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# The Unearthed

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The unearthed

by

Sean Evans

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and the Environment

Program of Study Committee:  
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## A Pilgrimage

I climb  
 to a high forgotten palace  
 where sunlit motes pillar the dark  
 through dragon-tongued rhododendron  
 into wild mountain stream  
 unimpeded by the forge and piston where  
 crude burns only in the once-dreamed  
 solitude of its waking, consecrated,  
 christened by its own fermentation,  
 black vicissitude, diamond ore  
 before the flame's conquest

I climb  
 a green cathedral birthed  
 baptized by underground springs  
 inaccessible to all but the eternal  
 sanctity of roots.

I climb the stair-cased streambed  
 chiseled and sculpted to fit only the unshod

hoof and foot with a shape only  
 the heart can trace outcroppings that speak  
 the silent ghost of yesterday's weather

where maidenhair fern creeps  
 along the ledge to wed the dark  
 crevices broken, sifted  
 granules relinquish their solemn  
 rigidity to lie loose, vulnerable  
 among freshets, wind's palpable  
 ventricular circumlocution pulsing  
 life into cellular hands, branches  
 like Shiva's arms waving,  
 bowing, chanting pink  
 laurel blossomed incense

in praise of sun, in praise of wings flying  
 seed over the mountain born again  
 another thread woven across the ridge,  
 into a universe vast as the microbe,  
 infinitesimal as the comet's blind orb,  
 omniscient and holy as the beetle's  
 esoteric revelations beneath the bark

I climb  
a jeweled shadow  
where brook trout leap  
for gadflies, ghost nymphs,  
where a stick fire licks  
the outer dark, where  
vagrant stars pluck tin  
holes in the void's  
operatic conclusion,  
where great ancient bears  
print boulder shapes  
across the vaulted sky

I climb  
to fish the rivers I fished  
before time lassoed the moon around  
and lay my head on the simple ground  
to dream again what was lost.

It Wasn't My Father in that Casket  
*for Harold*

I didn't stand right away.  
I sat the quiet,  
finished my milk with the clocks.  
The precise hour was uncertain.  
Sometime during the night the heart resisted dialysis.  
Machines can carry us only so far,  
the voice said.

My father loved fishing near Wilson Dam,  
locks and gages barricading the rain of five states,  
trout icing beneath the boat on the bottom.  
Shoulders broad as limestone, casting his line from the bow,  
bicep and elbow mending, making Earth  
fit the feather of a fly.

I don't recall what made me finally stand.  
I pushed myself away from table,  
walked in the living room and eased down on the sofa  
where he would sit for hours, tracking the plains for clouds.  
I didn't turn on the television.  
Beached in the yard,  
forty horse Mercury humped beneath green canvas  
unraveling its fiber in the sun,  
sat his boat.

That night the moon rose in the window above my bed.  
It moved slow and shone round as a perfect stone in the river,  
silver fish spilling to the bottom all around.  
It happened natural and easy

## Man on a Roof

The radiator was busted,  
so he put a box of rice on the stove,  
a brand he never bought.  
The directions said three level cups and stir.  
The man leaned over the burner and let the heat build,  
waiting for steam to rise.  
It was their twelfth anniversary.

Life was unkind to the man.  
It lived beneath a smokestack,  
melting crude into jazz.  
The man didn't understand—  
it loved rats and cathedrals,  
canals; wept for sunlight,  
kept dying, coming back,  
dying again.

But the man had chosen his bride and kissed her under water;  
at nine meters lost his hearing to the deep,  
a ballast of clams, an oyster dinner.  
When the muscle receded only a shell remained.

Moons and tides came empty,  
washing up steak knives and the view from a kitchen window,  
so the man climbed a roof on Bourbon,  
buttoned his coat,  
and swam to the bottom.

## Mama's Little Helen

At the crest of a slow, steady climb the burning hood  
 of a dark Buick tilts like a sweating rim of iced bourbon  
 into sun polluted grove of broad pecan, oak, elegant  
 peach balconies of iron lace bulging in the heat like Parisian  
 bodices. Liquored sweetness floats down stairwells, begging  
 love too big, too bad, too dizzy to ever be had; it slips  
 round the corner past midnight and you wonder over coffee  
     if you dreamed it, or it dreamed you.

The courthouse presides the heat beneath the hooded phantom  
 of a white convertible, quail-shot into hysteria by a Dallas parade—  
 a startled whale rising out of bottomland shadow, yellow-fevered,  
 armed with mosquito teeth of Sutpen's Hundred, a pillared cloud  
 risen of sweat and cane into statutory history loitering the dead.  
 Its gaping chandeliered windows still wilt as Faulkner shuffles by

    lewd- mad with genius of nine a.m. Southern Rose

I sneaked into Rowan Oak to hold his black riding boots to my ear,  
 a conch shell listening for ghosts beneath the air-conditioned cedar  
 while half the town smuggled bourbon into a secret drawer of designer  
 ties to wave red flags at a running back heroically shouldering the ball  
     past enemy lines.

When the visiting team had bombed us back

to gas-lit alleys  
 in bitter defeat  
 the underground  
     debated

deaf allegiances over Lynchburg whiskey. He was a genius, motherfucker.  
 Oh, fuck off. All he ever told was the misery. Played the race card every  
 chance he got. Goddamn carpetbagger is what he was. You fucking Judas.  
 You coward. Well you can go read it for yourself in the newspaper clippings  
 on the walls of his very own home. Hotty Toddy. You swine. *The Sound and  
 the Fury* is the only thing of any real value this town ever produced, maybe the  
 whole goddamn state, and I can say that because I'm from here. That's when  
 she leaned over the bar in her loosely perfumed gown. You could have heard  
 owl footprints on the roof. She had Elvis's cheekbones. Eyes burning from  
 the fields of Ireland. Vision of all that was woman flowing into our presence  
 like a Greek statue. Kind of beauty either ends the argument  
     Or starts a war.

I'm no saint, she said. I've hated and loved every voice that ever sang a note

in the beautiful schizophrenic choir you keep calling Dixie. But I know Medgar Evers loved it more than you or I ever did, any of us, even Faulkner, and he'd tell you so himself if you had the spleen to walk out of the bar and go sit in the cemetery

alone  
some night  
and truly ask.

When she was done, we all turned and watched her walk past the pool tables to the jukebox where she flipped her head back to see that we were all looking, let the coin fall, pressed E-12, and began swaying her hips to the sweet blues notes, rocking her body to and fro as the bottle-slide slickened and poured into night like black, venom heated molasses.

Ruby in the Void

She is  
 Earth blinking  
 a green lash  
 through electric  
 storm fission.

Light reaching us  
 from distant objects,  
 visible, invisible.

A Volcanic yolk  
 of eons erupting  
 DNA, a blind archer  
 and two stoic bears.

Misnomer, the current  
 consensus of a millisecond,  
 pure energy and  
 the black echo  
 of infinity.

Pythagoras vanishing  
 in a helium cloud,  
 powder keg of dust,  
 nuclear flash, pollinating  
 elemental gardens, astral  
 rose

stoking fires  
 in a black kettle  
 of cosmic debris.

She is  
 a sachet  
 of cool radiation,

boundless  
 elixir

steeped in light-  
 years, insoluble  
 inquiry looming

all that is  
 threadbare to gold,

sand to stone.

