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EDUCATION OF A WHITE TRASH GRIOT

by

Michael Warren Adams

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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## **White Trash Griot**

I am to be like God, the bastard  
son of five mothers who didn't nurse  
me, and three fathers—two alive.

I am Moses left to chance  
the reeds, the loving arms of a Jack  
of all trades and a drunk Jane  
Doe on a farm near Memphis.

Memphis, where the Blues found its  
name after it wandered the Delta for 40 days,  
where a part Cherokee boy from a shotgun  
house in Tupelo came to rock and roll,  
and where my first mother made me the hardest  
decision of her life before she took I-40 east  
to freedom.

My last ditch hope is that  
my place and time, my record, will ball  
off this text and find you, hold your hand,  
and take you through these worn streets and keep  
you safe after the sun ducks over the river.  
This is my city, and this is my history.

Papa Legba, I am ready. Let the godforce  
come upon me so I may conjure this thing.

## Daybreak in the Delta

When the sun rises in the delta,  
the farms and their hands see it first.  
They're the first to bear and hear those  
low strung groans crest out  
of bed, the ebb of calloused toes,  
fists clinched like cotton bolls, the first  
cracks of bone hardened in topsoil,  
dried in drought, drowned in high water,  
eyes crow-footed by redemption prayers.

Theirs is hard work chained to hard lives.  
The time clock runs east to west, and families  
in plank houses hope against hope  
the crops make, *good Lord willing and the creek  
don't rise*, harsh winters huddled beside pot stoves,  
burden shucked with hand-me-down guitars on front porches  
at the end of work, moonshined Saturday nights,  
and Sunday morning repentance, offerings of three,  
drunk ridden nights outside one room shacks,  
sweat and toil by daybreak.

Theirs is history written in a family bible,  
future saddled by present and haunted by past.  
It's moss on the south side of an oak, lightning  
bugs caught in a bottle tree, catfish walking  
between waterholes, hoot owl daydreams or a black  
fly on momma's favorite record years after she's gone  
and buried in tales over muscadine and mash. This is  
the sunrise that always comes to find her empty chair.

## **Whatever happened to Robert Johnson?**

Old man Muddy never stopped rising,  
falling in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time down to the gulf.  
Kudzu grows fast enough to watch.  
The green flood chokes Mississippi bottoms.

I saw Robert wait in dusty, old  
shoes for a ride from the crossroads.  
Saturday came to collect the night  
he hit that bottle of strychnine whiskey,  
took to bed for three days, and passed.

Mornings, now, at the intersection of 61  
and 49 highways, the fire the fryers before sun-  
up at Delta Donuts, keep the coffee warm  
and pouring for the locals.

A few miles west, a tug pushes a barge down  
stream. The river bubbles white in its wake.

## The Education of Sweetsop Jones

Have a seat, boy. You look like a man  
need to learn a little something, since you down  
south of Memphis with a bad run of walking  
blues, come through the kudzu  
and high cotton, caught up with me under this sugar  
maple that reaches heavenways from middle of this  
field, like a dead man needs a helping hand.

Now, I ain't no conjure, but I know a little  
something about it. The blues caught me good,  
came on me not too long after I filled out,  
started to notice the curves of a woman.  
I started to stir, took out and seen some things, laid  
women you wouldn't believe, went all over  
down New Orleans way, up Chi-town, got four  
kids, and lost four more.

I'm here at this tree to pay respects,  
heard word my last brother passed and figured  
since I'm the last Jones left on our branch, I'd come  
crawling back to take up the mantle left. This was mama's  
Bible. This is our family tree. You see that blank spot, there?  
That's the space left for me to fill, I got to catch up.

They turned my daddy into fruit up in this tree  
after he come home from the war. Mama and me hung  
to it when the river came for us in 27.  
Rains came quick, and kept coming.

*[no stanza break]*

The water ain't too far past that treeline.  
There I was, just old enough to be off the tit. Water  
come rushing. We climbed up and tangled  
ourselves to the limbs. When help come,  
I had all that white sap on me. *Man said Boy*  
*be all right if we had some biscuits, sop*  
*him right up.* That ain't to say this tree mine, no more  
than it belongs to you. Now, I told you all that to tell you this:

This tree been here longer than black folk.  
Shango done walked through here,  
no telling how many times, shouldered down trees,  
brought hell and high water, made all the noise he could,  
but them roots run too deep, stretch too far, help too much.  
You see how rich these Susans are around this trunk?  
Good roots saved my life, save yours too if you let'em.

