died. The wind ripped,
blew the snow and ice sideways,
so hardly a snowflake fell onto grass.
While Wyatt trucked cross country
on the frozen highway, the shriveled magic man
snatched the nose from their youngest daughter's
face (The one that took after her Father).
She giggled and commanded it back.
Nelda catches a cold breath in her lungs.

When the smell of burnt bread reaches her
she's wondering if she must be the father too.
Her little girl's mouth is pressed to the window
huffing hot breath rings onto glass.
She traces them quick before they evaporate.
The illusionist gives the little girl back
her father's nose, warns her not to go outside
or she might blow away. When he disappears
down stairs Nelda tells herself
the radiator will click on soon.

The Fluttering Moth

Through the window, Nelda eyes magnolias.
Each is so perfect. They grew
from buds and couldn't help but bloom white.

She sees her mother inside the pane, clipping
rotten twigs from stronger boughs. It's the last
May before she dies. She has on her most strained

face. The one Nelda grew into before
her mother passed. She died in her sleep,
a list of chores scribbled on a beauty parlor

receipt bedside. Tonight Nelda stares
into the window and mimics her mother's
faces. Each look sinks gracefully into

her own skin. Caught within the pane
and its screen, a gypsy moth.
It flutters wildly then settles, bound

by its mother's wings passed down.
Next spring she carries her mother's room
in boxes up to the attic. Before she falls

asleep she feels the lines imbedded
in the skin of her face and writes a list
in case there's something of her mother she missed.

Wyatt is Followed

A homeless man blew in with the autumn leaves,
delicate as origami.

He had the face of my father,
the one I'd kissed as a boy before
he ashed his smoke on the nape of my neck.
In the paper, he was a nameless dead man
drowned near the demolished historic site.

His caption follows me around newsstands
until I see him emerge from the front door,
his arms unraveling as secret plans
passed through hands under the kitchen table.

We're in the historic site. Its walls expand
and now I remember my old home full
of bruised faces I knew. He holds out a note.
Its words cocoon inside me like bodies
under orange leaves, words I could've written.
He folds up the faceless crowd and smiles.

Nelda Loses Wyatt in the Trees

Wyatt takes me for long walks
with his gun dog, Glory—her ears
cocked from the distant horn blare
of geese. The days are longer
with him home. I miss
my grown daughters. *We're too old
to walk past the fortune teller's
and into town*, I tell him.

The kettle squeals and Glory howls;
I watch her scramble to the kitchen,
the dog that can't live without him.
He returns with tea steaming;
The geese fly low over our drooping pines,
tattle like children.

Wyatt leaves me to follow the flock.
When I search for him through the screen
door, my migraine throbs with the honking
of geese. He slows his pace, motions for the retriever
to heel. It's almost as if knows he'll never get close
to them, then continues anyway. He goes too far
in the trees, so far that I no longer recognize him
when the geese fly away.

Part II

Clay's Deep in Trees

Granddad Wyatt tells me stories—his gun dog Glory, flat-coated and snoring by his deck rocker. Stout fingers grip the blade, glide it through layers of lemons. I sit on his lap, he slices the lemons into boats, holds the peel so I can get at its fruit. We watch Blue Jays flutter: he tells me their flight patterns, how some stay through winter and some never return home, their fledgling's downy feathers first feeling wind, the blistering cold, the crossfire of elements, their growing crowns, blue streaks forming from gray. He says they mimic the hawk's song, its protracted cry.

In photographs, Wyatt is a boy deep in trees, sure-footed and dozing in the crowns of giant oaks. Seemingly, the blue songbirds are all around. *Kee-yah. Kee-yah* they crow. I see him judging the branch's weights, tracing midribs of leaves, their blades in wind aflutter.

Wyatt tells stories sitting on unearthed roots of live oaks. His voice drawls slow, deliberate sounds. We imagine the sound of leaves falling, it is the sound of rivers churning stone to frost. Its branches stretch over us and in its nooks a nest. The newborn songbirds chirp. He says they mate for life. The mother *kee-yahs*, protects her nestlings. Father is gone, foraging for berries that float on grass like trifling buoys. His gray-blue crest resting, the blue squares of his quills in the sun shimmer: steel blue, cobalt blue, cerulean, sapphire blue, indigo. When he returns, the sky is midnight blue, the roots turned cold.

