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## Starlight Drive

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*Western Michigan University*

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STARLIGHT DRIVE

by

William R. Reynolds Jr.

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
June 2005

## STARLIGHT DRIVE

William R. Reynolds Jr., Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2005

*Starlight Drive* is a book-length manuscript of poems that reflects my abiding interest in how poetry can use the fiction writer's tools, such as characterization and setting, without sacrificing the beauty of the lyric. Like Rodney Jones, I write about my north Alabama childhood filtered through the lens of my adult life here in the Midwest. My field of perception does not begin in a cotton field like Jones', but on a cul-de-sac in a middle-class neighborhood of Huntsville, where my father was an engineer for NASA. The poems in my manuscript show my protagonist moving through a landscape peopled by sometimes grotesque, sometimes hypocritical, sometimes tragic characters who are mostly middle-class, white, and "educated." I have tried to spin out of many life-studies the core narratives of a life, the ones that show not only bewilderment and a hunger for the unnamable, but swift glimpses of grace.

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2005

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## INTRODUCTION

“Memory is recovery”—Stanley Plumly

“Memory is genius”—Robert Lowell, reported by Helen Vendler

I remember sitting in my first poetry seminar as a graduate student at Mississippi State University back in 1995, a course that I was taking with Richard Lyons, who turned out, after much cajoling on his part, to be my first writing teacher. I was looking out the open window of the second floor of Lee Hall, seeing the distant lights from the quad, the moths like flakes of sawdust rising toward the light, hearing the clank of the flagpole and the low rumble of thunder. Already it was spring, even in early March, the wind outside gusting so the tall windows that Rich had opened earlier the wind now slammed shut. The book in my hands was Charles Wright’s *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*. The poem in front of me was “Self-Portrait,” the very first one. I had no idea what this poem was “about,” or what it “meant,” nor did I have any inkling as to why it, and many of his poems, showed Wright working within a long tradition of meditative poetry, dating even as far back as John Donne’s “Prayer (III)” or George Herbert’s “The Collar,” poems which that night we were reading alongside some of Wright’s. Influence, tradition, the personal and the impersonal: I was a long way from the kind of conversation that can arise out of poems. The knowledge and experience necessary to participate in a sophisticated conversation about poetry were several years away, but that night I fell for Wright’s music. Lucky for me, a city and state later and I would begin to

recognize how he created his signature music, all those phrases clotted with spondees and trochees, all those accordion-like lines with their odd number of syllables (no doubt, an instance of a poet's conscious decision to resist the traditional baseline of the iambic pentameter and thereby create his own "sound"). Although that night I was charmed by the poem's sounds, today I also admire the subtle manner in which dramatic tension arises from evocation of place in Wright's apocalyptic pastorals. Wright's scene dramatizes his musings:

Someday they'll find me out, and my lavish hands,  
 Full moon at my back, fog groping the gone horizon, the edge  
 Of the continent scored in yellow, expectant lights,  
 White shoulders of surf, a wolf-colored sand,  
 The ashes and bits of char that'll clear my name. (11)

I like how he plays the images against one another. "White shoulders of surf" is a phrase that is immediately undercut by its partner, regret and longing here suited up and disguised inside the image of the "wolf-colored sand." The opening clause plays with the colloquial but Wright unsettles the thought with the phrase "lavish hands." Even one line of the poem gives a sense of Wright's baroque style, the way he, for instance, embroideries like sounds into a pattern that create shifts in tone. In the second line, the long o sound makes an appearance in the picturesque "full moon" but its subsequent reincarnation in the phrase "fog groping the gone horizon" signals a sudden change of heart. There's an interplay here between the pastoral and the elegy and between landscapes sponsored by the English Romantics and then the Modernists, the full moon of Coleridge's "Frost At Midnight" and the fog of *The Waste Land*, echoes, reminders, allusions that can jumpstart poems. In the second stanza, the pattern is much

the same, ironic acceptance and passive relaxation, as if the poet were sitting in a hammock thinking up a song while he looks out into his backyard. Whereas the opening stanza's one sentence creates shifts in tone from clause to clause, the second stanza begins with a three-sentence idyll that is abruptly unsettled by a sentence whose corresponding image in the natural world would be that of the undertow:

Till then I'll hum to myself and settle the whereabouts.  
 Jade plant and oleander float in a shine.  
 The leaves on the pepper tree turn green.  
 My features are sketched in black ink in a slow drag through the sky  
 Waiting to be filled in.

His features won't be filled in until he's dead, when he becomes a part of the landscape, that final and permanent merging with the natural world.

Of course, I had read already that Wright was born in 1935 in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee in 1935, and already that fact mesmerized me and made me want to make a bundle out of the coincidence that I was conceived at Pickwick Dam in the July heat of 1971. There's an old photograph of that trip that ever so often I search out and gaze at when I'm visiting my parents: my father, Ray-ban aviator glasses and long sideburns, the red hair, which had caused family and friends so long ago to nickname him "Red," beginning that slow fade into a burnished copper of a penny showing my sister how to bait the hook or cast the rod and reel. In the snapshot he looks animated, excited, his body showing her how to reel in a catch. Or have I misremembered? Do I have in mind a Polaroid snapshot of my father instructing, no, not even doing that, but just merely looking on, grinning, my brother shining in our father's eyes. I cannot exactly say that my sister is nowhere to be found, it just feels that way. She's there, I know, kneeling in

the sand, the clear lake water before her. She's not on the other side of the bank, but in the foreground, the picnic tables, the swing set, and my father blurred behind her. Her back is to the camera: no doubts, no doubt, she's going to dive in.

That night in the classroom, all I could do was scribble a few words into the margins: in the upper-right-hand-corner, I wrote "edges and silos." And as if to emphasize my own confusion at the intoxicant sounds of the second line, I wrote "silos and horns of the hound." Later, I would come to know this poem so well that I would memorize it and even be able to stand up at my sister's graveside service and say the last stanza of this poem just before we placed our red roses on her casket:

Hand that lifted me once, lift me again,  
Sort me and flesh me out, fix my eyes.  
From the mulch and the undergrowth, protect me and pass me on.  
From my own words and my certainties,  
From the rose and the easy cheek, deliver me, pass me on. (11)

The liturgical power of this stanza, the final directives to the dead ("protect me and pass me on"; "deliver me, pass me on") that echo the New Testament, the anapestic feet that slow the rhythms down to a stately pace, the identifying marks of this passage's power come back around to the poet's life, the care and attention he gives to each line he writes down.

Even back in my first year of graduate school when I didn't have the language to talk about poems as made objects, I was drawn to poems like James Wright's "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio" because its structure brings the speaker back around to the isolated and isolating self. In short, I began to see that the beauty of the poem was in the way Wright juxtaposed the swimming pool with the hole of a grave.

When those Ohioans died it came at a cost for the poor still living:

I had seen by that time two or three  
Holes in the ground,  
And you know what they were.

But this one was not the usual, cheap  
Economics, it was not the solitary  
Scar on a poor man's face, that respectable  
Hole in the ground you used to be able to buy  
After you died for seventy-five dollars and  
Your wages tached for six months by the Heslop  
Brothers.

Brothers, dear God.

In just two words, “Heslop Brothers,” Wright summons a lifetime of deadly small-town economics. Often his speaker inhabits the voice of the voiceless: the fallen, the poor, the lonely. The adult speaker remembers the little girl (yet another apparition of Jenny, the muse that appears in other poems of his) telling his child self to “Take care now, / Be patient / and live.” Yet the adult speaker’s response is a shuddering admission: “I have loved you all this time, / And didn’t even know / I am alive.” It is not only the past, but this present, his own time, he has kept from himself.

In “Speak” he inhabits the voice of a man who feels guilty over his own good fortune, but the phrasing, especially in line two, is both flat and poetic as he turns the diction to his own purposes:

I have gone forward with  
Some, a few lonely some.  
They have fallen to death.  
I die with them.  
Lord, I have loved Thy cursed,  
The beauty of Thy house:  
Come down. Come down. Why dost  
Thou hide thy face? (158)

These lines range from two to three feet of mostly trochees (“Some, a”; “Lord, I”) and

here and there lightly stressed iambs whose first syllable almost has as much stress as the accented syllable (“I die”; “Thou hide”). The most emphatic statements are found in the lines with the shortest feet, the bluntness of the fourth line’s “I die with them” and later in the final undying question (“Why dost / Thou hide thy face?”) as it spills over into the last line. The short lines mirror the flatness the speaker is after. They slow us down as much as the short sentences scattered throughout. This final stanza contains slant rhymes that a casual reading misses: with/death, some/them, house/face. The face of God is as faceless as the face of Jenny. Wright blurs the two: they are one and the same. Together they are his mixed feelings about the bedeviled and cursed, Liston drunk in Lewiston, Maine, Ernie Doty drunk in hell again, and Jenny who left her new baby in a bus station can and “sprightly danced away.” The face of God and Jenny are the poet’s unflagging memory, the will of the poet rejecting the puritanical spirit that would shove Jenny down into hell.