## A Brief Account of What I Know

I'd like to begin by saying  
that I know little to nothing about art.  
I don't know it the way I do  
porn, past due bills, or an empty refrigerator.  
(Not completely empty, I have some mayonnaise left.)

I know I was adopted from birth.  
It's never been a secret, so my parents are *my parents*.  
My real mother was broke,  
lived in a Midtown studio  
apartment with my sister.  
(I forget their names.)

I know my adoptive father works hard for us,  
four total—all step. I'm his only child.  
He weeps at night for my salvation, prays  
that some Sunday I'll walk into service. Tears  
well up in his prodigal daydreamer eyes.  
(He'll probably reach out and squeeze my hand).

I know my uncle was shot in cold blood  
by a man with a badge and a vendetta.  
My mother hasn't put down the bottle  
since she got the call from the ICU and sped  
to the Med at 2:30 on a Wednesday morning.  
(She had the bottle before that; it got worse).  
[*stanza break*]

I know last night I killed a mouse.  
I saw him Saturday. I bought the poison  
Sunday morning, and I put it out that afternoon.  
Four days later, I put his corpse in a cup and tossed  
it into the green trashcan outside.  
(The city man came today to take it).

Looking back, it seems the only brightening  
certainty I maintain is that, if I kill another mouse,  
someone will surely come by to pick up the corpse.

## **Magnolia Girl**

What's her story? The one  
in Chuck Taylors, a pants suit,  
T-shirt tight against her curves.

I'm only interested in the history  
between her legs, her mother and father  
back to Adam and Eve.

The pure flower of her  
rests in the peace of thighs  
coaxed open by smooth talk and whiskey.

When touched, the flower  
bruises, wilts, dies.

## Discovery by Proximity

What Memphis did de Soto see  
as he topped some since-smoothed ridge  
and looked out at the piles of dead?

While the bored people of this city sit on idle  
porches and play race cards, the entertained  
take out and take on payday  
loans, cash for title, no credit, no problems.  
*We don't care about your credit.*  
*We care about you.*

Moses shivers in his surplus  
jacket on Summer, long dreads and VC purple heart.  
He hasn't led anyone in years.

I woke up inside out.  
Before my toilet backed up,  
I ran out of cigarettes.  
*Motherfucker! Shit!*

I drove towards the sunset, so high  
I forgot I was alone.  
I cruised down Madison past the Square,  
Otis on shuffle, past  
Cleveland, through the Med-plex  
until I was lost downtown, and I found  
my way over to the yeast-heavy  
air around the Wonder factory.  
*[no stanza break]*

Monroe to Marshall, down to the Hattiloo,  
and they looked at Otis funny.

No crowd gathers before dark at Escape Alley, Domino  
drivers like MPD cruisers lined up before Union.

Outside Sun Studios, a red '55  
T-bird and something whispered,  
*Magic happened here.*  
*You're magic because you're here.*

Moses got the Spirit,  
Not another junkie on the drag,  
not nonsense, but the kind of rabid  
scene played out as some faint  
feel when the right song that moment  
tells us *Welcome home.*

## God Damned My Time in a Trailer

Tipton County, 1994

My stepdad beat me because I used  
too much of his *Goddamned* toilet paper,  
and he threatened to throw me and my drunk  
mother out of his *Goddamned* tin can of a home  
that hadn't moved since he *beat those niggers* back  
in '68. All of this while my mother nodded  
off in a bounced check of a Jim Beam stupor,  
the smell of mulberry potpourri, Skoal stains on the rug.

Some weekends, when she had custody, I slept in a tent  
pitched in the back yard, Army surplus and coarse  
as their accusations that poured through the cracked windows.  
*All god damns and I'm not half the drunk you ares*  
until their two forms spilled into the yard. It was obvious  
my mother hadn't fallen out of a tree like she told me,  
explaining away the bandage on her cheek when she picked  
me up. It was obvious my eleven year old  
arms could never save her.

## **Missionary**

The archangel pulled his shift and punched the time clock. He found his panhead and roared down the 240 noose to his little house tucked deep in a Bluff City barrio. He shed his faded cut and slung his shouldered service revolver on a dining room chair. He traded his blue collar for a Blue Ribbon, stretched his wings and pulled a slug from a fifth of Old Crow.

His eyes watered.

His tears burned.

