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## Jarfly

Zachary Harrod  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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Jarfly

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

by

Zachary Don Harrod  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2014

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Davis McCombs, MFA  
Thesis Director

---

Geoffrey Brock, PhD  
Committee Member

---

Geffrey Davis, PhD  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

To look, through poetry, at the men my culture has produced. Formal decisions are unique to each poem which are arranged sonnets, couplets, quatrains, among other forms and free verse forms. Toxic masculinity is examined, as well as the people enabled, participating in, and victimized by that culture.

## **Dedication**

For Mike, Shelly, Zane, and Hailey Harrod

For the Costello family

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Autumn Begins in the Ozarks, *a week before the big game*

The river has spun itself into a hollow trough.  
Dinged up Fords with their wired-on mirrors convey them:  
the shirtless packs of cat-calling sons  
grown rugged with the October maples  
in their frayed unblooming.

The nose-guard chews a wad of sheep sorrel.  
The safety rubs rabbit fat over his groin  
and at Will Hutch's bonfire they shotgun  
cans of beer popped open on a goat's  
newly budded horns.

All week they've shot at the wild hogs  
that gouged the silt bank.  
Crows have become scabbards hung along branches—  
scrawny sacks of blood with black apple eyes  
whose high loft the boys traced with an iron-sight.

The preacher's daughter, handled roughly,  
speaks against the fullback the night before  
and the townsfolk, seething at the loss to Prairie Grove  
when the replacement fumbles the fourth quarter pitch,  
rail terribly against her slight body—

Therefore  
hope flits like a scaled thing  
in shrunken pools  
and on Sunday, a few cast lines instead of hymns  
tugging for anything worth cleaning.

Gallant

So Tony drank as much as he ever had. He was thrown from Brewski's and in that cellar dark of Dickson went whistling, lobbing *fucks* and *fuck y'all* at all the gallivanterers.

A few tried to follow him but he ran track and they were awfully drunk and stumbling too. He played at being a rat or a stray cat, scrounged in the trash, sifted

the passed-out pockets of frat brothers asleep on the tracks and clicked his heels against the street lamps and even though he didn't wear boots he sure wished

he had for it was a heel-clicking-kind of night. He lost one of his shoes and put a hole in his lucky sock. He didn't fight anyone. He didn't pick up the girl every-

one wanted who wanted him that night. He slunk home alone and I opened a picture from his roommate of their front porch with a shattered

grill; a busted fifth of Bulleit; their glass table in ruins; the jolly little text:

*Tony B. was here*

which we all laugh at now.

But Tony doesn't drink so much anymore which is alright (a little sad) seeing as we never knew what might happen even if we were to lose track of him as long as it was all good fun, as long

as nothing serious got misplaced or broken, like that ivory ashtray from Chicago, or a derby glass, or that slipper his ex-girlfriend had forgotten at his place a week before that night,

a day before she left the country  
and we snuck to the woods  
and he shot a gun for his first time  
saying *goddamn* and pumping his fist  
and parting the humidity with lead pellets.

I should have shouted

*Tony B. was here*

but all that hadn't happened yet and the coyotes  
who may have heard us were off licking their lovers  
in some den far from my friend  
posed with his stick of metal  
tenting that terrible heat.



Screen

We sit at plastic tables while the omelet workers  
flash their wares, yolking a sour slick of sun through the blinds.

Out back, past the ravine, the phlegmy river  
sludges its thick-throated questions  
through the roots  
of those oaks, doubled over and coughing up their leaves

which collect in drains  
to be raked out by a man in cover-alls we do not notice.

Car Chase in Backwoods Arkansas

A honk—the word *faggot* flung at our car  
with a flicked cigarette butt

from a dented-in gray Civic plastered with *EXTREMELY*  
*RIGHTWING* that we chase with your *Tonight*

*I will not be fucked with.*  
We leap ditches. We hit dirt.

The speed-trap town is lost  
between the hills and now we're past

the Pruett's where no cop will go.  
We return, as you drive, to our talk:

*He lied to me.* The bumpers nearly kiss.  
The Civic pulls out. *You know things*

*I don't tell my family.* The moon presses  
behind a crest—sudden dark except

for the slit of headlights and your teeth:  
*But he sure knew what he was doing down there.*

Up a steep stone drive—pit bulls, a metal  
complex with tarps tucked over the windows.

We park our cars: two pairs of angry  
men, chest-puffing, your arm

a rigid slip of metal grasping  
iron. A tarp pulls back—

a sleepy child framed in a window—  
—The slow gravel crunch of our departure.

The slow, silent drive until we pull off  
and pull from a jug you had stowed.

