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Spirits Here

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Spirits Here

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2011

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

This collection of poems explores southern rural life through the lenses of nature and spirituality.

Acknowledgments

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Garth Steven Blankenship, 1934-2011.

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On Frogs

Steve said, "What's coming for us over that dark line,
where the hill meets the sky, black on starry black
but that tinge of a glow from somebody's
porch lights; wonder why they're still awake?
Listen to them frogs sing about a rain wind
swishing down their creekbeds and scummy ponds,
sing about the night damp that calls them up.
I burnt a brushpile and they came hopping out like a plague,
too small to make a sound in the grass, their brothers cooking
in a blaze of briars. Have frogs got lightning legends?
Are they singing to someone when they drink the dew?
Do they revere the heron that pecks, the bass that snatches?
You watch that treeline. We'll worship what wounds us,
and the light that keeps it away, and the days
and the land that spread it out and mask its fearsome face."

Fundamentalist Sign Guys on the Corner of West and Dickson

“The pleasures you seek are destroying your soul”
has a nice ring to it and sure enough, I feel
a twinge of guilt, having just partaken in a heavy
pour of something heady and weighing the temptation
of another. My poor Baptist heart thrills at “Fear
Jesus”—here is something I am doing right, though
fear is mild for the notion that I can’t go back
to Yellowstone, where the crust thins, where I could
fall in, be burned to nothing but a finger
bone the earth spits back. A fiery end waits for those
who won’t believe, which could have been among the signs,
is just another mark I carry like the flinching
pain in the small of my back from falling off a tire swing
at eight and landing on a rock. I love to drink, this town,
its glasses, faces, stony briar glades,
copperheads and ticks; I love the sight of the Tetons,
in creative debt to nothing but their own insistence
that they stay, and I love every lonely man
who’s lain beside me, every blessed gasp. Damned
by these and all the gifts of sense that swell
and break the heart like a wave that fills your mouth
with salt and sand, I’m a glutton for my mother’s sorrow,
her prayers abashing me from east to west and back
to Arkansas again, where Jesus lives
and breathes, watches from the faces
of the overalled and bearded men so kindly
come on Friday night bearing signs to warn me.

Elegy for a Beloved Hen, Taken as the Weather Changed in September

Patsy, you were incorrigible –
waking the house at dawn, chattering greedily,
every crumb and potato skin of the scraps I threw out
yours to eat or share as you pleased – I had half a mind
to trade you for another, more straitlaced animal.
But unorthodox dear, the most daring, you approached
the dog (who I thought posed your biggest threat),
would hunker down and let me stroke your back.
My heart turned over when I saw you this morning
curled pitifully, stiff under the coop. It isn't nature's
dictum that animals die warm in bed, but prone, solitary –
as we all do really. This is the way some babies
used to go – quickly, in the wee hours, taken by
a baffling force that stole in and out before you could
close the window. A hundred years ago, I might have known
that larger ache by now: a chicken in a shoebox is neither
remarkable nor tragic. Patsy, I can have a sense of humor
about this. Your sisters remain healthy, and now
I see the cruel meaning of pecking order. Loretta
has replaced you as leader of the coop and scratch,
and I have already begun to think of you this way, so far down
in the order of things: God, fathers, mothers, babies,
dogs, and someplace lower, the chicken.

Firstborn

“You ought to name her Windy. We got damn near
blowed over on I-40,” said Steve in the hospital room
after the whole thing was over. Through the sweaty
haze of panic, Jen’s sleepy smile, his heart a pink
helium balloon, Dave saw the weight on his shy father,
who pulled loose teeth after swearing he wouldn’t,
who fed secret bits of cheese to even the fattest dogs,
who’d named him David after God’s own heart,
and he felt it on his own heart, handed down,
heavier than a case of beer, heavier than the thickest
Bible in the house, and he saw a little bit of it rise
off his own chest and settle like a crimson leaf
on Piney Creek on the crinkled forehead
of the nameless newborn in his arms.

On the Nature of Prayer

Steve said, “You couldn’t grow a chickweed patch a hoe’s height from the ground – though hoeing helps; you’ve got to get down in with your hands, got to raw your skin, get on your knees like you’re praying out there – and you might be at that, if hoping counts as praying, which your mother says it don’t. Don’t tell her I said so, but I believe I’ve hoped sundry things into happening that couldn’t count as chance. Like her marrying me – nothing so good comes to a man but that the Lord detects a stoic cry and intervenes. And listen, if the Lord don’t look down and honor the rough hope of bending over the ground He cursed and filling up your nose with that cursed dirt, well, He don’t know a thing about telling an earnest heart from a prodigal.”

