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THE CREATION OF THE BLACK SEA

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

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THE CREATION OF THE BLACK SEA

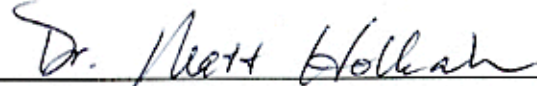
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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

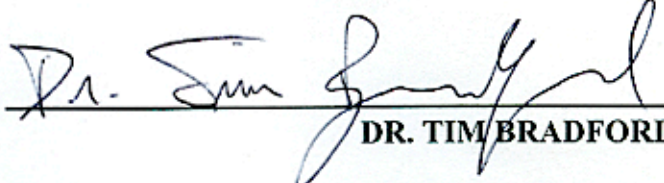
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ABSTRACT

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My thesis is a manuscript of poetry that I began in my poetry classes with artist in residence Doug Goetsch in the MFA program in creative writing. The principal theme of this collection is manhood: adolescent males becoming young men; young men dealing with love and sex; young men becoming fathers and husbands; fathers and husbands dealing with children and wives; grown men and their careers; men dealing with death; and men as witnesses of the world beyond their homes.

The poems are all free-verse, most having short to average length lines, and most having irregular stanzas rather than a fixed lines-per-stanza, and most were written in the first person. My most profound influences include Douglas Goetsch, Tony Hoagland, Philip Levine, Tony Gloegler, Stephen Dunn, Russell Edson, Billy Collins, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, Randall Jarrell, Doug Dorph, Sharon Olds, Gary Soto and David Kirby.

Most of my poems are realistic, but a few drift into the absurd. All deal with issues of concern to almost any individual, especially the average man: falling in love, getting older,

supporting a family, losing loved ones, meeting your neighbors, dying. Most of my poems explore these issues through narrative and description rather than through philosophical discussion. As my collection is not a continuous narrative, they are linked thematically.

A Critical Introduction to The Creation of the Black Sea

Poetry Is Scary

The poetry teacher said, “Tell the class a little about yourself.” He was the short, balled embodiment of New York City, his hometown. The first thing I said was, “I’m not a poet.” Just by looking at the serious faces of my classmates, I assumed they were all more poetic and deep-thinking than I was. “But I’m hoping this class will make me a better write anyway,” I said.

That was Poetry I of the MFA program at UCO. The teacher was Doug Goetsch, artist in residence. I had taken Modern American Poetry as a literature class years earlier and misread or misinterpreted so many Eliot, Stevens and Pound poems, I figured poetry wasn’t for me. If I can’t read it, how can I write it?

I figured writing poetry was a mystical process reserved for people with a reservoir of trivia from Greek mythology and a vocabulary much grander than mine. To write a good poem, I assumed, you must have been to at least five European capitals, preferably long enough to become an official resident of at least one. And you had to walk around with sunlight in your eyes and have at least one dead child, one failed marriage, or one suicide attempt.

But the first thing Doug Goetsch showed us was that poetry didn’t have to be scary. It didn’t have to be hard to read, and it didn’t have to send a reader running for the French-to-English dictionary or the encyclopedia or classical mythology. It could be simple, straightforward, and written in language that any guy on the block could understand.

I had a student in a composition class last year who wrote an essay about a Robert Frost poem. This kid was much more concerned with getting girls’ numbers and keeping his grades high enough to keep playing hockey than he was with poetry. In his essay he made his best effort to speak intelligently of the Frost poem, spending most of the paper trying to simply figure out

what the poem was about. He ended the discussion with a sort of apology. “I’m not a poetry guy,” he wrote.

I e-mailed him this Goetsch poem:

Bill

My first Little League manager
 was supposedly too young to coach,
 just a college kid who wanted a team.
 He kept pestering the league and because
 there weren’t enough interested fathers
 they finally awarded him us:
 the Central Federal Savings Mets—
 leftover boys nobody had picked.
 We loved how we got to call him Bill,
 and because he wasn’t anybody’s father
 Bill belonged to us all. And Bill
 had a rocket arm, and Bill knew baseball,
 and naturally you want to hear how we
 became champions, and I want to tell you.
 But we stunk. Bill stood and clapped
 for each of us as we went up to bat,
 clapped as we slumped back to the dugout.
 And we cheered for him at McDonald’s—
 where the winning coach was supposed to
 treat his team, though we lost every game.
 Twice a week, Bill was up at the register
 counting out a stack of crumpled ones.

The kid e-mailed me back: “That’s poetry? But I understand it!” I sent him some examples of other poets so he would know that it wasn’t only Goetsch but most contemporary poets.