You point: *How about those two strange trees—*  
*lookin fit to kiss—* We leave. We don't hear

from each other until I get your text: *What did I miss?*  
and after my response—*What does that mean?*

a question that warrants an answer but, sodden  
with gin, with the distance of a pen, I fumble at the loose

ends of: So: backwoods car chases.  
So: a velocity un-accounting of curve

or tree or the hurtling ton  
of a word better left unsaid—

So: our strained tenderness  
or loss in a jar of 'shine between two men.

Dear Frank,

The honeysuckle has shredded this patch of woods,  
leaking its sweet juice like a siren song,  
imploring me to not take a hatchet  
to its proffered limbs. It's everywhere:  
a jumbled, delicious heap crowding the muck-filled  
cow ponds, tearing the barbed wire fence line to its knees.  
There are no empty roads here—they're busy  
with undergrowth, with possums and other ungainly  
nocturnals that paw at that week-dead mutt  
whose chest bulges with an impossible  
thump. I worry there is nowhere  
you haven't gone before me—everywhere  
your blue yodel like a rat chewing its way  
through what once was a heart.

## The Fishing Game

Sometimes it's called, "Catch a Fish, Drink a Beer" and it goes like this: backpack with a brick of Pabst that we shotgun after each fresh, flopping belly is pulled to shore, bashed on a rock, and placed between the remaining beers to keep cool.

Sometimes it's called, "Dodge the Lightning" and this one is a real hoot, though only available in a storm. It involves a flask of Fireball. It involves sloshing in the rain, chanting, rods extended like we're flipping the bird.

Our favorite is called "Trespassing." It ends when a man notices the two drunk strangers on his land. There's likely a chase. We likely reach the car before he does. Him, on his four-wheeler, hatchet raised above his head like a half-moon.

The way you win is always the same: surviving. And your friend survives, too. That's important to note: any casualty, the girls, even the dog you bring along, and "Game Over." The whole point is something to do with death, sure, but more so, I think, what comes quick before—

## Death of a Bull Rider

It was not Cowboy Terminator, the bull  
with the mean eye and the star-spangled  
scar on its flank, that did him in.  
In the dawn's wee light after a night  
of whiskey, it wasn't the .22 revolver  
he thought unloaded, its tubed coffin  
of rounds gleaming like a channel cat.  
The flinch that set off a trigger, the bullet  
that pierced Wild Jeff's pinky toe, not that.  
Not a terrified girl of seventeen trembling  
a shell into each barrel of the elephant gun  
she could barely lift, not him, on the other side  
of a jammed door he knifed, hoping  
to pilfer a little copper, thinking  
the trailer abandoned. It was not  
the lead slug goring a slash below his left  
nipple, or at the buck of the girl's chin  
against the grain of the handle  
when the smoke settled and she saw him  
strewn over her couch, his hair  
a yet wavering banner in the flash  
of the second muzzle. No. The room  
of strangers in suits and skirts  
filing into rows, or coughing politely  
into their elbows as a man leaned  
over a page. The barrel of the pen  
cocked in his hand. The ink,  
cool and unspent in its chamber.

## Dismantling White

*after J. Camp Brown*

White as the hatchet the wind takes  
to the white sycamores, slivering  
bark like wax paper. White as the tooth-  
pick dodging the white teeth between  
the pink-white lips of the man in a Stetson.  
White as the spit he hocks at the promise  
of trouble. White as the cuffs linked  
at his belt, white as the air his baton  
winnows. White as the rope in the rafters  
of a crumpled barn. White as the spots  
left unblemished in his smoker's lungs.  
White as a mattress where a white rag  
turned red, the white smell of bleach.  
White as the flash he topples a teacher with  
at a routine stop, white as the white lines  
on the road gripping a body: whited out.  
White as the spot where a verdict  
goes. White as smoke. White as soap.  
White as the hope he scrapes at, white  
as sin. White as snow that settles over  
white faces: white flakes witnessing white  
melt, thaw solving for what white is,  
isn't.

Two White Couples in NOLA, 1:00 a.m.

We file out of the city, open as a wound,  
into the dim light of *The John* where the seats  
are repurposed toilets and the crowd is not  
what we expected. We settle into a corner, secluded  
at first, but gradually warm past our discomfort  
and merge into the back room where a man  
named Ellis is having a sick run at Ping-pong.  
He befriends us after creaming me, whipping  
his paddle as fast as he can flash that knife  
from his pocket—already sprung—like a magic trick.  
He hands me what he calls his modified crow-  
bar—a soft fabric grip, smaller but easier  
to conceal—which I hold as he whups  
the opposition. He takes us outside where  
we lean against the brick and he passes  
around a joint, brown as a tiny loaf  
of bread. After I point worriedly to the two white  
cops posted at the entrance he laughs and produces  
a handful of weed from thin air and asks,  
“Now how did I get all this?” He boasts  
he hasn’t lost since Katrina—though he has  
had a few close calls. There is a whiff of trouble  
(Zo’s people say Ellis is running his mouth)  
and we order a car to leave. Ellis waits with us,  
calls me brother, and when I ask if he’ll be here tomorrow,  
he says “I sure hope so,” as the door to the bar closes  
off the crowd inside which I imagine still gathered  
at their various tables around their plastic cups  
thawing into tidy circles, wetting the wood and ash  
to which he returns and I, despite every promise  
and gesture of fraternity, do not.



