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HOPELESS VACATIONS FROM NATURE

by

Raymond Lincoln Coffman

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

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## Abstract

This collection of poems explores themes of dislocation and conversion, blurring distinctions between autobiographical and fictional experiences. The poems are intended to lurch forward and backward in a way that evokes a sense of chronology and memory, so that the text leaps in place or time without the narrative thread being broken or digressive. The thread's envisioned aim is to progress and evolve from the personal or lyrical to the other-centered and back. Various landscapes, inner and geographical, play a central role in the circuitous movement and rhythm of the collection. Transformation is at the heart of each poem, and somewhat in between them. In many, the service of personae is used to invoke a sense of fluidity, range, or multiplicity. The exquisite and terrifying unmanageability of nature is a central emphasis.

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## Asylum

I don't remember climbing out the window,  
or why,  
only hanging there,  
hands clenched to the brick,  
red ribbons down my arms, two stories up.

Two massive limbs grabbed me, hauled me in,  
came down on me. Father.

In the tub, the water emptied pink.  
I sobbed as the drain  
drank cold water and blood.

Izzard County Hollow

Eyes glowed everywhere,  
high pitched calls, rustled sedge,

stars bled down on the ridge,  
shadowy rondure of unfolding flickers.

I can't make up his name,  
Billy Bob Billingsly,

in soldier's stance,  
gig poised, and a machete,

severed snapping turtle heads,  
as we made rounds of fishing lines,

their bodies, laden, dropped into  
the Strawberry River.

His sinewy adolescent hand  
rested over my younger mouth,

telling me to listen for their rasp,  
a low, innocuous song.

The spear struck its soft target.  
A crude squish, marsh murder.

His grin, gratified,  
the frog's vulgar corpse in my face,

arms, legs, hung like tethers,  
a mangled blob of conquest.

I thought:  
*we can't eat this,*

though we did,  
by a campfire on an island of stones,

snakes rushing by on either side,  
holy and violent.

## Wonders

We'd take walks,  
she'd point to trees,  
said there were brownies  
living within them.

I'd nod like a dolt,  
smiling at  
such a disturbed construct.

For something in me  
knew it was there  
to protect her  
from something else,  
maybe me.

## Homewood

Homes lit on hills cut with winding roads.  
It was rumored that the principal  
had an electric paddle that would shock you on impact.  
I'd bike around and stab trees with knives,  
set things afire,  
the video for Thriller came out, haunted my dreams.  
A girl at school liked me named Christy.  
I knew she'd come  
from an apartment complex  
where kids ran feral, their names hollered at dark.  
She showed up one day to school,  
blood on her dress, told me her mom had picked up a dog  
hit on the road and it died in her lap, its tongue  
draped on her thigh.  
This made me like her. We both had black eyes.

## Championship Concessions

I'm sorry about the baseballs.  
When you were young,  
I'd throw them hard,  
hoping you'd get the point.  
And kicks to the rear,  
my father did that, too.  
He'd rear back and send one.  
Punched me square in the face once,  
right at the kitchen table.  
Your grandmother was there.  
I moped and stumbled down to the pond,  
said I was going to kill myself, sobbing,  
threatened to drown myself  
in three feet of water.  
He never came out.  
After a while, I went back in,  
finished dinner at the table,  
no one said anything. I went  
upstairs and did arithmetic.  
I don't blame you for quitting,  
for taking up soccer.

## Staten Island Ferry

Beer was cheap,  
the ride was free,  
back and forth,  
past Ellis Island,  
the immense lady's  
headache of spikes.

Someone might say,  
*If you jump in the Hudson,*  
*you'll go to the nuthouse.*

Fished from the waters,  
wrapped in a blanket,  
shepherded into some cement echo,  
for months, maybe years.

Although, some days,  
that was all the city was—  
why you jumped  
to begin with.

## The Lake Below Beersheba Vineyard

Her unsteady hand led me  
down the metal plank,  
naked, bristling with chill  
into moonlit feathers of wake.

Afterlight raptors circled  
our cove, their shadows  
riding hushed winds seen  
in the rush of limbs,  
waving delicate arrows  
that snapped, groaned  
as our toes ploughed cold mud.

We swam as lower animals,  
circling our weight,  
tiptoed like ice-frightened fawns  
swathed in thrill and liquor,  
mingled with warmth,  
veins aching with married muscle,  
lappets in subaqueous rhythms,  
the drift and whirl of  
spaces between bones.  
My body a reed, crooked  
to welcome her casual will,  
our breath a fog across embers.