Chore

Dave was digging a ditch for Steve
and came across a corroded copper
belt buckle burrowed in the dirt;
he heard it *ting* when he touched it with the tip
of his shovel. Surely the quick shot
of adrenaline driving down his chest
was superstition instead of a spirit,
but he would've walked away if not
for Steve's inevitable stony stare
at supper for failing to finish the furrow.
John Gentry, a known jokester,
had recounted encounters with countless
hants who harrowed him in corners
of the wild, wooded waysides of Gorby,
and Dave could never divine the distance
between truth and clamor of nightbirds clawing
John's tall tales. Crossing the pasture,
he eyed the woods, suffering perils
cloaked in bracken, the brutal boars of the dark.

The Last Earnest Prayer

I'd like to buy a little more of what it was
at work that January day when Dad was burning
brush for Nadine midway up her driveway,
Annie and I were setting the tips of sticks
on fire, and a copperhead began easing his way out
from a thick section of pine bark, woken
from his winter sleep by warmth, now
curling clockwise round the trunk not two feet,
no, not a snake's length from my head.
If there's anything left of what kept him addled,
what made me turn, a shot-glassful of grace
I haven't yet used up, let it snow down now
and melt in little dewdrops on my back
and save my life this one last time,
and I vow from now on I'll be good,
will let my hair grow long, the chords
of my throat rust, will never toss
a penny in a pond again. I'll be like
Nadine, who long since left this world,
praying in that ringing shack of a church,
*Thank you for the pretty sunshine outside,
and thank you for the rain when it comes.*

When We're Old I Hope We Remember

That day at the end of summer we drove south
through hayfields still obscenely green
and grasshoppered, busted towns we couldn't
even bear to read the names of, to see the grave
of the poet whose tragic death at twenty-nine hangs
redolent, romantic as July all year over the town
we sometimes share, that day I didn't know you
very well, was surprised I even said I'd go at all.
We checked the monastery first, the alabaster dots
of stones of monks terracing a hill off to the side,
and when we didn't find him there, you asked the bearded
mowing man, who didn't know the poet's name
but said there was another cemetery down the road
a spell. It took us half an hour to find the grave;
we expected ostentatious, something to suggest
the legend we were craving to call in some part
our own, but near the front, with nothing but a single
line of poetry to set it apart, it faced a barn.

Limby

Coined by some illiterate uncle,
it meant lousy, surly, “out on a limb,”
and overtook Steve often, when, beaten
by love, debt, or weather, he would stow
his mind away in the purple martin box,
in the cobwebs in the cellar. His dreams
were of banshees, rotten-pitted cherries,
babies stillborn and lovers drowned.
He saw a vine wrapped around his elm,
turning its torso a burning red
against still-yellow, and cried and ripped
it down as best he could. Quietly,
Steve tilled, watered, and chopped,
taught his son, but justice seemed
awry at times—a parasite can kill
an honest tree, a god can take revenge.
A farmer can wake every white dawn
with dark, inviolable tendrils laced
around his heart, his lungs, his limbs.

On Struggle

Steve said, "Farming will make a fool
of a man, pitting him against the likes of grass
and flies, the dumbest enemies. Why, it's an honor
when a fox starts stealing chickens:
gives him something almost worth fighting against!
We got tater bugs breeding in the apple roots,
Bermuda shoots choking every last vine
and only so much rain to go around.
There's that *chip-witter-witter* again,
warble of the whippoorwill perched
on the ridge of the roof of my heart,
but it's the thieving crow who cuts in furthest,
nesting in the tenderest spot, his hungry
caws issuing out of my throat."

Snipe Hunting

You said don't worry, they're easy to catch.
I was four years old wandering around the yard
clutching a flashlight and a paper sack.

Steve, I just don't believe you've gone far.
I've been seeing signs. A sourceless flash of light.
Tickle in the night: a tiny green spider spinning

a home inside my belly button. Two crows
pestering a hawk in flight. I got it in my head
that if I came before sunup to the fishing pond

below your house, brought a hunk of cornbread,
a thermos of coffee, you might mosey up the draw,
a little see-through now but still enough you.

You said there's nothing out here that can hurt me.
I bet you're laughing your head off.

