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HOMESICK HALLELUJAHS

by

Koltin Thompson

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2017

For my parents, for giving me a childhood so wonderful and simple that I had to make up a more fraught one to write about.

I would like to thank the *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, who first published “Go Down to Jordan” (in a very different form) in their 2014 issue.

Abstract

Homesick Hallelujahs explores the complexities of southern life. What begins as a bildungsroman of a young, lower-class Tennessean soon evolves into an exploration of southern culture and values, a journey across what is real and what is hoped-for in the lives of Appalachian southerners, and an exploding of themes that show up along the way. Racial tensions, religion and the lack thereof, the escape from the mundane that literature provides, identity politics, America's deep and divisive history—all of these things come to the forefront as the work progresses beyond “local color” into a realm that is universal and unabashedly American. Woven throughout the collection is the grounding presence of a young man searching for a place (and a voice) in a world that is set against him.

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Hymn of the Homesick Hillbillies

It is a curious emotion, this certain homesickness I have in mind. With Americans, it is a national trait, as native to us as the roller-coaster or the jukebox. It is no simple longing for the home town or country of our birth. The emotion is Janus-faced: we are torn between a nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known.

—Carson McCullers

Sinking teeth deep into peach flesh,
sweet blood chin dribbling;

running shoeless, slicing on rock,
on briar, *More! More!* banshee moonhollering;

lying frondcovered by the pond
where the girls skinnydip, stealing what we can

is to be the sons of mountains,
of stones—to be children

of hallelujahs and of deadbeat
former mechanics. Smelling

Sunday chicken, Old No. 7,
a singlewide burning in a mushroom

of Sudafed is to remember why we left
and why we can never leave.

I.

American Mulch

To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart.

—J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*

The Mercy Lesson

Daddy puts the barrel against the back
of the dog's head. I watch from the front porch. *Thirty aught six*,
he told me, dragging the car-struck dog, whining, bleeding,
from the road into the yard. He fetched

his rifle, said it again. *Thirty aught six. Only weapon
worth using when mercy is needed.* He looks down tar-black
barrel, cold steel, shuts his left eye, brings finger
to trigger, fingernails dirty because my father works

to put bread on the table. Daddy says, *Do what's necessary, son.*
That's what bein' a man is. Daddy tells me now
that shooting the dog is necessary. Tells me the dog is suffering.

Like when God killed Gram 'cause she had cancer and didn't feel good?
Daddy tells me *yes*. I am smart for my age.

Now cover up them ears.

While Towers Fall in New York City—I See My Parents Kiss

outside window daddy face red hot red
my mother her voice loud *out your mind*
he never let her wear no makeup none
common whore he'd say and *painted*

jez'bel he's grippin ballpeen hammer got sweat
his forehead wet chest wet hollerin
then go *go then* *just go* and mama
statue stoic schoolbook textbook greek goddess

not sayin nothin just walks touches daddy
cheek then chest kisses and kisses
hammer plunks grass mama's blouse they kiss
like they are angry are two

planes lost a wartorn nation they kiss
fall tumble daddy's belt off daddy's fierce with a belt
I once hid blood boxerbriefs for mama's sake
for god's sake

whippins for something dumb something *you shoulda*
knowed better no whippins for mama just his body
her body a coo fence all rot hides neighbors not me
not god we see I hear a coo

not mama coo—different bird big burnt orange black beak full
whisperflower snatched tight spores to the wind little
melodies music class lessons little whispers whimperings soft
a puppy I no longer have because of daddy little sad

harmony I once kissed a girl in music class
and below below daddy lays spent
mama all ruffled bird and dandelion gone mama in tears
me too me too

The Harp Between Her Teeth

We picked flowers once while she told
me, *I saw my cousin die in an upstairs bedroom.*
It wasn't terrible at all. It was a face, three
faces—mine, his, God's—all looking,

staring, smiling a little bit
like you do after you hear
a joke for the sixteenth time.
She paused. I kissed her.

And I knew.

Her scent is nectarine,
redclay, aloe. Rumors
say she once saw the face of Raphael, spoke
to him in angel-tones, seduced him
with the harp between her teeth.

Her air is confirmation,
testament that she once tipped her tongue
to a red hot coal and was not burned.

I see her when my eyes are closed.

Kissing Her at Longford Bridge

Tonight we meet at the Longford Bridge
to kiss, to talk. *Your parents know
where you are?* She brings her lips to mine, thirsty,
slakes her craving, rakes her front teeth hard
across my bottom lip. I imagine Eve did the same
to the fruit in the Garden, naked
as we were the night we lifted whiskey
from my parents' liquor cabinet,

skinnydipped in a piece of pond,
made love underwater with chipmunk cheeks
full of air, guffawing at how absurd
we looked, releasing buzzed hallelujahs from the prisons
of our lungs. On the banks, she told me the seven dark
freckles on my back resembled Ursa Minor. She bit my ear, baptized
me with water from her hair, christened me as the "Little Bear."

The angry tip of Daddy's Pall Mall was waiting for me that night.
Where you been? With that nigger girl again?

She kisses the cigarette-sized scar
on back of my hand, calls me
Little Bear now, tracing
my bearded jawline with a long purple
fingernail, returning to my lips for a drink. She is small
in my arms, fragile. I could snap her spine
with a tight enough squeeze, a swift enough twist.
Her lithe body would fold into itself
thrice, four times, self-contained nesting
doll. I hold her, her jugular tight against my collarbone. Hot

blood courses. I apply pressure.
Hold. Release. She is still breathing in my arms,
breath rich with spearmint gum
and cornerstore booze. *I love you.*
Her lips turn me inside out, a breeze blown garment
clotheslined to dry. With a double-handful
of blonde hair, she pulls me into the ether, reveals
my namesake constellation, daring me
to wish upon the seven stars that the Lord
burned into my skin.
I love you, I return.

To Gram: A Retrospect

You lived so long then died
so quickly, next breath too heavy.
Your final days were wept
out on linoleum, slick with 409
and snot and green Jello. *Though besides*

*that nasty stuff, I don't mind the food
here. But Jello? No way, José!* I would always
laugh when you'd say that, rhyme swimming thick
through the Appalachian accent you swung
like a katana (a word I learned

from one of Pappaw's books). Your last minutes
were wasted in slumber, and I wanted
to wake you, craving a final kiss,
one last *I love you, you little stinker*, and I shook
you violent, beat my head against your tummy,

rising less and less with each breath. I hollered
Damn!—the only cuss I knew—and was taken
to the bathroom, to Daddy's belt. When I returned
you were already waltzing with God. You looked
so small in death, so grey, and your funeral

found you smaller and greyer. My suit
was too hot, too tight around my neck. You
were dead, and I wanted to pour out tears
like a libation, an offering. Daddy stilled my quaking
shoulders, whispered fierce: *Not here. For the love of God, not here.*

Choosing a Shirt for My Lover's Departure

I cannot wear the black.
She hated the way
I looked in black: *you look
like a magician or something.*

Recall the blue from the time
she told me that she watched her cousin
die, that she saw God's face.
That was the first time that I kissed her.