Our elders slept back at the cabin,  
perhaps dreaming back  
when they'd lost themselves, like us,  
in the primordial thrust that never  
stills nor surrenders.  
We stole back up the path,  
newly flooded with lust, over soft  
moss, laughing grasses  
scaling our ankles,  
then quieted footsteps  
through old worried doors.

Memorial for the Void, Belle Meade, TN

There had been a suicide attempt the night  
before my first day of work in the gardens.

The boss gave me a hazmat suit  
and I followed him, crimson footsteps

along the pathways, down to the Japanese  
pavilion, where she had taken a blade

to her ankles and crept over the roji  
in the glow of a hanging lantern

as frost deliquesced under a rising moon,  
danced and scattered in strange shapes

like shattered lace, enshrined her infrared  
footprints on the walkways, raked gravel,

smooth wood beams, and stone islands.  
I pressure washed each ruby stamp,

shadowing her course as the winter sun  
warmed her paces into curling vapor,

thinking of her, alone on the hill under  
the maples, amidst bamboo and gingko,

stunted pines, slicing the life from her feet.  
Policemen idled in the road at the top of the hill,

questioning staff that ambled in shock.  
Land appeared raw, awake and unmoved.

Yarn

I rode a bigwheel  
in the horseshoe-shaped  
driveway of the family farm.  
Several kids  
bigger than me  
came to take my ride one day.  
So I fisted the gravel  
hurled powder and stones  
sending the leader, the biggest,  
to the hospital. My father  
had to drive him, said he cried  
all the way there.

I got whipped later,  
although  
that part's often left out.

## Once at the Edge of the Quarter

I wanted to reach down in Tommy  
grip his real heart.

I found my green eyes burning  
in the motel kitchen  
as he danced  
atop the filthy toilet in a fit.

Violence streamed the ether  
from the TV's shaky screen,  
a leaden glow through the smoke.

Pam, our guest, waited in bed,  
pale saucers for eyes,  
smoked her blackened glass pipe,  
face bathed in radiation.

We showered together  
in the grimy tiled bath,  
three skeletons banging away  
in a shady wet closet.

At noon the next day,  
in some septic chrysalis,  
we eyeballed the phone  
that scorned our escape.

Staggering out,  
we traveled in a silence  
never before there.

## Southern and Gomorrah

Me and my sister  
had a babysitter  
named Porkchop.

He'd sit in a lay-z-boy,  
breaking pennies in half  
with his pudgy bare hands.  
The grubby apartment was  
littered with whiskey bottles,  
him sitting there,  
immobilized,  
bearded shitkicker grin.

4-years-old, I sensed  
the yellow film  
of mankind's liability,  
something in the room  
would appear everywhere,  
vile, with a purpose.

*Thomas Granger (1625? – September 8, 1642), servant to Love Brewster, of Duxbury, in the Plymouth Colony of British North America, was one of the first people executed and the first known juvenile sentenced to death by hanging in today's United States. At the age of 16 or 17, Granger was convicted of "buggery with a mare, a cow, two goats, divers sheepe, two calves, and a turkey," according to court records of September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1642.*

Foule Nature, 1642

I am Love's servant,  
God keep me,  
bring them forward,  
we will fill the ditch,  
banished man and faunae.

I cosseted my first sheep,  
its haggard coat, pleading bleat,  
while you toiled mercilessly,  
stricken with propriety and decree,  
cursed to obscured industries,  
viler than these deific beasts.

The goat and turkey,  
we made merry in your absence,  
the calves, my paramours,  
whilst you putrefied in mud rooms,  
recited scripture from the abyss,  
rejected by the soil and sky alike.

I took them all, we united,  
flesh and spirit,  
one passionate, quelled hash.

Slaughter them, execute me,  
*Thomas Granger and his smeared lot,*  
soaked in mare's blood,  
swallowed by the new world,  
left to rot in some ploughed cavity,  
as you suffer this wild tangle of sleight.  
The cow's brawny haunches—  
I admit no misgivings.

(stanza break)

Flash your scythes and blades,  
wet with slanderous gore,  
you've butchered my company,  
the rest are yours to scourge and devour.  
I am ready to hang.  
Lay me on their still warm remains,  
downcast eyes, blanketed hides,  
these simple, sinless things.

They yielded,  
elected me.  
Let me drop.

Know that my murder is marriage.