## The Ritual

*Over there* slipped around the edges  
of the conversation like a nipping fly  
I never could quite get the sight of,  
not then when I was twelve and had glanced  
my bike off his bumper and our neighbor,  
ten beers deep on his porch, was milking  
it for a check. *Over there* he would have solved this  
differently. My father frowned over the bills  
he pulled from his wallet and led me away  
as the old man tucked them in the pocket  
over his heart. That house became a no-fly zone—  
the man on his lawn chair, to be avoided  
as he crumpled aluminum can after aluminum  
can, listening to his clanging music. I knew  
I should not have gone over to him  
when he gestured a year later, our past  
confrontation forgotten. He fumbled  
several albums from his garage, said *Over there*  
these kept him going. I asked him why he missed it.  
He laughed. He pulled down a shoe box  
full of ash, told me it contained his prized  
baseball card collection. He remembered the day  
he heard he'd be deployed. He went to the woods,  
dug a six-foot hole, watched each card flake  
into a brown sheet. I could almost see the dark  
flecks settling over his eyes as he opened a Zippo  
to emphasize his point—that quick flick,  
that single dagger of flame.

Dear Frank,

I've dreamt this goblet of wine that nestles  
next to a tulip. One petal peels itself  
from the extended stem and floats now  
in the glass. That's the thing—you see  
a stretch of hills yawning from the dirt path.  
You want to pad along their untilled cheeks,  
lose your shoe's sole against the jutting quartz  
and freshly exposed shale. The sun is just peaking  
the rim and everything is that opaque green,  
the light barely coming through, setting  
a flame to every growing thing. But there's  
this old, rusted bar across it all. It says  
do not enter in black letters. It says  
do not enter and you do not believe it  
but the moment you try to cross you wake  
to your white comforter, hanging  
from the edge of your bed like a ghost.

## Angel

Beneath the blazing fixtures, fixing a hangover  
with burgers and coffee at Mickey D's, I'm next  
to a woman's leather jacket I have no business having  
when in he flaps—memory all shot to hell,  
shouting loudly to the cashier that she must not  
forget his extra pickles. His white hair tufts  
like a patchy cloud beneath his cap and his harp-  
string lips hardly move when he smiles.  
He proclaims, with a wink, he never planned  
on getting so old—*Damn inconvenient*, he harks,  
then grabs his crotch, complaining that the piping's  
all busted and leaking *and ain't no plumber  
can fix* that. My Big Mac squats on my tray  
like a toad and he crouches next to me, holding  
forth greasy sandwich paper bunched in wads.  
You won't make shit doing that, he heralds,  
pointing to my poems. He commands me  
to make some rich friends or to marry  
some oil-man's daughter. I hide my ringed  
hand below the table and nod along. A tiny trumpet  
bound to his wrist sounds off. He turns his back to me  
with a *Do you mind?* handing over a crank and pointing  
to where his wings latch right below his shoulder blades:  
two oiled pinions that gleam in the last light  
from the 24/hr window like a tattered drape  
where flesh meets flame.

### Imagining My Brother's Last Good Day

He finds two frozen lizards in a brick  
and attempts to thaw the death from them.  
He prays, even, asks me to hold his hand  
and join him knowing I can refuse him  
nothing, now. He sends me to the garden  
for fennel and when I return, claims  
they are singing, those cold lumps in his palm.  
That night we share a dream: the lizards dancing,  
us dancing with them, a parquet floor  
between empty rooms emerging like a gas lamp  
slowly winding on. Lungs pump, tiny mouths  
hum a scaly tune, eyes roll backward, side  
to side, frantic to be alive.

The next morning he forgets them and when  
I return from the hospital they are still lying there  
beside the brick, huddled husks against the frost.

## Demons

I drive back to that tin-roofed concrete slab  
of a building to face mine. The gravel lot,  
the trailer our preacher camped in for a time,  
whisper-singing out of tune praise songs  
into an old tape recorder, as had been commanded  
in a dream. This is the church where I loved  
a boy who later would hang himself  
with a garden hose because he could not stop  
touching his sisters' bodies. When it rained  
it sounded like hail. We believed, then, in brim-  
stone. We would circle and place our hands  
upon our friends, confess to masturbation  
and other hidden things. We prayed away  
cancer and early onset arthritis. Once,  
it was my sister's friend in the center.  
She was disabled, her hands and feet  
reversed on their limbs at birth, straightened  
through multiple surgeries and, we were told,  
divine intervention, for she should not have lived  
as long as she already had.