In dreams, Wyatt is an old man singing in canopies, his long white hair alive in the night wind, arms outstretched as branches. The river is flooded with fallen leaves, floating like boats come home from winter. I hear thousands of blue jays' sharp cries, then the raptor in full dive, its red plumes like daggers.

Wyatt tells stories on a deck rocker eating lemons. He says my father, Lane, has gone north, then calls for Glory to come home. He takes me deep in the trees. He crows and whistles in the blue-black darkness. We find his dog dead, near the river. Inside her gullet is a songbird, its blue wings turned back to gray.

Breach

The yellow pines cast shadows.
Mother held my hand. We walked
through football fields with men and their boys.
The smell of sweet sap hung.

There were sign-up booths. The men yoked
pads on small shoulders, tailbone pads,
pads with snaps for hips, knees, thighs.

Mother could not get them right. The weight
of thick plastic, misplaced cushion and foam.
Our first game—
the coaches, the boys circled.
They gawked, teased
as I stripped down.

Sundays was church. Preacher
cast a long shadow,
told us about ancient men, their concubines.
He said, *For every man shall bear his own burden.*

When I am much older, mother
teaches me to split wood. She puts the stump upright,
tells me to focus on the center.
I let the axe-head fall, smell the sap in the air,
and cleave the pine straight through to dirt.

Clay's Thoughts on a Fish

I dropped a Perch in the chicken coop
one afternoon. He bucked trying to swim
through dirt. I told myself
he would be okay, but the chicken hawks
kissed his scales to bone.

Pine trees seemed tall in the low clouds.
Needles tamped underfoot by puckered
feet that shuffled as nervous toddlers.

The tiny Perch so close to his ponds
and streams. Those strange, violent
birds swam through him. Their feathered
heads coalesced above him, turned darker
the deeper they dug.

He wanted to breathe, to feel water through his gills,
the safety of a sunken pine. His last thought
was the open water. He knew nothing about a bird,
a cloud, a cage, or a boy.

Fig Tree

At first, it is a fig tree and it grows
in Wyatt's backyard. He did not bury its seeds
in the earth; it has always been there. The stalk is split
down the middle, and I hide behind its
trunks until Wyatt calls my name. His giant
hands wrap around my waist. He places me
on the highest branch.
He gives me the vulnerable purple fruit.
Eat, he says,
Lane's gone.

When I am older, I am surrounded
by the fig trees. The mighty Ficus beings
exist for miles. I am lost,
so I speak to the grove.
Anybody here?
And the luscious fruit
floods the ground, up to my knees.
It shakes down in torrents
and I am shouting to be heard.

When I can search no more,
I see the tree with the trunk sundered.
There is Lane,
his white teeth stained
with the fruit's fleshy belly.
In his hand, a chainsaw.
I shouldn't have left this, he says.

But I always walk past him,
never knowing the way out.

Bamboo Grove

We were in the bamboo grove.
Granddad was so young then.
Their slender stalks, dense foliage
let in glints of sun. He tells stories,
saws through shoots with the tiny white flowers.
He says they will die soon.

Later, I watch him strip their nubs,
leaves, coat them in shellac. Under
the porch, they hang to dry.

Near the grove is a lake,
our cane poles, red and white bobbers.
The small Channel cats sucks
air on the lake sand: hook one
through the mouth and the eye.

I ask if it will die soon. Granddad
tells me stories. He smiles; he snatches
out the hook.

When we leave the sky is deep red,
Granddad's hand is sticky with blood.
Into the grove we disappear, and I never look back.
I know the fish is there, belly up in the shallows.

Wyatt and Clay by the Fire

Wyatt crumbled my father up
with the rest of Buntyn's stories,
buried in the wood burning stove.
The fire catches and they turn to smoke,
the ink perfume litters the air.