Have you not gnashed their soft tissue,  
gnawed at their marrow,  
coveted their gravid viscera?  
I sought them in comfort,  
since this place is no paradise,  
and the pit is a kinder home to us all.

Blue Ridge School for Boys

Winter lifted its boot  
and we dove into  
warm winds,  
knotted ties in flight,  
the mouths of our shoes  
gulping pollen's green gush.

No girls for miles, so we made them up,  
only foothills and a graveyard of tombstones  
bearing one family's name,  
a mirror of incest to our gendered captivity.

The priest and Lit teacher,  
red with parody, merlot stained teeth,  
had us recite Shakespeare,  
his favorite erogenous passages.  
We'd swarm away when he crossed the quad,  
hands buried in his robe.

I caught a wormsnake,  
hid it in a jar of dirt.  
It would slink through my fingers  
in figure eights,  
condemned to the patterns of my hand.

The last day before summer,  
I emptied the jar,  
sat and watched the snake burrow down  
into the dark soil.  
My fingers aching for  
the soft curls of a girl.

Oblivious Florae

I went west to Santa Fe  
with Bailey and her mother,  
after a year in the Tennessee backwoods,  
consigned to an outdoor jail  
in the hills outside Bucksport,  
freshly eighteen and profoundly adrift.

In a run-down adobe studio,  
her mother studied native rites,  
performed depossessions on us,  
circling, chanting in a haze of sage.

We'd drive north past Espanola,  
conforming to the coiling arroyos,  
small roads we didn't know  
leading in and out  
the desert's igneous spread,  
crag, canyons cloaked in junipers,  
no one in sight. Once, far from any town,  
we found a haphazard trail,  
parked on the shoulder,  
hiked along what we guessed  
was a branch of Santa Clara Creek,  
picnicked next to the rivulet  
on a slab of Gypsum.

Bailey stripped down, stretched  
in the ubiquitous sunlight,  
sat in the creek bed,  
dug her toes in the silt,  
tips of her pigtails dripping,  
called me over, to follow,  
join her in the current.

I did and we played in the water,  
incredibly cold  
despite the scorched landscape.  
We danced out the stream, onto the rocks,  
naked and tangled, in the bright  
yawning breach of the sky.  
At one point I looked up, her mother,

(no stanza break)

ever braided hair and a denim jacket,  
watched from the bluffs, silently  
beholding us, in the shadow  
of a straw hat, a gun at her side,  
its stock planted next to her boots.

It did not strike me as odd,  
nor did we stop, and she vanished  
while we were entwined  
in the ravine, writhing  
in rock and sedge, two burning  
white lilacs, savage at best.

A dread washed over  
when we'd dressed,  
walked up the winding path.  
Caught in the disarray of  
disparate moments,  
fragile and transient,  
we were strung on a web,  
trembling like threadbare lace  
over a fierce, fathomless wilderness.  
She was gone.

## Basilica

Before our split,  
I'd sit below the Sacre Coeur,  
a painting she'd made in art school,  
large in the light  
of our high ceilinged flat.

Later I ambled the Paris sidewalks  
down to the Seine and beyond,  
places that seemed familiar,  
faces gave some grave moral.

I went to museums,  
idled on bridges,  
surrendered to beggars  
in cold winds that swept  
through porous stone.  
The solitude was precise,  
rife and divine  
in the steps I took.

I staggered back  
from the river in lights,  
passing the opera in the rush  
of dark-haired women,  
a man on a blanket in tears,  
his mouth wide and quiet,  
face disclosing  
the perfect phrase of ache,  
much more than I bared or had buried.  
People passed him and I followed  
her mural homeward,  
high on the hill.

## Sandwoman

Dwelling in buckets,  
walls showered down.  
Her skin sang, clothed  
in chattering teeth.

Blankets of glass  
clattered into cracks,  
constellations of gasping mouths,  
cursed to the pit's gilt core,  
devoured us, starved,  
in slow gulps.

I'd seen this with insects,  
in hepatoscopy,  
her grit-cruste'd eyes,  
hair matted with grime,  
as scratches on caskets  
tell at what lengths  
claws are sharpened.  
Rooms scrape open  
to ragged cavities,  
shattered exoskeletons.

She has caught me  
completely.  
Villagers watch us  
knit our anatomies  
in a wretched knot,  
divined to sink deeper,  
slits in the shingles.  
Our scrapheap of a household,  
homespun and shrieking, we  
clutch each other,  
lovers with no other way home.