Wright’s poems, no doubt, influenced the poetry of Rodney Jones, whose poems critique the religious hypocrisy of his native Alabama. Jones is one of many Southern poets considered a “narrative” poet, yet he achieves surreal effects by centering a poem on two seemingly disparate narratives that dovetail through a rhetorical structure that contains but does not seek to reconcile them, as in “The Privilege,” “Remembering Fire,” and “Sweep.” Jones writes about his north Alabama childhood through the lens of someone who now lives in southern Illinois. Like Jones, I write about my north Alabama childhood from here in the Midwest. My field of perception does not begin in a cotton field like Jones’, but on a cul-de-sac in a middle-class

neighborhood of Huntsville, where my father was an engineer for NASA. Also, like Jones, I have tried to spin out of many life studies the core narratives of a life, the ones that show not only bewilderment and a hunger for the unnamable, but swift glimpses of grace. What sets his best poems apart from that of narrative poets is not only his poem's muscular style and ghost of blank verse but also the fact that Jones understands that a narrative poem is as good as it is dramatic. His poem "Sweep," from his second book *The Unborn*, (1985) is another poem I read that first year of graduate school and that became for me a kind of touchstone in my writing life. "Sweep" describes an estranged homecoming for the speaker who returns to the small Alabama town where he grew up. For the speaker, the place is not so much "backwards" as limited, slow, provincial, and dying, a metaphorical grave of a town, "a green valley of herbicides and chemical factories" where the talk is more often than not of football, the weather, and the obituary pages of the local newspaper. The speaker tells us he has been home for three days "listening to an obituary" and that "the names of relatives met once, / of men from the plant where he works / click like distant locks on my father's lips" (19). Slowly the speaker's words move him *backwards* in time. As the Garnett brothers, who run the Shell station, fix his ruptured heater hoses, and his father and Mike Garnett "trade the names of the dead," the speaker returns to a distant episode in a football game when he was a defensive back and watched, almost like the hopeless bystander he is in the present, a humiliating play unfold:

But mostly it's the wait, one wait after another,  
and I'm dropping back deep in the secondary  
under the chill and pipe smoke of a canceled October  
while the sweep rolls toward me from the line of scrimmage,

and Myles Hammond, who will think too slowly  
 and turn his air-force jet into the Arizona desert,  
 and Don Appleton, who will drive out on a country road  
 for a shotgun in his mouth, are cut down,  
 and I'm shifting on the balls of my feet,  
 bobbing and saving one nearly hopeless feint,  
 one last plunge for the blockers  
 and the ball carrier who follows the sweep,  
 and it comes, and comes on.

This befuddling play becomes an apocalyptic sweep of death. By shifting into the present, the speaker is both absolutely there on the football field and not there. It is a scene he inhabits from the parking lot of the Shell station. Myles Hammond, “the quick tackle on the football team,” thinks too slowly and crashes his air-force jet into the Arizona desert, but Don Appleton, “the slow, redheaded one,” exceeds the expectations of his slow-footed and glory-less play on the football field by becoming an item in the obituary page, the teammate who “drove out for a shotgun in the mouth.” Such tough-minded phrasing moves us far from sentimentality, but the losers aren't just those football players on defense. The speaker remembers saving the “one nearly hopeless feint” that puts the ball carrier safe in the end zone. The speaker writes on the past an obituary that includes the so-called winning football team. The sweep becomes the speaker's cry against small communities who, every autumn, live vicariously through their athletes, cheering them on, even as their rural valleys slowly die off.

Once I arrived in Michigan to start graduate school, I found myself working two summers for Delhi Township, which is south of East Lansing where my girlfriend and I were living at the time. Delhi is a small town, and within minutes you could end up in what turned out to be a narrow corridor of cornfields and pasture cut off on the one side by I-94 and on the other by U.S. Highway 127. Amid all this rural plenitude was the

wastewater treatment plant, where I spent most of my time those two summers mowing grass. My boss was a man named John Fairbank, who like me wasn't originally from Michigan but grew up on a farm in New Hampshire. Now I realize my time with John turned out to be a kind of apprenticeship. Because there was more than enough time in a forty-hour work week to mow the sites we were responsible for, we ended up spending our spare time working on projects John invented for us. We repaired most of the almost two hundred sandstone markers at the Pioneer Cemetery, long "inactive," some of which dated as back as far as 1853. But a lot of our projects were at the water treatment plant, where John had worked for sixteen years until the township reassigned him after he was diagnosed with leukemia. Most days in the stillborn heat and windless days of summer a foul odor overran the plant, until I slowly learned to not breathe through my nose. Despite our efforts, I sensed enough junk ended up at the plant that couldn't be transformed: weed whacking around the holding ponds, I saw the stringy release of tampons, the blunt spud of a condom washed up on those huge white rocks.

Our desire for beauty in the face of such ugliness isn't hard to understand: it sprang out of our desire for a homemade eternity, even as the black rout of water rushed through the concrete maze of channels. I remember we bought some ivy at Wal-Mart and planted it at the foot of the north-facing wall of the clarifier. We retied the trumpet vine to the chain-link fence around the front entrance of the plant, spare blue rags the color of hospital gowns. Everywhere around us were hundreds of bluebird boxes that, several years before I showed up, John had made himself out in his barn in the short afternoons of winter before he clocked in for the second shift. Now the foursquare

boxes of cedar wood were evenly spaced out and stapled to those miles of chain-link fence that surrounded the treatment plant. The boxes didn't attract bluebirds as John had hoped, but squadrons of barn swallows that dive-bombed our mowers as the chutes spit out the grasshopper, the flea, the gnat, the whatever. We also made weekly, sometimes daily, runs to the Pioneer Cemetery, long neglected and subject to vandalism, all the burial records burned in a fire way back. Our efforts there were efforts of recovery. Besides mowing and then trimming around each headstone, we stood all the gravestone markers back up. We picked up huge, broken pieces of sandstone and hauled them to the back of the pickup truck and carried them away, like the injured, to the maintenance building where John would glue them back together with epoxy. We weeded the groundcover under a stand of trees so its waxy leaves and violet blossoms would shine once more. Our results were mixed. The epoxy ran down many of the stones he repaired, obscuring names and dates, even the pencil mark that turned out to be a stonecutter's center. The finishing touch to all our work was my transcription project. In a few months John was going to retire and he and his wife, who had already sold their ranch-style house and their Plymouth Voyager, were going to spend their time on the road, living full-time in an RV. My last weeks there I transcribed all the gravestones. Each morning, John would drop me off and I'd find myself alone in this small graveyard. Below the concrete embankment, morning traffic whooshed by on Cedar St. Through the trees I saw the same green house, the same child's bike turned over all winter and now all summer. Before I got started, I always seemed to find myself sitting under the oak tree that appears to stand in so many graveyards, but I experienced

it as living, as breathing, not an entity, but a being, the boss of the place, sort of. Mostly I read from whatever book of poems I had brought. I wasn't bored with my transcription project, but it was as if by stealing fifteen minutes here and there I thought I could stretch my project out until it was time to return for the fall semester and teaching. All those early mornings I'd kneel in the grass and find the light jumping from stone to stone, a flash of intense bright light, then nothing. Then began the hard work of making out each worn letter and number, each obscured name smoothed by time and weather. All those makeshift rows of sandstone like scattered teeth, my kneeling, my finger on the smooth white stone, the light, the dark, I knew I had a poem to write, but I hadn't learned that writing entails waiting. I hadn't yet learned about *that*.

I don't know when I started bringing books of poetry to work, but John didn't seem to mind or care that I did this. Toward the end of my last summer, he'd even ask me to read from them as we drove around checking our sites. I remember he got a kick out of Gerald Stern's travel poems like "Baja," in the way that I was drawn to the way his poems are attempts to recover certain fragments of the speaker's buried past. I was still several years and a death away from writing any poem that would appear in this dissertation, but it wasn't for my lack of effort or desire. Those summers were the summers I read Larkin, Walcott, Levine, Ashbery: the list goes on and on. But they were also the summers I brought my Peterman *Field Guide* to work and looked up the name of the dull purplish flowers that appeared to sprout from inside the cracked curbs. The *Field Guide* told me this wildflower was common chicory or blue sailors, and for me that nickname now defines John and me with our fading blue work truck with its

floorboards rusted through, John's failing health, and my befogged dreaminess. This was the summer I carried a grass-stained, dirt-smudged book with me onto the mower and read from it when I took my breaks: behind the maintenance garage under a scraggly pine that was a start on a windbreak, or back behind the holding ponds in the wood-land under story where the chain-link fence was all around me but invisible. Often over the powerhouse noise of my mower, I'd shout the lines that I'd learned by heart as my mower cut each ghost swath. It wasn't arrow straight like John's but zigzagged like lightning across the mown field.