Screen Porch

Coming on towards evening,
the grays of clapboard and wood-edge
have worn each other out; the shying moon
deepens, mixes them, flusters us who lack night-eyes.
Our screen porch – God’s rainbarrel,
pool at the bottom
of the green hill of heaven.
Something grand and final waits
out there. I love
this woven reprieve, in roof-pitch, birch,
hollow and barn.

After You Go

After you go I look in the mirror,
fingering my lips, eyelids, jawline,
all the places your touch traveled
in the blue night, to see if anything
has changed, if the skin burns
or shimmers. We were pale
shapes, only flesh, while the heart,
that astral wolf, roamed far
on yellow planets, drinking
in the shallows of lunar
lakes. If I am shaken,
it is by an echo, many times
removed from the purified blade
of its single, distant howl.

Mount of Olives

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:5

My mother's hair is longer now than mine
and graying fast, as if it waited until
she let it grow to loose its true nature,
wise and of the moon. I have spent so long
trying to cast her off, along with all the chores
she brought me up to know, scrubbing, cooking, mending –
tending to men, it seemed to me. Instead
I always wanted to be like the men, dirty-
fingernailed and intemperate, vociferous
with supper-table platitudes, with her meanwhile
still at the stove frying up the last of whatever
we've already started eating. Yesterday
she told me she'd never climbed Mount Olive,
named after that biblical epicenter of divine
wisdom, and she thought she'd walk it
come spring to see if she'd hear anything.
This got me wondering if all her years of straining
milk and kneading bread and wearing down
the path to the garden gate to gather
cucumbers, corn, and greens,
if all her hours sitting silent in the dark like a stone
set on top of another stone waiting for the Lord to speak,
if every card she's sent to every distant place
I've gone, on which she drew lumpy hens
or my father as a stick-man with a bucket,
and wrote scraps of scripture from Psalms or James
to stoke my heart – and I swear they even did –
if every hog she's watched die snorting
then boiled its outer layers for lard,
if all the well-earned bites of all the simple meals
eaten at her fine oak table –
I wondered then if all these gentle acts of hers
will ever amount to anything
in me that will, when someone someday,
friend or child or man or God forbid,
my mother herself, comes to me hungry, sad,
in need of something warm,
rise to that occasion and give, of my own two hands,
all I know how to give.

On West

Steve said, “Here in the hills, a mind stays put, hemmed in by brush and swayback ridges browning with the year, ardent gusts petering out in limestone hollers. Even in the dark, our threats are slight and particular: a copperhead lingering on a sun-warmed glade rock, a freeze, the cougar nobody’s seen since my daddy was small, and he a famous liar. There’s only the next thing in front of you. But drive west just a little ways where the land flattens out like a bedsheet your mother took an iron to, where you can see the whole train long: there a man’s as sandy as the high-desert dirt, his mind loosened up, nothing to stop a thought or memory from spreading, every dead horse and undone dress button coming back, every match striking at once. I’ve begged aloud out there for respite, but it was myself I was yelling at, a dirty trick of the big sky. If I ever thought to lay myself to rest— if it ever came to that—I’d drive west, to that red canyon where the river falls a quarter mile, climb the fence and step right off the brink. Chances are I’d get to thinking on the way about this hill, the bobwhite, the little rusty red wagon you used to haul the firewood in, how everybody’s got this same damn beast inside them.”

Fantasy

Every day a different tree drops its leaves
to cover the slats of my deck. Yesterday, hickory,
today, sycamore leaves like brown palms
spread to hide the rust-glowing ghost stains
of your blood where it dripped on the stairs
I scrubbed months ago. Winter won't be cold
enough to freeze this memory: three a.m., squeezing
towels around your hand, walking on shards
of the lamp you smashed, a flower girl's white
petals – your face so surprised by what I had done.
Science says we choose mates in our brains'
reward centers, the shrewd parts where we measure
gains and losses; serotonin syruping our neural
passageways – honey licked off a lover's finger.
Tell me: did you ever want to climb out of bed,
walk to the lake, all the way to the end of a dock
and stand and slowly start emptying your pockets,
dropping everything in – your driver's license,
keys, cards, every dollar drifting down, every coin
plinking in and sinking, your right shoe, your left,
then your coat, shirt, jeans, down to your last stitch,
then cast, too, your own body in to be baptized,
gasp up a new person, no one you remember,
all your wants and wrongs undone, and come
back to bed with something different, something kind
to give? Even animals fall in love, choose one
to want above all others, if only for the moment
of copulation. I did, I did. My house is cold.
With each leaf that falls, I whisper *sorry, I'm sorry.*

On Roadkill

Steve said, "I'm so tired of looking at roadkill I believe
I'll walk. As a young man horseback
I could say I'd eaten of everything I'd killed,
excepting the odd armadillo and old Ruby,
who it fell to me one awful morning to shoot
when she drug herself up half froze and bested
by coyotes. There's no honor in dying
by the tire, nor in the secret councils of buzzards
laid open by the road; even a shot dog
ends better. I fear to sit at my table in glory
spread rich with every life I took in passing,
every squirrel, rabbit, sparrow, every Junebug
ever squashed in my hurry fried up with gravy,
a wry recompense for owning the earth."