## Domiciles

What does it mean to be vacant,  
a sedentary framework of walls and windows?

The latchkey kid uncoils  
the wire from a spiral notebook,  
feeds one end into a wall socket,  
the other into an old floor lamp.

Or crowded, vaulted to guard  
from the threats of space?

The current rips a red gash  
across his palms as fire ascends  
the curtains, walls, bedposts.

Floors groan against footsteps.

No one hears him scream fire.  
He runs out to the lawn and watches  
smoke form like a god over the eaves.

Doors linger, bolted or ajar.

Firemen arrive and rush  
into the hissing ghost of a house,  
as the kid stares at his hands.

He lines up his palms  
and covers his eyes  
while the neighborhood waits  
for someone to come home.

## Mantle

My dead uncle's painting  
dishonors me,  
The hearth of the house  
flexes its scandalous onslaught.

O blonde bowl cut, eyes glooming  
through time,  
three-piece corduroy suit,  
unwanted kisses from sisters.

The world's revenges avenge themselves.

Parents serve a sting all their own,  
a degenerating blow, quick, resonating,  
an endless kick to the testes.

## Shades Mountain Kids

5-years-tall, we were huffing gas  
in the parking lot, straight out of cars.  
I got caught in the dumpster too  
many times, saw a kid molest  
his sister, got my first French kiss:

She was older, led me under a stairwell,  
her fat, slick tongue filled my mouth,  
choking me like too many hot dogs.  
A teenage girl called down to us  
from the landing, said,  
*What y'all doing? Where's mine?*

Fights everyday, filthy hordes on the porches,  
my father taught me to ride a bike.  
I fall twenty times, skinned and howling,  
as they laughed, pointed, swore.  
He said,  
*Don't mind them. This is the only way.*

## Boat to New Jersey

We took a taxi to East 35<sup>th</sup> Street,  
boarded the ferry, fought the crowd,  
my head in your lap, black dress,  
legs crooked across drifting concrete,  
a nativity among screams, screeching gears,  
last night's liquor a swarm  
in the dull hive behind my eyes.  
Sprawled on deck, cradled in your arms.  
I'd come to the city to see my ex,  
re-break my spirit and show her  
my wreckage, see me torn down.  
You ran hands through my hair,  
gazed down from the transient clouds  
on a heap of poisoned pulp and woe.  
Eyelids trembled against  
the engine's rasp. That day  
saved me, when we kissed,  
our lips pressed steady as mirrors.

Helen

Midwinter, she and I guided cows across Nutbush Road,  
yawning gray meadows where the salt blocks lazed.

They'd slaver and moo and she'd point  
down the worn road where Zeke, a farmhand,

had died. Veins snaked over her neck  
and into her hair. At night she'd fry chickens and

take out her teeth. In spring we'd slink into blackberry  
bushes and thorns would marry

sticky juice with our blood. Over hills of dirt,  
the dismay of harvested winter wheat, we'd

squint at buzzards float over the leveled,  
plowed land. I was twelve when she fell

from the loft into the lower stables,  
pitchfork gripped in her hand, hay raining down.

At the nursing home she slowly went over,  
called me by Zeke's name, eyes whitened with rime.

Demimondaine  
Manet's *Olympia*

As distant and close  
as light itself,  
you make him wait,  
another hat in a lap, eyes on the clock,  
the shroud of tobacco smoke.  
The manicured hands feign to groom.  
You laze on your settee, vexed  
in everyday vanity as the maid lingers,  
arranges their gifts, and hovers, hands clasped.

He is polished, cultured, handsome,  
like the rest, bred for leisure,  
in pursuit of whatever aim you've embodied.  
At sixteen you learned the unabridged lesson,  
your heart on the block of the market,  
limbs knitted and looped like a package,  
the pearl of a fragrant bedchamber.

So you fade away, glazed,  
one red orchid hangs in your trace,  
a wide-eyed cat curls its tail,  
a gold bracelet floats over the bed,  
silk slippers graze the sleek sheets.  
The black bow round your neck forms  
an O on the pillow as the maid backs away,  
a bouquet in her wake. The imprint  
of your nakedness is razed, displaced.  
Your recumbent gaze plagues the shadows.

## Asbury Park Motel

We sat at your brother's bar on the pier,  
strolled through the ramshackle  
mess of timeworn attractions.  
Kids on makeshift scooters,  
fashioned from weed eaters,  
buzzed like insects across sidewalks.