Next, I hold up the red
I wore the time we
climbed on top of a building, mooned
a helicopter as it flew overhead.

Observe the green from the date
consisting of mixology lessons
in my kitchen, tipsy laughter ringing
out after she mastered the art of a perfect mojito.

Then the purple: a gift
from her mother, an ugly-as-sin
shirt that I had to mumble
a falsehood of thank you regarding.

Finally, I pull the white—the shirt I planned
to propose to her in, accentuated with
navy jacket, with blue bowtie,
with crooked smile.

Outside, lightning cracks. I decide
that I have no place at the airport. Closing
my closet door, I crumble, barechested.
I listen to the rain beat a cadence on my roof,
and I read her letter once more.

The Letter She Left Me

Little Bear,

I ache to write this, but know I must. Loving you, giving you my trust, has been a great adventure, and I'd venture to say I won't experience anything like you again in my life. But I'm not wife-material—not for you, not yet. I still need to get my feet wet; I'd regret not doing so for the rest of my days, otherwise. I have my eyes set on Europe.

I want to shove all my cares into a suitcase, wonder around Paris for a bit. The closest I've ever been to Paris is New Orleans, waltzing up and down the French Quarter. Of course, I drank it in, was the best and blackest Blanche DuBois you've ever seen. But how could that be enough? How could it, LB?

My great-grandfather always ached for Paris. He served in the First World War, shimmied through Paris, and was forever altered. Said it was the first place he wasn't "colored" or "boy" or "nigger," instead was "sir," and treated like a man. I know this might sound insane (and you know I'm prone to bursts of insanity), but I feel like it's my duty to see where my ancestor found his humanity. And if I start there, who knows where I'll end? Besides, there's so much art I need to consume while I'm there.

I'm willing to fight my way to the front just to see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. I want to drink where Hemingway drank—shouldn't be hard to find; he drank everywhere—and I want to stroll where Scott and Zelda would've. I want to find that hotel where Carson McCullers' husband killed himself. Did I ever tell you that story? The one about that tragic Reeves McCullers committing suicide in the hotel room? He wanted Carson to kill herself, too. "You and me can go together," he probably told her. I think it's dreadfully romantic.

You really should read more, LB. Do it frantically. And listen to music—and not just the Top 40. Listen to Dylan and Springsteen and The Beatles and Leonard Cohen, but also Beethoven and Tchaikovsky and Wagner and those guys. Drink it all in, be greater than the place you came from. You already are better than them, but please strive to be better and better.

And speaking of the place you came from, please don't think this is about your family. Sure, there were times I thought your dad would answer the door with a white hood, but that's not why I'm ending this. I'm ending this because I know there is a great world out there, and I cannot be tied down. I need to explore it, break free, flaunt myself all over the cities. I can't be tied down, LB, and neither can you. It's a pity that things worked out this way, but I know that you'll be okay in time.

Read like it's the only antidote (because it is). Dream bigger than the town that chokes ambition the way they used to lynch folks who were different. Transcend, LB, and you'll be fine. You are the best person I know, and I won't forget you. Couldn't forget you if I tried.

XOXO, and all the best—

Pancakes

I whisk flour, egg, milk, wonder,
Is she selling carnations
in some Hemingway corner,
pages all yellow age, tobaccoed?
In a pan—gift from Mama, two Decembers
back, before hospital gowns—I heat
oil. A sweet sizzle tickles me.

She used to kiss my neck, sing her dreams in mezzo-soprano, call me Superman.

Batter splats, bubbles, shifts now from cream
to brown to plated and syruped.
She would dance furious
dervishes, twirlshout, slosh bottle
of Bacardi, cuss the neighbors. I shovel
sweetness. Chew. *Her brown suitcase*
that October morning, packed haphazard:

bras,
memories,
blouses,
The Sun Also Rises,
bottle of gin,
country of shoes.

Deepdented trashcan consumes soggy paper
plate, and my couch and flatscreen beckon.
I will watch Bengal tigers consume children
because no one hugged them when they were small,
and there she'll be: *purple hair in Parisian wind, screeching*
arias—oh! slinging flowers like sabers to thinslice
Eucharistic bread—yes! tempting sour cigarlips to her mattress
to bargain their humanity.

L'appel du Vide

My nights are icy now, without you warming the left side of my bed
with your litheness. How many prayers, how many songs, how many
nights bleeding onto a sheet of notebook paper or piano keys, how many days

frying up saltcakes for breakfast will it take for you to dig your heel
into the ground, make an about face, wind whipping your hair wild
as Paris? Have you ever eyed a hotel balcony, wondered what it would be

to careen twenty-eight stories into that fountain? Ever wondered how you'd fare if you hopped
the fence where the big cats sleep at the Knoxville Zoo? I cannot bear to sip my tea
most mornings, not now—without bruises on my ribs from your jerking kicks from some

dream you forget by breakfasttime. How am I supposed to make my commute
each morning without the smell of your perfume on my shirt, without
the sound of your *Hurry home tonight, I have a surprise*, without your winks

and your licking of your lips? Perhaps one day, I will simply cease
to arrive. How sweet and how sweet, and I crave you, I crave you, I crave you like a prisoner
craves privacy when his stomach aches, homesick. I want to crumble you

up into fine powder, burn you gently until you bubble, insert your essence
into my veins so that I can fly to the tops of buildings, beat my chest in defiance, bare
my body to overhead jets, not caring an iota. Not caring any Greek letter at all

because I am invincible when you course through me, skin soft as kisses, eyes
topaz, hair Parisian as Parisian can be. Perhaps I will jump to the sidewalk. Perhaps I will
drive to the subway station, wait for the train, take the great leap to the applause

of heaven, of *mesdames et messieurs*—to the applause of the quiet girl in the back row,
hands smacking in appreciation, though she will likely leave during the intermission.

Unswerving

Antlers protrude, smash my windshield, hooves beat
against my hood, dent and dent. Swerve,
careen, slow, stop. Ditch. Deer's tongue swollen,
saturated with blood, the departing soul. Shard
of window pierces deep venison gullet, frees
a stench wet and feral: rotted wayside fruit, so melancholy
and bruised. Nerves twitch in death, hindlegs jackass outward feebly.
Where am I? Where am I?

*I am twelve. Driving lesson with Pappaw, his melanoma
arms, his paint-splashed Levis. "Just remember,
don't swerve for no animal. Do more harm than good
most the time." We light out on County Road 603,
my hairless knuckles on the sticky black five-speed gearshift.*

Out here, the middle-of-nowhere is easy to find. Hazards, door open,
out, judge the damage. *Oh. Oh no.* I'm bleeding, back of wrist to elbow.
Crimson slice. Laceration. Cascade.

