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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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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.

4th 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 10th 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.