The poverty was a siren in my head,  
laggards wandered the beaches till dusk.

I got us a room and your pillhead brother  
roared through the door and passed out.  
We romped in the dim shanty room,  
ran a bath and splashed as he crashed on the bed.

In the darkness there was bliss, a warm glow  
in kerosene-soaked rags,  
stripped of gender, laughing  
prayers in low drones at godless walls.

## Mire

Out past Tina Turner Highway, my grandmother  
fell from a hayloft and broke her hip,  
left the quicksand ranch to my father.  
He slogged grave dirt in waders,  
sank into the earth and built a new home.  
When my father first took my mother,  
he guided her to the gate and whistled,  
commenced to perform horse tricks,  
hooves kicking dust to impress her.  
Mother doesn't leave the house much.  
Says she misses the city, sirens and asphalt.  
His hearing is gone, his eyesight is fading,  
and he's forgotten. There's an old  
graveyard on the land with a lot of little headstones.  
I used to lead my cousin and leave her there with  
the smell of sinking roses.  
She'd cry but she kept falling for it. We had  
mudfights and kissed. Sometimes I smear mud  
on my son. Our pastures know he's their own.

## Terralingua

Wind dashes the daughter's mouth  
with sand like seeds, she listens to the trill,  
the valley's growl, a gaping stomach,  
basin of cinders bordered by mountains.

The doctor's truck  
creaks away over rutted dirt.  
Engine belts shriek their friction,  
headlights flash on plunging bats,  
gusts of creosote drift  
over the deepening silhouette.

Mother writhes, cries out  
from four clay walls,  
an unborn sister, quiet as Christmas night.

Father fires the rifle to frighten  
wild dogs from the cover of mesquite.  
The clothesline whips its tails.  
Howls travel the distance.

Shovel in hand, the daughter walks  
beyond the well  
to the soft ground behind the shed.  
She digs, makes a mound  
that the wind carries off.

Her whisper dissolves into night's  
wandering breath. Fingers carry  
the fragrance of dust to her face,  
its furtive wonder and comfort.

## The Beauty

In seventh grade  
he got his first girlfriend.  
She'd been around,  
knew how to french,  
blouse surging with marvels,  
not at all afraid.

They'd go to the ice rink  
make out in the bleachers,  
but something ate at him.

She kept trying  
to help him  
get back on the horse.  
He adored her.  
It felt good to  
sit on the fence.

She dumped him soon after,  
auditioning others  
to french her  
in that very spot.

How badly that hurt,  
strangely to this day,  
prized and replaced,  
burned  
for a lifetime  
in a beautiful way.

Poincianna

Sundays in Alabama,  
I'd bike to the sewers of the zoo.  
Church bells in afternoon swells,  
pavement hissing with summer.

I'd watch through the high fence,  
some piteous creature  
suffer in hard eyesight,  
as crowds passed and pointed,  
as if they could see me,  
through vines and chain links,  
looking back from the gutter,  
their bright colors beyond  
the wretched beast between us.

## Piggott Finch

Eloise never leaves,  
watches the river through her window,  
beyond the graveyard of tires,  
rust-blighted appliances.  
Men come from all over with mountain flowers,  
dressed for church, eyes on their shoes,  
to vanish inside,  
where she drifts from window to bed  
in the room down the hall.

A teenage queen, daughter to the man  
who ran the horse opera in Piggott.  
He'd warn men with buckshot who courted her.

Her father was there when she became slow,  
caught her with a boy in the barn,  
backed her into a stable,  
where a horse stomped her skull.

No longer lovely,  
sour teeth and a scar-hooked cheek,  
she still shines for men,  
speaks in tongues of hurt birds, and floats,  
bed to window, in the room down the hall.

## Ezekiel's Wheel

She placed an egg in each corner of the room,  
sick with nights of rapacious possession,  
demons shrouding her body, smothering her,  
her addiction-ravaged mind in critical flight,

Walked in her panties down the broken road,  
plastic grocery sack of eggs in her purse,  
to hail a cab at the corner of Madison Street  
and bury the eggs in Memorial Cemetery.

She dug a hole in a vacant sward with a stick,  
topless, scattered spells as the cab idled,  
buried them, chanting quixotic mantras,  
returned, meter running, satisfied.

I met her months after this happened,  
wondered whether it worked.  
*Should I martyr a chicken for good measure?*  
We had a child together, an intact angel, uncut.