*At thirteen, I flatten a 'possum on Goodsprings Road, scatter
his guts into a grotesque mosaic. I pull over, face hot
and salty. "First one's the hardest," Pappaw says.*

With unbleeding arm, I drag the carcass, dislodge. I grip
the buck, wrap my unclean fingers around the five point left antler,
heave ditchward. Back against a roadside pine, I choke on the night.
My hazard lights *click-cluck-click-cluck* eerie cadence, yellow
pulses reflect in my forearm glass, buried deep as a teenage secret.

Whisperflowers

Do you remember, sister, when we called
ourselves lord and lady, not knowing
better? When we called ourselves orphans under

our breath, sure that we were secret royalty,
perhaps not brother and sister at all? When we constructed
spells, conjured beasts out of thin air,

saying, *It's real, real good?* Do you recall
when we called dandelions Whisperflowers?
We'd whisper wishes, prayers, blow, send spores heavenward: *take*

*away Gram's cancer, or make Daddy
be nice, or give us a puppy!*
or we would ask God

for something else: to be something
else. . . to be *someone* else.
Even now, I still

pick dandelions,
ask, *What now? Show me where now.*
Blow the white

soldiers skyward to tickle the ear
of Christ, to beseech, then fall
prostrate, kissing dirt, moaning

Hallelujah, beating fists against grass,
and, sister, I miss you, miss
us—like Adam, like Eve—

discovering wonders, talking to God, bestowing
names because that was one gift
that could not be stolen from us. We would walk

our Eden unashamed, too young to understand
that Time would one day cast us out and teach us.

Café

I am struck
harder than any wreck
that wracked my body
by your fingers,

how they flex
around a cup of steaming
coffee and milk,
how they glide

across the table
to tap my hand, beat
cadence against
my knuckles, as if

to say
I am having a good time.

Proposing at Christmastime

To be sung, accompanied by acoustic guitar—

When we met, I knew that we
were fairytale-lovesong meant-to-be.
God has been so good to me—
 He led me straight to you.

And as we celebrate His Son's birth,
good will toward men and peace on earth,
I can hardly contain my mirth.
 My dear, you know it's true.

May every kiss upon your lips
manifest itself into a million paper strips.

Here comes the confetti,
and I'm ready to start the show,
I am ready to hit this road,
with you by my side, babe, my heart and soul.

The confetti is falling and falling,
no more stalling, I'm calling: *Will you marry me?*

I can't promise an easy road,
mansions, sports cars, pots of gold,
but you'll be mine to have and hold,
 for richer or for poorer.

There'll be times I'll make you mad,
and I won't be the perfect dad,
but I'll give my family all I have,
 of that, you can be sure.

And I'll never regret the day,
I knelt on one knee to say:

Here comes the confetti,
and I'm ready to start the show,
I am ready to hit this road,
with you by my side, babe, my heart and soul.

The confetti is falling and falling,
no more stalling, I'm calling: *Will you marry me?*

Serenade

I get a pick off the dresser, bend over the Fender that Daddy passed down,
fall once more into your brown eyes,
begin my rough-sung cover of your favorite song.

Good times never seemed so good.

I don't see, can't see, the future, what the decade brings—
coffeeshop-falling-confetti-diamond-ring-wedding-lead-up-pandemonium-Hell-hole
of a first home: debt and doubt. One miscarriage, then another, before
your mother moves in, talking about
your dad's midlife crisis and *Why don't I have a grandbaby yet?*
Thank God she helps out with the rent.

I've been inclined to believe they never would.

Some nights, I lie in silence beside you (and you, beside yourself),
but on other nights you play-wrestle, you pounce on me,
offering an ounce of the wildeyed girl I proposed to,
the woman I'm supposed to love till death do us part.
After our lovemaking, hearts beating together and fast,
I take up the Stratocaster and pick.

Where it began—I can't begin to knowin' . . .

American Mulch

1.

On my father's hands, the unmistakable
scent of mulch packs memories
double-fisted into a knapsack,
traverses a field a thousand miles
across, clogs my nostrils with sweet
rot. Sharp inhale
hurls me backward
to the age of thirteen, Daddy's voice
up the stairway, dawn still away
an hour, *I got an opportunity for you.*

There is sweat and sweat
at his side, his arms some browner cousin
of red, pocked dark with years of unforgiveness.
You're doin' good. Thanks for your help.
He spits yellow, a fleck of tobacco
hanging on his tooth as he smiles.

Noon brings cans of cola,
Coke or Pepsi or whatever
was on sale. Noon brings
bologna sandwiches smeared
with yellow mustard on white
bread, which Daddy calls *light*
bread. Noon brings
Andrew Jackson's crumpled face
as Daddy slips me a twenty.

2.

Noon brings Andrew Jackson's crumpled face
into the light as America learns
a new articulation, rehearses
three syllables to describe a way of life:
Democrat.
Dem. Oh. Crat.
Riders on beasts of burden,
champions on the backs of donkeys.

3.

Riders on beasts of burden fill the streets of Bethlehem,
summoned by a decree, weighed down by purses
heavy beyond heaviness. The pregnant girl walks
alongside her betrothed, listens to the scoffs

of the woman in the shaded cart. The woman's hands
jangle with bracelets and fine jewels, her gut
hangs happily and full of meat, her feet
carry not a speck of dirt. She scoffs once more,
Poor. Pregnant. Peasant.
Yet the pregnant girl smiles, for she knows
that she carries in her womb
a treasure to outshine all earthly treasures.

4.

The pregnant girl smiles, still toilet-seated in the bathroom,
hair pulled back tight in a ponytail, green eyes burning
bright as Blake's tyger. She's never read Blake, yet she knows
the poetry of a happy purple plus sign on a white stick.
Later, her husband spins her around and around, and she does not care
that his hands will make her dress smell like rich brown mulch.

5.

*Smells like rich brown mulch,
like Daddy's shirts in the laundry room floor,
like the old Bible that cracked in two
from overuse,* I muse as I step
into the doublewide where I was conceived,
my hand intertwined with my wife's, my nose
drinking in the odors of the trailer.
The bedroom wall tells old stories, tales
of a knife gnawing into the cheap faux wood
to render initials separated by a heart, beneath it
a year: 1988. A violent carving of newlyweds.

6.

1988, and Nancy Reagan touches her husband's shoulder.
What are you doing, Ronnie? He faces the window, looks out
into a rainstorm on Pennsylvania Avenue, idly stroking
the place where Hinkley's bullet didn't kill him. He does not answer
and does not have to. Nancy kisses her husband's cheek.
You'll always be my hero, Ronnie. My steadfast stallion.
Lightning strikes three miles away and he feels very old.

7.