Reading Stern's "Vivaldi Years" now captures for me those two summers when I gave myself "up to poetry" at the age of twenty-five. But the poem, more importantly, shows that the speaker's "crazy youth" was a rite of passage, a wild tutelage common to many artists:

I lay forever, didn't I, behind those old windows,  
 listening to Bach and resurrecting my life.  
 I slept sometimes for thirty or forty minutes  
 while the violins shrieked and the cellos trembled.  
 It was a crazy youth, wasn't it, letting  
 my mind soar like that, giving myself  
 up to poetry the way I did.  
 It was a little like Goethe's, wasn't it,  
 a little like Eugene O'Neill's, one joyous  
 sadness after another. That was the everlasting  
 life, wasn't it. The true world without end. (134)

I admire Stern's associative way of writing, the way his poems often begin with an image that he moves along with and allows to take him where it will. The initial parallelism ("I lay forever"; "I slept sometimes for thirty or forty minutes") creates a kind of stasis. Ironically, the repetition of the expletive construction "it was" leads to the poem's soaring final thought, while the active voice describes his younger self at his most seemingly passive. Paradoxically, it is while he appears to "lay forever" that the

speaker is resurrecting his life, whether he knew it or not.

It was after my sister's death in the spring of 2000 that I wrote, over the next several years, most of the poems that appear in this dissertation. I feel some need to emphasize here what Frank Bidart has pointed out already about Lowell's autobiographical poems: namely, that in them we are not getting a report on Lowell's life but an "illusion of reality," not a recording, but a making ("On Confessional Poetry" 1001). Reading Lowell's poetry has taught me that his candor is "an illusion of candor created by art" (997). I hope my poems do some of the same work. Reading Lowell again, especially the hundreds of unrhymed sonnets from *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*, I felt a deep kinship with his blood-on-the-hands images, with how his speakers always appear complicit in the world of his autobiographical poems, and with the gulf that always appears in them between the adult speaker and the child self:

Two grades above me, though two inches shorter,  
 Leon Straus, a sixth grade fullback, his reindeer shirt—  
 passion put a motor in my heart.  
 I pretended he lived in the house across the street.  
 In first love a choice is seldom and blinding:  
 acres of whitecaps strew that muddy swell,  
 old crap and white plastic jugs lodge on shore.  
 Later, we learn better places to cast  
 our saffron sperm, and grasp what wisdom fears,  
 breasts stacked like hawk nests in her boy friend's shirt,  
 things a deft hand tips on its back with a stick. . .  
 Is it refusal of error breaks our life:  
 the supreme artist, Flaubert, was a boy before  
 the mania for phrases enlarged his heart. (*Collected Poems*, 501)

The opening—the subtle irony that centers on Leon Straus' apparent lack of stature, (and echoes too the adult speaker's sense of diminished grandeur) even the reindeer shirt, that almost banal detail—has but one aim: to bring the speaker back around to how he really feels ("passion put a motor in my heart"). I like how "shirt" and "heart" rhyme and how both of these words appear again later in this poem's split-narratives.

The boy's blinding crush reappears in the diminished wisdom of the adult that includes his perception of the girl's breasts "stacked like hawks nests in her shirt." Yet at the end of the first sentence and then in the last line of the poem, he has given the heart literally the last word twice. Fittingly the final line connects the act of making to growth, while not betraying the blind mania that can infest any obsessed artist.

In his essay "Narrative Values, Lyric Imperatives," Stanley Plumly argues that "the most effective poets understand that their art depends on their access to their original narratives, those life studies that, involuntarily, inchoately, dream their way back to us" (*Argument and Song* 293). Besides the craft that makes their poems something greater and more than non-fiction, what drew me to poets like Gerald Stern and Robert Lowell were those original narratives that they found themselves returning to again and again. If, during my first years of graduate school, I thought writing poetry was going to be an act of emotional recovery, then now I think I don't want recovery. Instead, I want to come back again and again to those sources of great feeling. What memory allows me to discover isn't necessarily what I thought I would find. I want language to find me out, but I also want to find it out, the bits and pieces, the barely remembered and source fragment hardly touched on. Who I was, who my sister was. These past few months, I've kept coming back to the image of a boy trailing his sister from his bedroom to hers and back again, her too-small bed just moved from her bedroom to his, the light on the gauze curtains, the light like a screen against the footboard. She's being patient, almost motherly in the way a big sister can be with her kid brother. She's asking him to test the bed, to try it out and see if he doesn't like it. She's good at it, this helping him to feel better about having his own bed. It was hers, and now it is his. That's it, that's all I've got to go on. She's there, then she's not there, but I'm alright, faint thump thump from her record player, Pink Floyd's *The Wall* or something by The Cars. Her bedroom door is closed, as it should be, as it should be.

I.

## Cappuccino &amp; Christ

is held in the sparkling gym, guitar plugged into amp,  
 slick band stage and hoopla instead of the pulpit's  
 obsolete dark skin, and high above no stained glass

electrifying the pierced Christ Cross but walking track  
 and elder hawk camcording the chirpy guitar-led  
 version of the Lord's prayer and this can't-miss feeling

at half court, free throw line, or where I am at, late, mute  
 heckler, behind the players' bench, if it were here,  
 of the ridiculous. Somehow I miss all that rigid,

straight-back stuff the pews afforded, the drifting off,  
 the gruff message in one ear and out the other,  
 until what took hold was that rougher silence,

what this closing to the tune of *Yesterday* can't mean,  
 an eternity of wistfulness that matches this baby blue paneling  
 that surrounds the glass backboards and the bleachers.

For some reason, I keep thinking about the old sanctuary—  
 before the tornado did a million numbers on it—  
 when my mother let me sit in the back with the ushers

that one Sunday when I decided to heave the oak doors  
 and saw Ralph Winton, like a gangly second-string center,  
 crying against the great wall of our Lord Christ,

my father's arm around him as the choir sang the Offering—  
 the Wintons, who year in, year out we vacationed with,  
 Hilton Head, Seaside, Destin, those mythic names

of healing—their marriage ended, my eye doctor cuckolded.  
 All through the sermon I threw rocks at the sparrows  
 while they smoked and talked until their talking

talked them back down to a god of small things.

## Starlight Drive

i.

When she was fifteen, my sister broke her neck.  
 She was gone all night, out of the juvie  
 only a few days before, up on Monte Sano  
 watching the sun come up with some boy.

She was hugging herself, quiet, wounded  
 from god knows what and dragging on her last cigarette.  
 She was plain high and loving it, the way  
 they'd keep talking about climbing the WAFF tower

together as plane lights disappeared through fog  
 and mountain headed north or south toward Nashville  
 or Atlanta. Rhea. I don't think my parents thought  
 of her as rising like a green shoot from this earth.

Rhea, the spelling borrowed from the middle name  
 of a fraternity brother of our father's. Rhea,  
 who thought sacrifice became her and fed Kronus  
 stone loaves so that Zeus might live and overthrow

his father who, pawn to some greater god's game,  
 overthrew Uranus. And yet from where she tests  
 the cliff's edge, from where she will jump, black out,  
 or slip, Rhea stands to live perfectly upright

another twenty-odd years with her story's violent luck:  
 the rock seventeen feet below she will hit face first,  
 the terrible going on of the first groans  
 like a prayer sent up from down the road

where the sunrise service has gotten started,  
 where a phone is surely at, where no one knows  
 to listen to the blood swallow and spit,  
 to feel the sun lightly, lightly, rise up her face.

ii.

The story goes my father was arrested, drunk, with her  
in the car outside of his hometown which was Corinth.

I believe she was eight. That's in some record somewhere.  
The story goes he'd take her to some bar,

some dive, say the 19<sup>th</sup> Hole and Lounge, and leave  
her with the light on in the car or with a little flash

and glare of headlights that graze face, arms and hair  
as she counts seven or eight pull in, pull out,

and doors yawn open and bright moths flash  
and pop in a streetlight's upside-down sauté pan.

The story goes and goes—takes up a life not my own—  
but did he do worse? Would he once they got home

from some bar, some dive, once he had blacked out  
and came vaguely to, did he crawl into bed with her,

the nightlight—the one that was later given to me,  
the one with the shepherd watching over the sheep—

eclipsed by his hand or by hers, did he? Did he  
mistake her for someone or something else?

That's what Rhea, high on every pill she could get,  
spit out two days before she died in jail—

there on some overpass where all the tires and gaps  
thumped like ultrasound, like the heartbeat pounding

inside the womb, that fast, and I yelled and yelled  
as I drove her to her probation officer in Nashville.

The next day I left without so much as a word,  
and slowly began to write of you this business.

iii.

(Corrections Corporation of America: Nashville, 2000)

The sky blue trace of a cleared billboard at the Harding Place Exit.  
 The walk up filled with the small newspaper print of embarrassment.  
 The ad in the lobby that said *photos with loved ones \$5*.  
 This was Sunday. This was the dim inspection cell for visitors.