The Real Eden

Soldiers searching the dead men found only a pair of scissors, an identification card, some pens and three cucumbers.

Dave Philipps, The New York Times

I slept one summer with a gun under my pillow,
cocked, loaded with bullets designed to butterfly,
a lump of certainty to seal my hatchback life.
I was living on burned beans then, whatever
meager meal I could summon from a can and a campstove.
Nights I ate saltines and read ecology by flashlight,
about the first apples, how they grew on high
and rocky slopes near where the real Eden
could very well have been, how they tasted,
not of apples so much as of vetiver, lanolin,
the terrified breath of some shaggy animal
just getting used to being hunted by men just getting used
to needing to hunt, the garden guarded
by retaliatory mandate: angels' flaming swords.
Fire is sometimes an order. *Fire* means *hunger*,
means *mine, need, fire*, the threat of something
sharp and sudden, the trembling
way we love what we love. I want to live one day,
just one, by the strength of the honorable vegetable,
which can come back by flower and sunlight –
even the apple, even the fleshy abandon of fruit can come back.
Just one day our life is not a blooming stain.
Just one day we don't have to conceal what we carry.

On Teeth

Steve said, "I have always had remarkable teeth. Talked-about teeth, you might say, wondered-at, the few times your ma sent me to the dentist; straight across the front and white, though I chewed awhile years back, still white as the underside of a deer's tail, and never chipped, not even that time Bill knocked me out at Edna's. You remember the other night, when it thundered shotgun strong and we thought we might should head for the cellar? Well, I'd been outside talking as I watered after supper, praying you might say, more like sassing the Almighty for all I thought He could yet do for me. *I'm tired of these same lessons, Lord, I said, these same hard clocks in the teeth, feels like waking up a boy every damn day for forty years!* I was steaming and splashing that hose all over the tomatoes, hitting the leaves like you shouldn't and stomping on the peas. Wasn't too long before those clouds blew right over the top of us and the lightning started streaking down over toward Chessman's and I was scared, just knowing I'd brought judgment down on my arrogance and got you all in the way, sure He was just about to turn me on my ear. But all we got was a little shower and an awful noise as if to say, a man with perfect teeth ought not to ask for more."

To the Man My Father Picked Up Walking Down Highway 9

How did you get this far south, to this little-driven backwoods stretch by Twin Creek? Then again, it's January: yours must be the mind of the starling, the Canada goose, wise to winter farther down, these nights only just bearable in a sleeping bag. You could have been lying, god knows, but it would be a strange one—a young man walking across the country, New York to California, and nothing else to say about it—other lies would garner more from strangers, so I believe you when you say you only have an honest dollar fifty to your name—was it Andrew? To need to strike out like that, at our age, is not so crazy. I know that heave when you catch your own eye in a mirror, the compulsion to leave the houses and the people for blanketing silences of all the trees and hills your body becomes part of, the very heat of the earth your own core, lying alone in a tent on a shelf of rock you found a little off the road, the starlit skyfuls you drink to cool down, and the idea of ocean, that only the cold Pacific licking at your toes can stop you, young and strong, and when you get there, maybe not even that. I imagine a woman back east, some city girl you tell yourself you don't belong to, never did, the way you clench your jaw walking when you think of her and how you've tried to measure up, the way you've smeared the face of goodness with handfuls of rotten huckleberries, the small animals you must now feed the mountain lion in your heart that is stalking, stalking you across America. I know you are not a revolutionary, transcendentalist, or pilgrim. I know you better than that, my cousin, my brother, my husband, my self. I could give you messages to take west with you: give my love to Guadalupe, Moab, Hayden Creek, or Grant, depending where you pass. This is your walk. You're as stuck in it as I am here. But there's a book I loaned a man from Boise and never got back you ought to read, a few Cascadian passes so snowed in I never made it over, a keyhole in a cliff in Texas I'd like you to watch a sun rise through.