Of course, that’s not to say that there aren’t deeper, subtler meanings there. It’s just that you don’t have to decipher the thing line by line in order to get any kind of enjoyment out of it.

So that’s what I tried to do: write accessibly. It took some time. I turned in several poems that were embellished with gaudy, ornate language. And Doug would give it back to me and say, “This is ‘poetry,’” using finger quotes when he said “poetry.”

“With enough fancy words and a rhyming dictionary, anybody can write ‘poetry,’” he’d go on. “I want you to write the poem that only you can.”

More than anything, this freed me. I was free to sound like myself, to use words that I didn’t have to look up, to use language that any reader would understand. I realized that you don’t have to use high vocabulary or esoteric references to draw out an intense emotion. Case in point, Tony Gloeggler:

1969

My brother enlisted
 in the winter. I pitched
 for the sixth grade Indians
 and coach said
 I was almost as good
 as Johnny. My mother
 fingered rosary beads,
 watched Cronkite say
 and that’s the way it is.
 I smoked my first
 and last cigarette. My father
 kept his promise
 to wax Johnny’s Mustang
 every weekend. Brenda Whitson
 taught me how to French kiss
 in her basement. Sundays
 we went to ten o’clock Mass,
 dipped hands in holy water,
 genuflected, walked down
 the aisle and received
 Communion. Cleon Jones
 got down on one knee, caught
 the last out and the Mets
 won the World Series.
 Two white-gloved Marines
 rang the bell, stood
 on our stoop. My father
 watched their car pull away
 from the curb, then locked
 the wooden door. I went
 to our room, climbed

into the top bunk,
 pounded a hardball
 into his pillow. My mother
 found her Bible, took
 out my brother's letters,
 put them in the pocket
 of her blue robe. My father
 started Johnny's car,
 revved the engine
 until every tool
 hanging in the garage
 shook.

Who wouldn't be able to understand that? I also like to send those students who claim they aren't "poetry people" a copy of Goetsch's "Gone." The last stanza is about the speaker's grandfather, who apparently was a prick. And the last two lines are perfect for people who think they aren't "poetry people," readers who think there is something mystical happening in the poem that they just don't get. The last two lines, about the abusive grandfather: "He's dead now. What else / do you need to know about him?"

The Shape of a Poem

To rhyme or not to rhyme? That is the question. And where do I break the line? That's another question. And how many lines per stanza? And how many beats per line? And do I indent, or do I leave every line against the left margin? And do I start each new line with a capital letter even if it's not the first word of a sentence?

So there are more questions than one. And the answer, I've found out, could possibly be different not only for every poet but for every poem. I've more or less found my comfort zone: I never rhyme on purpose; I try to break a line on a noun or verb or in a way that creates a surprise for the reader; I break stanzas like you would break a paragraph, when there's a shift in the discussion; I try to get a good first line, then measure all subsequent lines on the beats in that first

one; I leave every line flush with the left margin; and I don't capitalize the first word of a new line unless it's a proper noun or the first word of a sentence.

But it's taken me the entirety of the MFA program to develop those standards for myself. A few of them—like the beats-per-line method—were suggestions I adopted from Goetsch. But the rest of them were arrived at through experimentation. I'd read a poet, attempt to mimic something he did, and either stick with it or abandon it, depending.

The first thing I had to learn was the shape of a poem. On the first day of the first poetry class, Doug said, "I don't care if your poems are paragraphs for now. You'll learn how to shape them eventually." So that's what I did—I turned in poems in paragraphs. Each poem was a single paragraph, like a lump of clay. That's when Doug told me to start looking more closely at how other poets do it.

I read David Kirby's *House of Blue Light*. Or I should say, I *started* to read David Kirby's *House of Blue Light*. I was turned off from the beginning. Every poem was at least five full pages long, and every piece had a staggered justification—Kirby having indented by increments back and forth, away from and then toward the left margin so the poem zigzagged down the page:

My own heroes are not Andrew Jackson or John Bunyan
or Cervantes but people I already know,
like Officer John Moore, the little skinny yellow-eyed guy
who used to be what was called a "prize fighter"
(from "Meetings with Remarkable Men")

"That's stupid," I thought. "I don't want to write poetry like that."

But after having given up only two poems into the book, I made myself read on, much like you make yourself do sit-ups in the morning. I started again, and I ended up loving the book. Every poem was an elaborate narrative that started in one place, meandered far, *far* away, and

then managed to get back around to the starting point by the end. “Oh,” I thought, “*that’s* why he makes his poems zigzag like that.”