She is  
a fig leaf  
sprouting camels  
through the eye  
of a needle.

Isis, dipping her gourd  
for rubies in the void.

Eve's celestial shower  
of planetary lemons,  
searing golden holes  
in the rust pail of  
time's dark well.

She is  
the lame  
who fell  
from a wild ass  
into the arms  
of a blind king.

She is  
the final cadence,  
a purloined wing  
shimmering  
toward the ultimate  
shadow  
of midnight's candle.

The ocean  
the vessel  
the mirror  
the violet water bead  
stuck to the windshield,  
defying gravity, vibrating back  
through herself at 800  
miles an hour.

## Little Bear

There were two lakes, Big Bear and Little Bear, where my father and I hooked striper, rock bass, the red gilled shellcrackers, their bright collage of gilded scales festooning the gunwales, fanning oxygen in the live well mounted into the hull just behind the steering seat. People said the lakes were haunted with Union soldiers murdered in their sleep by a witch who poured molten lead in their eardrums, soldering them forever to that land when their thoughts poured out onto the rock

We'd fish late, trolling the limestone coves, clear black shimmering fingers thrust lengthwise between bluffs, calm surface mirroring sky more accurately than a camera lens, yellowleaf pine canopy and cirrus cloud dragons flickering like flame through the waves, stilling again in reverse replica, as if water held the entire universe

in one eternally floating instant

My father witnessed terrors overseas I'll never understand, or imagine. But I know if he could go back and hold that draftcard again, he'd tuck it into his back pocket as if it were a small child and walk into the kitchen where my grandmother cut biscuits with a water glass. And he'd take the rolling pin from her and quietly explain why he couldn't go. He'd shake hands with my grandfather, a veteran with no tolerance for cowardice, and he'd explain in such a quiet way they'd understand his war was not his father's or the battles his son would fight, because everyone has their own history to shoulder, vast territories no one can ever win or lose but them.

I asked my father on Little Bear if it was true about the ghost who walked the shore in search of sleeping boys. I waited while he baited the hook, threaded the cricket behind its chitinous collar, pinning the silver point back through its abdomen as the tiny barbed legs tried to claw free. I watched him rear back and sling the bait down-shore, the mangled, airborne insect overtaking its own reflection in the sky. When the red and white floater bobbed up and the line tightened again, he lit a cigarette said it was just a story people made up. I looked across the water into the darkening woods and shook my head, as if I'd stumbled into some final revelation.

He breathed smoke as he watched the line. That's not to say it didn't happen just the same, he said, exhaling, poised for the cork to vanish, the cricket lost down in that murky water, fighting for life on the end of a line with no chance ever kicking itself back to shore.

## Alligator Gar

You seemed alien as a heartbeat winched up by elbows  
from the brown murk, hauled in on a trotline weighted  
with mortar bricks, devious hooks, barbed and buried  
in a goldfish gut.

You bubbled up reflective and silver-scaled  
like some Precambrian knight of the marsh,  
wanting to sever a finger, a thumb. Your eye  
burned red in the headlamp, fire inside an opal.

I reeled you up and you stared back as only a fish can,  
sedated glass muteness, deadpan, accusatory, godlike  
and wise, pink scar of gills, clam flesh dilating oxygen.

I should have cut you loose when I saw the teeth,  
the jumbled moonlit rows, house of mirrors and  
saws on the water flying toward fingers in the dark.

I should have cut you loose, but it's been drilled in us  
by our fathers that you are bait thieves and to kill you  
before you steal again and take the all the good cat,  
the tender yellow channels who aren't bottom feeders.

So I did, not what I believed, or felt, but what was expected.  
I took the short paddle from the hull by the corroded battery  
without wiping the handle and clubbed until your skull clapped  
out over the water three times and back like the wet slap of a boot  
on vacant pavement, a railcar connecting in the dark, and waited  
while you seized into prehistoric fever, then subsided, slipped  
back to your alien palace below.

## Holy Ground

I've often thought them ghosts  
 the way they gather  
 at the edge of things, hoof prints  
 behind a cold sun  
 on the slow fall  
 of a fallen light, tails sizzling  
 orange in the low-lit brush,  
 herds, silent gray  
 armies  
 appearing among the sage  
 without rank—

a dozen premonitions drifting  
 in their tracks, heads mounted on  
 necks, sloughing and bobbing, tasting  
 venison in my sweat, stab of gun oil  
 on the downwind. They intuit  
 unseen intrusion; eyes bugged  
 sidelong from the naked brain,  
 fawning motionlessness, mineralizing  
 to stone, twelve small breaths born  
 of thicket, eight-second splints  
 of sky

always there  
 low in the west  
 sun  
 percolating their backs,  
 dappled  
 and holy.

I stood a long time, and shivered  
 from a high pine, gripping my carbine,  
 trigger slicing sharp against my pulse

forgetting  
 the lead ball  
 asleep  
 in its chamber.

## Runners in the Dark

## I.

Every Saturday night on this dark bend  
in Marshal County, jackrabbits streak blind

cover from boozed headlight beams.  
Vehicular homicide, roving dirt rich

bottomland. Blue ridges my mother walked  
nine months before I was born, scabbed gray

with diesel tracks, industrial skidders, invasive  
beetles. *It was different back then*, she says.

*You could walk for miles without hitting clear-cut.  
Looks like they tested a bomb up there, or the moon.*

Now timber planes fly over, dusting hybridized  
pine for infestation. *What happened to the frogs?*

she asks, as if my Ag-arts degree could afford  
eloquent conjecture bearing children couldn't.

I want to tell her I drink the same roads  
they drank, losing my life to dark curves.

Same dead-end nights, bingeing to inoculate  
AM guilt over the fire glazed eyes of Chu Lai.

## II.

Tonight, two deer freeze beyond the guardrail  
of a narrow bridge, pumping stars through

foamed-wet nostrils. Irises honeyed halogen.  
I watch them from open window, rounding

Dead Man's Curve as I light another joint.  
A daisy-mottled fawn and its mother, blinking

in unison across the creek bank, movements  
so synchronic they seem mechanical. Until

they break full lope over fifty-year barbwire,  
blaze past posted signs as if hurdling air.

## Autumn Moonrise

Was it not you who climbed my shoulder  
in a dream of blue ridges, opal  
full as a light I can't find anywhere?

When I closed my fist over the heart  
of a slain deer to fit the creases of your palm,  
was it not your dying I fired from the long hill?

Was it not you naked under a brown leaf  
pretending to be a footstep?

## Big Two-hearted Circle

Only a raven could have noticed  
 the jelly sack of eggs knifed loose  
 in the stream, loping over ledges  
     staircases of wind.

Miraculously they thaw suspended  
 in shelves of ice when the dorsal ridge  
 tingles awake and two-chambered heart fires  
 through the melt. They're never dead as you think.  
 I've caught entire schools peering out the cardboard  
 of my deepfreeze from arctic depths, crystalline palaces  
 where orcas dream of ice through a perforated spout.

My brother and I fish long hours in the streams  
 we floated twenty years earlier on vacations  
 to Cherokee, where we climbed into rubber duckies  
 and slipped down the rocks as mountains flowed by.  
 Places have a way of calling people. The mountains  
 we thought we'd long passed circling back to now  
 we wade the rocks searching eddies and shaded pools,  
 always upstream, despite what Nick Adams said,  
     piling water is also good.