Bethel

I sleep in the loft where the heat gathers up,
leave the ceiling fan on, say my prayers
not just because it is my father's house –
petitioning, petitioning. The beat of the fan
bores into my fading, like the pant
of a tired dog, the locusts'
metallic cadence up by the pond,
the creak of ladder-rungs
someone is climbing, strong of purpose –
a body going up, a spirit coming down – the pulse,
a thousand pleas. My bones will ache
in the morning; this pillow-stone quakes
please, please, please, please.

On a Wedding

Steve said, "I once watched two barn swallows marry.
A shy little waltz, sniff and flutter in a ring of yellow
elm leaves till I couldn't tell them apart.
They hopped and chirped a joyous while,
then away they flew to nest under an eave somewhere.
Son, to give a girl away is like walking downstairs
with old knees; any way is hard to bend.
Once a woman's eyes travel out they'll hang on none
but the blessedest of men. I remember your mother's
lilac eyes, those evenings before you two came,
when I'd have the fire stoked for night
and she was waiting on the taters to fry; she'd settle
down at that rheumy old piano we got from her aunt
to feel out a hymn or two, 'How Great Thou Art'
skimming our thin ceiling like a flitting bird."

In Private

There are days my hands still won't make the music
I spent so many months harrowing the neighbors
to learn, so many off-notes, so much frustrated banging
of keys, only recently approaching what he might have meant
with this nocturne—slight nausea of the pause
between the climax and the darker, minor
finish where I take a sip of wine and glance
at my gown bunched on the floor. Never play Chopin
fully clothed, something in me says, or sober.
Some despairs keep creeping back and if I want
to really make a night of it, I can chop up an onion,
innocent vegetal tears slipping down to salt my soup.
We touched each other like his triplets where they climb
to the major, three against two—should sound like
one lit-tle pig—specters now, anecdotal, as parents
when they met, or lovers' lovers from before,
characters in legends not our own, that shuddering *cadenza*
just before the end, your purple mouth on mine—
but maybe we can still be friends?
Perhaps just now you're making something in your kitchen,
something with onions, your square hands
delicate with knife, hesitant as mine over the keys
when I am so convincingly alone with my man.
I comfort myself: you were good but no Chopin.

Flawed, Brother

Sometimes, walking train tracks,
you come across a turtle shell,
hollow, bleached by many days
of hard sun into a white half
moon, far from any crossroads
where gravel levels with the rails.
You hold it up, see daylight
coming through the tunnel
of the head- and tail-holes,
pity the thing that died
weak-legged and bloody-beaked,
walled into a gleaming eternity
that is not yours. Lie down
between the tracks, breathe in
the rust and tar, stare up
into the sun, so small and white
it's like a pearl that forms
on the tip of your tongue.
Revel in your largeness,
in your capacity for compassion,
like your friend who, dropping
acid, followed a turtle
for an hour on hands and knees
then turned it over to find
in nail polish on the tic-tac-toe
of its belly *how's my driving?*

Hail Mary

It has been hard for all of us.
The hens refuse to sleep in their coop,
roosting instead atop the fence,
in low branches of the tree
beside the fence. Each night
I scoop them up, squawking
and flapping, and put them to bed,
whispering into their floppy combs
“don’t worry, girl” and “you’re so pretty.”
I’ve clipped their wings
almost to the quick. I’ve read
the news: of war, of discovery
of particles ever more minute,
of the inconceivable coming true.
I’ve wanted to be loved
with the gentle regard
the consciousless deserve:
so full of grace, snuck up on,
warm under the wings.

Paternoster

What I heard was crickets, frogs and crickets,
and your milk cow bawling for your hands,
and what I fear is that my heart buzzed up then
like a yellow jacket from those blooms
and departed your house forever.

I'd hidden myself in your blackberry rows,
but it's not our family way to go looking
when someone's wandered off,
as your father used to do right at suppertime.
You're the only one supper waits for now.

I know that you too have prostrated yourself,
one ear to the ground, one to the sky,
and waited for a word that doesn't come.
Faith, the thinnest of walls between us,
means every night at sundown you return

and your boots leave tracks of mud on the floorboards
beneath your chair at the head of the table,
while I fly far over the graying hills, sheltering
in caves and stream beds that echo endlessly
with a voice that sounds like yours.