So I decided I’d try it:

In Forest City we lost
 a pump shaft and dropped
 the car at a mechanic
 and then got a room at Motel 6,
 where they didn’t ask for ID,

 even though neither of us
 could have looked eighteen,
 since we were both seventeen
 and eager to get a room
 by the pool even though we

didn’t have our swimsuits,
 which led to one of us saying
We might as well have sex,
 and it occurs to me that you
 probably thought that was love

(from “In Forest City, Arkansas”)

Everyone who read it claimed to have been distracted by the unnecessary indentations and the seemingly random stanza breaks.

So it was time to try another model. *Donkey Gospel* by Tony Hoagland was recommended to me, and I loved it immediately. I loved it less as time went by, and nowadays I like it only as a friend—but Tony remains one of my muses (though I’m sure he’ll never know he has that distinction) and any time I’m feeling uninspired, I read a few Hoagland poems. That’s not to say they look or sound anything like his, or that they’re about the same themes. It’s just that his poems get my mind going. And I wanted to capture that in my own stuff back when I first read *Donkey Gospel*.

So I studied his Ferlinghetti-like indentations, the example below being pretty mild:

nothing, not even you.
I want to love women
until the love burns
me alive. I want
to rock God's daughter
until together we
become one wave
of the sea that brought
us into being. I
want your blessing,
whoever you are who
has the power to give
me a name for
whatever I am. I want
you to lead me to
the place within me
where I am every
man and woman, the trees
floating in the cold haze
of January, the small
beasts whose names
I have forgotten, the ache
I feel to be no
longer only myself.

Tonight my son
will come home, his
hands swollen and cracked,
his face gray with
exhaustion. He will
slump before his dinner
and eat. He will say
nothing of how much
it costs to be 18
and tear some small
living for yourself
with only your two hands.
My wife will say nothing
of the helplessness
she feels seeing her
men rocking on
their separate seas.
We are three people
bowing our heads to
all she has given us,
to bread and wine and meat.

The windows have gone
 dark, but the room is
 quiet in yellow light.
 Nothing needs to be said.
 (from “Words”)

And Dunn:

The woman whose backpack I helped lift
 to the baggage rack in that suddenly sweet
 compartment of a train was an art historian
 from Marseilles. We talked Giotto
 all the way to Naples, and fell asleep
 in each other’s arms.

Or was this an episode partially lived,
 partially dreamed?

After my old Ford broke down in Yellowstone,
 those grizzlies I invented, especially the one
 standing upright near her cubs
 as if declaring *no pasaran*—that story
 has just the right feel.
 Trust me. Even the Spanish belongs.

With that bar fight in Elko, however,
 there’s much still to solve. Should he be Mexican
 because he was Mexican? And when,
 exactly, should he pull his knife?
 I keep changing my mind, sure only
 of the scar on my arm—the importance
 of mentioning it, I mean.
 (from “The Land of Is”)

I am most comfortable breaking stanzas where it seems there is a natural shift or pause in conversation or story. But now and then I do it in an attempt to create a surprise or to break the stanzas into small units. Goetsch told me small stanzas are little islands, and you are obliged to take care of each island on its own. You will have no choice but to tighten up a poem if you have short, two-line or three-line stanzas. You can (and must) focus on each two or three lines as a unit, make that “island” as good as it can be before moving on.

There are finer points to form, but once I had the basic shape of the poem, I knew enough to get started.

The Gall

In addition to struggling and experimenting with the shape and form of the poem, I also wrestled—as if to the death—with what to write about. Goetsch gave all of us in the poetry classes suggestions. Every week, he had a basic assignment (such as “a place” or “a moment” or “a person”) and a list of prompts to get us closer to something specific (such as “a place you know better than anyone else,” or “a moment you knew you would regret,” or “a person you wonder about after all these years”).

But he always said, “If you have something else in you that needs to be explored, go with that instead.” Thus, we were always allowed to write whatever we wanted, however we wanted.

And that’s what I almost always did. But not so much because I had all these fantastic things to say. It was more because I was bad at following instructions.

So I wrote about whatever cute or pivotal moment from my life popped into my head. I wrote about my dog Maggie, my wedding day, my sister’s house burning down, the gun my dad kept in his closet, our trip to Vicksburg, Mississippi.

But they weren’t necessarily worth writing about. Or at least, I wasn’t the right person to write about those things. And what I ended up were a lot of “exercises,” as Goetsch called them. They were things that seemed appropriate for a poem—the typical poetic issues, the basic details about my upbringing, the sad stories that don’t really make you that sad but that you tell to girls so they’ll be sympathetic and (hopefully) slightly more attracted to you.