We fish late, now, well into night and ride the curves  
 with beer, cook our fish on a rock firepit under tulip  
 poplar, smoke rising out of the cracks. We don't talk much  
 about the heart attack our father had last January. Reminds  
 us too much where we're headed. Same as the fish. Even  
 these mountains, washing into sea before our eyes.

I hooked a fifteen-inch brown last night.  
 She rose behemoth, roused like a log  
 out of stone sleep, jerked the treble free  
 at arm's length, sacrificing a bit of lip,  
 a morsel of eye for the lucky.

It was a kind of birth, slick longitude writhing  
 in the grip of trumpeting light, muscled slab  
 beating its tiny breath against a cradle of sky.

I laid her on the ground and whetted the fillet  
 knife on a stone I kept in my belt, then the leather.  
 I worked the blade into the soft belly skin, slit  
 her and scooped the vitals out with two fingers  
 dipped her in the river and rinsed the ribs clean,

the roped innards and pebble-sized heart slipping  
downstream as dusk gathered high on the ridge.

I considered how it might be  
having your entrails funnel wildly  
down the rock, navigating unseen  
stars, spilling over edges of earth  
through the pitch pupils of circling  
crows, disembodied gills steaming  
in the falling night air, circling  
the bends back to the heart  
of a great shimmering bear.

## Army Man

They lived in a little white house  
when his dog ran away  
to live with the Indians.

His mother took him  
on long walks beyond  
the new highway being built  
through the sunken mounds  
of bone and flint. She held  
his hand, said, "*see?*  
The new road."

They flew kites  
in spring her hair  
smelled like lemons.

He never wanted to go  
overseas and shoot anyone.

## Backbeat

Two naked skins writhe on the backseat,  
joined at the mouth like diamondbacks.

Windshield blanks the white sky.  
A southbound Buick pours chrome

over the glass above her, matchbox  
silver, smaller, smaller beyond the pine.

I can't make out his tattoo. Is it a scar?  
Astrology burnt in the skin like crucifix?

His square-toed boots latch at the buckles  
his hand slides between her thighs.

She stiffens, goes limp. The radio  
plays soft. I can't hear the tune.

The black dot of bird vanishing  
on the telephone wire

suggests  
Leonard Cohen.

The double barrel lanes blasting  
semis toward Jacksonville

point to *Blood*  
*on the Tracks*.

Motel vacancy winking golden  
horseshoes above his fistful

shock of raven hair screams  
rock-and-roll summer, 1955.

The pink Caddy flaps its wings toward  
statuette flamencos of the half-acre

floodlight she will live inside  
twenty years from now.

Rain smatters holes  
in August heat.

They are almost  
safe. Pine rosined

sky drips red sun  
through the nickel slot

of a blue highway sign  
for Memphis.

I want to reach through the rearview,  
tap him on the shoulder, nod  
to the sunset, whisper

*go slow.*

## Song of the Dark Child

I suppose she could have clenched a fist when the moon  
sank, drawing gravity upward from Earth. The wrought iron  
rail was fairly stable, though she got this twitch drifting to sleep,  
remembering the battalion of horses, their scent—

Hooves, black and scissoring.  
Loping, lassoing fury, eager as  
butterflies, pale sweet summer  
going to seed all around.

Night is sultry thick here  
cicadas bore into your thoughts,  
armies of lonely pine march the dark  
on slow Gulf breeze wild roses bloom  
for the dead. Broad-necked live oaks lean  
against the moon, swaying green and poison  
in their garland of moss, so lovely with night,  
so looming. Cruel things have happened here;  
the slow rot of cottonmouths gets on your skin  
you cannot wash it off, you cannot get away.

But in satellite image or walking on the moon  
perhaps performing her nightly act of levitation,  
she knew the continent morphed into the shape  
of a slain bison, Mexico, the limp curled legs;  
Canada, the head, bushing horns along  
the Bearing Straight, heart bulging  
somewhere over Rocky Mountains,  
snowed over and white  
with everything lost—

When she was a girl  
there were wolves  
in the shadows.

Don't you want to come play,  
little girl, come play?

I don't know why she ever had such trouble  
waking to the splintering light, when  
it was always the push, the letting go,  
first wild instant of absolute inertia  
which truly terrified her.

## Wild Horses

She weaved the silver buckles of her motorcycle jacket  
 between billiard greens like a lioness, flat nose and cat eyes  
 prowling the bass-littered haze of Marlboro and reefer savannah  
 in black theatrics before the curtain was drawn and Elizabethan  
 tragedy bowed to reality T.V., text monologues, Facebook drama.

I know now she held night in her eyes like a lonely hunter  
 '66 Mustang keys jangling on her hip to buck the world  
 into an oblivion  
     time and horses couldn't roll back.

*Ten years ago I flew her out to Montana  
 I remember how close the walls felt, breathing  
 together in that twelve-by-twelve cabin we slept,  
 trying to roll and kick our way back to that bar.  
 To the night she lay across my hood and confessed  
 things about her father, screaming at the stars, God  
 if He was up there. What else could we do but drive  
 down to the river, sleep on the banks, listen to birds  
 sing the world awake again, mist rolling back  
 the sun like a heavy stone laid over all truth.*

*We drove through sunrise to the Spokane airport,  
 and I stood in the lobby watching the escalator  
 carry her away into clouds. The last I saw of her  
 was the calfskin boots touching her like saddle  
 leather, clinging to the only horse it ever knew.  
 Two brown bears eased above the overpass  
 just as I crossed the state line into Idaho,  
 climbing for what seemed like an eternity  
 into the high snow terrain they'd winter.*

The Stones were playing on the jukebox.  
 Somebody sank a shot. A head was split  
 into cantaloupe across a trailer hitch  
 under the polluted mosquito light of Buick  
     spokes and reefer smoke.

You wanna dance? I said.  
*With who? Dance to where?*  
 Just here. With me.  
*Nothing is ever so actual,  
     or confined.*

Well, you want to?

*What if I said you look like trouble.  
Maybe I am.  
Come on. If you're not afraid of dying  
Maybe I'm not.  
I mean before you're dead.*

## Rabbit Fur Coat

Every Christmas kids at school would brag  
What gifts their fathers bought their mothers.

A sparkling two karat diamond anklet one said.  
A sky blue Lincoln Continental said another.

A cruise to the Bahamas said an ocean-blond girl.  
Gen-u-ine mink in a red satin box from Macy's.

But there'd be this shy kid who'd get quiet  
During these contests, these false testaments.

Tommy, the ocean girl would say, giggling.  
A small bronzed hand over her mouth.

And what did old Saint Nicky bring your mommy?  
Bath towels? A vacuum? Steak knives from Penny's?

So Tommy would stare at his shoes.  
Invent something far better than the truth.

## The Craft of Poetry

You want to know how to write a poem?  
Drive down to Pinky's Liquor outside of Ft. Worth,  
Texas, where Joe Ely used to hitch rides.  
Forget money. Stand out in the desert until  
a car comes by and says, get in. Shove your work  
into a knapsack and ride off to San Francisco  
with nothing to lose except time and your career.  
As your beloved spins loosely into sleep, waiting  
for your fingers through a pillowcase, ride away  
on a buckskin stallion across snowed over Raton,  
then gamble away his moonlit green eyes in a game  
of five card stud. Take your saddle and hitchhike  
back to Austin with a renegade Navajo who  
carries in his wallet a yellow slip of paper he says  
he's been running from since before you were born.  
Ask him what this slip of paper means. Wait  
for him to breathe hard liquor into your head  
and ask why you think it matters.