The Creek Place, Mount Olive, Arkansas

*Being of a restless mind, he and three other families took up the journey
through the wilderness on pack-horses, and made the last stand on the
White River.*

Jeffery family historical document

Without telling anyone, I wandered off, not far,
at dusk, walked the edge of the hayfield ankle-deep
in spring floodwaters, watching for the cottonmouth,
rounded up the edge of the fledgling orchard, and stopped
to view the last clementine bite of a soaked sun
pinking everything but the silhouette of a solitary trough,
unused, in the middle of the field. It came to me then,
in that deep furrow of the day, how every disappearing
mauve blade of fescue, the hulking barn half fallen in
with age, the salty trough, the black blurs of calves
and mothers trudging to their rest behind me
evidenced a notorious longing to set out west
and lay in somewhere, the same longing of Jehoiada
of Carolina, our venerable forefather
to whom we owe this land, his sons, the same
of my mother's people quickly dying off
somewhere in rows of Kentucky corn, the same
of my own father, his ragged boxblade, the same longing
of myself, trying hard to hold the dear weight in my hands,
perhaps the same even of the dog at my foot
chewing on a deer bone, in whose minds heaven is only this
meager cultivation, the precious tendril, branch roaring
in its fullness, heated mulch of decay, the redwing
that often graces the cedar fencepost by the vegetable patch,
where doomsday is only the leaf-roller's hunger,
and glory is only the sharp ravine by the hill atop
which Jehoiada's headstone tilts westward after a rain.

Husbandry

that you might
husband the rabbits
of tall grass and hutch
husband the water
of well and branch and cloud
husband the husband rooster
his harem of hens
husband the howl which threatens
from the hem of the hill
husband the disc and the plow before it
rusting now behind the shed
husband the shed, the wood,
the fire's pine breath
husband even the ridgeline
that husbands your heart as you
husband the house place, the house
the heat inside
whatever glimmers here
whatever ever died
husband the merciful hover
of swift and terrible power
over every breathing, browning thing
you have, for now,
dominion over

I Hate Kentucky

I have come to resent it for its liquor, serum of delight,
corn mash greening me up hot nights the Holy Spirit himself

stirs the saturated air into a pollen-thick soup of memory;
for its men, its poets, their black-earth fingerprints

ghosting every page; for its men, its be-grimaced farmers,
Uncle Gertie scolding me for the empty pop bottle I threw in the fire –

sure enough, he jumped high when the lid exploded at his foot;
for its fields of tobacco, which haunted my granddad late into his disease,

when all he could remember was the breeze on his hands in the rafters
where he and his brothers balanced on two-by-fours, hanging the leaves,

broad as a woman's hips, to dry; for the stoic frame of a house on a hill
where I learned a death amounts to creamed corn and "Rock of Ages"

a capella in the sitting room; for the hundred thirty acres there I stand
to inherit, planted all in soybeans, bones – another place

to keep from dying, another spot to try to keep green.
Yes, I hate Kentucky, how it has come to mean

a loamy secret, an eight-part doxology over chicken fried chicken
making its way upward, raw pink kittens hiding blind in the barn,

all the things I broke when I was drunk, this reedy regret,
this windbent whimper, this getting right with God.

Pew

*What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Robert Lowry, "Nothing But the Blood"*

At some point I stopped receiving communion,
sat pews away so my father wouldn't see
as I passed the plate without taking juice or cracker,
even sometimes pretended to swallow
on cue: for this is my body. For this is my blood.
I loved the way the purple dregs twinkled
when everyone lowered the plastic cups.

The problem with poetry is I want wine with it—
the problem with everything. My regular bar
has a pew against one wall where I sit
reading, rolling cigarettes, eyed by
and eyeing the other suppliants.
The bartender begins to set out paraffin candles.

My father nails a board to a board, calls it a table.
Calls it a hogpen, a coop. Calls it home.
A wrist nailed to a board is called salvation,
and how right it feels, this hard wood against
my back, right as the drink on my tongue.
It's hard to call anything right
with nothing but this vocabulary of blood.

On Considering the Lily

Steve said, “Down at the mouth of Mill Creek,
Calvin Jones planted a garden in the same spot
seventy-five springs in a row,
lived on sweet potatoes all winter.

We used to find zucchini squash in paper sacks
waiting on our porch in July and August.

Calvin thought he heard the angels singing
when it was just him and guessed
they were shyer than the word let on –
it wasn't a hallelujah so much as a sober
why, why, why spreading over the green beans.

This he told me on his tin porch
while a black butterfly, contemplating
a dry breeze, perched on his hat-brim.”