*In our center*

*she shivers. It has been at least an hour, her body  
the vessel our hands conduct the Lord into.  
A healing light is blue, we are reminded. We all  
see the blue light except for one of the elders  
who has noticed the shivering and, he regrets  
to inform us, there is something ill at work here.  
Something we did not expect. A new trial:  
that old inhabitant of swine, frothing, to be cast out,  
whose name we will not now utter—"This child,"  
he moans in holy dread—"is afflicted."*

Dear Frank,

The sky—whiskey drunk—twirls like the slow blade  
of a porch fan dragging itself through the dust-flecked night  
and there you are, finger corking that chest wound,  
a crow perched on your shoulder gargling blood  
like it's seltzer. "Hey crow," I say, "where'd you get the juice?"  
It levels its gawker at my heart, cocks, "around." Frank,  
I have no pucker in my chest, but sometimes I'll wake  
in the middle of the night, dreams around my neck like a wet  
noose, a poem pecking free from my mouth, its lines unclenching  
a talon at a time, dark as ink in the larger dark:



Jarfly

*Prelude: The Black Dog of County Road 310*

where, between the pale sycamores,  
bats dart—their cries untangling  
among the husks of cicadas strung  
like dull bulbs along the branches;  
where the knobbed white oak taps  
its dead bark free against the wind  
like a man ashing his pipe; the same  
white oak where, it's said, that dark bitch  
harried Old Beardon; where his daughter's  
bones still lie; where cows line the road,  
licking their nostrils, not heeding  
any yellow-jawed fury whose eyes,  
on a dark night, might glint like half-  
dollar coins between the trumpet creepers;  
where they say he sat, shucking his heart,  
laughing his teeth loose as the black dog  
paced the forest's edge—where she now  
prowls past the barns and fences, shadows  
that protrude like broken fingers  
through the dust of her mongrel steps;  
where he could do nothing, though his chest—  
strange vault—should crack; near where  
the run-down shack still smells of burnt  
sassafras and boiling peach skins, guarded  
by the sooty flash of tooth and fur—



*Part One*

I. [*Camille's Conception*]

Beneath the falling of the sickle moon,  
the witch-woman of the shack whispers  
to Old Beardon, prone on her straw mattress:

*Mark the hollering of jarflys.*

He consults her again—the cows  
have been letting blood into their milk.  
*Who's suffered?* she asks. He knuckles  
his chin, contemplates the many toads his son,  
Jack, caught with his foot and splayed  
over a stump, or the scabbed cat whose tail  
he wore as a talisman; the skewered skinks  
and mice strewn about the field like broken  
dolls.

He folds, upon her advice, seven stones  
into his palm and tosses them over his shoulder  
into the empty well where they flash like gems.  
The next swish of cream whitens against  
the clumped straw.

Now July, and Jack, upon  
Old Beardon's knee as the jarflys' gravel inflections  
thread the night, watches his sister enter the world  
pink and yowling.

II. *[Un/Named]*

Autumn now and Beardon directs  
Camille to the spindly insects wobbling  
over the shovels and hoes, croaks:  
“granddaddy-long-legs.” Jack, his eye  
to the tool-shed’s slat, has heard them  
called other ways; is it “Harvestman”?  
A harmless speck amid the tumblings  
of itself? or the Crane-fly, hawking  
mosquitoes in the mug? Devil’s horse,  
Cellar Spider, yellow-abdomened, clenching  
thing—and he shivers to think of some  
unnamed, poison-pouched slouching,  
its shadow flung against the boards—  
As the day dims the dreams return:  
those needled knees kissing his lips,  
web slung like a gown trailing  
from the doorway that divides his room  
from hers—

III. *[Apotrope]*

Jack wades into the pond's slop,  
submerges his hands in the tangled  
squirm of rubbery bodies. Turkey  
vultures scream overhead, dark shadows  
scrawling their death-knell above  
the box-elders. He counts the tadpoles  
as they clink into a milk pail and roast  
against the metal sides. He takes  
a cottonmouth, snaps its peculiar, rolling  
head and hangs it from a bodark's limb.  
He plops a line, liver-baited and tense,  
runs his fingers against its slack,  
and feels the tug of the pink lipped fish  
and the blood-crunch of the setting  
hook. Later he'll hang them  
above Camille's crib, a catch scaled  
against witchery—a precaution he deems  
necessary after he propped himself  
against a tree and searched for God  
in the corners and ends of things.