But there was never anything dangerous in anything I wrote. If I hesitated to approach a subject, I would never go through with it. I was never daring, never blunt. If I wrote about death or sex, I wrote about it in ways I had seen it done before. I only wrote what was safe, what was comfortable and normal.

But then Goetsch had us read Stephen Dobyns's *Best Words, Best Order*. Dobyns says we write a poem when we are "so taken up by an emotional concept that [we] are unable to remain silent." So if we can't remain silent, we can't help but share whatever experience is compelling us to speak, why would we hesitate? Why wouldn't we be blunt? Why would we censor ourselves? In an interview with *The Cortland Review* online literary magazine, Dobyns says, "You can't allow yourself to be hesitant in a poem. You have to think what the poem needs, and you have to be frank with it." He goes on to say:

You have to have gall in order to follow your ideas in the poem no matter what, to use your imagination, to do things that seem without precedent.... You have to be willing to put anything on the page. You can't censor yourself. I mean if you want to write a poem about having sex with a sheep, I mean, if that's what comes out, what you do is write the damn poem, or you choose not to write the poem, but you don't turn the sheep into some more politically correct animal.

This pep talk—the gall talk—I feel could be aimed directly at me. As a writer in general—not just of poetry—I find that my work is tame. I am afraid to let loose. Like the white kid on the dance floor, I am inhibited, afraid because people are watching. What right do I have to express myself? I better stick to expressing tolerable things, ideas that aren't potentially offensive or startling or stupid.

Dobyns tells me that what I lack is gall, the gall to write the poetry—or fiction, or non-fiction—that comes to me, even if I worry that it might ultimately be rules offensive or stupid. I did not realize I had this problem until I read this passage, again from Dobyns in *Best Words, Best Order*:

Graduate writing students tend to write far more cautiously than undergraduates. In those few years the graduate writing students have assumed the burden of history. Dante, Shakespeare and Milton sit on their shoulders. They are more concerned with what they can't do than with what they can. They are afraid of appearing inadequate so they constantly censor themselves or push their work into obscurity where their intensions can't be seen.

This paragraph in particular was a bullet coming right for me. I am a graduate student, for one. And I'm not even a new graduate student; I've already been through the MA program, gotten the degree in creative writing, sat through lectures about Donne and Pound. I've been taught that these guys are amazing and I should revere them. How can I possibly ask myself to write something that competes with them? The best I can hope is to write some respectable free verse about my wife and just appreciate the fact that I cannot and should not ever hope to be Robert Frost.

I can look back and see myself sitting down in my home office/living room to write, and I can hear myself thinking, "Gosh, I'd really like to write about X. But I don't think I have it in me. What if people look at me weird? What if they don't get it? What if I seem too ambitious? I better just write about Y. Y is safer. Anybody could write about Y."

And that's what I'd do: write the safe story, the safe poem or novel, and the class workshop would say, "You describe the scenery well. But this just isn't interesting." This happened with the novel that was my master's thesis. I wrote it safely, not how I wanted to write it. I wanted it to be fun and exciting to read. But I wasn't having fun writing it (a good sign that it wouldn't be fun to read). I was too busy hesitating.

Dobyns says I should write from the unconscious mind, just let it out, don't worry about what other people will say, just put down whatever comes up: "The function of gall is to allow the original intuition to express itself without being interfered with by the conscious mind."

Even now, as I write this, I have to remind myself to just write what I think and not worry about making sense; I can always come back to it later and revise it so it's clearer. Dobyns says that's the order you do it: write from the unconscious mind, revise from the conscious.

"Ideally, the writer moves from total intuition to total consciousness...." This reminds me of an old quote—I'm not sure who said it first—"Write drunk, revise sober." As a non-drinker, non-drug-user, I have a challenge: I have to find the gall without the benefit of chemical substances. I have to let myself write something that someone else might pick up and say, "You had the audacity to write *this*?"

When Dobyns said that undergraduates have more gall than graduates, I thought of my own freshmen. About half of them think that they can't write at all, and half of them think that they can write anything. Now that I am aware of the Dobyns gall and how it applies to undergrads, I can definitely see how, when I encourage them to strike out and try new things with their writing, almost all of my freshmen, regardless of their previous notions about their abilities, are able to at least attempt to do impressive things. Is this because they don't yet know

about Milton and Shakespeare? They don't know what they can't do yet? They haven't had anyone yet tell them what an achievement *Paradise Lost* is?