## False Idols

I'm sorry you thought you'd made love  
to a poet, that I'd pull the rubber off with the eloquent  
grace that they teach in Academia,  
that already—while you waited for the nicotine to quell  
those post-coital shakes—the wheels  
would turn in this man brain and I'd laurel  
that moment with grandiose movement,  
three stanzas of exhausted breadth,  
that, in the morning, you'd pull your head off  
the pillow enough to catch the break-  
fast scent of eggs in a basket and bacon sizzle  
before you fell back into the pillows and smiled.

I'm sorry you thought you'd leave that morning  
and when you came back, I'd have a brace of poems  
with your name scribbled in a line here and there,  
that you'd be remembered as only I could make you,  
somehow immortal because that's how  
it all happened, that you could take  
that brace back to him to say *this is what I've been*  
*doing while you were away* and he'd boil  
with the same ferocity you fell in love with.

## Conqueroo

There's a murder of them back there,  
rustling through leaves I never raked  
in the back yard. They root and pull  
worms from the wet dirt under the dry  
blanket. Some caw, fly. Justice came  
and watched them with me. She felt the pain  
piled up in me, each day something more.  
I felt her hand. Her fingers wrenched  
the tension from my fist.

Somebody working roots on you, boy.  
I see it in that clinch-jaw grind  
you carry, like something empty  
sparks between your worried ears as you  
stuff all that straw into second-hands.  
You got a want in you as high's them  
pines, and it wasn't that inked girl  
give'em to you either. You set out  
walking in the wrong pair of shoes.  
You won't ever build enough  
scarecrows to stave the things you fear.

## **Bussed**

Scratch sat in back of MATA bus 923 as it dirged down a frozen Summer Avenue. He found himself alone, broke, and broken. He seethed as he read his latest eviction notice. His whole damned life, a flurry of evictions, hardship. Scratch knew the Greater Truth—there were only so many he could tempt, so many he could control.—He recognized a passing face near Highland. The weight of his age finally caught up with him.

It'd been years since he snaked through the garden.

It'd been years since he changed the world.

## **The Gospel of Sweetsop Jones**

*for John the Revelator*

I always say good morning  
'cause they're always mourning somewhere,  
and if you gonna mourn, might as well mourn good,  
gonna play harp, might as blow right.

Always folks working the graveyard  
shifts, and I don't mean the Guédé.

After six straight days of hard conjure, God come  
down and said his peace to Adam. When Eve talked  
her man into that apple, they got the eviction notice,  
and the blues was born before their sons.

Thirteen sat down at that table. The freight train blew  
three times before sun-up. They say His tears ran  
blood that night in the garden, and He realized  
that's how it had to be when the men closed in.

Days passed before the Baron come calling, Judas  
long strung up like Delta fruit and gone. Mourning  
brought Mary to an empty tomb, stone rolled away.  
Soon after, the doubter dipped his hand into the wounds.

## **Homecoming Tradition**

Once a year and for funerals,  
we ride out to the wildwood church  
and sit in the brick building thirty yards  
from where we'll go when we die. We dropped  
Nana there in '94. Granddaddy lived  
into the Millennium and paid hard  
cash for my plot near his. My mansion  
prepared, feast laid out in wait.

We affirm faith and rise,  
sing about our Blessed Assurance.  
My father won't tell me about his biopsy  
It runs in the family, and the last  
thing he'll leave me is worry.

## Thirst

I find my grace in each round of shots.  
I lose myself in conversations. My water  
color days bleed like my own skipped syllables.

My friends say I use  
it as a crutch, that I try to drown  
demons with fifths and twelves,  
I'm on a feather  
fall to madness.

Their reaction is funny,  
like I'm a caged animal that waits  
until I find them vulnerable enough  
to reach beyond the bars and attack.

They look from their sheltered, little worlds:

*Don't feed the bear.*

*Don't tease the bear.*

*Don't rattle his cage*

*He only looks harmless.*

I've become a liability, and no one  
wants a good time anymore,  
not like this, not my good time.

I know these things,  
but awareness is not resolution.

**Captain Hook was always hearing clocks.**

My best friend in high school married an attorney with red hair.  
Every time I see them out and about, she gives me her card.  
I have seven now.

I piss off almost everyone I know. I'm not confrontational; I only want  
them to remember me, even if it's for my hard times.  
I'm not built for one night stands.  
I'm tired of the wait between here and last call.  
I'm out of pot, and there's no money to make the right calls and re-up.  
My happy thought is me on a free-fall from the Peabody rooftop. No, really,  
I can fly. Just you watch.  
My dumb shadow fights me back.