IV. [*Camille, from the Hayloft*]

From the peeking spot, atop  
the hay stacked like soft blocks  
of gold against the barn's southern  
wall, Camille searches the planks  
for where the tree's knot once spiraled.  
She watches Jack who has a stick  
in hand, twisting the morning's paper  
into a bludgeon, who whistles  
as a bull rams against a cow  
loosening her hide's dust  
into the air.

Later Camille sneaks  
to the pasture in only her shifts,  
pats the poor ol' heifer to the cow's  
low complaints. The moon emerges  
from her shroud of oaks and Camille  
gathers a song in her throat, alone  
among the night's tresses.

V. [*The Way She Dressed*]

Camille pines after a new dress—  
 not the tattered-overlarge cowls  
 of flannel or the sacks as prickly  
 as the cockle-burs she plucked  
 so often from her hair. She finds  
 in the remains of her mother's shack  
 an old script for a spell: *Place  
 a monarch in one's mouth, chew  
 the dusty wings, roll the obsidian  
 clicking legs along one's tongue.  
 Weave honeysuckles with river-reeds  
 while chanting the following  
 incantation:*

*yellow and red  
 'til king be dead  
 then spin to know  
 the weed to sew!*

The sweet  
 smell and surging insects work  
 their magic—mud splatters  
 her legs and raggedy dress  
 as she dances along the earth's  
 swampy spine. Jack finds her  
 in such a state that he hitches  
 the cart to drive her to town  
 where, with smiling mischief,  
 she finds her butterfly gown.

VI. [*Sin Eater*]

Dirt, riven from the flint escarpments,  
coats the doors and windows and Jack  
wonders if the fields will stop when he does—  
or if the corn will grow and rot then bleed  
deeper than the chert spade-head he found  
there last Spring. Old Beardon taught him  
to make a catch-all for his sin: place  
a boot beneath a peach tree to soak up  
mis-deeds along with the rain. Then, per  
each trespass, take a peach, ripened  
and bruised nearly to dirt, and drive it  
with a nail into the tree's bark. Now Jack  
plants another boot in the acres  
expanding westward to the jaw-bone hills,  
filling the land with leather soles  
caught in sin and stone. As the wind  
furrows the silt he fears he may uncover  
his own half-face, grey-flecked, lipless  
beneath a broken spade. He hammers  
another nail into the fruit tree but it does  
not seem enough, that weight of cool iron  
in his hand.

VII. *[Jack Examines Camille]*

He is a crowd of shapes  
in the twilight.  
Brittle chin-hairs of a goat,  
half-brother,  
weirdo in the doorframe,  
he watches  
her, a cottonmouth loose  
near her feet.  
He watches, choked among  
the reeds,  
cursive in the dust, piling stones  
against his sin.  
Crouched behind a cow, dressed  
in a coffee-  
stained dress and long-John's,  
she sinks  
against the naked tree.

She will rise in the morning, her dress  
filled with holes  
through which light wavers.

VIII. *[Misconception]*

By the workings of larvae  
within the willow leaves,  
she knows. A winter of ice—  
the shack—old slave quarters  
she tucks away in. There  
she finds her mother's brush,  
an old hair coiled like a canebrake  
between the bristles. She's stowed  
a horse and wrapped a week's  
worth of biscuits and bacon  
in a rag—but she also knows:  
Jack can follow. Thus, a ritual  
to provide a convincing corpse:  
    blood of a grackle  
    a moldy peel,  
    a pullet's foot,  
    old bones  
from the plot out back, all  
into a cauldron. Then an item  
costing flesh and blood.  
She brews squawroot soup  
to pull it off. She weeps, knifing  
the mattress as it bursts to dirt:  
a heap of pale, tangled limbs  
with Jack's eyes.





*Part Two*I. [*Camille*]

Old Lear Beardon lingers in a bad way, squatted roadward  
 with tobacco-tongued men of stone who never speak.  
 He claims to hear his daughter's tune uncurl itself,  
 a wind that never rises or stirs the sycamore's fingers.  
 Others swear it off: "deranged dog," "queer varmint,"  
 nature's tune, mind-bent into melody; maybe a wolf  
 that paws out the night, howling, howling—"but never,"  
 they say, "a human voice to be heard." The road hangs  
 limp and empty: no hazy specter—no heel-bit dust  
 kicked by a dear-legged foot, never a fool child dancing  
 in its ditch. Old Beardon whittles, scrapes, tooth  
 his wood porch, gnawing the hours, peeling them back—  
 back from an empty bed—her sun-dressed belly  
     her white-bellied smile  
     gaped wide  
         again—no—  
         never.