## Springwater

Drunk nonsense spewed  
from my gorge  
at the bar.  
Other faces fumed with aversion.

Kicked out, I stomped home in snow,  
amused at my ancestors' mistakes,  
across the hoary train bridge,  
stopped midway to look down at my ex's window.

Her own glowing home,  
father a famous Nashville songster.  
Her black cat in the window,  
its face framed in the low lit foggy pane.

Sandpaper tongue purring pleased  
as I wheezed in winter's hiss.  
Poppy-the-Persian-Found-at-the-Pound.

It raised a paw and my chest moaned  
a low broken hell of a note.  
I turned and tramped over the trestle,  
to a place less disgraceful.

## Base Camp

Billy Smith, treed  
like a coon,  
pissed down on us  
from the high branches.

Some laughed, others  
climbed up  
after him, wet and furious,  
guided by violence.

He jumped down and shot  
for the river,  
like a rabbit in chase,  
bounding over reaped  
rows of what was corn,  
stopped at the banks  
of the Duck River,  
disrobed, sucked in air,  
expanded his lungs,  
arms outstretched  
with hanging wings,  
jumped in to swim  
across to safety.

Lost in the current,  
we never saw him climb  
the far bank,  
We stood, blood drumming,  
aroused and hopeful,  
then let down.

## Bobby Got Shot

Three sheets to El Dorado,  
lurching to his neighbor's door,  
thundering, cataleptic,  
he thought he was home.

His neighbor, half-asleep and armed,  
fired three times  
through the Douglas Fir slab, maybe four.

There is a sense of transience  
in the desert, people see  
dying things everyday—  
lizards, birds, wild dogs—

Lead lodged next to Bobby's spine,  
he ran from the first shot,  
down the dust road to Tesuque.

You could move the slugs around with a finger,  
like a child's googly-eyed toy, mementos  
of the dumb luck some get to waste.

## Blastula

Heirs of subterranean rage,  
thrust upward, huddled, exposed,  
bouldered shoulders blighted by sunlight.

Childlike forms, smooth,  
worn calcified clusters,  
cowered en masse,  
bleached backs crooked,  
pivoted against the radiant gaze.

The peaks beyond Las Cruces,  
stomped over by Billy the Kid,  
Geronimo, just sedge, scrub, and cover,  
forged and aborted, scions elevated  
over a blanket of dust, heather, nettle groves.

Harsh, tumescent mounds, like bandits  
absconding the Rio Grande Rift,  
unwanted features, a merciless face.

## Dog Track Tryst

I'd seen her saved on the jumbotron  
at my grandmother's church,  
the crowd's eyes shut,  
hands wavering  
like a sea of dumb Kansas sunflowers.  
She was too good for me.

We drove over the river,  
through the ribs of the old bridge,  
the tawny slug of byway blood  
below, far banks  
wraithlike in the heat.

*Make a wish*, she said, before  
Arkansas, *but don't tell me*.  
The bankrupt mineshaft inside  
wanted to shake and reach above  
her like a bubble, pop and spatter the  
contents of her dreams upon us  
in a shock of ice,  
while the land hammered on.

At the track we stopped  
to pray for the greyhounds,  
heads low in the parking lot,  
her hand on my inner arm.  
I faked, because it's rigged,  
those dogs never catch the hare.

Bushwick

A quiet neighborhood,  
mostly poor Puerto Ricans,  
windows glowing through rime,  
a faint trill of horns.

Across from my window  
was an unfinished building,  
the abandoned skeleton of  
a high-rise of slums.

One night I watched a stray  
dog pace a high level  
then leap to its death.  
The street filled with people.

Crying and mourning,  
the miserable event  
launched into a parade.

Musicians and singers  
swayed through the streets  
clutching garlands and candles.  
The dog was then buried

in a lot rife with weeds.  
The crowd scattered back.  
I put on my hat and coat,  
went down to the heap.

My first prayer  
to the untended earth.

Caroline

Nothing hangs together out west  
dismembered tails, limbs, severed wings  
cornered and splayed by fitful winds

I broke your window with a rock  
At Jimez we gazed naked from hot springs  
across the asteroid-smashed land

You vanished with daylight  
I bought a pane and placed it  
at your door—the webbed  
porthole shivered—so I threw one more

Hoping you'd lean out and curse me  
sharp fragments collapsed  
that was all that happened

You fled to your dad's trailer in Utah  
where he swallowed Old Crow  
I drove there from Espaniola a week later  
He looked devastated, said  
you'd gone to Nevada  
I gave him a twenty

Regarding the still fractured glass  
I wondered if you'd ever made it.