It blew us away, the metal curtain of the electric door  
 that could shatter you like a vase, opening to barred windows,  
 a horizon of barbwire, the camera's beacon flash—*ready,*  
*ready, ready*—and my sister over there with napkins,

trying to make things look more certain and better.  
 Each dimple on the napkins was an amphitheater.  
 Each page kept thousands of craters. Open, shut,  
 open, shut. We couldn't bring the photo album either.

Open the book. See Rhea holding up her college diploma.  
 See us gathered around all smiles. See her pull from her purse  
 one gold token—sixty days sober!—see heads, the embossed S  
 like penny pitiful Lincoln's head, see tails, the bend

in the road of the six, zero's infinite circle back.  
 See her with clipboard in hand standing behind the bar,  
 see her breeze by with a stack of greasy plates,  
 making it back with double shifts and bankruptcy payments,

outside Day-Glo surveyor stakes flapping in the bulldozed median.  
 In most of her photographs, there is this movie star stance,  
 this devilish grin she hides behind. Why this is the case  
 and why the fluorescent lights stuttered—no answers

there in the lifelines of my hands. Open the book.  
 See us? I am folded leaf. Rhea is on the tip-top of the tree  
 we will cut down when there is time and money.  
 I am understudy. She is look out. *That's D. Yeah her,*

a woman who had found empty chairs all around her  
 because whoever she thought was coming hadn't.  
*Here Rhea is hunting for mussels in the sand.*  
 Beyond her lie pure oily depths and maybe a pearl necklace

for her Sweet Sixteenth. Open, shut, open, shut.  
 The Book of Mirage. The Case of Finish Hard.  
 Now the female guard had begun circling the shortening  
 runway of Love Field. Were we going to stay?

Rhea, pronounce it straight as a nail, not with a lagging groan  
 so the name hangs in your throat every time you say it,  
 Rhea said that it didn't even really matter. In two months,  
 she was going to die in a jail like this one, the girl

the guards got to look after her down on the cement floor  
 screaming for her to wake up, dream another life  
 free of addiction, the guards there now,  
 the jail going to clean up its act now,

and if we win, trust funds for our children.  
*Here she is feeding me at the kitchen table.*  
*Here she is stashing for me my first six-pack.*  
*Here she is wiping my forehead with a damp cloth*

*as I puke my drunk-guts into the toilet—*  
 thank god each page of this life slowly whitens back,  
 she wants to know who gave us what at the wedding,  
 my voice drones on and on like a propeller,

I'm blank. Nothing can restore the breakage,  
 unless I have begun to chart the rest  
 of these black hours, their slowly narrowing isobars.  
 All Rhea is planning against the noise

is to play solitaire—sleep all day tomorrow—  
 and some boy, whose family has crowded around the camera,  
 has moved in close toward his mother's gray issue  
 telling her to smile with a smile that is too

short to tell us anything.

iv.

I saw through chain-link fence the curse of runway and distance.  
I saw a guy on a forklift. I saw another guy watching him.

I saw the plane jerk skyward heavily into splendor.  
Only then did I see it was a coffin

the airport guy was feeding into a hearse  
like you'd feed an ice-stunned oak into the chipper.

Only then did I catch the look of passing things.

v.

You have to want to help yourself. That was that.  
 I told her as much and left. For good she looks up  
 from looking up the number, I think, for unemployment.  
 The door is a form. I stand in for a lifetime of byes.  
 The door is far and she's on the bed, and turn  
 and go and check self, clear, clean, in the hall mirror.  
 Later she left, called a cab, cleared out  
 what she hadn't pawned all the other times.  
 What dad thought home from his walk was she left  
 the snack drawer open, unless he forgot himself,  
 which he hadn't. The rest he knew. Simply hungry

for more pills she hit the silver and china, our lineage.  
 He called mom's work twice, then called the police.  
 Some guy around Rhea's age drove him around to get  
 what they could spring. They found her holed up at the King's Inn.  
 The rest is clouds, fog, rain back to clouds again  
 from, hear this, two years too late.  
 The rest of us were frankly sick of her.  
*Druggie, junkie, addict, girl, whatever.*  
 My brother and I would have done the same thing too.  
 Let her sit in jail and hit rock bottom.  
 God damn, what happened was so long in coming,

I don't know how Rhea snuck those pills inside the jail.  
 She told mom in that place in too far for me  
 to go all the way back to find it, feet theirs,  
 voices theirs, words theirs, tones theirs, echoes theirs,  
 looking theirs, *that she'd be sorry in an hour*,  
 the iron clad, the shut tight, our words resist us,  
 all that booking and handcuffs, all that locking into place  
 at every twist, turn, step, step back and S-curve,  
 so late spring, the air like a weight  
 that wouldn't lift, like an andiron I thought

coming out the hospital that last time on Sunday afternoon,  
 crisp, clear, clean, scoured, blue, wide open,  
 and into the parking garage and into the scattered sounds  
 sparrows make, the rest of them still upstairs,  
 my dad on his cell making the arrangements,  
 the priest, who had done the final rites as a favor,  
 my mom, her sister, my brother, his wife,  
 all taking turns holding Rhea's hand, the officer  
 that had to be there until termination  
 gathering up his things at the nurses station,  
 the waiting room full again, already filled by others.



II.

## The Billy Poems

### 1. Easter Garden

It had been weeks since we had spoken.  
For once we didn't take ourselves miserably  
home where my sister began a long descent  
that simply ended on a jail floor and her burial  
on my birthday in Starkville the narcissus in full bloom.  
So I asked him and he said yeah  
and came but came late and forgot the hoe.  
That day it felt good to give up language,  
the whole world reduced to transparent  
gestures, to grunt, sigh, and pointing.  
Sunday of dirt beneath my nails.  
Sunday of blue on blue and discovery.  
I hardly know what it meant to my brother,  
but we fetched the wheelbarrow out of the truck  
and hauled some dirt up from the creek.  
We found an old loading pallet and broke  
the handle off a broom and made a trellis, sort of.  
Though I wasn't even going to be around  
to watch the cucumber vines rise up each plank,  
or sit down with him and eat our vegetables.  
Though you could see we were getting tired of each other,  
and already the first few hard stars were out,  
and the yellow flowers that make me sigh for summer,  
for I don't know what, were gone,  
leaving only the blood-spit azalea blossoms,  
leaving only my brother to say *ah lawd*—  
half sigh, half why—half nothing in particular.

## 2. Billy, 1979

I can barely see him anymore by the tall clock  
 and the armoire—obedient, blond, the sun-kissed  
 arms of a seven-and-a-half-year-old whose face  
 is locked in the mirror. I know he knows something;  
 the surety of mother's hand fine on his wrist  
 as they moved into the Spanos' kitchen;  
 or back home, the sharp lines and great sighs  
 his father made on the Bermuda grass.

And his nighttime theater? Except for the one  
 where the family station wagon rams  
 into the back end of a semi hauling wood  
 killing everyone inside Billy, no dream stayed that long—  
 which is to say each stayed no longer than it takes  
 for friends of friends to become the warmest.  
 In the blink of an eye, Jule and his mother fussing  
 over the food while the men swapped Ali jokes.

Jon Spano laughed at the short sting of his cleverness,  
 and his father's face loosened, as if he'd undone his tie,  
 at the commanding lilt of the first few punch lines,  
 and how the boy got to go upstairs is not miraculous.  
 He asked if he could, then was told to go up there  
 with Jud—Napoleon-short, short-tempered; and rotten,  
 "rotten to the core," a saying which when invoked on him  
 or his brother was always their mother's darkest judgment,

so up with Jud he went. Up—to see the model submarine  
 Mr. Spano bought in Tokyo, Japan.  
 Deep in the sea it drifted, lure and bait and  
 reconnaissance—he could play with it if he took off his pants.  
 They were in a walk-in closet now.  
 He was mesmerized—as if that closet were  
 a hovel out of *Snow White*—each sense  
 colliding with each sense: penis-taste

in his mouth, somewhere ringing high-pitched  
 laughter, somewhere ice cubes being dropped into a glass.  
 The whole time Jud was quiet, directorial.  
 Pleasure? Release? Not one peeping sound  
 out of that mouth—ever, there in the closet, the door  
 ajar, or in the MG in the garage, that hulk on blocks,  
 or later (or earlier? which would it be?) that summer  
 at the Spanos' beach hut, in the outhouse,

on a metal black frame cot while a brother watched,  
those sharp middle linebacker eyes sharper  
between the green slats of the green outhouse door,  
but only later could he try to say what he saw—  
under the clothesline where beach towels  
dozed like bright flags of the nations. “You fag,”  
and they left it like that for awhile.  
Left it until he saw his sister’s photos

from the Junior-Senior Colorado ski trip:  
that one of Jud swinging in the bus from a hammock,  
like a spider twisting in his net. Left it, left it, left it,  
and later his Dad let Jud know that he knew, the family kept  
quiet about it, did not jeopardize their friendship  
with Jon and Jule. Left it, and then years later I  
saw him in church with his brow-beaten, blond-headed  
son Taylor. He said: “Let’s play a round of golf sometime,”

and I smiled at him and at his son Taylor,  
dull release of the real, the mundane  
of the sweet-sorry mouth said “Sure. Anytime.”