II. [*Jack and the Lost Heifer*]

A low moaning in the night:  
*Westward* says the harvestman's  
thinly bending knees as it bounces  
along the crouching bunches of fescue.  
The spit in his palm harkens to that same  
dying light through which the hills  
grayly poke and there she is, eyeing  
everything at once, slouched in a ravine,  
her briar-caught hooves shoveling  
clods of mud and stone. He glimpses  
a face in the tree—does that grinning  
knot of bark condemn him? The sap  
has spilt like old blood, dark  
and hardened, retaining a dull glimmer  
of moon where the afterbirth has settled  
in the soil beneath the low-hung  
pawpaw. He puts the heifer on a lead  
with a “here girl,” and the words  
are a shotgun in the night's side.

III. [*Jack, Now*]

He saw the moon, yellow  
as a busted casket and knew  
Camille wouldn't rest easy—  
he saw her everywhere:  
a pear in hand, complexioned  
like her cheek, the turnips  
tucked in their sacks of dirt  
like the weathered sockets  
of her eyes, grubby roots dangling,  
when plucked, like grave worms.  
He frequented that hollow oak  
to make sure things were as he'd left them:  
her bones piled neatly, tooth-white  
against the wood, moths sputtering  
in and out of existence as Jack  
shouldered the night, a lantern  
sweeping away the patch of dark  
just before him.

*Camille Rides Away, an Afterword*

The clouds, storm-bent, cackle  
 in their cheeks as her stallion,  
 its snout hot and heavy, stomps  
 the gravel path. A reed juts between  
 the horse's mandible for reins  
 and the flanks chomp against  
 her legs, a warring drum, in her  
 hair a screech-owl's feather.

*I am the creek princess,  
 stolen bride to the sun,  
 lover to the river  
 and its tossing.*

She embraces the dip and war-like  
 heave: *sword on bone, splintered  
 shield and tongue, bloodied  
 to a woman's work.* She imagines  
 her boot between the sun's teeth.  
 He might laugh until she bashes  
 in his head and scatters the bits  
 of skull over a fire. *I need no lords  
 attending—here, my own lance.*  
 She gallops down County Road  
 310, a fanged face, like a familiar,  
 scouting the path ahead.



## Vampire

There's one, I've been told, works as an English teacher down Greenland way. Each time she reaches into her purse, that leather wing, you can hear the jingle of pills. She hangs from the twisted remains of the jungle gym the ice storm of '09 tore down. She hones her teeth against the quarters the teenagers pay in, tonguing their tiny doses of immortality.

Sometimes, I suspect my uncle. Pasty, squinting through any day-time gathering, hardly articulate, his room a cave of empty bottles that clatter like bones. What he slurps down, as essential as blood: the last of my grandmother's medicine, something tender and flowing straight from my momma's heart. But when my cousin shouldered him home from a coven's lair, I saw my uncle rail thin, wrinkled, looking about sixty instead of thirty-five. And we all know vampires don't age—never die.

### Rising Early, Hungover

I wake with a mind to walk away the day,  
search for my socks, discover my shoe  
under the bed, beneath my wife's arm  
locked in its sleepy way. The door unplugs  
from the jam with a sigh and the almost sun  
stretches its toes, lighting the startled flight  
of a robin from porch to gutter. I read a poem  
as I walk and am amazed at how loud  
it all becomes—rabbits thieving the neighbor's  
vegetable garden with crashing paws; the squirrels  
squawking and tumbling among the shingles.  
A basset hound howls half-hearted and lonely  
from behind a fence as the garbage collectors  
seem to drop everything and as hugely as possible.



## Lottery

The man in coveralls scoots through a vent-shaft, scraping up pockmarks of rust as he goes along toward light, last shiver of fruit on a limb. Homeward he thumbs those few silver-rimmed coins that jingle so sweetly when he unbolts his limp from his pickup, bumps closed with an elbow the whiskey box (clumped meter receipts, a dark rag, his .45 nestling its cold muzzle). He tosses an amber bottle at the trash, hears it shatter—somewhere. Inside behind bullet-proof glass he picks from assorted numbers. He looks the cashier in the eye, takes a bite from the apple he plucked from a bin just that morning.

## A Solemn Declaration of Fact Concerning Johnny, the Accused

Yes, Johnny worried the split edge of a baseball bat  
along the gravel drive to his sister's house.

Of course: the call came late, and it's true, Johnny  
was flicking bottle-caps into a brick's hole

when the landline rang, and his head already buzzed  
with something of the hurt of that place. As he might a syringe,

he tapped his finger along each beaded wound:  
the ache from kneeling on hard pine—the lump

where his father's anointed thumb smashed between his eyes  
—the blank space on his wall where once was slung

the twelve gauge from his war-vet grandpa,  
tendered back and to his Marine cousin.