## Preacher's Kid

I used to cram books down my pants—  
maybe this will explain.  
I'd skip church and read,  
take acid and read.  
Impregnated my girlfriend,  
quit playing sports,  
slept in cars, burned flags,  
broke and entered, aided, abetted,  
all the while wandering the city  
with a backpack full of books.

Bastardized—  
the pages I knew did not care, some urged  
me on, others advocated morality,  
some tried to dissect me, some  
sympathized, coddled, cursed,  
theorized, proselytized, condemned—

Years later, I rented a room  
in a tenement shack.  
It was winter,  
the water heater was in the attic,  
its pipes froze, exploded, and I came home  
on my lunch break  
to find books in the torrent,  
soaked, wilted, lifeless.

I tried to salvage some,  
dried them in the sun.  
They became blighted with mold.  
I sold them to a sucker at a yard sale,  
who came back and complained  
the mold had spread to  
others on the shelf.

## Widow's Sale

She sits at a table of not-for-sale things,  
her hat ablaze with Memphis sunshine,  
mouth pursed in the shadow under its wide, white brim,  
the grass dying around her.

*The sale ended at noon, she says.*

Still, people circle her piles, hands in orbit,  
as she watches them, the word "over"  
churning in her mind,  
fevered in her creaking chair,  
too alone to move.

She won't take down her bright signs,  
gather her dresses, picture frames, cookbooks,  
her dead husband's tools and shoes.

I pass back by at dusk, walking my dog.  
She's in her chair, hands shaping a church,  
her wares still strewn in the yard.  
She smiles as my dog sniffs at a carved oddity,  
a wooden squirrel, mouth crammed with acorns.

*He can have it, she says.*

I place the statue in his jaws and thank her.  
She manages, *you're welcome*,  
transfixed with the rodent enshrined in teeth.

## Elegy for Dave Cloud

You, Sir, seized Saturday night  
by the balls,  
gray chops raging,  
crowds wild to your  
wavering lusty skulk,  
your pornographic  
repartee, white suits,  
pick-up truck  
parked outside the  
whirlpool brothels  
of Nashville's 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue strip.

Your feral rolling stutter  
that made young girls  
uneasy yet rapt,  
days when we dove into  
depravity's maw, following  
your brave lead,  
fists tight with longnecks,  
fearless, like crucified apes,  
and you, the silverback,  
haunting rows of  
drug stores and dives  
with your sighing eyes  
and stirring ballads.

Your words will ricochet  
in boozehalls,  
bathroom stalls,  
inner walls of minds  
who knew you,  
your thick, dark glasses,  
slick dyed-black hair,  
your sly, gentle glare  
that must have known  
some colossal agony  
only freed  
in that brash, gutsy brogue.

## Center Hill Revival

Born into winter  
the robin needs work.  
See it starving  
in the fingers of a tree.  
Cold air seeks release,  
exhaled to burn and smoke.  
People in all chasms  
in agony for someone,  
skies clear while sunlight  
snarls over every morning.

Years ago I drank my last whiskey,  
staggered down the path to a lake,  
begged the world to help me  
die like a man.  
I wept on the worn boards of a dock.  
Families in sleek boats  
waterskied by, waving.

It is limiting  
to survey the way land  
thrives, up  
in search of sovereignty,  
thunderous magma pushing  
against our feet,  
the blanket of enormity  
pressing down  
on our shoulders,  
marrow within each fragile limb  
whisking in a gale.

I left blank waves, coveting death's  
indifference. Slash pines  
with heartless pleas to  
coevolve, empty bridges  
hitched flanks of scrubland.  
The gift of misery swung  
down like a blade,  
my breast broke open.

## Ryan at the Wedding

Cans cascaded onto gravel.  
He motioned to me from the driver's seat.

His hair was barn hay,  
dull eyes rolled as he spoke,

a cheap pint of whiskey in one fist,  
Schlitz gripped in the other.

We'd played little league together,  
thirty years back. He was shortstop,

not bad with a bat. His father screamed  
from the stands, livid with Maker's Mark.

*Get in*, he said,  
*I've been cutting down.*

I pointed to the line of guests flowing into the church,  
his face cracked like dropped glass.

Later, in the onslaught of ceremony,  
I saw him tottering, back against

a stone wall. I spoke to the groom,  
thinking little of it, until

we saw the blue suit in the dirt, shouting  
*Stop* and *No*

as a gang of handsome children poked  
the lifeless body with sticks and laughed.