A rainstorm on Pennsylvania Avenue clears the casual tourists,
and I am finally able to approach the iron
of the fence. Atop the White House, a sniper paces, ready to plug
intruders with lead. Grass too green grows upon the lawn,
and I wonder how many missiles lie hidden beneath.

Rain slicks the iron, and I grip it tighter, my scarred finger
purpling, eyes wet with wonder. I moisten my lips, always
chapped, and I dream dreams of cabinet room epiphanies,
of indulging guests with a night in the Lincoln bedroom,
of dinners with foreign leaders, discussing acronyms and political poetry
over trade agreements and bleeding steaks and glasses of Cabernet Sauvignon.

To my left, twenty-three people hold oversized
posterboard in their hands, scrawled with Sharpie.
They stand with duct tape tight across their lips,
rendering them silent as a fetus.

Duct tape fixed everything in my pappaw's house.
Either that or WD-40. If it can't be fixed with either of those,
it can't be fixed at all. My eighth year saw us building
a feeder for hummingbirds. My hand slipped
and my finger gashed open, spewing blood
onto the concrete floor. Pappaw wrapped
my finger in duct tape. The glue burned deeply.

8.

That Jack Kennedy is smooth.
I heard that if he can't fix the country,
it can't be fixed at all.

—overheard in a Boston pub, 1:13 AM, November 9, 1960

Much too handsome
and too young
to lead us
yet there he stood,
wide smile
across his face,
tired eyes nearly
invisible, pale hand
lifted high, waving,
that red hair
perfectly coiffed, wind
blowing just enough
to convince America
he was flying.

Dinghies

Mama

Hiwassee's so cold this time
of year, cold enough to freeze
the east Tennessee euphemism between
your legs—my mama preferred
dinghy for penis. Her,
on the banks, face still
plump with babyweight, hollerin
Don't you freeze your dinghy off now, sonnyboy!
The sweet aroma of buttered
beer bread in her basket for sandwiches
later, and Daddy castin lines.

Daddy

Daddy was always castin lines.
Always reelin in castback fishes
like someone's broken hero. He was
Hemingway's Old Man, he was
blubberstruck Ahab, hackin prophetic, he was
mythology bound to a masthead screamin
until blood replaced spit in his throat.
He built a ship from driftwood devildances,
sailed the southern capes, yet could not help
but to board a dinghy into the ever after,
and so I board a redeye flight back home.

And Me

Hiwassee's so cold this time
of year, *freeze your dinghy til it snaps,*
but got to wade anyway, wade
to daddy's island, little clump
of rock and bramble, and there
I scatter what remains of him,
a whole identity reduced
to ashes, to ashes, to ashes, amen.

II.

Tennessee Poems

I placed a jar in Tennessee. . . .

—Wallace Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar”

Welcome to Tennessee

I pray for those who are wild at heart,
for the souls of those who built their cages.
I dream of Marlon Brando's torn tshirt,

cats with a burning sensation
on the pads of their paws,
of all the things that happened

last summer—suddenly—

my ears are full of the youthful bird's song,
the fiddle in the wings,
nocturnal shouts of some crazy Pollock
screaming his wife's name,

that "*Rise and Shine! Rise and Shine!*"
My lifeblood is the kindness of strangers.
I wear upon my battered body a rose tattoo. . .
Blue roses everywhere! Blue roses everywhere!

My life is a projection screen of French
and smoke and summertime.
I taste the sting of alcohol and ridicule,

and plastic blocking my windpipe,
and the musings and the madness and the music
of some southern boozing faggot with a lobotomized sister.

Welcome to Tennessee.

Finding Puppies

While digging for buried treasure, they find puppies.
Beagles, four of them.
Scent before sight, odor like potato
in month-old milk.

Daddy said they'd runned off.
Their faces are together yet separate, stained-glass
collage, little Christs in Gethsemane, sweatbleeding.
Daddy lied to us.

Pastor Dave once, *Beasts have no soul,*
no place in the Kingdom,
and while the eldest reburies, the youngest
prays that Pastor lied, too.

An Encounter in the Ned R. McWherter Library
—Memphis, TN

Eyes blur from too much Alighieri,
so I toss the tome aside, inferno
to oak table, stand and stretch, cracking tired back
against hands. Hard rub of eyelids

yields galaxies, and a man materializes
from the elevators. He points a finger, short
and littered with coarse black hairs, to artwork
on the wall, scoffs, *Now that's art, huh?*

A scar across his upper lip tells some story.
Tells? I ask myself. *Or hides?* His beard,
thick and cuddling crumbs of bagel, refuses
to go near the scar, that refugee ostracized.

*I seen where there was a sculpture once,
welded but not welded too well, called
"The Pointing Man" I think it was. Just a real crap
job of welding, tin can for a head.*

Is that scar from a wife he could not
love enough? Some man he crossed the wrong way
at Kroger? *Sucker sold that hunk o' metal for—guess
how much?* The man smells of a pear

left too long in the sun, withering
and becoming some lesser cousin
of drinkable wine. *One-point-six million*

bucks. You believe that? One-point-six million!
I nod my head in disbelief, though I barely
hear his words. Instead, I paint this man
as he might have been twenty years ago, before

his damnation to haunt library shelves with Camel
breath and rants against the art. I am sure he was handsome,
perhaps baling hay for a moneyed man, perhaps baling
that hay to woo the virgin daughter. Perhaps

the scar is his imitation of a piece of artwork
that he did not understand, and could not. As I bid
him goodbye, return to Dante's comedy, the man
sings on, unfortunate muse: *One-point-six! "The Pointing Man"!*

The Long Way

Deep below moss covered
swamp surface, her body lies
broken, scapula shattered,
tibia and fibula
exploded—shrapnel under skin
once taut, once milky,
now flapping in the water,
a grey-blue decay.

Clad in panties, brown stained—
mud, feces, blood long since spilled—and in a
shirt that she received on a church
retreat, she is exposed. Scalp
salvaged, brain screaming naked.
Her frontal lobe sings a hymn
of despair to the hungry, hungry minnows.

Of its own accord, her arm reaches
upward sometimes: toward the bleeding
sunrise, the tart lemon high
noon, the sexuality of the sunset, as if to say,
Take me. Take all of me. Her nail polish
is still visible beneath the grime, full of silver glitter.

Rust grows on the chain around her ankle.
One day, the chain will give way to a grand
discovery in the Hiwassee, scare the Holy Spirit
back into a sunburnt fisherman.

Until that day, she lies at the swampbottom,
her dead eyes still weeping, her minnow-eaten mind
mulling over her grandmother's neglected words,
*Never take no shortcuts, child. They'll always take you
the long way 'round in the end.*

Ocoee Ghazal

Many summers have been spent splashing, baptizing ourselves in the lake of Ocoee.
Its name comes from that Cherokee word for passionflower, grumbled reverent, with fate: *occoee*.