## 3. First Reading

i.

Pitched into the cicada-loud and fire-fly night,  
I saw great clocks or faces and by god my brother  
among them, and a fence or two I had helped him build,

and unspoken refusals, and loss. I'm sure high in the pines  
the squirrels slept, though I had not yet seen a squirrel  
peek its head out of a mess of leaves and sticks

and descend. . . . I was standing at the podium  
about to read my poem that tried to get at *no less my dad*,  
its incantations good like dried snot, and more or less

ripped off of Penn Warren's "There's a Grandfather's Clock in the Hall,"  
and amassed furiously from inside a summer of poison  
spread around burlap, and the Roundup

that fell in a shushing parabola death-mist  
and got the true bug or the crab grass *no what ifs*,  
got the poems I thought unlocked each world.

The four-hundred-dollar lawn table and chairs delivered,  
in the delivery van I sat and listened good—  
Garrison Keillor reading a poem on NPR,

some girl with the itch to get home to her father,  
who *like that* had gotten older, private among his tools.  
Caulking the tub was where he was at, and where she was at

didn't jive with all the nights he couldn't fix anymore,  
the tightness she woke up to, car traffic like surf,  
distant strobe of an ambulance, somewhere someone

being murdered, somewhere someone making love  
until all she saw were her ceiling's white chalked stars,  
and maybe later every one of those linking verbs.

So I saw myself up (*nowhere to go*): read the poem  
that missed terribly (*but up*) what wasn't my own.  
I simply lost (*dead world-weight*) for instance this:

ii.

slurring refrain, my father crooning *Sweet William*  
all the way down jack-joke hill. October chill.  
The P.A. voice blinding, bright, and assured,

like the clouds and the tissues and the floats,  
and my best friend Brett Love shot out the car so fast  
I don't know what he took with him to say what he saw of the deal earlier,

of my father's eyes stalled in their mountainous rise  
and fall, of the dashboard's plural sunlight, there,  
not there, curtained too long like his eyes,

*of us glide of us glide of us* gliding in the air,  
past bit shards and the underpass  
where homeless guys held their signs, slept,

or *got run off and so on* until my brother, 15,  
got the nerve to tell our father to *pull over*  
and drove the rest to our Homecoming, his exact  
wrecking ball head—nodding off—in the want seat.

## 4. Billy, Naked

That's September laughing behind the storm door.  
Those are lightning bugs like tiny odes,

and inside are the owls, stone-cold and stationed  
all over the house, later inked for good

on his brother's right calf. And these?  
Maples from under which he looks at the world,

and here is the wind, and the wind puts the full shining  
on the stick-child, thin, thinner, and thinned out

like pine bark scraped on a curb. Watch it  
float its sins away. This is the year of days

dulled down to this boy shooting into that black round,  
swish, void, or letting a punch fly right smack

into Johnny Hornbeck. Fall, sticks, leaves,  
muck that leaves a kind of muck, I tried to fuck

Johnny up. Then. *Then?* What a god-awful word.  
My brother said I was a dick sucker still.

All right, yes, eight, I tasted my own dick spit.  
My brother bunched up like a rabbit in snow

caught it, caught what he could, transfixed, between sea-green slats.  
One out, and one and one in the outhouse.

And where were our parents but almost right  
where they could see us, peeling the fresh shrimp

or up from a long nap, the sound of a deck  
of cards being shuffled, dealt, the clothesline

full of every bit of stitching it held of Billy's.  
Surely this kid, who had to run naked to the yield sign

before he was allowed back inside, is dead  
and the present tense is quiet

like moths that hover around streetlight,  
and my brother, long gone to muscle and tough,

has since put aside that massive book on the eye,  
underlined, dog-eared, kept right by his bed,

front-cover a pupil, blackest black as our shadow,  
incomplete unrest, black as the trouble the light sees by.

## The Fall

*“It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist.”*

—Emerson

Mirrors that told us divorce, affairs, deaths,  
of the cancerous lump risen from the great  
plenty of the breast; blunt, inscrutable,  
mirror as tall as the parent; the long view,  
the stare, the glance, Mother’s pensive  
half-turn and quick inspection of herself,  
Narcissus’s pool about the size of a door  
in which I would stare and stare at myself,  
her full-length mahogany dressing mirror  
that I keep coming back to, that’s the gist  
of all others; the shop window, the rearview,  
the glass tower, the puddle, the TV,  
the hand mirror, the watch face, all mirrors  
whose promised translucence adds up to nil.  
Mirror of mirrors, vast, short screenplay  
and same abrupt monologue with the face,  
we’re watchful of the slow turn into age and worse.

## The Level

The soul of which is the bubble aiming for  
the least bit of center, touching the outer  
lines of the vial, inherent, insistent, yes,  
it is still there, dirt-caked, to tell us  
where all it's been, slowly jostled

by the hammer, the handsaw, the lovely  
aberrant toothpick chisel of the nail.  
Landscape stuff I found in my brother's toolbox,  
our grandfather's once. We'll never build our own house.  
There'll be no post-war booms for us,

no churches for us to build in Memphis.  
There's only this level brothers inherit,  
this snake lore, getting purer and purer,  
until it's an essence we don't even know what to call.  
Once we used it to bury a drain.

Now the water flows out every time,  
no trouble, no doubt headed for  
the drainage ditch. No trouble that day—  
we finished early, no alarms, no deaths,  
him over there at the faucet swishing water

around in his mouth, the shovel sprayed off,  
the level still on the slope where we sprinkled  
some grass seed, ready to be put back, forgotten.  
And me over there by the back door with that watch  
of our grandfather's a gawking full moon in my pocket.

III.

## Pioneer Cemetery

First some boy must have hit that gravestone with a baseball bat.  
Then on Monday morning, my boss and I found it scattered  
among beer cans and brushwood. That's when I saw  
on one of the jagged slabs of sandstone a pencil dot,  
the center some stonecutter must have forgot to erase.  
Our idea was to glue the stone back together with epoxy,  
but we squeezed out too much and it ran like a deluge  
and buried that black sun under our glacial resin.  
High in the tree someone or something whistled a tune.  
It had the word lonesome written all over it.  
When we stood the stone up, and I saw how it  
shined in sunlight, crazily, like a monument on death row,  
right then I lost my faith in science and doctoring,  
and began my life-long crush on the white-throated sparrow.

## Black Meadow

*"He was the first set cold in the black meadow"*  
—Dave Smith

1.

This was the summer John's cancer was in remission,  
but the white blood cells still vanishing, so low  
though the ivy we planted flush against the stucco wall,  
which housed the digester's solid-eating bacteria,  
was a rising curtain of green a weed whip cut down.

This was the summer of the bull market, of deepening  
sky above fields of tall grass with barn swallows  
dive-bombing our Scag mowers, light like a bunch  
of Erlenmeyer flasks shipped across the holding ponds,  
an open book too fast to read or forget,

like that concrete animal of grit channels  
that pushed the solid stuff toward the rag,  
or the treated clean water that flowed over the radial weirs.  
This was the summer I saw Canada geese molting,  
their feathers, like cotton dross, settling in ditches,

and tied the sagging trumpet vine to the chain-link fence  
with spare blue rags the color of hospital gowns.  
They'd flap in a little wind, the faintest overture  
of ragweed or goldenrod. This was the summer  
I saw that killdeer's broken wing-act. It wasn't

that she was hurt, I was too close to her speckled eggs  
dust-stunned and camouflaged there on the gravel path.  
O I heard her in the green summer meadow  
above my trimmer's high whine,  
John's newfangled mower that roared like an alien spacecraft.

2.

Development, haphazard with summer's rough heat,  
eased off into a man washing down his mower blades,

the tiny wet ribs of fermented grass released into the sludge  
of a drying bed, the tangled hose's insulation collapsed,

showing through gray and uncertain. What the silence  
told John, whether it was a bad day with chills and a headache,

whether the treatment had worked to give good sun,  
like a file folder that opens, closes, never seems to shut—

what he told the silence, automatically,  
as he pressed the black button to let the garage door down

was wide open, maybe even nothing.

### 3. John, In the Old Clarifier

Late summer, endless blue sky with its banner contrails,  
us lollygagging in an EZ golf cart when we spotted  
those ducklings, too many to get a head count,  
their fur like dew on morning grass in mid-July:

they were trapped down inside the old clarifier,  
its twin bowls like hunter's eyes, permanent.  
All day those baby ducks raced with those troughs  
an endless oval racetrack, under the half-bridge scraper

a nest snug against a huge girder. The old clarifier,  
was it white concrete and snow of this world,  
John chasing each small bird into his cupped hands  
and lifting them onto the dry August grass,

his exposed steel toe boots flashing silver in the sun?  
He unlocked the gate and still we said nothing, bullfrog  
and cricket, redwing swaying on the burnt match of a cattail,  
the ducks now scratching in high brush near the creek.