## Two Kinds of Poetry

The first:

Lives its life through what the poet can pick up, hold,  
say: this thing has to do with the other thing I picked  
up and held. A poetry of castaway objects.

A music box no longer plays. This poetry tells  
of its engravings. Tracing the scent of its lover,  
this poetry sings of a lost earring.

Play this tape backward through your childhood  
when finally you're strapped in a chair, waiting  
on the switchman to turn, raise his right arm,  
heave blankness at a cinderblock ceiling  
and you'll discover

The second:

Lions run through fields, wolves talk  
to fire. You dream of snow. Wonder  
how Jesus forgave Pilate. How Buddha lived  
inside a white elephant. You wonder about Adam  
and Eve. You wonder about the stranger who saw  
one square foot of sky before the guillotine rolled  
his head into oblivion. You think very lucidly  
and without hesitation that it's exponentially better  
to be scalped by spring grizzlies at the foot of Denali  
than die from Doppler contusions at a trailer park  
in Bessemer, Alabama.

## I Have a Dream

It was me that sent him down there to stay  
 with Uncle Mose. Roy Bryant say Emmett  
 got fresh with his wife, let a finger slip down  
 the back of her hand, suggesting what Negro  
 never supposed to suggest to no white woman  
 at no store owned by no white man in Money,  
 Mississippi. The FBI men who investigated  
 say Bryant and his half-brother showed up  
 to Mose's at 2:30 AM, dragged Emmett from  
 the bed and drove into the dark, and the FBI  
 told how many times they smote his body, how  
 many different ways they brought the pistol down  
 across his face, and the angle the .45 slug went in  
 how they strapped a cotton gin fan around his neck  
 with barbwire and dumped his body in Tallahatchie.  
 They dredged him up waterlogged and bloated  
     reshaped into some clay

no longer mine  
 no longer God's  
 something they made.

Mose say all the young Negro children who had only  
 hunger, hell, and the Devil, now have the greatest fear—

not knowing how  
 to save themselves being lynched  
 because of not knowing  
     how to keep from being  
     Negro

But I have a dream

Emmett slips loose of that barbwire and  
 that cotton gin fan spins on down to the bottom  
 without his body. In my dream he calls my name  
 climbs up the back steps onto the porch.  
 And his mama wakes and goes to her baby  
 breathes every ounce of light inside her,  
 every ounce of light in that house, every ounce  
 of light in every cross her people ever prayed  
     since they sailed the Middle Passage

I have a dream

she breathes light  
till the bruises recede  
    like moonlight reshaped

into the true face  
    the face half hers  
        half his father's

and none of theirs.

## Pure American Brother

The night they came for me I stood at the door and said  
 well, who is it? Are you him, they said. Maybe, I said,  
 breathing like a deer who knows the trigger's been pulled.  
 I could hear the handcuffs clink at their hips. I could feel  
 the gunmetal, lonely 38s, needing to be unsheathed.

Last night's song still played in my head, *bey gunner man that's quicksand*—  
 I stood there breathing life I'd held in my hand fifty times, though  
 I didn't know at the time a dying deer was no different from a dying man;  
     it was just a matter of who held the gun.

Jesus, I thought, it was only a fistfight. He touched my face.  
 He accused me. Pointed and said, you don't *know*. I told him  
 with my fist that I did. We were on the stairs below  
 my room. Women were half naked and music was going,

*Hey kid you think that's oil  
 man that ain't oil that's blood  
 I wonder what he was thinking when he bit that storm  
 or was he just lost in the flood?*

I'd read too much Marx. Didn't love anything  
 American but the blues. The Sioux, the Blackfeet.  
 The sharecropper, hands that worked, or had,  
 so much they'd quit, said, naw, hoss, can't no more,  
 and lived homeless with a grocery cart, devastated over  
 discarded tooth brushes in labyrinth west wing garages.

My mind flashed back as they cocked the hammer and waited  
 behind the door for the ten-second dream I lived in to end:

They'd mined the bituminous out of West Virginia and taxied  
 our fathers across the Pacific to shoot farmers who slept in huts.  
 I'd invite a homeless bucket player to the top floor pool deck  
 of a French Quarter Hotel to get high on the government  
 before I'd piss on a burning banker. America is a prospector  
 who rides to the moon on the lithium balloon of pack mules,  
 I'd say. A venture capitalist who needs police like I need  
 Jesus, to prop his face upright while the rest of him  
 goes off climbing toward gods that don't exist in the sense  
 he thinks they do. Forget the parachute, motherfucker,  
     I said. You're already dead.

We got a warrant, they said, on the other side of the  
 Universe from the carpet I stood on. You can open  
 the door, or we can bust it down. I'd spent a hundred

nights in that attic fog, soaking in a tub, waiting  
on my affair to arrive with cheap Bordeaux and a bag  
of tricks that belonged only to us. I'd sit there  
looking at the plaster, watching my toes wrinkle.  
I'd stare down my reflection in the faucet and wonder  
where it was all headed. I asked her once in their bed  
if he came back and found us, would he shoot?

## Interstate Child

What you dream about is catching the speed limit  
for good. Semi lights thunder past your temple  
and you need billboard signs for direction.  
It's so easy to follow words, a written truth  
you could drive toward. Sometimes you get  
exactly the message you need on a license  
plate—Montana. Texas. A fat man  
in a neon wife beater squats with a lug  
wrench. You blast by, but see miraculously  
as you fly past at seventy-five m.p.h. that  
God is more precise than you ever imagined—  
little ones cub out of the cab and you see  
that you don't know anymore where the  
border is or if you've crossed it already.

But you've lived with an artery in your ear  
while the little peach towns fell asleep and  
dreamed of sailors in white suits on the decks  
of ships who had nowhere to go but a museum.

You hit the brakes and stop.  
They come to you like water.  
But you've emptied your canteen  
forty miles back on a pay-by-the-hour  
bed in Dallas. Help? you utter, fumbling  
to conjugate verbs you never learned.  
They shake their heads, flashing silver  
phones like pesos, laughing wide  
as the hills above Rio Grande.

## Spirits in the Night

We drove around all day, bruised by liquor  
into the Blue Ridge. It rises quicker than  
you think, swerves around a curve and strikes  
like a pigmy rattler, jaws wide, intoxicant.  
It could swallow you up on the right night.  
We ate barbecue while the kids slid down  
a flat rock with reckless abandon and breasts  
spilled out of trout slick bikini tops. If I was  
that boy, I'd fall against her wet body while I  
could get away with it, then float out of sight  
into the laurel and dare the adults to come  
take back the dignity I was born in.

Years later, that same shy, towheaded boy  
steers the fogged curves of some high road,  
slips in an album as black rock and spruce  
stratify into short infinity, and the singer  
was born in Louisiana, but sings he'll tear  
down every prayer his mother can say,  
because his home is in the Blue Ridge mountains  
and he aint' going back there anymore,  
but that's not all—The moon is low and the boy  
who was once a man keeps falling, climate after climate  
toward the city, and finally he stops on the side of a ridge  
overlooking the lights, and the folk singer says to the boy  
that he's gone to sleep and dreamed a song, waken  
in a strange room and played it across the street  
at a bar who paid him with booze. And the boy  
says, I wonder if I could do that. Two voices hit his heart  
like nighttime heat, though he doesn't hear because he's trained  
to live only in the brain. The first says, this mountain  
is you, there's nothing else. The second says,  
what he said is bullshit, keep driving.