*Was born from a blast furnace,
Wyatt says, His face was grayed
from mining pig iron in Kentucky.*

The caption under the picture
said he was lost.

When I pedal past his family home
I want to tell him I read his story,
to find out where he escaped.
I picture him covered in soot,
digging deeper into dark rooms,
tunneling back to us. He floats nearer;
when he is so close I could've touched him
his face is gone, just a gray cloud
of smoke that is only here for a short while
then gets carried away.

Elder

Clay sweats through his black cotton suit,
dismisses the itch crawling up his arms.
The elder tree's shadow has shifted since
the beginning of the eulogy. The trunk rises
as if from separate roots. Yellow jackets buzz about
its leaves with white flowers.

Wyatt can only quiver
his kind word (purpling fingers
gripped around a Bible). His brother
was a fisher. For each nook of the lake
there was an exact cast, a silver bearing,
a distracting jig, a hook, an explanation
of how to catch the big one.

It's Clay's first funeral.
His uncle's thin cheeks layered
with blush brought the itch
back, this time in his throat.

Wyatt clutches Clay's hand
like that Bible on purpose.
When he cries he hides his face
from the families uncle made—
each in their own pods, standing in
black coats, just buzzing.

Beneath Flower Beds

The slug traipsed out beneath
stones from our flower beds. Trees
of slime tailed its body
over cast iron Lilly
pots and all moored beings
belonging to metals, woods, terrene
elements. Clay watched it lying
at breakfast by Mother's frying
pan. The cotton snowed hard
today when he heard
someone died. Death found
him swallowed in woods. In town,
they roam back to the church,
sing mourning songs before lunch
for his soul to be light
when it tastes steamy night
air. They fry fierce red tomatoes
and forget about creatures
belonging under stones.

Clay Climbs Inside a Tree House

“So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.” (Ephesians 5:28-29, NKJV)

Wyatt believes in regular church going.

On his cherry dresser there is a photograph.

It is my mother as a child.

He puts me to bed, he says to pray for her.

On his cherry dresser there is a photograph.

All around dogwoods are in bloom.

She guides me up to the tree house.

She cries and I promise her she will wake up.

All around dogwoods are in bloom.

She asks me, *What will happen to Lane's love for me?*

I tell her about Wyatt, how he prays.

This is when the clouds become fog. She never wakes.

She asks me, *What will happen to Lane's love for me?*

When my mother is a child

the clouds become fog. She never wakes.

Wyatt believes in regular church going.

Clay's Thoughts on a Bird

I was a child when Jesus settled inside.
His church walls protected us from ourselves
that summer a sparrow nested
in the white canopy wood. I was sure
someone would notice, but he was so small.
Evenings I prayed for him in the pale glow
of the night light. I heard the flutter
of wings and imagined nests hidden.

I never told a soul about the captive bird.
We all held secrets and our bodies outgrew
our rooms. I prayed for us to return
to small nests we'd forgotten, as small birds
who came not to fly, but wanting to learn.

Clay Takes a Ride

Right field swallowed me up back then
and the day dozed to evening much too late.
Flood lights high above were dead.
The outcome always in jeopardy.
I lost my dad in the wash of strange faces.

On rides home, the deejay did the talking.
I asked Lane, *Which song is your favorite?*
He had a way of answering
me quicker than I hoped.
I was stuck being the grownup
until he left me again.

Between the darkness and the ride home
I picture him alone the other nights;
his home swallowed by empty rooms.
He reaches me less than he had hoped.
When he calls, I tell him I must go soon.

Wyatt and Clay Visit a Grave

Wyatt shows me the grave.
There is a fierce heat, there is a tree.
Its giant trunk hunched, maple arms
dead long ago, stuck in near embrace.
His father's stone marker under rain.

I hear the mumbling, a prayer.
His hand tightens. He wants to give me the secret.
He wants to tell me he can be my father.
But he pays respects. Before he turns the key
or the tires spin,
there is only the electric chafe of the locust
and the stillness.

He has heard them before, the night
his old man's coupe crashed
driving home. Wyatt will not speak ill.
His back holds scars, his mouth, a secret.
Despite this, he still prays, fingers interlaced
and gripping.