Containment is the story here, how we  
locked the gate back, changed into our street clothes  
and punched out, then the long separate drives home,  
fresh blocks of dry ice melting along the new bypass.

Ringer, Strip Mall, Lansing

I saw a shopping cart clang into a corral,  
typo gulls land and take off, a latte straw.  
After an hour I wanted to tuck my issued bell  
inside my issued apron and let fall my smile  
inside the kettle whose green tree was as scant  
as that Family Dollar's bargain windows.  
My last day there I slid the van door open  
at my stop on Capital, the gold dome  
still as a spot on a AAA road map: 7-Eleven,  
snow plow, streetlights, windshield wipers  
antidote to this or that cold front, quiet, so quiet,  
my breathing alone could have choired the almost  
silence, the echo of which was, is, a slammed  
door that I thought could be heard for miles.

## Turn of the Century

Where had that store been? There was debate on that.  
 The florist said over there. Brother Bob pointed down.  
 Even the December kudzu looked like it had enough  
 of the general store where Emmett Till wolf-whistled.  
 Under a magnolia we nickled and dimed the facts,  
 preacher, groomsman, and the like.  
 Behind us the church was painted white.  
 The grammar of it all is still hard to come by.  
 On the ride over, somewhere between Starkville  
 and Money—wherever are when we talk  
 the world down to its observable parts  
 as the four-lane ends and the drop on either side  
 is magnificent—my mother said, “you’re too young  
 to be getting married.” But that weekend I got married  
 who asked me where my sister was at?  
 Rehab, now jail. Before that, a good halfway house.  
 She was no angel. Thanks be to god.  
 She was about a season away from being stuck in the ground.  
 It is a cinch sometimes to forget where you are at,  
 but not on your birthday when you’re burying your sister.  
 For instance, when I got through sorting who was who  
 and had dutifully shook hands and had scooped up my brother’s son,  
 I saw, really saw, the frail rigging of a kite I flew once  
 as bit by bit it resumed the shape it was before it was an it.  
 That Thanksgiving, the wedding invitations in the mail,  
 my sister called from as far as she could get  
 on her roommate’s credit cards and wheels.  
 Her tears sounded real, as real as a salt lick.  
 “Why can’t I stop?” she asked. Outside my window a squirrel  
 shot its tail up, like an umbrella, with a mouthful of needles.  
 It just did its tail that way, it didn’t need help:  
 far off through the trees, too far for me in Kalamazoo,  
 too far for her in Nashville, too far for words—  
 and that was that, our last real heart to heart.  
 Her sponsor was back with probable fast food.  
 Alone again, I tried to read, but mostly I took note  
 of a square of light on the back porch that did not waver,  
 that did not check itself, that simply was itself,  
 that simply refused to quit, that lifeless beauty.

## Laguna Blues

We tiptoed through the bare facts and tropical wilderness  
of the outhouse, the huge spent husk that was itself.  
We met Joe and Diane from Ohio celebrating their 40<sup>th</sup>.  
We all looked out into the Gulf at the Navy Seals  
practicing rescue, the hands raised, the net dropped.  
We ate at places with names like Boar's Head and Paradise,  
and kissed on the black leaf of the parking lot  
like we were homesick, and certainly we were.  
We saw all the neon currency gone to frost and repair,  
and way back like a monument to summer  
the Bullet Ride and the Haunted House were quieted,  
and here a moon shoe and there a pitiful crab  
whose every hole was the tentative ampersand—  
and then this shell, this pseudo hour glass, dumbfounding, intact.

American Pastoral

1. Pennsylvania Coal Town

Unexpected, sparse, the all-told glance,  
his white arms fresh, like a new canvas.  
Everything here, as elsewhere in Hopper,  
is utter balance, front lawn as dark as

the stone owl that oversees my garden.  
There to remind me that this pure instant man  
looking up into late good sun between two houses  
might not come again. I look up from the book,

the shadowed slope still coming down hard,  
a forty-five-degree angle, like a mower blade sharpened,  
like a wave in abeyance. Curtains drawn, his eyes  
toward that great shaft of otherworldly:

daylight hitting him like some terrible  
last offering, which won't come again,  
the living room in plain view, its white lamp  
a momentary harbor for the starved eye,

which looks on from across the street: a passerby.

## 2. Under the Mowers, Second Shift

I liked it down there, the way you could break  
down and be none the worse for it, late  
summer, early fall, a combine in tall corn,

its headlights on in the light, the light like a scour,  
the floor polished with it, not a cure,  
not a curse, but a pure steal, like song,

or knowing, in the dark, the difference,  
spindle from pulley, sharp blade from dull.  
*Death is a cloud alone in the sky with the sun.*

Now it was dark, and another shade of quiet.  
I was alone. My sister was dead. It was  
that simple. I lay flat on my back and listened

to two cardinals, one near and one far, one near, one far.  
I shut my eyes and still each blade glistened.  
I was idling awhile on that cool, dark floor,

next day's cut grass caught slowly in that late hour.

Grace

1.

It was hot in the work truck and where were you wind?  
There was only Don's voice, loud and slurred,  
telling me he aimed the hose inside the Mustang.  
I can only guess at the damage down inside,  
not to the floor mats, nor to the wiring.  
He didn't tell me about the fist to the mouth,  
the knee in the stomach, the teenage boy  
who pinned him down on the wet crab grass.  
He only laughed and said the boy scalped his hair.  
I gazed in the rearview and saw his shock of white hair,  
his eyelids that rose and fell like blinds behind a window.  
His new meds were generics. That was the problem.  
Now he opened the door and poured gas into his mower.  
He was quiet, too quiet, he was a vacant lot.

2.

This man, Don Forward, with the chin of Leno  
 who downs four two-liters of pop a day,  
 who still doesn't know his left from his right,

or how to tie his shoes, who walks his invisible  
 dog Duke to this truck to say to me every morning  
 "let's go, go, do it," this man, this rage, this anger,

this turning-on-you-like-a-snake, fixed up  
 now by a squadron of meds, this man,  
 the stepfather who beat him time and again

his cousin Nikki says, a new stylist at J.C. Penney's,  
 this man his childhood trailing him  
 like a cloud of fruit flies or bad gossip.

Who else, who else, but this gun-shy face of a boy  
 with a last name that sounded like a mobster's  
 and new meds that brought on eternal drowse

and the sorry heat and our beater Dodge  
 and a girlfriend and a car he neither one had  
 who quit lawn crew to become a bagboy?

John Gazzi, and I remember him with a trimmer  
 and a look in his face when he saw I saw the doe too,  
 and it lifted its token grace at us and ran

back into a woods with a name like Sherwood.  
 Idle trimmers, idle looks, the yard mown,  
 others yet to be mown, his smile that my leaf blower  
 blew to kingdom come—we stumbled back into time.

## Leaf Removal

All the small leaves are brown and the fruit is black,  
the wind refuses to shake down the last,  
and Jack Smoke is a name and, no joke,  
Al Grimm another, who has the big-time star face  
of Billy Bob Thornton a la *Swing Blade*.  
Last week, his girl, clad in clandestine black  
with FBI emblazoned across the chest,  
tried to torch her two-bedroom apartment,  
lighter fluid, lighter or matches, the self,  
the seismically sincere self, not a drop  
of irony to be found on her person, not a drop  
of lighter fluid touched the shirt on her back.  
Where's a small wonder, the short-term sparrows  
hiding among fashionable ivy? Where the shade tree's tact?  
Where are the troubling, troubled bright days  
that relapse into a weird, scared standstill,  
but here as Jack Smoke dusts off each pinnate leaf  
in a futureless forecaster's voice  
he thinks he once had for the newscast,  
Al Grimm rolls another Bugler cigarette,  
and the horn man plays on soundless as snow.

Robert Book

Through the locker room, where he's dressed in quiet,  
the baying far off but non-stop like a pilot light,  
through the empty break room where the TV is muted

and, as always, switched to the Game Show Network  
and reruns of the *Gong Show* or *Press Your Luck*,  
through gray metal doors and *beware, do not enter*,

he passes, like a surgeon, in a mask and blue scrubs  
into a roomful of two-year-old beagles stowed in kennel cabs,  
and minutes of petting and names bestowed in secret.

Here is Socialization with its traffic cones and sharp curves  
that these dogs will know later through the fog of the latest cocktail.  
The point is moot: these dogs were born and bred to serve.

O this room, twice the size of a dream playroom,  
where each dog waits for the hand that pets and grooms,  
the hand that for weeks has refused the handful of meds

that calm and hush and sweet talk him into sleep,  
that slow the motor skills and torture his speech,  
the hand that once squired his girl to the dance,

the hand that makes the ears twitch, the hand that shakes.  
Like us, he'd want a moment not a story,  
three minutes of petting, then on to the next and the next,

each dog in its own cage, the job done as he was instructed,  
the neatened seconds ticking away on the timer,  
not all these disciples bringing him to his knees.