## Wreck at the Santa Fe Rail Yard

Smashed in the altitude,  
Jake could not be dissuaded,  
across snowy adobe vistas  
my hair thrashed in the open air  
of his raggedy VW Rabbit.  
Drunk, driven again, he  
wouldn't listen when I warned  
we'd strike the rails.

They're buried, he argued  
as I braced for the upshot.  
We smacked them full steam,  
then sideways in flight,  
landed snug on the crossties  
as the tires hissed into  
the clear mountain air.

We faced the train,  
I hammered him  
with gloved fists,  
a hazardous boyfriend to have,  
and myself the real sucker,  
on our way to a gig.  
Then I thought of my cello.

## Hopeless Vacations from Nature

*You hit a fairy,  
she said.  
She was four inches tall, with boobs and wings.*

I drove onward, firmly negotiating the country road,  
having noticed the soft thump and smear,  
the crude brownish-gold streak on the windshield,  
mottled with turquoise,  
as swaths of soybeans, corn, and cotton surged by.

*Look! She said, pointing,  
There are her guts. You killed her!  
She was magic and you killed her!*

There were several splatters,  
various sizes, textures, hues,  
mostly brown and yellow, low-life colors.

To be fair, it was the most striking of stains,  
an iridescent severed wing trembled with friction,  
fused to the glass in a splotch of organic ruin,  
writhing against our momentum.

*Don't you feel anything?*  
She said.

*Look, I said, a fairy is basically a tiny pennate person,  
right?  
So what was she doing, floating in the center of the road?*

(And I'm the asshole)

## Suffering Machines

I tore women apart,  
birth by birth,  
hands fused to mouths,  
fingers, faces knotted,  
warped by worship.

There was no nativity,  
weak and breathless,  
my mother's ragged gap  
as smoke lit up my eyes,  
hers hollowed with grief,  
drawn to me,  
like so many thereafter.

All shades made me mean,  
stillborn somehow  
throughout my conquest,  
festooned halls of models,  
wrecked in my wake,  
dancers slammed against canvas,  
broken open, eviscerated.  
I buried them awakened in spirit.

Appalachian Infamy, 1972

Hell, we saw it,  
packed the family up  
off to the show,  
40 miles in the Chevy,  
six in the bed,  
thought it'd be a real good time.  
The women were excited  
about Burt Reynolds,  
rest of us heard it was  
banjos, crossbows, and river action,  
right next door in Georgia.

About a thirdway in  
we just froze, God,  
that Ned Betty, mortified,  
made us look like a bunch of  
unrefined philistines.  
The kids got real quiet.

Mamma about died,  
buried herself in my shoulder,  
didn't speak for days after,  
said our bed and breakfast  
was done for.

*Who's gonna stay at a place  
they think they'll get raped at?*

Business was slow.  
We didn't talk about it.  
God forbid  
someone strums a c-chord.

The evening glow  
through black oaks  
keeps coming down,  
music streams  
from the creek like chimes.

## Elegy for the Comedian

My heart sick at each stammer,  
your travels from stage to stage,  
to the roughneck bars in Kingsport,  
Johnson City, reciting your loathsome  
jokes to crowds of working men  
with severe haircuts. Boomed

offstage half the time,  
you'd never concede.  
I watched you get  
kneed in the crotch  
by an enraged woman once.

You hung from hooks  
through your shoulders at a show, ordered us  
to "hang in there." We sang hangover duets.

Crossing Tennessee,  
you were truly enrapt.  
Your High Lifes and Winstons,  
death's lark in your belly,  
your desperate faithfulness.  
Whatever it was,  
deliverance was an offering  
to the erratic and hopeless  
of every southern dive.

## Scapegrace

Fires swayed in the city,  
Danced in winds off Lake Michigan

My one-time wife had the yellowest  
Hair, her Bible gaped daily at the table

I read something once about  
Legions of pigs flowing over a cliff

Met a man who smelled us  
Marching past his cave

Somehow you've stumbled on this forsaken place  
I'm telling you this cause you made it this far

People leapt from buildings  
My hair became knotted

He handed me a sack of rattlesnakes  
In case I gave up

Pointed in the direction of the most  
Barren landscapes

Somehow you've stumbled  
On this forsaken place

You've undone the sack,  
Be still and don't labor

I'm telling you this cause  
You made it this far