When Wyatt was young there was a tree.
There was a switch. He remembers
the earth littered with holes,
the cicada's shell, a father's hand clenched,
his head spinning, and the stench of whiskey
on his old man's breath.

Nelda and Clay Walk Through Her Garden

Barefeet on cobblestones
repossessed by noon heat.

The wildflower patches
purple like the last ones.

A black bird builds a nest.
A rat snake digs a hole.

The white-painted trellis
blisters and requires

another coat. Morning
Glories wake in Easter

best then bury themselves.
Fireflies flash cryptic

green messages. *Beetles*
is all they really are.

She tells me this while we
can still see each other.

I can tell she won't lie
to protect me anymore.

I watch her garden grow
into itself again.

Then we guide each other
back to where we came from.

Circus Arena

Clay's graceless body
zombies on crabgrass—
the same practice field
Lane cleated to mud.
His bony legs, bulky cleats
pumps in unison with the other
bodies lost under shoulder pads. He dives
to the whistle—it's clear
pitch paralysis.
His heart beats like a church organ—
the clamorous hundred pipes.
Coach with the voice of God
summons his family name.
It weighs on him
in the hot rain,
in the balm
of creeping grass
and upturned earth,
where he tumbles
with the other animals
driven to perform.

Clay Goes to Church

Sunday morning unfolds.
All the same neighbors are suspicious
of the developing winds, low dark clouds.
Is it supposed to always be sunny?
I'm drawing the gold stained glass dove in church
as though my life depended on it. Over
my shoulder, someone watches. The preacher
explains to us real slow that we only
have our bodies a short while. A whisper
reaches for my ear in the organ pipe
confusion. No. It's the rainstorm shuffling
overhead. Maybe I should become a man
today, drink the fake blood, or worry
over the weather. My heart constricts.
I'm old enough to believe
it could stop.

Clay and Nelda in the Ocean

Nelda is unremarkable—her sallow skin
liver-spotted beneath a one-piece suit. Her long pepper-hair
stuck to her back, full of seawater. In the swell behind her
the medusa lolls as if behind plates of glass.

Yesterday she brought me inside the aquarium.
We watched the creature drift along with its father. Their golden
bells rang soundless in the currents. The wave-maker
engine gently rocked them for display.

You look like my father, God rest his soul, she says.
Her graying locks float in matted strands behind her.
She traces circles in the water. The blooms
of sea nettles undulate nearer, reach for light.

Her soft voice echoes from glass plates.
Her father's reflection appears. He knocks to be heard.
Sometimes I wonder if Lane knocks at my window
then can't bear seeing me older, so he disappears.

When I close my eyes, Grandma is in the shallows again, eyes shut,
spindly arms unfolded, ears longing

for the tolling of bells from behind paned glass.

Rabbit Holes

Lane cradled the unhinged faces of stones.
Their deep furrows formed from rivulets
flooding feldspar and quartz mirrored his own
complexion on the stream. Stones leapt. Spray misted
to smoke, the smell of the old neighborhood.

The retired illusionist—his attic
filled with rabbits and toads in chicken wire
cages, his trained hand at Lane's ear fetching
coins. *The world is full of magic, and magic,
illusion.* Lane is inside the crystal globe

and in his hands are two stones. When they skip
they become his children running. He senses them
discovering their way back to him—out
of earth, stream, smoke. And when they draw near
he burrows back to the old neighborhood to disappear.

Lane Has a Visitor

The lank, pale trunks of the Aspen are ghosts,
jutting from the earth like skeleton fingers.
Through the grove is a small clearing. Here
is Lane's house.

It has been twelve years since I found his note.
Then, the wind was bitter.

His breath lumbered inside these walls, alone.

I peer through the window.
And I try to picture him, writing.

Or asleep on the couch. The prolonged
yowl of wind and flurry all around.

On the cold glass
I write, forming a path of letters
through the flakes
with my finger.

One of the branches breaks,
falls on the snow.

When he wakes
he will never read his son's note
and I will already be gone.