Lovers dance in the dark, drinking deeply, full of sodapop and maypop, on the banks of the river,
hallelujahs first to a God called Yahweh and secondly to the river god called Great Ocoee.

We slice sourdough thick, pile it high with freshest meats and smoky cheese,
wrap it all in Saran wrap for a day of tubing and sunning on the riverside until late on the Ocoee.

My father taught me how to wade out into the water, mindful of the slipslide rocks,
an open can of fresh sweet corn ready to be pierced as bait for Ocoee

fish, swimming rapid, haphazard, hungry. I once brought a girl here,
and I kissed her with fervor as we danced by the shimmer. Oh what a date on the Ocoee!

We scattered the ashes of a buddy of mine, who loved the water more than his life,
and I think his eternity was aquatic; I believe his Heaven's Gate was the Ocoee.

As a young man, my father wooed my mother, sang thick-accented, *we'd go down to the river—
and into the river we'd dive—oh down to the river we'd ride*. Love, Bruce-imitating, the Ocoee.

As a young man myself now, I walk the banks, my father at my side, saying very little,
then he sighs, and smiles, and says, *Koltin, there's nothing as great as the Ocoee*.

Field Dressing

Steam rises from the buck,
fills clearing, woods
cold not snowy, cold enough
to snap bone. Knife

slides easy, rough-haired skin
melts from meaty ribs; liver
all purple will make hunger

flee when it burns black
on morning coals.
Eleven ivory points fetch

a fortune once mounted
against oak. *Hands all
red! Hands all red*—innards

bloodbrown ropes,
darn near endless,
would make a stout meal
for a silver wolf, lunarlusty.

Back of the hand
against half-frozen
snot, crimson the moustache, hawk
yellow spit to the frost. Rope

taut around the deer's throat,
heave heave heave,
five long miles to the fire of camp.

Among the Horses

I am Tennessee, and I am

Tom. Laura. Blanche.
Brick. Stanley. Amanda.
Maggie. Mitch. Stella.

I am the unicorn
among the horses.
I am in their world

not of it.
I gallop in another dimension,
am fragile, do fall, shatter

into tiny shards of glass,
litter the floor where the candles
still burn, and will always

until the selfish dreamer is forgotten,
until the glass is swept up
and the smoke rises to the rafters,

until the lemonade is all drunk—

Lemonade!
Made in the shade!
And stirred with a spade!
Good enough for any old maid!

—until time truly becomes the greatest distance between two places.

Coyote

Based on the east Tennessee “Coyote-Boy” who—after a terrible car accident that killed his mother, father, and four year-old sister—survived almost two weeks in the Smoky Mountains by resorting back to ancient survival techniques, including using rocks as weapons, fashioning clothing out of animal hides, and striking flints to make fire.

The boy stoops, splashes
water, sucks droplets
over cracked lips.
Yonder, a coyote’s accordion
ribs hum over what little
is left of some maggot-ridden meat.
The coyote’s cold eyes
meet the boy’s. *My family’s dead, too.*
Rock flung from the boy’s hand
smashes coyote-skull.

Wiping his mouth, the boy
regards dying fire, endless stars.
He feels very small, and is.
Coyote’s meat stains
fingers he absently suckles. He whimpers
prayers before pissing
embers into smoke.
He screams, devours the echo.

Glorious Appearing: Chattanooga, Tennessee—1883

Her hands were once dainty, once
deft at swatting small children unruly
in Sunday School, once keen
to thread a needle, to stir
a soup, to wave *hello*
to this person or that one.

Now they are fists, clenched and filthy,
beating nauseous cadence against the ground
as the crowd draws closer, prepared
to hurl the stones as hard as their spit-filled
insults of *Whore! Hussy! Lecher!*
Rubyfaced bovine women

and their husbands with every button
fastened, ready to choke. *There'll be hell*
to pay for this now. Tears flee
down her face, rivering the rouge
she wears like warpaint, staining
her dress that is no longer white.

She casts eyes to heaven and screams.
She's facing the banshees of her grannie's lore
from the old, emerald country—hill and the good food—
where music fills sweet stinking pubs, and the spirits
dance with virgins at sunset, bleed them and kiss them,
and make them women as they burn young souls with glances.

Then she sees him, and she knows he comes to save.
Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus! He is no Jesus, or at least
not any form that the church
paintings revealed. He's sable-eyed and darkhaired
and he is humble. He places his body over hers, dares
the crowd. *Go ahead. Cast them.*

Every stone rains to the ground.
The crowd sleepwalks home. A stark silence
reigns. The hero stands, pockets a stone, glides
down the road of dust and harsh gravel, whispering hymns.
The girl lies small, weeping in the streets,
sobbing prayers she was always too scared to pray.

A Tour of the Hermitage

We are not long past the fields
where Jackson's slaves broke their backs
to pick cotton—an activity

that schoolchildren on fieldtrips
can partake in—when the tour guide points
to a lovely venue. *Perfect for weddings,*

he says, his voice much too chipper.
Behind me a woman with skin
the color of delicious dark caramel scoffs,

whispers to her friend in a tone
that is not a whisper at all, *A wedding? For real?*
That close to the cotton field?

Why not just have your wedding at Auschwitz?
The whole tour hears, and for a moment,
we say nothing. Mustering

courage to break the silence, the guide
directs our attention to something else.
We don't dare turn our heads to see.

Smoke in Cochran Cemetery
—Englewood, TN

Arriving late, the sun
near to slumber behind
the mountains, I light
a cigarette, though I do not

smoke. The earth is heavy
tonight, weighty and threatening
to break my shoulders. Menthol
cools my inhales and my exhales,

and I shiver in the graveyard.
My grandmother smoked menthols
for sixty-eight years, so that
is what I told the pimple-faced clerk
I wanted. Beneath foot,

there is a rustle, and I dare
not shine a light, lest I see a snake
or worse. Yes, the earth is heavy
tonight as I pace the rows,
Confederate tombstone neighboring

Union, as though someone forgot
the war was fought. Families
stay together that way. Soon,
I, too, will fight. Already, my hair

is buzzed stark against my head,
and my hands know the cool
of a rifle. I stoop at a grave, illuminate
the headstone with my lighter, read

the name half-devoured by moss:
William Harvey Cochran. I ask him,
Is it okay to be scared?
Being dead, he gives no reply.

I finger the moss in the letters,
picking until indentions appear
and my nails are gone green.
I wonder if it's holier
to leave the moss where it grows.

I believe it is, yet I cannot
resist pulling away the silky parasite
until the name is revealed. Ashes fall
from my lips, and I entertain

notions of boarding a plane to—
to anywhere! I am not
the brave man my parents see,
not the *Few* or the *Proud*. I am

a child, still prone to department
store rages, kicking and shouting
and pissing my pants. I am a candle
knocked over onto brand new carpet,

extinguished but leaving dark
marks over the floor. *William,*
dammit, tell me something. My cigarette
falls and is reduced to nothing. I seek
solace. The cold smoke is all I get.