The preacher man says, *Ask, child, and you shall receive.*  
My 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher said, *It's better to give, son.*  
I asked for nothing.  
I received nothing.  
I've given only to be asked for more.  
MLGW won't take an I.O.U, and no one understands BYOB.  
The pirates close in on this lost boy.

I want to believe that clapping can bring a dead  
fairy back to life, but reality doesn't lend itself to happy  
thoughts and wooden swords. Maybe it's time

I take my father's advice, time to grow up and realize there are  
no fairies, just a bunch of lawyers with red hair  
married to people I went to school with.

## Poor Man's Stained Glass

Full moon tonight, the bruise  
grey shadows at door, all that old  
comes to keep me wide awake, near  
every night—all those lovers who ran  
back to their husbands, those full tilt blind  
drunk nights, one-night redemptions,  
the hangovers who follow the dawn.

Save the bottles you crawl in, boy,  
Those empties you think you  
find answers in, and hang  
them in the persimmon off the porch.  
When your haints come to haunt, moonlight  
dances through the colored glass. Funny  
thing about them spirits, child. They more  
scatter-brained than you, and the bottles keep  
them until daybreak  
comes home to collect.

## Sweetsop talks Forgiveness

It must be a cold day in hell  
because that couple, that man  
and woman across the room  
sat down together and didn't spit  
their curses into each other's  
coffee after all the heart-hurt  
hate talk, the way people do when love runs  
cold and they stoke that dying fire with empty  
words and dregs of old missteps.

It ain't more than a start for them  
two to look at each other and remember  
how Christopher took that ragged child  
to his back and started across that river  
when he thought, *This cat seems a little  
heavier than he should.*

## **Lindsay**

You're a ghost and all the clichés  
that encompasses in the sheets we  
rolled in, all those out-of-body experiences.

I watched one of those ghost  
hunting shows on SyFy.  
They talked about spirits like you. I feel  
you pull the energy out of the air  
around me to manifest. I find myself  
antsy, but you never appear.

I catch myself thinking of you  
on the road between here and Music City: sex  
and pumpkins, board games and blowjobs.

Most trips since I saw you last  
have been little more than bust,  
wastes of time and money.  
I flee stress to find stress.

I slink into roadside bookstores,  
geared towards fags and deviants.  
It's the only time I see an underbelly  
and show my own while I wait for you  
to come back and be pierced again.

## Memphis in May, 2011

*Everybody in this car is going to hell.*

Two beer-drunk cups, I scanned  
the faces nearby and hoped to see that spark,  
that flint spark recognition bound to life in a big  
small town. Sister Gayle warmed the ivory  
crowd while the river swelled well above flood  
stage. The sky forebode another downpour.  
The lightning would not strike. The rain would not come.

*If I'm going to hell, I'm going there playing the piano.*

They called on Jerry Lee, and he appeared with all  
the cocksure swagger he took to England in '58.  
The cougar in front of me slipped into my beer  
when the Killer sat down at the baby grand and started in  
on a familiar blues. We were all mounted, ridden,  
shook-nerve, brain-rattled, witnesses to a sun  
blond break in the clouds, the flutter of birds  
at Jerry Lee's wrists.

The Killer played.  
Nobody followed.

**Her pudgy-pawed hands fumble-fucked the plastic surrounding her tuna on rye.**

Does anyone remember Maybelle Hobble?

The wild haired mess, some acid frenzy gone  
awry in a mix of insistence, uncertain  
whims, some bipolar bitch hound who was  
here as fast as she was gone.

The eternal one-sided phone calls  
that said nothing before she showed  
at the door with half a twelve pack  
she kept in her car and complained  
she felt cornered in Bluff City.

She was half Jew with a drunk father, claimed  
a half agnostic and pious mother, with her  
siblings off somewhere doing philosophical  
mushrooms in Appalachia while she could not  
find the right words to say what she meant.

She lost sleep over the soup  
left in Ginsberg's freezer when he died.  
Old Maybelle hated Jim Brasfield  
almost as much as I do. We had that one,  
thing in common, but I don't know  
Kierkegaard or what he wrote  
like I know what's on the men's room wall  
at Poor and Hungry: *Maybelle Hobble killed my  
Myspace page. Maybelle Hobble gave me syphilis.  
Maybelle ate my lunch, scribed on the wall*  
[no stanza break]

of the filthiest shithouse in Memphis.

Her last day in town, when she stormed  
out of Patterson into daylight,  
the final *fuck you* on the steps.

The ever accusatory *you people aren't good enough.*

*You just don't get it. You never will.*

No, Maybelle, we get it.

We only wish we didn't.