Clay's Palms are Read

The diviner possesses my hand—
her elfin head coiled
in chintzy shawls—threads frayed.
Six minutes the emblazoned
Fortunes Foretold signboard
expires, the steel bolt fires through
the strike plate. Her tongue, spiritless,
wonders aloud over radio static.

My breath fogs the window of Wyatt's first home.
I'm back in Buntyn.
The rainless Bermuda helter-skelter
at my feet. Pearl-gray paint molts
exterior walls. The whole town feels
like it's shrinking. Wyatt's father, veneered
teeth with a smoke, puffing clouds and shooting
whiskey, ogles the picture box, its snow flurry clamorous
through the walls.

The diviner's forefinger weeds over my palm
and plants me in the vision;
she strikes deep through my life line.
I feel the current of white noise flow through me
and the old neighborhood peels off me as snakeskin.

Lane and Clay Row a Canoe

Lane says we have the canoe for a short while.
The oars become heavy, we reach center-lake
and the Smokies are all around, but the fog hunkers
still. We rest on the surface inside the veil.

Lane says Tyler is twelve, takes out the trout beads.
We hook through the roe with nothing
but the drone of damselfly. Smell
the stink of eggs.

Lane says to not rock the boat when I cast.
It's the first I've seen of him in years.
I remember his old roost—the brown
grass, paint peeling from walls. Summers
he'd come by and we'd jaw like grownups.

Lane says my brother lives
somewhere in Texas, shows me a picture.
We float across the dark water. Belly up,
a fingerling trout breathes. The damsel's hum
at my ear.

Lane says the oars wore him out.
My hand goes to the fish,
but I pull back. See Lane at the stern,
picture in hand. It's like he's deciding
if he finally wants to grow up. He sees the eggs
rocking back to shore, the damselfly and panting trout.
I grab the oars without asking and row us
through the fog.

Clay Remembers a Bluebird on Marston Drive

This bluebird is silent,
works from memory.
How his father burrowed
himself in an abandoned
woodpecker hole last spring
then loaded his small claws
with pine needles to build
the nest walls.

I am the grown son
reaching back to that orange
early evening when
I was a child and what seemed
like our family's bluebird
quietly took over his father's home.

I let myself believe
he would return to take care of his nest.
The neighborhood was already lost,
oaks and maples overgrew
our home, extended their branches
across Marston. Few ever left,

except the birds. Lane left
his home the way he found it,
flew away and searched
for a new one, forgetting
what he already built.

Clay Fishes

I drag up the stringer to make amends
with the three Rainbows. Ensnared through flushed gills—
their bittersweet mother's marks begin
to burn for river drift, the brush

of eel grass in shallow sunken meadows.
I am in the mouth where the careful stream
pools clockwise. I follow back to shore, woolly black fly pinned
to my vest. On aerial roots I knife inside

their bellies, feel the warm flesh rekindle
in the hushed breeze. It is the hush before
communion, the pause of the prolonged din
between organ hymns. My thoughts turn

to myself as a boy, praying on the end
of the last pew. The pipes' deep clamor streams
back to me. Shoals where rainbows send
their faithful sons to hunger far upstream.

Rooted Down

Multi-colored, cedar-planked shotgun homes,
shadows floating through slouched conifers;
delicate pinecones above monkey grass patches.
Myself as a boy—blue eyes, slim silhouette.

Inside the canvas, I embrace Wyatt's old gun dog,
whistle birdcalls; the ones he whistled before Glory
swallowed the slowest bluebird. He digs a hole. I catch him
mumbling to his dead father. I whisper to Lane,
picture him alone and lost in the woods (I prayed
he was slow to leave). The neighbors chattered when he disappeared.
Their whispers flew colorful yellow-green, jade, teal-hued twisters
through the tumble clouds. The wind was chimney smoke,
the night starred.

Row homes abandoned or burned to cedar
skeletons line Marston Drive, become nests again
to bluebirds and jays. All the owners,
their mongrel strays turned back to dust.
Granddad's shaky hand is on mine.
There's a rotten pine he wants cut down
before it falls. I promise him I'll return
before the sky goes black.