## What the Tide Demands

I have a dream some nights the moon floats up  
 over my shoulder behind me. But I can see it  
 back there above. White and cold, shimmering  
 like a startled eye. Pharmaceutical-grade  
     lucidity from the holiest lab.

I'm fighting my addiction  
 in a dark window. I get angry  
 and say just what I think I need  
     to clean up this act.

Clean up, man. Get clean. Quit being dirty,  
 damning, accusing. Just stop, I shout, trembling.  
 Stop blaming Andromeda for nebulae you keep  
 inventing. All by yourself, I point to the sky.  
     Nobody out there but you.

My addiction gets quiet. Bows its head to one side,  
 goes limp, swims the dark like a drunk fish in the sky.

Hey, I say. Don't take it so bad. The truth can't kill you.  
 But my addiction doesn't raise its head, or hear anymore.  
 Just gets real still, refuses to move. Look, I say.

We all have to face up sooner or later. To our own bullshit.  
 You hear? I shrug, I nudge him. I slap his flimsy shoulder.  
 Don't go to sleep when I'm saying something. Listen.  
 You lift up. But he doesn't lift. His head just rolls  
 up there in the sky, like a loose boulder, or a melon

on a severed vine.

Other times, when I'm clean, the moon passes  
 behind a deep blue cloud still enough to illuminate  
 its appearance to an arresting visage carved of light,  
     benign lucidity that calls to me in some way.

## Quantum Gravity

There's a theory the body can die  
defiantly alive, unified  
blot of tugging particles,  
smeared  
on the Event  
Horizon, which is like a spillway  
of memory's singularity  
decoded, the waking dream,  
waking to mourn  
its own  
fractured absence—

what kind of new die  
is this, that splits  
us in two realms  
of old suffering?

Rumi says, "gamble  
everything for love,"  
whirl  
the musty rags  
of your unknowing, until  
knowing grasps, wholly,  
the fleeting  
fragrance of veils.

21<sup>st</sup> Century Dali

The dancer careens like a broken violin in blue sequence,  
elegant, obelisk nightfall, the female twin before the plane hits  
the fifth lumbar, spilling all her secret drawers—  
Parisian toiletries, red lace bodices, 401Ks, offshore investments,  
a lifetime of suicide notes aborted on the desert floor.

She glides her arms wide to embrace her invisible partner  
in this tango with death. Tilts her head to offer a breast  
backward to the scaffolding that props her at the elbows—  
begins to marionette, though her eyes dream charcoal without  
paper, as if she had no traceable face.

## Miro's Bull Race

It is a strange bull  
with horns like a boat  
sharp on one end, the bow.

The bovine eyes do not blink  
or move  
in the sockets  
only death  
fire black armband  
without number.

Moon is its matador,  
plump gluttonous  
medieval gesture  
cavaliering in a gray soup.

It is no criticism  
I would like more ovulation.  
The blood seems octagonal  
ochre  
imprisoned

the chalklines—may I say—  
remind me of yellow tape  
too rectilinear  
for the missing body.

## Quilt Horse

At dinner a timer sounds, fizzing  
through the halls and musty rooms,

pantries

where soup cans wait on the gears that will grind  
their lids, drain the stewed tomato its jailed blood

Time will fizz through the shadow of the adult  
who will come stoop in the doorway with a hand

on each hip, insisting the horse be folded  
packed and returned

to its cedar box with the rest of its makings,  
the spindle-back chair slid back

under the kitchen table where it must live, ribbed,  
quadrupedal, beneath the doily and the silverware.

## A Lifting of Bread

1.

Alone, she passes room to room, kneading  
the dough, mashing yeast into loaves. On TV

a program about copious galaxies beyond, narrated  
in the voice of surrender you imagine love to be,

a voice unadorned as grief, without bloom or root  
to attach its weight, only space, tumbling as though

all weightless falling might rise again in the leavened  
heart of bread, shaped by the tumult of a secret gravity

trumpeting multitudes in a sky of wheat she leans, opens  
the oven door like a drawer to the universe, expectant

meteors shower magma shadow across the living walls,  
while outside the moon waits chained to its light, calling,

calling the yeast. Supple aroma of loaves,  
grain to nourish the hearths and tables.

It's a lucid night with no rain in the forecast for weeks.  
Her figure passes in the window, eyes iced blue as planets,

distant crystal seas frozen impenetrable. Her heart's  
in Rio. Mine's on a flight anywhere far from here.

Maybe some night they'll pass beneath the moon  
like red eclipse realizing its passage the first time.

2.

Faraway in a city atop the hemisphere a kind of thief  
steals his way to an unsuspecting cinema and takes lives.

Do people just wake some day and forget they're loved?  
Maybe she bakes to invent joy no one can rob. Or maybe

between silent voyages to the kitchen she flies trembling  
to a gemmed street in Paris after the one grief that could.

But it's a lucid sky when I bite into this bread she's left  
on my doorstep like a fuse of savory air set loose from stars,

solid, simple gravity brought to nourish  
night's hunger with its entire weight.

## Ritual of Wheat

She wraps the bread in cellophane so thin  
I can feel the mounds, ridges, rove a palm  
along the startled eyes of figs, pears, dates,  
whatever succulence she favors when she's  
of a mood to stir her bowl of yeast and wheat,  
laboring love high in the kitchen window, shaping,  
kneading, prodding her white pilgrim of dough  
to a shape of land, a risen breath of earth.

Does she wear gold rings during this ritual,  
smack the dough and lick bran from her  
fingers? Leave me all, I say, all she can  
heave into her lonely oven of clouds.

Let me come to my mailbox at noon  
and find savory figs, exotic grains, stark  
naked to air, October sea of blue Midwestern  
piling warm stone onto shoulders of the world, high  
bright vigil of corn and wheat and straw flung down,  
down from some secret hidden box onto this wind-born  
plain, washed aground on separate islands, she north,  
I south—this understood boundary only  
the clandestine wheat may cross.

## Amanita Virosa

Upend a stone and you may find her  
germinating the gardens at Gethsemane.

A pale mutiny in the splintered light  
of stockyards

barnacled lotus among the leprous  
blood of radish peels, fungal white  
flame in the tumescent seed gut

of a tomato's heart.

*Audubon Field Guide to Mushrooms* says,  
“she is tacky when wet, smooth, dull  
to shiny white and may discolor  
at center of cap with age.”

Strikingly beautiful, she is found alone, or  
in a small, scattered group. She is deadly.

“Severe nausea, vomiting, cramps, kidney  
or liver dysfunction, without treatment  
she may result in death.” Jaunts  
a wide, grievous brim, with a veil  
to shade her gills' ribbed toxicity  
from full sun—long, fragile stem  
widowed beneath the weight of air,  
as if the faintest mote of descending  
light would topple her delicate rigidity  
in-two, rupture her membranous

basal bulb.

She constitutes the group of  
deadly amanitas; also known as

the Destroying Angel.