To live here was to hang, most nights,  
above the frantic tumult of 49 South

dangling his legs, mapping his veins with a needle  
until the cars became fireflies whose light he'd smudge

with a thumb. But yes: when the landline rang,  
he might've known better than to pick up—to hear

his sister's broken voice: "He hit my kid this time."  
He might have slurred down another drink—

instead, he sobered up with enough hate to suck on  
until her husband came at him with the bat

and then she to Johnny with a shrill  
fist of words when he knocked her

man to the ground and tore his knee.  
Later Johnny waited in the drive

for the cops. He ran the bat  
like a chipped tooth over the lip

of his family's land turning rocks  
beneath which—he knew—

only darkness and stubbed dirt.

## Jonah

Tillery tells me how he trolled the south  
bank of the West Fork with lizards  
and crawdads rigged on a split-shot.  
He tried crickets and grubs and Texas-style  
crawlers, tried chicken liver barbed  
on a hook. Nothing took. But the morning  
the black clouds boiled into a storm, the largest  
smallmouth ever caught in Madison County  
snapped onto his line. He tugged  
it out with a whoop that set off the hounds  
for miles. He sliced it open  
and—he swears—from its guts toppled  
a squirrel, scrunched and lathered  
in bile, its paws pruned open.

## In Praise of the Hospice Nurse

Nights sponging the fever  
from those too spent to get better.  
Twelve-hour shifts that draw on her  
like the half-sucked Camel Light  
passed between the CNAs on their break,  
their feet propped against the swelling.  
Lunch rush of dying and paperwork.  
A husband, tired of the long absences,  
bumping cues in a pool hall, sloshing beer  
over some woman who happens  
to be there. The nights off: boxed  
Moscato, medical dramas where the nurses  
get to save the patients at the last second,  
despite the odds. And then back at it.  
A young man this time, a bad fall,  
untended bed sores from an immobile life.  
She cannot save him. Though, when he tanks  
she nearly ignores the DNR, nearly cuts off  
the morphine. But doesn't, can't. When they cover  
and wheel him off she is left alone in an empty room  
in a building with a thousand people, tracing  
with her pinky the spot where her lips  
might have pressed against his with life.

In a Church, After Several Years  
*for Andy*

The walls are lined with crumbling grotesques—  
rain water whispers along the mortar during prayer.

In the yard, a tree. On its placard:

*European Weeping Birch. One of the first trees  
to appear on bare or fire-swept planes.*

I would etch your name here, if I could.

If the priests, in their loud collars, would turn their backs  
for even a second, I'd kneel and scatter your ashes.

Letter to E—, *after the breakup*

Remember when the ladybugs covered everything?  
I'd pluck one from your ear like a bit of wax,  
you would tell me of a mole you hadn't noticed  
in the oddest fold of my skin or, *oh*—Damn bugs.  
And yes, that is the language we began to express  
ourselves in: at first delighted by their appearance—  
how the window seals bloomed with orange petals  
dotted brown like you had extinguished a match  
on their back—then commonplace as a peck on the lips,  
your snores, the things we only notice when  
they're in the way. Roll over in bed to the familiar crunch—  
*Damn bugs*. But then today I found their corpses  
everywhere and motionless as breadcrumbs.  
In my coffee, below the bath towels, in the pack  
of cigarettes you left behind. Apparently, trapped in  
with us, they couldn't find what they needed  
to survive. Funny, the things we kill without even trying.

Dear Frank,

Sometimes I worry about you.

Sometimes I want to pal around the South  
together, but then I remember that you are dead,

that you only ever lived for me  
on a page, anyway; that I could tear  
you from the world with a pen knife. Oh I could fold

you up in a wad or shred you  
into little strips that I'd sprinkle over  
the dirt like a bunch of July snow—you melted

from this world nearly  
so quickly. Why'd you have to do that?  
Poke holes in everything? Scratch your story

into your yellow breakfast table?  
Leave gaps in our hearts like the space  
between slats that wind wails through?



### My Poems Have a Gun Problem

Tugging for words in the dark ends  
where they glint, I realize, reeling one in,  
before even it clears the distortion where sun  
smears water, that another oil black,  
sharp-edged thing of metal has latched:  
another gun and so another story about another  
person I love who clung so long in a net of bone  
and syllable where I cannot keep them  
and must send them, like a child, into the world,  
into my poem, which like the world,  
has its problems. I want to snatch them  
before tooth clamp, before hook savages  
scale, and metal gapes flesh like a book.  
I wish I could hold the poem here: let it hang  
between my finger and the pen, only metaphor,  
not even lines. If it wouldn't wriggle free—