**In the Land of the Delta Blues, it's especially hard to find someone.**

Lonely, disconnected, driving past  
church signs and run down  
jukes full of life on Saturday,  
my old Fleetwood passes  
streetlight, streetlight, streetlight,  
funeral home, and another town dies.  
The road stretches into the darkness beyond  
the certainty of headlights.  
This is the delta; this is home.  
I've been gone for too long.

She stands on the side of the road,  
too proud to stick out a thumb  
or draw up a sign, but I know  
she needs me to get her where she goes.

She gets in and lights  
a cigarette. She fiddles the radio  
dials until some old blues  
crackles through the speakers.

She doesn't talk, just hums  
Lady Day and pulls  
drags from her cigarette, blows white  
smoke into the Mississippi night.

She's every prepubescent fantasy  
I kept to myself in my little bed and prayed  
*[no stanza break]*

forgiveness for on Sunday mornings.  
Her thighs slip out from her baggy dress,  
and I can't help but wonder  
what heaven's like between them.

She tosses her cigarette into the dark.  
Her embers thump off the asphalt  
and the wind shapes them  
into the form of a woman before  
they all blow away.

She's gone.  
The radio's dead.

There's not a blues station around here for miles.

## **After having my wallet lifted in Midtown 12-13-11**

Burn it. Burn this whole damn  
city like so many crosses and storefronts  
after they murdered Martin before  
they set things right. This is the city that kills  
its Kings, and I don't want to be a part of it  
anymore. The local news has always been too much  
to bear, but now I can't stop for smokes and road  
beers without a hand out. I've been lucky  
they haven't had anything in their hand but typical grit  
panhandlers seem to line their pockets with, until tonight  
when that pockmarked and crack-ridden hooker leaned in too close  
for comfort and begged me to trade my money for thirty minutes of her.  
I must have been half stiff with entertainment at the thought, stiff enough  
not to feel her lift my wallet with professional grace, dexterity.

It wasn't until stopped into the Mapco at Central and Cooper  
because I hadn't had enough yet, and I put a six on the counter,  
it wasn't until then I realized she'd  
taken from me and didn't give me a damn thing in return.

When MPD showed up to take my statement, all they could say  
was, *Welcome to Memphis.*

**This city eats people.**

Writing poems will never make me  
a poet, no more than hanging out in Midtown will  
ever make me an artist or a drag queen, hanging  
out at Wolf Chase won't make me rich or happy, and drinking  
downtown doesn't make me a tourist, but damned  
if that's not how we're labeled.

Memphis takes a strange breath  
when it wakes up beside the river,  
half drunk with a Beale Street headache—a long  
night—the music too loud hours after last call.

Sometimes friendships shatter. Sometimes a wish  
upon a star is slipping a twenty  
to a waitress I'll never take home.

Sometimes being a man means hocking  
my mother's favorite records and burning  
her Victrola to stay warm after she's gone.

**You have to be willing to be ridden in order to be rode.**

I need you tonight, boys. Please,  
play it bluesmen, give me some dirty  
South, soul stealing riff over the bass line  
where she finds herself open to the sickness.  
Drums drive a gut-rattle  
high hat and lightning flam snare.

In some bar on Beale, flat beer  
and a house band people love,  
the last cigarette in a pack  
burns to filter in the ashtray.

Y'all call that train back to Memphis.  
I'll buy your beers if  
you teach me how to shine  
my soul in Mississippi dirt.

An old bum wails in the empty  
street. A warm breeze blows off the river,  
kicks cans through Confederate Park.

Smoke rolls out of every mouth and nostril.  
Water beads on cold beer and in the small of her  
back. The hem of her dress rises. Her thighs  
goose pimple. It's got a hold on her. It's got  
hold on me. It's got a hold on me.

[*stanza break*]

It will all be over by the sunrise.  
We'll pull ourselves out into the broad light  
act like it never happened. Somewhere in us,  
though, we'll know it did. We carry the same echo  
out into the world.  
*This night, this city.*

## Scars

Someone else's sorrow  
rumbled Monday afternoon.  
The wind kicked cadence in leaves.

I looked down at the scars on her arm.  
I feel my own scars beg for her attention.

I wonder what happened last night. The blue  
streetlight found us in bed, bare naked  
exploring one other for the first  
time, before I spent myself in her.

Drizzle-headed afterwards,  
we slipped out on the porch  
to smoke and tossed our empties  
onto the street to be swept away  
by the ghost of an old beat.