Through the hawthorn skull gray  
November scuds itself translucent  
as her bridal veil drops

flinging her spore to the moon.

## The Environmentalists

The city grew crowded, year after year, more polluted, congested. So the man and his wife decided to look for a spot in the Greens. They loved long walks along the fresh stone creeks, the sweet mountain air, and they knew on one of these trips, they'd find just the right property.

Real estate in Vermont has always been a seller's market, their agent explained. That made it a sound investment.

The couple loved their new home. They'd made good choices every step of the way. From the compact florescent lighting to the wood burning stove, and most importantly, the foot-thick insulation, the triple-pane glass that would keep them safe, warm in the coming New England winter.

Saturdays of their first autumn in the Greens, the couple went on lazy, winding drives along the river banks to take in the dizzying fall color. But year after year, they began to notice plates from nearly every state. Indiana. Alabama. New York was very common. Texas. Missouri. Even an occasional Hawaii. It bothered them to see so many outsiders in their mountains.

Can you imagine? the wife said. Ferrying a car across the Pacific to drive from one gift shop to the next? They stopped at their favorite café for a latte and found the wait unusually long. Impatient, the couple shook their heads and walked out. It was the first time the sleigh bell above the door had ever annoyed the wife. On the drive home, she glared out the Subaru window, shaking her head in disbelief at all the motorists.

They act as if nothing is wrong, she said. As if everything is okay. As if we weren't in a crises. She looked at her husband and waited for an answer. But he only gripped the wheel, took a deep breath, let it back out very slowly, and looked away from her, to a cement table beside the river, where a young mother had opened her blouse to breastfeed, while a boy in a gray cap tossed a ball in the air.

## Grand Canyon of the Pacific: A Brochure

In the left-hand corner, just below the gaping lush vista  
a sleek, assuring voice echoes from the border, "Slow Down  
and adjust to island life. Come join us for rest and relaxation  
at Kauai's Waimea Canyon." Cool lime splashes of botanical  
flurry bubble over opposite rims, shelving ledges like molten leaf,  
unwinding along the river canyon toward the sea. Halfway down,  
water and wind have shaped igneous folds into an abstract animal skull  
which appears to guard the ravine, peregrine nose arching regal, defiant—  
on either side, two caved depressions like closed eyes culled blackly in the rock,  
as if any second the sleeping beast might awake to swallow the sea.

## Tigers Found Dead in Omaha

Along the rutted roads of central Iowa crops climb the sun  
 in military formation, row after row, geometrically calculated,  
 genetically engineered, scientifically formulated to blot out  
 everything on the horizon but Sioux ghosts scudding across  
 the pale Midwestern blue like great floating bison herds, slate  
 thunderclouds churning yellow August light, as if the arthritic  
 fingers of a dead midwife come alive in the branches has given  
 birth to the murders upon murders of crows who assail winter  
 sidewalks for breadcrumbs when the fields are slashed for silage  
 left fallow on the prairie tundra with its nightly dream  
 of antiseptic fronts, gusts that kill from inside out.

But for amusement you can drive your family four hours west  
 to see the Siberian tigers of Omaha, the world's largest cats,  
 the only breeding captives in North America. And they'll walk  
 you and your beloved up to the cage and let you point and make  
 primate faces and ape your arms and hold your hairless babies  
 high to the perimeter fence until their cheeks crumple into violet  
 beet skins sobbing for I-phones and bottle milk until their eyes  
 turn placid and recede like the Snows of Kilimanjaro, every breath  
 backward into some vague Pleistocene repose.

The zoologists will go on to explain how the big male Siberian  
 clawed the stripes off a plaster model they put inside its fence  
 to test the territorial rites, mating zones, complications involved  
 in getting the pair to unite successfully. In captivity, they'll explain,  
 the mother commonly abandons her young.

They found her two newborns emaciated, rare snowy  
 flames manged with neglect, ribcages sunken to a slow  
 heartbeat above the swollen tiger paunches.

But it's not just these two cubs who are dying,  
 the biologists will explain, it's the entire population.  
 And you'll instinctively click a few telling frames and  
 upload them immediately, so there is a record at least,  
 some documentation of their demise.

Man Kneeling at a Rock

A man walked to a rock  
he thought was a good start  
and knelt  
in the Buffalo Grass  
above an old wallow, soft  
beneath the ball  
of his knee

With hammer and chisel  
the man looked across the wide sky  
from this rock he'd found  
to a high spot  
where he thought there might be another  
and another  
that would satisfy him.

## Mountaintop Removal

the mountain sleeps,  
naked, with a hand  
over a great heart, gasping  
dreaming allegiances, counting  
minced sheep, mining  
the bones of a century  
coughing  
the black cough of draglines,  
midnight shovels.

always, a hand

over a great heart, she sleeps,  
with the courage of a spider,  
lowering eight miraculous feet  
to forage the leveled  
plateau, where  
every second  
a false seed sprouts  
its alien shrubbery.

## El Dorado

Two riders mirage  
 in and out of shape  
 on high Bolivian  
 sand, saddling pickaxes  
 shovels, the magnetic  
 pull of a new god.

Mayan descendants  
 whisper from ruins  
 having trailed the foreign  
 scent through Guatemala  
 sensing, knowing this  
 beast has become  
 no different than  
 the gringo steel  
 angling like stars  
 in its swayback.

Vaqueros surround  
 the riders on sun-scorched  
 pampas, silver-winged and  
 mask-less as a flock  
 of Coscoroba swans:

Caballero?  
 Si. From the North.  
 Americano?  
 Si. No politico.

We are merely traveling.  
 And her? She also?

(To the horse.)

Si. Her as well.  
 We are one.

(As the gauchos  
 trade secrets.)

Let us pass –  
 we have nothing  
 we have  
 only the road.

(They look again  
from horse to man.)

We could buy more cattle,  
but they carry no money.

Take the horse, kill them.  
They're worth nothing.  
Why let them live?

De nada. A spirit  
is no good to kill

two breaths  
travelling with  
a face of one  
ghost

(They nod  
in agreement.)

Go, then. Ride  
(They slap the horse  
as gringo centaurs  
fade into dry seabed.)  
Cabarello! Be swift!

But gringo—  
if you can see  
past the imagined  
lungs of this horse  
you ride

pray to the sky

the god you look for  
dies at the end  
of this world

in the Andes

with puma  
and the snow.

## Cut Branch

After trains  
antlered shadows  
give their ghosts  
to the pine.

Whatever the deer taught me  
I've forgotten. How to lose  
the last skin  
of velvet  
in time  
for rut.

I no longer hear the Rosewood  
And the Solingen braiding  
cut-mark in the green. Low always  
for balance, tempered by fire  
the wood won't split; I was no boy scout.  
I needed a father

outpacing the Cheyenne over a suicide  
butte, proud as any  
light of hoof  
in the white cloud of a runaway Chevy.

Nothing epic—  
straight bender, unholstered  
and loaded through one eye  
of Tequila worm—a start  
west anyhow.

We never blamed you; just weathered  
the call, half-sober at least, and collect.

I believed in lassos then.  
It couldn't last, I know that.  
Each lope and hoof upon water  
must converge, linger  
long before a kitchen window  
at dusk, threading  
the latch, nightly,  
in time, always in time.