## Noise, Rain or Shine

Once more we will drive by where Don Forward,  
thirty one years ago, helped raise the roof of that garage,  
at 17 a ward of the state but also dirt-cheap labor.  
Once more I will hear of the joy ride in the Impala gone bad.  
Al Grimm will sit up and tell me that the dude took the curve  
too fast, killing his oldest buddy beside him in the back.  
Each has tried to tell his story, this castle of a state hospital,  
that salt box Al's mom, once remarried, sold for much less  
than his wishing he were blessed enough to call it his.  
Maybe Ms. Blink will stand again at her screen door  
yelling through the glass in nothing but a towel  
that we all need our safety glasses rinsed,  
or we will see the doe and fawn in that island-yard again,  
their slender necks, like giant cranes, still in the A.M. fog.  
Surely there is mystery in all this. Surely on those lazy afternoons  
when I'm showing my son the gingko's showery gold coins,  
I will think of the grown man from the foster care home  
who time and again crawled down the wheelchair ramp  
as I fired up my mower—an aphasiac who'd never mouth  
thank you or amen, but kneeled before our wizardry  
of noise, rain or shine, cheering it on, as if it were techno,  
his arms and chest pump, pump, pumping on his blue pool float,  
his initials—JK—penned in blank ink on his white socks,  
my mower cruising through late afternoon's shadows.

IV.

## Union of Dunces

When they were two these twins invented  
their own language, now one sautéed and  
the other cooked. The GM's name was Todd,  
and he had a smile that said he was right  
where he was. Within the year I'll hear  
how he cooked the books and got fired  
with a dead-on due date, a baby-blue room,  
a crayon-drawn cardinal already framed.  
All night long Snoop Dog talked the talk,  
and boredom and innuendo were big pals,  
intimacy eighty-sixed, smoke breaks and jokes  
the rituals that led to bed or to nowhere.  
I hustled out of the meat locker with bacon bits.  
I rearranged tables for parties of twelve and six.  
I consolidated, dropped forks and knives into each glass.  
By ten that first night I was hemming and hawing  
whether to walk out and not look back.  
Who there gave a flip? Maybe a shrug  
of the shoulders, maybe a sigh to let out air.  
The door, door of all my lives to come,  
fraught with all my father's maxims on quitting,  
I saw through it and pushed it clean open,  
only to discover that by opening me to streets  
hushed by rain, I had tripped the fire alarm.  
Miraculously Todd appeared with a key.  
Someone named Sarah yelled *gee you wanted  
a break?* Too embarrassed to quit again, I stayed—  
broke the salad bar down, bussed the bar,  
fogged my glasses enough times I learned  
to take them off before I entered that locker.  
A week and a week and a half week was time  
leaked away, or the cash we needed to pay  
for the U-Haul that brought us this far north  
where today, as we walk to the library and park  
with our son, as over and over we say open,  
say close, say sun, say moon, these words  
as light is to dark, as tree top is to moss,  
I watch this homeless man talk to a truant duck  
near the spot, the plaque says, where Lincoln spoke.

## Hurricane Party

In our kitchen there was this landscape painting  
that oversaw all our changes, a tunnel of yellow trees  
and grass path, static with fall, the painter  
daydreaming nobody around, limestone bluff  
and incidental pines, though twice in one day  
a small tornado touched down in my sister's life  
and sewed up the idea that hers was a dangerous life:  
the black sky caught in the glass behind the bar,  
Rhea, clipboard in hand, walking back to the kitchen  
to change out the keg, when the funnel cloud  
dropped from the god-breathed clouds  
and she squinted it into vision. Did she  
point to its shapeliness like pubes and soap  
down a bath drain, or see the street lights  
ripe for picking, before she yelled the dinner crowd  
into that cold snap cooler, each breath like a comic strip's  
thought cloud? Not a word was said in that locker  
for minutes, only breaths, in and out, take it as it comes,  
the next day's salad tossed on every blessed soul  
like confetti at a concert, though the tornado passed high,  
only clipping a few tiles, before it swerved east and hit her apartment.  
It was something you'd curse till kingdom come, amen.  
It was something you'd bless with White Russians  
and Hurricanes, with hi-fi and *Same As It Ever Was*,  
to sing each storm out, one by one.

## Southern Comfort

You can see how he thinks it ought to be—  
his parents' mortgaged yard landscaped to a shady,  
forgetful T, the trendy plants, the desert lily  
and cloud nine hibiscus, the new rock fountain—  
much nicer than the Guynes'—he installed last summer  
to buy a new starter for his beater Beamer.  
This year he's also repainted the shutters,  
cleared the gutters of excess, chain-sawed  
those two poor-in-spirit silver maples.  
Thanksgiving weekend he'll see his fitness  
junkie wife off so he can rent a Bobcat  
and splice a drain for a basement whose flooding  
you'd think goes way back like the world's longest rivers.  
After years of partying, after the bad trip  
that sent him to detox for almost two months,  
after years of what am I and jobs in construction,  
and reading all of Ayn Rand that spring semester  
instead of attending the Plant Materials course,  
after meditating long and hard on subatomic particles,  
how they are a kind of bedrock life and will not die  
these electrons that are the hoot owl inked  
for good on his right calf, after all the bat hits  
and live smoke drifted back toward his sleeping son,  
after a dozen years of this bankrupt life,  
he's alive and well—the good son—and on clear  
nights from his two-bedroom fixer-up on this foothill  
the Choctaw called who knows what can pick out of a lineup  
of streets the exact floodlight and horseshoe drive.

### My Father Wants An '84 Caprice Classic

He wants cruise control and an 8-track cassette,  
but he's crunched deaf numbers and briefed  
these skyrocket walls crowded with the dated  
mustache and arm around the child, each wholesale  
leaf glued to an eternity of pre-school brown.  
His son's feet dangle from that chair, not a care  
in the world, so lost is his boy in each brief highway  
of an Etch-A-Sketch. He wants one more nip  
on the bottle tucked under the seat of their Olds.  
He wants this song and dance man, who preaches  
miles to the gallon, to just shut the hell up.  
He wants to say thanks, but no thanks, and grin.  
Nothing is as real here, finally, as the prose  
of that gumball machine his too-pale hand  
grabs when he rises from his folding chair,  
and teeters, faint and nil, and the metal tree  
tips and the Rubber tree plant is too far to help,  
its ho hum headlight shatters and spills,  
and his too cute son with his hair styled like wings  
can help himself to all of that rainbow hail.

Elegy for a Would-Be Diva

—*The Mill Bakery & Eatery*

Mostly, I like to think of my sister walking back  
into the kitchen where the cooks are slammed,  
say a Friday night, late August, the dining room lights  
dimmed already for the dinner crowd, outside miles  
of cars on Memorial Pkwy, a traffic jam  
in the northbound lanes that refuses to quit.

Anyway, the night's young, Tupac's on or B.I.G.,  
the cooks giving her shit about some big order  
she just put in, but the part I keep coming back to  
is the part that happens too fast  
for me to be sure it even happened,  
as if I'd gone and made it up after the fact:

Rhea backhanding the air like a diva.  
To be other than what we are,  
say a Blondie or a Madonna—to say  
to Omar, Andy Salinas or whoever  
hey, that was ages ago, and this is  
what I see all over again, the plain desire.

Memorial Day, 1971

My father with his Ray-ban aviator  
sunglasses and his long sideburns,  
his red hair beginning that slow fade  
into the burnished copper of a penny  
is instructing my sister on how to bait  
the hook, then cast the rod and reel.

He looks excited, his body language  
telling her how to reel in the magnificent  
catfish she will never catch.  
Or have I misremembered?  
Do I have in mind a Polaroid  
of my father instructing, no,

not even doing that, but looking on,  
grinning, my brother shining  
in his eyes. I can't exactly say  
that my sister is nowhere  
to be found, it just feels that way.  
She's there, I know, kneeling in the sand,

the brown lake water of Pickwick Dam before her.  
She's smiling at the Polaroid camera,  
the picnic tables, the swing set, the grill  
my father commands blurred behind her.  
Her back is to the camera: no doubts,  
no doubt, she's going to dive in.

## Elegy in Black and White

Three electric candles frame the windowsill,  
like children who stood behind their parents

for a snapshot that appeared in the church directory,  
the oldest still the tallest and still smiling like she meant it.

In this our last photograph together, my big sister  
is smiling, but her smile is forced like mine,

even as the sun strikes those wind chimes.  
I've got my arm around her and her holiday attire,

a black sweater whose festival of lights  
shines here in the after life, hello and goodbye.

My Magnesia of heartbreak, its winter tint  
is held to the freezer door with my son's cartoon magnet

whose sawhorse, detour sign, yellow hard hat ,  
and two-dimensional shoulder work are laughable peace and quiet.