Blanche Dubois—Carried Away

ranting
& raving

raped
saw no escape
none in sight

institutionalized
by
chauvinism

*So much for familial love, right?
Where is justice?*

it comes in the form of the Man
scot-free
finding the buttons of his wife's
blouse

Supermarket Sorcery

In the Tennessee town where I matured,
there was a wizard in the outskirting wood,
face like a frightmask, gaunt, rough-whiskered,
voice hard from odd berries, old age, and elixirs.

His house was carved into a colossal oak,
alight with his magic and cigarette smoke.
He was known for his castings of slurrèd spells,
flick of gnarled wrist, a point of crooked nail,

croaking sacred word alongside profane,
smatters of Latin down Old Hickory Lane.
I once encountered him in town on a Saturday excursion
at the grocery, seeking milk, bread, and eggs (a half dozen),

as well as some dogtreats, and a sweet thing or three;
my young eyes scanning aisles and aisles of—and there was he,
blue eye lustrous, his other eye black
and squinted, as though weighted down by a sack

of potatoes (something I left off my list!),
or maybe a chain, a well-kept secret, a lover long missed.
His bowed legs swung, gait unique
and increasing, increasing toward me.

When eye to eye—for I was short and he was, as well—
he breathed into my face a spell:
*Follow, follow God's own will,
and ye'll swallow, swallow bitter pill.*

From my hand, he snatched the list,
crumbled it, ate it, swallowed it
whole, shambled on away to his piece of land,
and left me with a trembling hand.

Frost Prophet

In dark, in cold,
stiff white grass, gone red,
makes a fine pillow.

A frostfurred raccoon rouses him.
It nibbles his bleeding nose like a lover—skin
all cakebatter—might after a wrinkling of sheets.
And so 'twas meant to be.
Thus the man becomes burden's beast.

Come morning, he wakes and does not wake,
interred all white—the carcass, the bride—is fingerless,
craving water and whiskey, horseflesh and womanflesh.

In their small home in Sumner County, his wife stirs
a pot brimming with stew, rich meat bleeding into onion,
onion into potato, all begetting a mighty broth. She sings
half-remembered hymns to half-forgotten tunes.

Elsewhere, a roan horse gallops.

Oogley-Boogleyville

Oogley-Boogleyville, his father calls it,
quick to lock the car doors as they turn
onto Highland Street. *We need to get you a gun.*

They have never been to Memphis,
and his parents are especially white today.
When they park the car at a blood

donation clinic, his father speaks
to a cop whose cruiser sits idling.
The cop tells his father, *Most of the crime*

*is nigger on nigger, so your boy will be fine,
so long as he doesn't go roamin' after dark,*
and this makes everyone feel

a little better. That night they eat barbecue
and drive past Graceland, the gates
dirtier than what the TV cameras show.

Later, in the motel room, his father sets
his .45 on the nightstand, daring
the metropolis to disturb his slumber.

The young man flips through channel after channel
as his mother asks, *Are you sure
you want to move here?* He assures her,

*I'm sure. I think I will grow
here.* Soon, the room is dark, and his father's snores
rival the mighty train that rumbles daily

through the Bluff City. When she thinks that they are all
asleep, his mother begins to sob, and the young man
clenches his eyelids tighter.

You are Now Leaving Tennessee

Dead in a suite of a New York Hotel
at the age of seventy-one, plethora
of barbiturates in the room—that's how
they found him. Some say he died from choking

on a bottle cap. Some say he died from an overdose. Some
say it was something else altogether.
Buried against his will—a graveyard
in Missouri; he wanted to be buried

at sea like his hero Hart Crane. He left
his rights to the old Sewanee. He left the world
with characters and worlds that will live long
after him. And he left the poetic
myriad with fat hearts full to spilling.

You are now leaving Tennessee.

You are now leaving, Tennessee.

Blow out your candles, Thomas—and so goodbye.

III.

Sundry Store Hymns

*And in the streets, the children screamed,
the lovers cried, and the poets dreamed. . . .*

—Don McLean, “American Pie”

Not Birthed, But Carried

This darkness is no womb,
is no tomb offering forty winks,
offering forty acres and a mule
and a warm blanket and a cold swallow.

This dampness is no swim,
is no dive into a pool
of gold but of live sharks
seeking a pint or two at the bar.

Across this unforgiveness,
I am borne—not born.
Not birthed, but carried.
Not birthed, but carried.

How Does It Feel?

1.

He bleeds melodies to stain
his guitar, beat beyond
recognition. He licks

killing, reddens sheets
of stomped-upon music
smelling of marijuana and unwashed
t-shirts and Vietnamese hallelujahs.

He spits bloody
to fill a baptismal pool;
he forces heads under, moans
Don't criticize what you can't understand.

2.

When I think of Dylan, I see him as forever in his thirties, hair wild boys on a battlefield. Those dark glasses hide—what? Those glasses hide a boy, criticized and criticized, a boy hiding behind a wall of smoke, then bursting forward, mad but emptyhanded, singing hymns that are not hymns. When I think of Dylan, I hear a voice that comes not from the chorus of Hereafter but from the gutters of Minnesota, a voice that stampedes and bucks wildly and bites without aim. And I hear that *screeeech* of a harmonica, daring me, cutting right through me as if my soul were warm butter.

3.

She thinks:

if only I had a dime to throw. . .

And she moans:

Most nights I dream with eyes wide open and insomnia
yields hallucination. I can almost feel
the cold chrome of that horse I always loved, can almost hear
the purr of that cat, can almost taste—
but only almost—the lips of the ambassador that stole my heart
and my pocketbook and my ability to put one foot
in front of the other one.

And she spits:

How does it feel? you ask,
but I'm far too gone to answer.

4.

Either
the crash
was a metaphor

or—more than likely—
the metaphor was a crash,
one that tore him asunder, birthing

new man, man capable, man in flames,
fully engulfed and fully aware and fully broken
into a hundred molecules, each weeping in heathen Americana.

Either the crash was a metaphor, or else the weight
tipped some grand celestial scale and released the dragons.
What menace and malice! Malice and menace!
When the smoke cleared, where were they?

Where were the medics? The sirens?
Broken prophet on the pavement—
broken man on fire—

one wheel still
in spin
forever.

5: The Neverending Tour

Heaven is the nosebleeds, watching him,
now three quarters to a century, growling
over a guitar. Heaven is hearing him live
for the first time, his jumbotron face blurring

with my tears. My parents never got to see
Dylan when they were my age. As the opening chords
of “Like a Rolling Stone” blare through the speakers,
I know what *Neverending* is—it’s but a blink

in the eye of he who is immortal,
of he who steals the thorny crowns
and knows the thieves and the jokers and forgets
to call the folks in Sweden to say *Thanks*.