We crawled back into bed without  
a word in the dark. I ran  
my fingers down her scars and hoped  
I could save her.

## **Duty**

Every morning before the day breaks,  
the archangel pulls the dead  
feathers from his wings,  
has his morning coffee and cigarettes.

He pours a tall glass of dark  
rum and walks out to his front yard.  
In the fresh goofer around the bottle  
tree, he pours the rum for the lost  
trapped in the bottles. He couldn't  
neglect them in his offerings.

First light like a cigarette's  
burning embers under the ash of clouds.  
It peaks through the dreamcatcher shade  
trees of his street. His Harley glistens.  
When the sun is well above the horizon,  
when all his bottles have been touched, he turns  
each up, gives them a little shake.  
He prays.

## **Campus Clutch**

Walkways painted still in orange  
streetlights. Students clutch  
against cold, against mist.

There's hardly life left in the dying  
December. College girls clutch pocket  
knives while they walk, hold pepper  
spray canisters under baggy shirts.

Moving brisk and aware, I  
catch sight of a little woman  
as she emerges from a basement stairwell.  
Fear wells in her eyes at the idea of me.  
She tenses. I move

a few steps. I spin on my heels  
in time to see her take off furious  
the opposite direction.

The only weapon we have against  
each other is forward momentum.

**Just like the ones I used to know.**

Surely, Christmas can't be  
Christmas until my step-brother comes  
home high, with a Santa cap  
on his coked out little noggin  
and little white powder burns  
hung with care under his sugar  
plum nostrils. My step-dad feeds  
him top shelf whiskey by the fireplace.  
He turns up for two double-shot gulps,  
licks at his lips like a Bethlehem mule.

There's nothing silent tonight  
nothing holy. Father and son  
play guitar. This is their boozed  
tribute to baby Jesus and three wise Hanks.

My mother, in her deluded house  
coat and pitiful slippers, walks the hall, and clings  
her mug of chardonnay, stares the tree down  
*This ornament would look better here.*  
*No, no, no, not one strand of lights*  
*in this part of the tree! Who moved my angel?*  
and she nitpicks herself to tinsel  
frenzy over the burned sausage balls.

Everyone yells, whiskey and chardonnay  
spill on the tree skirt, and Bing Crosby's on TV singing:

*May your days be merry and bright, and may all your Christmases be white.*

## **She wants to Slit her wrists**

Nights are the hardest, no  
sunshine to chase his memory.  
When folks surround  
her, she pretends she's fine,  
it's not happening.

The darkness in her, the hole  
he chewed makes her feel empty.  
All her ambition lacks destination.  
She puts off forgetting him  
for the sake of saving time  
at the cost of saving face.

She's afraid to crack  
a smile. She's too proud to call  
help. She braces for the worst  
each day; she looks for more  
excuses, afraid no one can love her  
if she stands on her own.

**The full moon brought out the worst in him.**

(It was more than just a beer-drunk rage)

The full moon reminds me of Lon Chaney, the duality of man  
as he holds back whatever beast that lurks the pale hues of him.

My mother handed me a pistol  
she didn't know was loaded.  
*Don't let him hurt us*, she said.  
Her words heavy with bourbon,

and heavy too—that pistol  
the revolver she found tucked  
in his nightstand. The hatch grip  
dug into my hand when I squeezed.

We heard him gnash through the house:  
the coffee table splitting, the recoil  
of guitar strings as the body broke  
away from the neck. Dogs barked outside;  
they howled.

We huddled in the closet  
that night. She held the dead  
phone. I held the pistol and prayed,

prayed for a silver bullet  
while we waited for the moon to go  
back to the other side of the world.

**She wouldn't tell me why we'd come.**

I'm afraid of them, the shadows and unknown  
devils that come after me when I'm alone. I hear  
their heavy footsteps. I feel them well in me.

*For protection, take dirt from a serviceman's grave.*

Sometimes the loneliness is too much—the empty  
bed hangovers, no one to share the morning  
coffee with, no one to ease the world's burden.

*For love, take the dirt from the heart of your dead mother.*

And all those who wronged me? The ones I can't  
find forgiveness for in the thin pages of the Source  
Book? I want to share the pain they caused with them.

*For malice, take the dirt from a victim; power derives from violence.*

We crossed under the cemetery  
arch, past the weeping  
branches of willows.  
She'd worked her roots  
all day, saw the signs when the wind  
whistled through her  
bottle tree, her dogs stirred and whined.

*Stolen gravedust works against you.*

Three silver dimes for offering  
jingled in her apron.