## Voice

The tape rolls. You come crackling through a hole in the smoke. You are nineteen, load mortars in the dark, watch them leap sandbags, quake in the paddy. You are no officer. Officers don't dig graves with rifle butts when shovels aren't enough. You laugh and tell Corine not to worry. Vietnam is not so bad, your voice, unwinding inside the recorder. The nights steam like riverbottom in August. There's no winter and leaves never turn. You miss woodies and drakes in the sloughs. You miss dark water on your hip through waders, hounds chiming up the branch after deer. You'd like to come home soon. You miss a woman with child, eyes the color of soft fur. In the picture they remind you of Jesus. You say a slur word *dink* that means "little brown people." *Bookoo* means "a lot." I want to press the red button, stop you. Speak through the recorder, lie that I'm a Buddhist, over and over you were never saved in the river with ducks. Bamboo could be canebrake and snakes swallow striped birds along the clay at night. You hear them squeal and thrash inside the leather, dying featherless, holy.

It's November '69, and your favorite song will never be recorded. You don't like Jagger. He has hips like a girl. Richards is okay, Berry was first, better when he's sober. You drink fermented rice in the towns when the American runs dry. Whiskey blazes in back of my throat, I pause another pour. The liter nearly gone, I'll get more, maybe tonight. Father, I had a child, too, by a woman who loved me, though not enough. Love never can be. Not in a trailer, she said. It was snowing when I drove her to Memphis and there were people shoving homemade signs, angry, saying names. No one spat on you. No one called you baby-killer. Army don't fly boys back civilian. There is good reason for this, you will say, falling through the kitchen dark after eight more beers. The tape hisses, raining on the hills above Saigon.

Whiskey helps some nights to remember you are human like any other. The burn always comes to what cannot have been. Together we depend on this. You gave me for my thirteenth the pawnshop Yamaha, smoked in the fires of Chu Lai. It hung above the fireplace ashes, sun-bursting like a phoenix. Father. You're a better man than me, I know when I hear you wail through your hole in the smoke, with Robbie and Leon and Chet. They are good, but you are better for rhythm, whacking the top, backstrum I hardly believe. Your voice comes haunted, rasping, I see fingers lope four legs over the sound-hole, across the paddy, across the sea, to your beloved oak, to the church you will build, before you fall from grace, again, again, again. Father. I'm not your favorite son, I know. I take it all back, what I said. You're a

smarter man than I'll ever be at this goddamn university. I know this when I hear you pray in the evening by windows.

I know a few other things, too, this bottle half-empty, burning through rolls of tape you thought were lost, don't know I've found. You taught me to fight serious. *Don't swing unless you swing to hurt, son, always swing first.* You ate tequila worm, paled, swaying maniacal. Like *this*, you said, shoving holes in the air, killing with a clenched fist. I hit that boy, father. I hit him on the concrete and I can't take it back, you know that. It's our one thing, isn't it? Not the gospel.

I loved you like some god of the hills. Pale blue eye swimming toward deer no one could find. It wasn't like I said the night we fought. How can I tell you the brown eyed son we never had?

Voice. *Dinks live in thatch butts.* Their beautiful babies sleep on claymores that explode in the dark. I've seen their hooches in movies and want worship them. They built them here, too, dad, on the Tippah where you shot ducks, near the mounds you taught me to see them in the water, in the pine, in the red clay, so soft.

They're still here, you said. Look, son. Look harder.

## Triple Bypass

We were sent, my brother and I, out fishing,  
while our mother wept over the onions,  
halved cold turkey into a brown sack  
that lugged and thumped our path,  
downhill, splitting at the seams.

It was the wet of line made our hands hurt,  
numb and cramp, baiting the hook.

Nightcrawlers the color of rained-on turnips,  
violet as evening sky beneath their dirt skin,  
trying to pump and muscle whatever heart they had  
away from the silver barb threading their gut.

The wind was up, and we dropped our baits,  
built a stick fire in the sage  
to huddle and keep warm, not noticing  
the faint spark that spilled over the levee, wild,  
flaming like a sheep's yellow eye,  
or a talon we never saw.

I know she must have loved once.  
We had a motorbike in the carport,  
dying beside my father's black Mercury, enamel tank  
dovetailed between her thighs,  
pale as the underbelly  
of a drugged fish.

A bullet weight, one-ounce lead, sunk  
deep in a river you are afraid to swim.

I know they must have rode together,  
denim thighs straddling vinyl,  
from the dust that rose and welted,  
gas-powered loins flying the dusk  
of wilting honeysuckle.

But we were young and the wind was up  
on the frozen pond we had to burst through

to drop our chicken hearts, marinated livers  
on a hook-point, wait our turn,  
as fire approached. Soon.  
One. Two. Three.  
Pull. Set. Heave.

## Hailstorm

I.

The sky yellowed, we bowed  
 our heads from the bluff.  
 Ten meters swift the river dark, rising  
 one world above the next. Our kneecaps  
 shelled mussel. The sky broke and  
 vanished in the chemical heat  
 of pine pitch, falling  
 through the dark, falling.

Elisha was fourteen,  
 her voice an orchid  
 in the snow, opening itself  
 naked in blinding sun.

The hawk shrieked  
 shadow across the pine.  
 I slipped forth, let go gravity—  
 weightless three seconds  
 you are neither one hell  
 or the other, yours or hers,  
 light or shadow. Newton's first  
 flies out your stomach  
 on page forty-seven.

Never returns, ever. No matter  
 how deep you swim, paddling  
 blind in the river silt.

II.

Camping Tsalagi bluff  
 we skewered a speckled quail  
 through its wishbone,  
 like the rumors of a blue-eyed virgin  
 vanishing in the fogged  
 glass of a white van.

Devil dusting the taillights  
 because of time.

There was never enough.

## III.

When Bobby Long pitched  
his knuckleball .22 hollowpoints  
into the flamed heart of Alabama stars—  
hot long July dark, I knew  
he would die by gunfire,  
the winter before  
his voice cracked, as ours,  
small round stones, dropped  
down the wells  
we would drown in.

Looking out across the pine  
from that Olympic height,  
where witches sail the bluffs  
and black creeks pour lead  
into Union boys' ears  
by midnight we return  
to the shadow kingdom.

No runaway slaves, no satanic cults,  
not in the Free State of Winston,  
which could never decide  
on blue or gray coats, April  
snow or jaundiced, tornadic  
hail blossoms.

## Asphalt

The sun browned muscle of her thigh leapt  
 into my body like a water bead in the dust.  
 Blue-topping Highway 61, my shirt smelled  
 of tar. I wanted to wash my history in the mint  
 border of antebellum brick, cleanse myself  
 in the long deep stream of her old money

## I remember

Her mother came in the parlor, icing lily fingers  
 over the keys of a baby grand, metronome clicking  
 time like a worm in the stars. Bouquets of yellow rose,  
 a vase of rain, I could smell the Universe. Her daughter  
 breathing gulf breeze through the naked window of night.  
 Hair tangled predawn pink, as though a hundred years passed  
 from her hips to mine. We tried to lie. The metronome  
 clicking time. Zebra keys. Manicured nails. Ivory bones,  
 ebony elegance burned off the hills my grandfather shared.

I ran to her nights in the dark, stood outside  
 her bedroom, tapping the glass, hard enough  
 to wake her, but it was her father who woke  
 to chase me off the hill with a shovel, because  
 my hands  
     were more calloused than his.