Hurricane Season

They come linear, the four, with purpose—
strong wind flinging westward against their bare backs,
faces toward nectarine sunset.

The first wears warpaint and a wicked grin, recalling
bricks that shattered windows, hearts.
Above the smile—no wonder “eyes” and “ice”
sound so similar. She’s iron grip and alfa and zulu.

Behind her, freckled from Georgian sunshine,
slowtongued, sweetstrongliquored, her cousin.
She holds two leashes, dragging a skeleton and a ragdoll
she used to coddle and cuddle, but no longer.

Following is a Floridian princess with alligator blood,
singing English, Spanish, sunshine. She nightly
dreams of a longshoreman she loved in blush moonlight.

My toes curl, digging holes in the sand as one by two
then all their hands caress my chest, my back,
soul, history and weakness.
I succumb.

Laissez le Bon Temps Rouler

do not tell me sidewalks are not holes for late rabbits
meant for mad dashes screams and spit
in heathen english trade language some bandana tribe
some busted thing squatdropping rusty nails

how dare you burn my feet

I will scribble sundry histories upon bloody bathtowels feed
thread to fire inhale sable smoke like too many marlboros

and don't you recall my protests as you bit my warring fingers
with wicked wicked feline teeth claimed vampiric tendencies

but you are no count
you forced my heart —the actual organ not
valentine converging swoops— through a barbed
wire eternity caught my terrors

in bell of phonesex or saxophone in hurricane glass called me
adorable
your singsong is my funeral march casket busted
naked on the sidewalk a spectator

sport *spectator* I ask *or specter* yes
you are my march
hare which renders me the hatter beating
down these boulevards mad as hell

The Senator Puts a Hundred on Red

He slides forward seven chips, two green
25s, five blue 10s, places them
on red velvet. I announce, *No more
bets, please*. I send white

ball flying, lording over a blur
of black, of red, *has the Senator
ever committed hate-crime, war-crime
in his heart?* The ball catches a bump,

exchanges roll for bounce, grips
onlookers by the throat,
strangles them—CNN cameras
sadistic in a third-world feature story—

ball slows and warbles over some miserable
field—and didn't he say, *We must kill
the women and children?* The Senator chews
his black straw furiously

with creased forehead. Ball
comes to rest on the Red 23;
the Senator's money is doubled.
Other chips, elsewhere on the field, are swept

away, sawdust from the worktable.
Yes, he said once, hands all sweaty, *sometimes
you must kill the women and the children—
for the common good, you see, for the good of America.*

To Be Someone's Broken Thing

1.

I savor the bruises your loving left,
sometimes lick, suck the yellowing purple skin,
search for absent, salty flesh clinging
to me desperately—a shrunken sweater.
I commandeer doorframes, staircases, second-place
trophies to keep the wounds alive, burning.

Nights, I explore neon light, Kubrick erotica, and yearn.
Yearn! Oh, to be someone's broken thing, and, oh, to be some colossal orbiting
infant, omnipotent! Oh, to wear a shackle, taste freedom, taste your collarbone,
taste boiling iron from a tongue torn in two! I tumble home, cursed by angry streetlights.

2.

Rachel just returned to Ross, said, *I got off the plane*. Do you remember when we, full of double
chocolate ice cream and young love, watched this and wept? You wept at the sweetness, the love
story; I, for Jennifer, for David, for an era ending, America's favorite decade of *will-they-won't-
they?* I weep for the ends of things. Yes, I weep for the ends of things.

3.

Tonight, the heavens are alive,
meteors hollering across the sky,
meteorites cratering poisoned earth,
burying Martian secrets in our soil.

Burning my mouth with chamomile,
I pluck a raven from the air, whisper
my love, spit hot Latin into his beak,
send him flying with a message for you.
Listen. Please listen:

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|-----------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| | love wash | wash me | make me | make me well | smash | my |
| skull against a boulder | | lazily | lazily unwind my | | | |
| unfortunate | brain | oh lovely | oh lovely | lovely | love | take |
| | please take | firmly | my storehouse and stretch | | stretch it east to west | |
| west to heaven to hell | | | and plick-pluck | merry | tunes | sing with me |
| the song | of the shattered | | love take | and take me | erase erase erase erase | |

4.

And do you ever weep for me?

Reeves at the Hotel: Paris, France—1953

I.

It could all be over before you can say.

You done
your best; leave on top. Take my hand—hey? I'll lead
you to a fountain, full burgundy, there
we'll wash, drink deep, deep, full of greed.

Handful of white ones, handful of green, fifth
of whatever's handy, then a hell
of a slumber, Car. A long blink,
then God's splendor!

Well, God's splendor or Hell. Ha!

Your life has ongoing purpose? Which of them
sold you that crock? Tennessee? Capote?
Ongoing purpose? How many more backwards bulldykes
and faggoty men can you write about?

Sorry. I don't mean to shout,
but our dance is over, the music done left, now
we sway to nothingness like mongoloids.
Children who are not children. Like we're—

Give me back that bottle,
you! You fraud!
We all got vices.

I'm sorry.

Car, I tried.
Tried like hell.

II.

We always
so miserable?

When we married first time smoke in bed drenched,
you read a poem one about smelling
Georgia. That's the Carson I loved now she's dead I mourn

I mourn now you *you* and now
and now

We're rough balloon
and flimsy needle kissing in midair.
One bursts other bends.

Just stand over there. I'll be done dying
in a few. What? No. Crying.

not *dying* *crying*
but dying too

III.

white green fifth of something to dumb
screaming you can hold my we dissolve
into what what's the damn word i'm sorry that i've become i apologize
what i do how weary how weary is this bed am in bed

bedroom sure paris walls bare photograph false teeth
bared black white god so thirsty who's on nightstand in
french know no french good nightstand and so sad
called oak called oak called reeves

one more drink want to
die am now am now am you were born
to write me to die kiss oh kiss oh idiot tongues lie to
me with me one more drink for the well you know what

i'm meaning hell kiss oh kiss oh kiss oh
white oh green

Go Down to Jordan

It's baptism into fire, seeing the strong boys out on the farm:
got to avert your eyes, be ladylike, can't listen to them whistling.
Got to wait for the good boys.
Bite your tongue. Keep on singing those hymns,
tongue hitting the roof of your mouth, back of your teeth.
Glory Hallelujah! What if it wasn't my tongue at all?

Raise your hands, take a snake if God drops one.
Cute boy up front steals glances at you, gives you a wink, a grin.
You know he wants to steal other things as well.
You know that he's going to baptize you soon and very soon.
You'll wash white out by the crick one night, scream *let there be light* until there is light!