**A Wednesday that should've been recorded by Stax.**

He woke in the morning and couldn't stand the sight of her as she slept facing the bedroom wall of her Midtown apartment. He counted beer cans hoarded on her nightstand, the one she bought for him after he'd slept over too many nights—her iTunes still locked on that same god damned Lucero song she just *had to hear* the night before. He'd hadn't slept more than an hour at a time, constantly shaking awake every time that fucking song's obnoxious chorus looped, *Darlin, please darken my door*.

He dressed in the dark, all except for his Chucks—afraid that one of her antique chairs would squeak. He'd lace them in the stairwell. He took her pin-up red lipstick from the shelf, wrote *I quit* on her bathroom mirror, and eased the door closed behind him.

## Thief in the Night

At five, as the sun dropped  
its purple subtleties of daybreak,  
I left with just enough cash for a drive-  
thru biscuit and sweet tea with easy ice.

I didn't know if you were asleep  
or if you finished what we started,  
what sense ended.

Your husband was home by then,  
asking why you left all the lights on,  
if you drank all that alone, why  
the toilet seat was up. He'd ridden through  
the night to come home, to surprise you.

I-40 was empty, except the long haulers  
glistened with dew and first light  
The crackle of the CB men  
merging from the junction came.

.

*Break one-nine for a radio check.*

*—You're working, driver. Have a safe ride.*

## Possessions

While Sweetsop sat idle at crossroads,  
waiting for a ride, I sat and sucked the sun-  
flower's sun-kissed seed-face and thought:

too much empathy and not enough patience,  
not enough patience and all the time in the world,  
all this time and nothing to fill it—memories of Sunday  
school, idle hands on the devil's playground, thirteen  
and bored enough to snag cigarettes from my sister,  
a delirious fourteen fell out of the boat with papers  
in my pocket and rolled joints that afternoon with blue  
post-its, rode to county line with the farmhands  
and brought home two forties of Colt 45 that I threw  
back and back up at a Friday night home game.

The seventeen year old me showed at church,  
wild hair and third eye primed, already peaked.  
Still twisted enough to watch liver spots crawl  
across the preacher's face. Jesus judged me from His stained  
glass prisons where He loved the little children, where He loved  
the woman at the well, and where He rode the burro as the people  
waved their palms, and where He hung His grace and whispered,  
*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

Old enough now to look down the dirt road  
timeline, to own up to all those secrets I have  
kept from myself until now. While Sweetsop waited  
for Legba at the crossroads, and I sat, back to the sun,  
and the flower lost its face, seed by sun-kissed seed.

## Scratch goes to confession

Bless me Father, for I am sin.  
There's no coming home, is there?  
You've given me my circles,  
but I've broken free and come to this.  
Tell me, Father, do you laugh now  
how I laughed at you the day  
your goons came for me.

You rained on Tutwiler the other day.  
I sat on my porch had a menthol  
as I watched the water fill in the low  
spots. Puddles overflowed to the street  
and ran from driveways into the storm  
grates, seeped through the brush,  
pooled on the blacktop.

A group of little girls screamed  
at cars as they sloshed down the drag.  
The cars slowed, but never stopped.

An old vestige of me wants to tell them to go  
inside, they'll catch their death of cold. That part  
wants to get these girls in a group  
and warn them about what's to come. I know  
what you know, Father, and that is where we differ.

Of the four girls, the one in pink will be  
pregnant in six years. The chubby one in blue,  
[no stanza break]

speed hooked by the time she's blowing seventeen  
candles on the cake. The girl in black will fall in  
love, miscegenate. Her white bred family will disown her.  
They'll all be mine, Boss. All except for the little runt in hand-  
me-downs who won't live long enough to be like the others. She  
will be yours soon enough. It's only a matter of time before someone grabs her.

Her parents will come ask if I saw it happen.  
I'll look at the dirt, put some sorrow in my jowls to say  
*I didn't see nothing. I don't know a thing*, but I know  
everything, Father. I'm just like you.

## **Kudzu Bottom**

One of these days, boy, you'll learn  
just 'cause you breathing don't mean  
you alive. You stone foot long  
enough, and the kudzu will inch  
its way around your feet and hold  
you. It will creep like sickness  
around your joints,  
bind your arms.

When you try and scream, child,  
it will choke you into silence.

## **A message from one of His to home**

I haven't felt you in so long, Boss. Then  
out of nowhere on a sunny day, a little  
drop of water hit my throttle-hand and held  
as I barreled down 240. I don't remember clouds.