At the National WWII Monument, a Week  
After Carolyn Bryant Admits to Perjury

From the shadow of Mississippi's wreath  
I notice a boy in a hoodie jet  
through the Atlantic baldacchino on a bike  
and begin circling the fountain, front tire  
tottering in the air. He's very good,  
maybe fourteen, one headphone  
in his left ear, the other trailing  
like a ribbon. He's made it twice  
around so far, weaving through  
the sights of a hundred rifles  
etched beneath the pillared states.  
The crowd is ruffled—one woman  
half claps, then covers her mouth,  
another kid tosses an empty coke can  
at the boy's head, misses and is cuffed  
by his mother. But the balance  
is impossible to maintain—  
a park official in a Stetson appears  
gaping like a confused fish, "hey  
there, hey there, don't do that."  
The boy drops his front tire  
and everyone gasps as he breezes  
by a young girl, thinking he almost hits her  
as the air cat-calls through the wheel's spokes.  
Her father shoves at the boy and shouts  
that it isn't safe to ride that thing here.  
As he exits the memorial,  
pursued by the official who lugs  
his own holstered weight, the boy  
raises the end of his bike again,  
tire cocked like a defiant jaw.

4<sup>th</sup> of July, *before the breakup*

Bare-bellied, our morals slip out  
with our shirts after the sixth round.  
Purple-brown trails of smoke—rockets  
scudding into the neighbor's shingles  
and popping like small-arms fire and you,  
startled from my arms, off the porch.  
A broken shot glass, the penny-shaped  
hole below your knee. Blood sobers  
us both. The rush upstairs, the warm cloth  
I press against your shin. I kiss the blood  
from your toes and we will never end,  
we whisper, the red sequins brimming  
my lips, the musk of your breath, ash  
and bourbon: something dead, something sweet.

## Baptism

The sun, setting over county road 310.  
The music cuts off with my phone's service  
and I am alone, my truck stalling on the gravel bank  
last week's flood has carved. I am waiting  
for them to cross the road: that sudden flush  
of deer. One has stopped to stare at me:  
this two-legged thing with a large metal eye  
clutched at its chest—bathed and bathing, fully immersed  
in that orange gourd's last dripping of its life-giving oil.

Human

My uncle—heroin addict for whom we pooled  
our resources to purchase a trailer just out of town—

has posted a meme. He's new to social media,  
still "likes" his own problematic posts—

i.e. "Studies suggest that 9 out of 10 men  
prefer a woman with curves. The 10<sup>th</sup> man

drives a Ford and prefers the other 9 men."  
He "hearted" that one after sharing. He's figuring

things out, though. His selfies  
typically, now, involve a shirt.

And he's gone from "Johnny" to "John."  
Much more adult. And in life too, it seems.

He's not been to jail for some time.  
He didn't show up to Christmas

rank and tottering. But I worry  
he is still getting the hang of things

outside the walls of a facility.  
Like social media. Like that meme

I mentioned earlier in which there's a match-  
book lying open on a table. The three matches

on the left are burnt, bare semblances  
of what they were. But the flame

didn't spread: one match—scorched, but not  
so that you can't tell what it was before—

slid down, away from the shriveled  
wrecks on the left, but also away

from the healthy matches on the right,  
preventing the chain of destruction.

Johnny's accompanying words:  
"Sometimes removing yourself

is best for everyone.” He’s got it  
half right: matches—reed-thin, fragile

frames with a knack for combusting—  
make an apt metaphor for people.

And yes, it is best not to linger  
in the path of danger. But that

is where his meme goes wrong.  
Why I say he’s still figuring

things out. He can’t see the other option.  
To him—cross-eyed, stuttering child,

molten-veined, chiseled, filed-at man—  
it still seems as if he is alone. He doesn’t

see that all of us match-heads—seconds  
away from ember—can dip away

at once, together off the tracks  
and away—forever—

from that engine of fire.

## Notes

“Autumn Begins in the Ozarks, *a week before the big game*”

Apologies to James Wright.

In early September of 2016, a group of local high schoolers were caught on video shot-gunning cans of beer they popped open on a goat’s horns. They were not charged with animal cruelty. The goat—renamed Grace—is now residing at a shelter in New Jersey called “Goats of Anarchy.”

“Dear Frank,”

These poems are addressed to the Arkansas poet Frank Stanford who died in 1978 at the age of twenty-nine due to self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

“Jarfly”

“Jarfly” is a term used by Ozarkian hill-folk for the cicada.

Pt. 1, section VIII:

“Canebrake”—another term for the Timber Rattlesnake.

Squawroot soup—a folk pregnancy termination aide.

Pt. 2, section I:

It may be of interest to note that “Camille” and “Beardon” provide all the letters necessary for “Lear” and “Cordelia” (if you share the “r”). The poem, “Camille,” utilizes the word, “never” five times, after the famous line uttered by a mourning Lear, “Never, never, never, never, never.”

Pt. 2, section II:

“Harvestman” is a folk word for the granddaddy-long-legs.