Oh daddy'll kill you if he finds out! Kill that boy, too, but you don't give a rip
about what Daddy thinks and ain't for two years now—not since all the things.
So daddy may scream, but you'll be screaming too,
a spirit running free and thwarting major plans, committing cosmic treason,
showjumping down roads toward Paradise in a broken-down wagon full of sweet forbidden fruit
and shouting, "Come one, come all! Come one, come all! Fresh fruit! Fresh!"

Nightly, that boy will teach you a memory verse.
You'll brand it into your heart and you'll cry out to the Lord
in the moonlight—werewolf transfiguring himself, scratching out your eyeballs
and breaking your skin. You will laugh, moan, stomp your feet like a charismatic, sing
like a freight-train, *caaaaaw* like an eagle, dream about old films and rodeos.

On some nights he'll play you the violin.
On some night you'll be the violin.
Other nights he will prefer the cello, but you are fine with that
because you've seen the face of some angel
and you've seen the fire in that angel's eyes
and you hungered and thirsted.
You must—you must!—be filled.

Paseo en Coche

We ride wild, windows
down like trousers
at a highclass meeting
of sex-crazed socialites.

She cocks her head back,
blows smoke to heaven,
and I know dragonblood
meanders through her lineage.

I grab her hand as once
I did inside a museum,
a Pollack, which she called Pole-Ack,
before us like cosmic chaos;

I whisper to her,
*Mi corazon, fill your nostrils
with freedom—fill your lungs.*
She kisses my bruised knuckles.

We are who we are.
 Her brown hair whips savage.
 Her brown eyes say, Yes and yes and yes.
We are who we always shall be.

A Letter Regarding the Auction House

To the best and blackest Blanche DuBois,

How long it's been since childhood sunk its teeth into us, tore away my swimming trunks, your string bikini, to hurl us back toward Eden. How the lines have shot out from the corners of my eyes, wrinkled from too much smiling. Yes, I smile again. I didn't for a while, but now I bare my teeth with upturned lipcorners. It's a long business, life. And it takes us damn near everywhere. Last I heard, you were stateside. Married and living somewhere hot and so dry. Arizona? New Mexico? Some place where God's paintbrush thirsted. Last I heard, you were happy. Did he write you sappy love songs, like I used to? Does he hide his intentions to tickle your feet under the façade of "baby, it'll just be a normal foot massage—cross my heart"? I hope he does. You deserve it.

I did not come to Paris for you. I came here for me. I, too, now fatter than you remember me, longed to waltz the streets of Paris, sip whiskey served by gorgeous women who sing French sins through pouted lips. Down the streets, I chased F. Scott Fitzgerald's ghost, begging him to slow down. "Teach me, great teacher!" I'd yell and yell, to no avail.

I must admit, I was underwhelmed by the Mona Lisa. But the art is here. I saw it with my very eyes in an auction house. What a grand room it was, full of the crusted myriads, air rich with wine and perfume. Upon an easel, a painting stared at me: a man in blackface, half the paint smeared off his face, revealing peachy skin beneath. Across his face—a toothy and gapped smile. Gripped in his arms, an open wicker basket, choc-full of breads and fruits and wildgrowing flowers. A bleeding slice of stereotypical watermelon, if you can believe it. Below the painting, on a plain piece of folded cardstock, three simple lines, typed in Times New Roman:

Item #41:
"Le Faux Nègre" by Gustav Devareaux, 1841
Oil on canvas

I sat down in the back of the house, already sweating (they say that Paris is the height of society, but someone needs to introduce them to the AC!), and as item after item was sold to the highest bidder, I could not take my eyes off Devareaux's painting. I began to wonder—how long it took to apply that thick, black greasepaint to the model's face? And did Devareaux sing out, from behind his easel, "Smile bigger! More niggerish!" He was probably laughing as he smoked an overpriced cigar. That's how I imagined him, anyway. I imagined him as some sick sadist, but then I stopped. How much did the French really know about the slave trade? Did he even know about all of the slave ships? Could he close his eyes and smell vomit and excrement? Could he hear the cries of a little girl being pulled up to deck where some sicko rum-breathing bastards made her dance barebreasted for their pleasure? Could he hold out his own wrists and imagine iron chains coaxing him to the floor? Could he even imagine the hell that he was trivializing?

I did some research on my phone as I sat back there—the bidding was flying way too high for my wallet—and I found out that Gustav Devareaux killed himself in 1857. He took

cyanide pills and got drunk, and then he hanged himself in a bedroom. I can't help but romanticize the whole thing—we're an odd couple, you and I, forever making artistic suicides romantic. Sure, he probably hanged himself because he was generally depressed, or outed as a homosexual, or some other usual reason that artists use to off themselves. But I like to think that this painting, and his memory of creating it, was on his mind as he slipped that noose around his neck. And I wonder: did Devareaux regret smearing paint against canvas in that smoky room in Marseille? Did he weep?

When the painting came forth for bidding, I felt an overwhelming urge to bid on it. I wanted to buy it, fly it home, drive it the 2000 miles between my house and yours, and show it to you. I wanted, in that moment, to see you inspect it so closely that your nose brushes the canvas, little sad chuckles humming in your throat. For a moment, I half-lifted my paddle, half-said goodbye to my life savings, half-murmured a prayer for the family I left back in Tennessee, lovely wife and lovely daughters. And then I dropped my paddle to the floor and left without turning to see whose face belonged to the man who hollered, "Six cent mille euros, monsieur!" and won the bidding.

I paced the cold streets, those old streets of Paris that the cinema cameras always slightly fail to capture, and I blew my vapors into the sky. My body craved coffee (though you know I do not drink it) and a cigarette (though you know I do not smoke), and I slaked my craving for both at a small café with a name I cannot pronounce. I dressed my steaming cup with milk and with sugar, stirred it until the blackness and the cream became a single light brown. Our kids would have been this color. I drank, sputtered, drank again, and then tried to light a match in the wind.

Across from me, in the empty seat, for just a moment sat Fitzgerald. "So we beat on. . ." he began, and he left before I could inhale smoke and exhale the rest of his quote. Then I sat alone for a while, thinking of you and of Gustav Devareaux, of two wet naked bodies swimming in a lake, of the smile lines on my eyes that are now reserved for my wife and for my daughters. Down the street, I saw a woman—no, not a woman, but a goddess—and, for a moment, I swore it was you.

"Boats against the current" indeed. These sidewalks are dangerous, but I'm sure you already know that. I'm sure that's why you left. My plane will leave at 7 AM local time, and I will leave these sidewalks behind, perhaps never to return. It would be a sin if they didn't drink of me, just once. Just once. Just once. I smashed my mug against the table, raked a jagged edge against my index finger until blood bubbled.

On the ground, I smeared my name, porous concrete drinking with gluttony. And then I walked the three frozen miles to my hotel, had a drink, penned this letter. I hope you are well. I hope beyond hope that you are well. And thank you. And thank you, always.

Truly, truly,
Little Bear