Summer Love 2015

Maybe it's the recent solstice, the way the animal body feels the shift to lengthening nights;

maybe it's all this rain, or the heat, sweaty sleep with a box fan blowing across the bed;

maybe it's the convergence of Jupiter and Venus, meeting to recreate for the first time in two thousand years the big star the magi followed east, may be really a sign to walk;

maybe it's my married friend confessing over cocktails she's been faking it eight years, maybe just the cocktails, the bitters, the ice;

maybe it was Saturday night, the smoke and barbecue, the drunken hug from a friend of a friend as I left, his right hand cupping my head, fingers twined almost unnoticeably in my hair;

maybe the pride parade on Dickson Street, the divine hand of the Supreme Court and all those gray-haired couples strolling finally smiling hand in hand, the green jelly bracelet a queen tossed me from the sunroof of a baby blue Camaro;

maybe it's these earthworms underfoot, crawling up through cracks in cement, part of the life of the rain, then getting burned flat bloody purple when the sun comes out for just an hour in the afternoon as they struggle back towards dirt;

or maybe the mulberries crushed on the sidewalk under the trees like home-canned-jam murder scenes, like a spot in the highway where another suicidal yearling deer's been hit.

When Rolling a Cigarette

Be aware. Be self-
aware. Mark the edges
of your corporeal self.
Remember you are not air-
tight, that your molecules
have space between them
the air gets in through.
See yourself.
Be the backward person
staring from the glass.
See, it is impossible
not to catch your eye.
And now you may.
And now you may
exercise the dexterousness
of your god-given limbs,
leaning to your work
in dim candlelight, loving
what yellows and cracks,
the skin of your smoking fingers,
the skin of your grandmother's
busted feet, loving
what settles into cracks.
Let your fingertips meet,
thumb and index,
just like this,
the tube so tight
it won't go out.
The secret is in
the audacity of the roll,
be brave, be gentle now,
tongue-tip to gum, but don't be afraid
of losing some.
Be comforted by the smell
you know well,
dried tobacco,
rafters you climbed
years ago in barns long empty
of all but your grandfather's
boyhood ghost.
He'd have hung
his head in shame
to see you smoke.
He'd have never hung

another leaf.
Even so.
To be permeated
by history
is unavoidable.
Strike the match,
light the tip,
inhale, inhale—

On a Close Call

Steve said, "I've not encountered many spirits here,
but John Gentry tells of a time when one
barreled out and barely missed him.
He headed up with his shovel and his ax
to dig for lead he heard was on his place,
and sure enough he found it, that metal detector
screeching like a cat on fire over
a sunk-in spot in the glade, so he set in.
When he stopped to drink some tea,
here it come sudden out of the trees –
a paint horse, unsaddled, rushing him at a hard gallop!
Only checked at the last. 'Didn't make a sound' he said.
'And nothing stirred around it.
In its eyes I saw it was a warning.'
He took off so fast he left his shovel
standing in the dirt. Don't go digging that ore, son,
nor the story that goes with it. Korea missed me
by the same hair that Indian ghost horse missed John."

Egg, Cracked

I dream demolished eggs, the color of old lace,
some almost pink, their own kind of flesh
become a sticky mash of shells and hay in the body-hollow
of the nestbox, or hurled with dexterous purpose
at the fence and dripping translucent mucus down the boards,
even wetting the guilty mouths: orange yolk dribbling
the soft white chin of the dog—she has been known
to suck—or worst, the beaks themselves, for chickens,
needing calcium, will cannibalize. The nightmare:
yellow-jammed beak still clucking, not knowing
what it's done, its hunger, or ardor, or pride –
who ever knows what they want when they cry?

Everything is too easy to get to the inside of.
I rush at dawn to gather what eggs there are
in the apron of my shirt, to keep them safe, scrub
off the shit and straw, dried patches of other fluids,
tuck them in trays to be eaten for my breakfasts.
Delirious in his meal, the mosquito on my wrist
does not see the approach of my god-finger
which presses, precisely, reveals my own red smear.
I crush tea-stained lime deposits from the kettle
into senseless milky runes in the clay cup, or summon
a lover to come, press lips to my clavicle, my nipple,
to shackle myself to the filament of this day.
How of water, tooth and pulse, how about to burst we are.
How at the instant's mercy, our mouths at its throat.