Other nights the curtain flung back her nude and the  
 lace world I wanted to live in, jasmine of her pillow, soft  
 shape where her head had slept, tangled curls of papaya,  
 cedar, oranges. Fresh scallops from the sea. Clean silver.  
 Blue china I wanted to lick, smash against the hard black sun.  
 I stood outside the pane, caulk seal between warm and dark.  
 She ran to hole seven in a gown of willow, weeping her pink  
 blooms on a cool flat sod where dawn burned back the moon,  
 and the spell evaporated in the dry heat of another day I was  
 back in, on the crew, pounding hubs into clay. New lanes.

    Latest version of the road before. Steamroller  
     smoothing it out, over the hill, out of sight.

Song of the Mississippi  
*for shares*  
*and for debts*

You've painted your lashes  
 purple smoke  
     a chemical experiment  
 to knife a long drought and detonate  
 sins that never belonged to you.

I know your heart

wore  
 threadbare  
 on us—

your rare loam,  
 your summer elixir,  
 your wine brazier  
 pinched in levees and locks  
 so terrified of altitude  
 and the fingerless shadow  
     of cloud  
 you noose snake-gummed banks  
 oily buckets dredged straight  
 scarping inward and inward  
 afraid of the sky  
 wild geese carry floods down to the sea  
     to die.

No nightlight could glow opiate enough  
 to burn down your lonely city on the bluff;  
 no tap dancing for nickels,  
 no rattlesnake spurs nor switchblade teddy,  
 no cackling band of lady-sawing gorillas,  
 no electric flakes of nuclear winter,  
 only the mad arms  
 of a world sleeping off its sentence,  
 poised as scree  
     turning  
 fractal by fractal  
 to salt.

You must have assassinated  
     enough lies  
 and mosquitoes

to cleave an oxbow  
 with the pyramid of Memphis  
 hoping we could love you more.  
 It was a long way home  
 from your mansion in the sky.

Cane and snakes lie down to die  
 each autumn  
 you bury another soldier.

Queen of mounds,  
 Chucalissa,  
 rain leaf clay  
 root rock blood  
 rattle your chains to the sea—

Mud woman, emerge, bear our nation  
 of bad dreams to the sea, dream  
 your sleep of bombs and detonations:  
*A solitary acorn sank the Atlantic;*  
*you once loved the smell of rain in my hair—*  
 Lift your mane, dark woman, reveal your aboriginal  
 throat  
 gurgling  
 brass  
 sludge  
 murk  
 moon.

Only the horses can hear you now  
 only the blue horses lonely and lost  
 in their eternal night of dreams.

You are old  
 you are ours  
 you are time  
 plumbing the cosmos  
 for a straight razor.

Earth Day at the Races

We had good seats,  
Jameson with a splash  
of water on the rocks.

“I never finish  
the books I read,  
Charlie,” she said.

There aren't any more horses  
to run, only tracks  
in the sand  
where  
the saddle used to be.

I'd like to ride a bison  
but they're all dead  
except for the parks.

“Somebody ought to  
just shoot us, Charlie,  
before we cross  
the finish line  
and waste  
a perfectly good ribbon.”

## Anchor

The arms you believed yours  
were born as your mother kicked  
toes, a head, into bloom. She's  
walked with you inside her inside  
the earth a gown of forests that  
pulsed night breeze into daylight.

You learn to speak a fatalist's  
separation. Fight many lifetimes  
back to embryonic seas you floated  
before you awoke, remembered,  
believed you were not her.

Time passes. You don't know yet  
its ticking exists only in the invention  
of mechanical clocks replicating  
a vast spiraling arc better measured  
by two beating hearts.

What more could you believe? So far  
out on the dark wing of a capillary brain  
trying to calculate your way back through  
mathematical fire to safety?

Every direction you look  
the harbor eludes you—  
a wave inside the ocean  
that washed you here  
is the only shore there  
is, or ever could be.

Crow Circling Bones  
Downstream

The prophet struts on two twigs  
gold and a tassel of cloud, crooning  
ore from a gullet, harvesting bones.

In winter he runs trotlines, reeling pike  
through portals in the ice, holds trials  
in altars of stone, lays wait in the ravine  
to crucify an owl, guarding his temple  
with a scalped owlet on a stick.

I see him and know he is un-fooled  
by the straw likeness we erect of ourselves,  
our prosthetic arms akimbo in prairie sun,  
littering our small lives with artifacts  
washed back to the rain and the sea.

He circles high over the bleached bones  
of some animal, black river mud silting  
the brainpan, so many fractals, so much  
salt, sculpting resistance and non-resistance  
toward one body, one sight.

## Arrivals and Departures

Disemboweled below  
a guardrail off I-40, the dead sow bear  
stiffens like a bloated human cadaver,  
caught in the act, trying to circus hop  
four new lanes of westbound motorcade,  
caravan of wheels thundering toward the sun—  
high white diamond of the West—  
blistering rawhide into cellophane.

The humanlike forepaws  
still bend at the elbow,  
locked in a thwarted  
motion, as if reaching  
to waltz on hind legs.

Cargo byways. Incessant stream  
of semis loaded with lettuce and potatoes,  
the "Beautify America" poppies  
wavering rich-red in the wake.  
Dance, they seem to say,  
*faster, faster.*

## Top Kill

We stood offshore  
 holding a single breath  
 a hundred miles of shoreline  
 skimmed off the top  
 in a shrimping net

a blue emergency  
 blinking  
 out on the dark wide

curvature  
 beyond

the cue-cards  
 the teleprompters  
 we knew

something had been eclipsed entire  
 moons jerked under, capsized.

It occurred to me  
 even wind even the dead  
 require a certain gravity  
 a certain slant of light.

To the coastguard  
 we must have looked like catfish  
 beached way down on the levee

winking half alive  
 out of a dead dust.

I can still feel the concussion  
 smooth taut holy in its way.

Petrol jellied by-product  
 turtles without shells  
 frogs without eyelids.

*What happened to all the little animals? she said.  
 Will Jesus come clean up the mess? Will he daddy?  
 Laura, baby, Moses didn't part the Red Sea  
 with a shrimp net and a stale beignet.  
 Daddy, is it just for summer, Daddy?*

I Am Her Voice  
Echoing off the Walls  
of God

Night or day  
no matter

Crabapple blossoms  
snowmelt into rivers

She is naked earth  
spinning all directions

breath dreaming blood  
through one heart pumping

spirit back through stars  
in ceaseless cohabitation

Two bodies enter  
cosmic mind's  
pure sky bliss

Perfect yin-yang unity  
this mind-body-spirit  
unfolding

within without

this leaf  
breath could not  
form clouds

could not bloom  
red salmon dusk

Moon dance is sun dance  
unconditional eternal

Yielding one true path  
she carries our child

from before time

## The Unearthed

In the sharp bend of a  
sand bar, washed aground  
in the last good flood, a child  
unearthed a skull and wondered  
about comings and goings,  
the contour of bone.

The child noted how the sun had burned  
the marrow into chalk much like the sand  
on which its skull had come to rest. The child  
fingered the sockets and the smooth place where  
the mechanics had come unhinged, lower mandible  
no longer bound in sinew and in blood.

Later, after stars,  
the child returns  
to shovel with cupped hands  
a small pocket in the sand,  
and slides his discovery  
gently out of sight.