I see our smiles now as reflex, gesture,  
like ash brushed off the mourner's gray coat,

like the red rose I laid on top of her casket.  
Now she is each anecdote told on her as fact,

that row of Bradford pears facing the courthouse  
like a mock lineup that perpetuates itself,

their singular-unmistakable-white-as-it-gets  
blossoms, these trees that shall never bear any fruit.

She's an amen and a ghost, amen, ghost.  
She's trying on a white dress she'll never outgrow.

.

## Challenger

1.

I remember after it exploded I sat on hold,  
waiting for my father to tell me over the phone  
what went wrong, and the way the gym floor's

buckled bronze-shine crisscrossed in waves as crazy  
as the harsh Atlantic's. I remember, I remember,  
the janitors said the gym stunk to high heaven—

one hard freeze and the water pipes just burst—  
and how through the double doors midmorning  
sunlight moved up and down the south goalpost

with all the simplicity of a barber's pole  
or black ribbon wound around antennas  
as Chad Hester, hair the color of fire

even after several rounds of chemo,  
and them slipped out toward bruising  
somehow in them the explicable cold.

2.

He sat behind me in 6<sup>th</sup> grade P.E.  
His parents owned a photography business.

An older brother Bill, same age as my brother Jack.  
Travis Richardson's best friend that year was Chad Hester,

who was with Travis when he fell off his bike  
and hit the ground dead in front of Mt. Gap Groceries.

Santa owned it and lived down in the basement,  
packed a gun and had a sign plastered above bright

rows of candy that said *you touch it you buy it*,  
but Santa was nowhere to be found in that instant

Chad leaned down as if to listen to a seashell.  
No rise, no fall, Travis' chest like the stillness

of the fabulous stars, there on the sidewalk  
with its chalk faces, of which we will say

of our time there were only these bright traces  
the rain rinsed off without once failing,

Chad coming back to this instant over and over,  
 catching himself in the harsh light of staring back

at the night crawlers clear and free of the jars,  
 Chad, who later became whiz of body repair,

and how things fared. Travis' heart was a dud  
 and it went off. Lucky to have lived that long

the teacher told us. Lucky—and still that kick  
 in the stomach when I touch these Pixi sticks,

or walk the whole way out Mt. Gap Groceries  
 and the bell rings out the brightness of my hands.

3.

My father's voice, if there is a look to a voice,  
 was the stopped heart on the monitor.  
 I had come in on his own grief again,

which sounded like when his father died,  
 the bricklayer who sent him off to college  
 to do what couldn't be done with that 7<sup>th</sup> grade

education of his—be up there with the men  
 who rolled up the blue prints and stacked them  
 behind great, big, old desks. My father said

he had to go now and he did, all of us glued  
 to the neatened fluency of Brokaw or Rather,  
 to spacecraft as it broke up from every conceivable

angle, to survivors, no word on them yet. No, wait,  
 all five of them, like the janitor Arthur wiping up  
 Mark Sasser's vomit at half court,

were locked tight in the actual.

## First Hell

No exegesis, no footnotes, so naked, so raw  
are these highlights, page after page of mass graves,

the dead piled high in ditches, or the blasted out  
skull risen out of the green foliage of the uniform,

tons of footage done up in black-and-white,  
my grandmother's *Time-Lives* bound neatly each to each

in those boxes' uniform desert. Down in the crawl space,  
down in my fort where the Christmas lights I had strung

stuttered and flashed, down where carpet scraps  
and plywood covered the eyesore of native dirt,

I lived with that entire stack, the sump pump  
and dredge of the living book, all through my 10<sup>th</sup> year.

I still see the thin-shelled chests of those two men  
who looked straight ahead freed and yet not freed

from me, nor I from their glance—there on their ex-captor's steps,  
frail, hungry, feeble, you might say, except their eyes

resist the easy adjective and far off pity.  
I still hear my grandmother Vermelle, too,

come down from Blue Mountain to read Faulkner  
and be a single woman living alone in the 1930s,

this woman who married the man nearly twice her secret age,  
my grandfather who died long ago, whose heart—

long before I entered the picture—exploded  
while he sat on the couch his ear pivoted to a game—

this woman who loved a puzzle's pleasing promise  
of arrangement—*the Buried Blueprints, the Catastrophe*—

I heard her at the bitter end—hell from cover  
to cover, each volume promising more—

from down in my fort, her mouth's defying O  
that craved still meaning and still exact utterance,

and I walked up to see what was going on,  
and stood in the bathroom door and gawked at safety pins

and cloth diapers, at orifice, at her naked,  
shaking self shriven on the abyss of toilet,

and heard her repeat what the mouth clung to  
(*Jacqueline, Jacqueline*), my mother's name,

her only garment in the whole wide green world.

Dusk at the Rocket Park

That day *Columbia* exploded I tried not to let my  
 three-year-old son  
 watch it on TV spread ashes across Arkansas and east Texas.  
 Fridays at the Y, no easier to get him to kick his legs,  
 often I hold him  
 and we gaze at the thumb-nail moon on the ceiling and say *moon*  
 under which the older, bigger kids swim.

And things here, today, because I am with him take on some  
 of the dumb thrill  
 I remember when as a child snapping peas with my mom or  
 grabbing the mail  
 I heard the thunderous test of the shuttle engine, or watched  
 from the diamond  
 as the jumbo jet flew over carrying *Columbia* on its back  
 like a child.

And yet as we circle the statue of von Braun, “the rocket baron,”  
 later Hitler’s “secret weapon,”  
 or sit in the shade and eat our lunch a stone’s throw  
 from the kingly tip of a V-2,  
 I can’t shake it, how years ago I book-saw  
 the very bone and fiber that put von Braun’s V-2s together:

faces in their assembly line of putting things together,  
 faces so far away they are no longer faces,  
 faces that simply end in a long ditch on the next page,  
 end as fright skulls high in the library stacks of research.

Walking back through Rocket Park, again that harrowing voice  
 I heard long ago from inside  
 the domed “G-Force Accelerator”: *This is centrifugal force,*  
*do you feel it,*  
 the voice voicing ether-world, disembodied assurance.  
 Before they shut the door for another ride, I look in and see

the semi-circle of Frankenstein chairs that spin around  
 the huge TV screen,  
 the doomsday dome’s insides still done up in red.  
 Strapped-in standing up as it began to spin  
 I saw up on the big smoke screen  
 flawless clouds, sky, and *Discovery*, and the year after that,  
 sitting inside a school portable,

I leaned back and listened to the apocryphal,  
    how once some boy from across  
town unbuckled for who knows why and the ride still going.  
Later, uncontrollably, he became monumental like forgetting,  
as slow and fast as that was, as good as that was bad,

like not knowing, or like not knowing what you are going to tell  
    a son about evil,  
that we will overlook it if ignorance suits our ends.  
One last look at the jeep back from the moon and we are carried  
past Galaxy Food Court, past von Braun lifting up a space suit  
    for the "Mickey Mouse Club,"

past a footprint in moon's ash, past Alan Shepard's makeshift 6 iron,  
and then outside my son's breath getting heavier as he drifts  
    into our fitful sleep.

Wernher von Braun Surrendering to a U.S. Army Private, 1945

*“The V-2 rockets were for the biggest part produced under terrible conditions: Principal production took place in an underground slave labor factory collocated and run with the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp. The underground factory was itself built by slave labor, through digging massive tunnels right into the solid rock of the Harz mountains”*

—from the *Wikipedia* encyclopedia

It’s an old story, the jocular face,  
the upper-left-side of his body cast in white  
plaster as a result of a freakish accident  
when the liquid fuel exploded and hauled him out  
through the glass doors of exchange.

Let’s go ahead and call that Baltic compound  
the birth place of the missile.  
Let’s go ahead and pronounce the second i  
in missile with a high i sound.  
I turn the page and see fright skulls

high in the library stacks of research,  
across the street at the Von Braun Civic Center  
a replica V-2 alight on his bronzed palm.  
I speak to his maiden-white cast  
enveloped in his leather’s enigmatic black.

I speak as if he forgot that morning  
to lose his past, a cold morning, a screen  
of woods behind him, gray graying oak,  
maple, cedar, or hawthorn,  
the sun hid behind passing clouds.

In Answer to Piri's Question What's a Fraction

It's the action of breaking—we've got that down.  
But it's also a means, the world's body  
divvied up and shared, the sacrament  
and all of that. I'm trying to remember  
the stonemason's tools, the chisel and mallet,  
and that marigold is both a symbol of grief  
and a good plant to grow beside asparagus.  
I'm trying to remember a gravestone I saw once.  
Only the parentheses looked legible,  
the formal shade of dates. I want the words  
for the emotion when I traced with my finger  
each worn out number, when early morning sun  
flashed its brilliance and light interrupted flesh on stone  
and then, like that, vanished with the dew.

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