On Crossing Over

Steve said, "I ain't long for this world, son,
but then I never was. Threescore and ten's barely
time to scratch your name in the dirt –
why, we were building fence in April!
John Gentry died one time before he died –
did he ever tell you that, up in his old woodshop?
He said it was the only nap he ever needed,
one he was sorry to wake up from.
I used to think the Lord lived way out there,
spinning around in the dark and laughing
to Himself from time to time, or sighing.
You tell your sister what I said –
there ain't no veil, no spell to walk
to reach it. He's right here, breathing
close as my hand is to your cheek."

Dammed

In June, we waded in the shallows of the White,
white feet so cold I thought we might
get stuck if we stayed like that,
turned to other stones the water
makes its way around. I took
you for a bird, a little thing warbling –
play me a song your father loves,
I might have said. You told me to put
a rock in my mouth. You told me
to take my clothes off. Why do I always
do what you say and not what you want?
I've heard you can hold a rock on your tongue
to fool you out of thirst awhile.
I've heard this river used to be warm,
full of mussels, bass and crawdads.
I know it's time that petrifies, not cold.
Your voice would have reached clear to the top
of the ridge, broken me as your body
has not been able to. I took
a tiny stone and swallowed it.
I wished a flood, a river whale,
a sleeping mud turtle whose back
we stood on, any impossible monstrous
force would rise and take us under.

The Way a Poem Comes

i.

From up the creek, Eldridge's way,
following the water as it bends
around low bluffs and pastures edged
by cattle paths and pine, to where
it widens out at the low-water bridge,
turns, flutters up the fencerow to Palestine,
past the half-empty can of beer that always sits
on Larry Gwaltney's memorial bench,
to light soundless as a finch
on a wavering branch of the young oak
that watches, season by season,
over your grave.

ii.

In my father's eye when he turned on me
after you had broken my mother's lamp
leaning back in an easy chair and I hollered,
thoughtless at seven, "Ooh, Mama's gonna be
so mad!" and you fled the house, the bent
shade and shards, climbed in your gray
pickup and drove off.

iii.

Twanging through the thumby way
you played guitar when we could get
you to sing Marty Robbins tunes,
dead lover ballads like you did with Dad
that last Christmas and we cackled hard
at all the murdering heartbreak songs you knew.

iv.

Like a graceless heron flopping up
off a log and bobbing till it catches
wind and flies upriver to another
log to stand one-legged on.

v.

In your square clefted chin that's his and mine,
the way his mother says when you were young,
handsome as Elvis, you'd sit and snap peas
for her to can, or whatever needed to be done
with the corn.

vi.

From the pit where every shovelful of dirt
thumped on the flimsy box we buried you in
like hail on the side of a woodshed.

In the figure of the ghost of rising smoke
from the fire he made when he wandered out that night
and burned the ropes they used to lower you down.

On the Blackberry

Steve said, "Now I wouldn't call it a sin
to eat a blackberry on a July afternoon,
but I'll allow there's danger in that dark fruit,
sun-hot, sweet and addled, swole up so fat
the vine might have been snakebit. You break
the skin of one and hope the rapture don't come
at the biting-down moment, black juice
and your own thorn-drawn blood mingled
on your tongue: that taste is the sun
behind a woman's shape walking, her long skirt
brushing the grasstops; boy, don't you wonder!
I learned intemperance from the blackberry,
the skinny-dipping berry, the summer vine,
the last hope, a sly wink from above."

Whiskey Man

A man without a taste for whiskey
is still a man, though you'd not know it
around here, a pint of Jack stashed
under every pickup seat just behind the pistol
like some big secret they think they're keeping.
Now, this is all hearsay 'cause ladies ain't invited
to those late-night poker-faced goings-on,
but Dave can't keep his mouth shut
when he gets misty of an evening.
The way he tells it, Gabe was helping his dad Mick
with the last cut of hay in September,
almost a year since Steve had died,
and come across a near-full handle
of Dickel in the corncrib. Mick told Gabe
put it back and don't tell nobody,
for God's sake, that was man stuff.
Gabe asked couldn't they at least tell Uncle Dave,
which Mick allowed they could, and there it sat
through the first few frosts 'til Christmas,
which was the first the boys all snuck off after supper.
Dave admits he never had a liking for the stuff
but he knew the last lips that touched the rim
were surely Steve's, so he rightly got the honor
of the first swig, at which he did not grimace, no sir,
not in front of Mick with his handlebar mustache,
nor Jake, Dave's son-in-law, whose navy days
had made a drinker of him, nor even Gabe,
who had a few more bales of hay to stack
before he'd be allowed a sip,
and by God not in front of Steve,
who Dave swore stood there plain as day
with his hands in his pockets
and moths flying at his snowy head.