This drop, this refreshing drop,  
clung to my knuckle against wind. I knew you  
kept it there at peace, and me, at peace.

That moment, I felt you.  
I felt special before  
the wind whipped the drop.  
up, off, and into the chaos of the world.

I pulled over to praise you  
down the road. I reached  
the canteen in my saddlebag. The bottom  
fell out of the sky. All around me, Your  
heavens dropped and splattered off passing  
cars. Their headlights came to life. Wipers slashed.  
I watched them go about their lives.  
There was so much rain.

## Undead Blues

She said I was dead to her, so when I came  
walking into the Cove that night and ordered  
the usual well-shot and Blue Ribbon,  
she veered from her conversation and wrecked  
herself on me. I saw the same wounded  
animal who slammed her phone down on me  
a year before, when our loose change shook out.  
I saw the fear in her; the man  
she buried come fresh out the tomb and shambled  
his way back to her periphery. Before I could order  
her a drink and send it her way, she gathered  
her purse and company and fled. I raised  
my shot of well to the door.

I'd seen her storm through that  
door six times and followed her,  
begging down the street. Each time, apologies  
grew more frantic, begs to tear-fueled pleas.

The whiskey burned and warmed awesome  
waves in me as the door caught  
and whined shut.

## **Shadowboxer**

What would you write if you weren't afraid?  
Would you write about lunches with your mother?  
How you've given up on her? About walking into a bar  
to fetch her while your father sat in the car? How she threw  
up after she hit a bottle of gin with your friends?  
Would you write about her arrest record? Her DUI?  
Her nights of gun-wielding, violent stupors?  
How she doesn't remember  
if she's eaten in the last month? How she can't shake  
that cold she's had for a year? How she took  
to the bottle harder when her brother (your uncle)  
was murdered? How, when you were eight, you heard her  
tell your father she left him for being too lousy in the sack  
and too preachy out of it?

Would you write that if you weren't afraid?

## Strangers and Absentees

This is my father's grave, not  
the man who raised me—the man  
who cut countless checks, kept good  
food on the table, and never taught me how  
to tie a tie. It's not that man's grave. It's my  
father's grave, the man who never knew I landed  
safe in the womb of my mother, not the woman

who raised me, the woman who can't get out  
of bed in the morning without bitters  
and gin—but the woman who gave me away  
like Moses in the reeds.

This is my father's grave, and this six foot span  
of dirt is as close as I'll ever be to him. This emptiness  
belongs to us. It will be his and mine and the family  
I'll never meet, the strangers who grieve in the churchyard,  
the people who wonder about the Black-eyed  
Susans, the stink of Old Crow, the three wheat  
pennies next to the cigar I leave burning on his stone.

## **Take us home, Mr. Redding**

It's a funny feeling when the Lord  
pulls you this way and that, when you leave  
things to shuffle chance and hope the right  
song comes your way, the right woman  
walks into your life and turns things upside  
down (which is only a matter of relevance).

It's well after five thirty when they herd the last of us  
rage-facers, us hardcore pitiful, us wild-eyed  
drunks out the front door of Alex's tavern.

It's been a long Saturday  
night, and it's almost time to get  
on my knees and give my thanks, and ask the Man  
forgiveness and a safe ride home.

Soon I'm scooped up and flying over this  
city like so many blaxploitation  
films to a Stax Records soundtrack. It's easy to hate  
a city that puts its whores on the strip on Sunday.

I miss someone. I wouldn't be out to dawn  
if Memphis would keep her here, not let her  
back above Mason Dixon to Brotherly Love.  
That moment when she walked into the room  
just as Otis came on and I weakened and pulled  
her close with these arms of mine, the music took hold  
on us, and we couldn't have been closer.

[*stanza break*]

That was the night before I took her  
back to Nashville to catch a nonstop to Philly.  
It might as well have been years ago,  
but I've got the dreams to remember.  
She missed her flight and I wanted her to ride home with me,  
home to Memphis. I wanted to ask her to make Memphis home.  
She took a connector to North Carolina, then to Philly in safety.

I cursed Memphis and the air I grew up in. I could see the lights of Memphis  
orange against the clouds on the horizon. It looked like the city was burning.  
Deep in my heart, I wished it was until Otis shuffled his way to the speakers  
and I remembered that night again, how her heels questioned their steps on the carpet  
how we slow danced in the cliché of candlelight in my tiny blue bedroom, and how she  
felt against me as the horrors of this city disappeared, leaving us to dance.

Oh, Memphis, *I've been loving you too long to stop now.*