Now when I sit down to write a first draft, I think "I should try to be more like my freshmen," to forget how my professors went on about "In a Station of the Metro," and just write like I'm the first person to ever be brilliant.

I had what I consider to be an important learning experience with a poem I wrote in Doug Goetsch's Poetry II class. The poem was called "A Family of Persians," and the first draft I wrote of it is below. See if you can pinpoint the moment when I swerve off the road to avoid the guy who's playing chicken with me:

In Connecticut, you took that wrong turn
off the interstate like it was the popular choice,
and you had decided at the last minute to abandon
your morals and follow the traffic. While we're off
the road, I said, let me pee in that McDonald's.
In the parking lot, we walked alongside a family of Persians,
maybe Arabs, maybe Turks, dark skin, thick eyebrows,
wiry black hair. The mother, round and stern,
walked in front with her hand choking a purse strap.
She was followed by a boy, a girl, a boy, teenaged,
complaining and texting. In the back was a skinny girl
in denim shorts and strappy sandals, about eleven years old.
Short and round, her father caught up, put his arm around her,
patted her spaghetti-strapped shoulder, bent his head
around her to see into her face. He frowned at me when he saw
me watching. She wiped her eyes so delicately, as if
brushing extraneous grains from the roof of a sand castle.
Dark-eyed dad kept his arm around her, cupped the ball-and-socket
of her shoulder in his short, wide hands, taking his stubby fingers
away only once to toss an empty Sprite bottle
in a passing garbage can. I didn't say, but thought if I were
an eleven-year-old girl and crying, I would want exactly that,
a short, round dad with bushy eye-brows to suction his
squishy palm to my naked shoulder and walk me into the McDonald's
where everyone inside, eaters, cashiers and cooks, would see
I had been crying. A dad would keep it from mattering.
Red eyes, wet cheeks, I could still smile,

my dad and me, and order a milk shake.

Did you catch it? When I began writing this piece, from about the fifth line down, I thought I knew where I was going. I had this impulse that the speaker would say something about wanting to have been the father of whoever he was with (the “you” in the poem). And I got excited about that idea, I felt like it meant something to me. It reflected my personal experience.

But when I got closer to the end of the poem, I started to get nervous about it. I thought it might sound stupid or offensive or that people wouldn’t get it. So I choked at the end. I didn’t have the audacity to say what I really wanted to say. So the draft above is what first went down on paper, even though I had an idea that I felt strongly about. I felt this version would be safer, less likely to offend or confuse the reader or to embarrass me.

But at the last minute, I decided to give it a try, to attempt to make it interesting at least for myself. So in revision, I added the thought that I had originally had. Here is the version I gave the class:

On the interstate in Connecticut,
 you took that wrong exit
 and then woke me up with the f-word.
 I said, May as well pull into that McDonald’s
 so I can pee. In the parking lot,
 we walked behind a family of Persians,
 or maybe Turks or Spaniards. I don’t know.
 Dark skin, tight black hair. The mother
 choked a purse strap, and two teenage boys
 followed her, each texting on his own cell phone.
 Behind them, a thin girl, about twelve,
 with baby-horse knees and overall shorts.
 The father came up next to her,
 got close, put his arm around her,
 cupped the ball of her shoulder
 in his hand, and looked under her bangs
 to her face. She wiped her cheeks, and Dad
 was saying quiet things to her, and I realized
 that if I were a twelve-year-old girl and crying,

I would want a father to put around me his arm
 sleeved with dark hair. He could look into my red eyes
 and get me ready to walk into a McDonald's
 and not care that everyone would know I had been crying.
 Then I wished, for no reason that I can tell you,
 that I had been your dad. We wouldn't be able to make love
 like we do now, but I could have watched you
 hunt Easter eggs with your cousins or play basketball
 for the church league. You would have always been
 happy to see me and never afraid.

This might not be the order that Dobyns suggests; he wants us to write the first draft with passion, without fear or hesitation, and then to revise with our heads. But I at least managed to get the important part in there, the idea that really moved me. I worried that a speaker saying something so personal and strange (like "I wish I had been your dad") would be too much for readers, would get me criticized, ostracized or laughed at.

But I took a chance (like Dobyns's example of writing about having sex with a sheep), and it worked out. I was sure the group would hate it, find it ridiculous, but I had the gall to write what *I* thought was good.

And while the relative success of the final draft of this poem is still being debated, it got an amazing reception from the class when I turned it in, which at the very least reinforced my conviction that Dobyns's "gall" is a good thing to have.

It was a treat listening to Doug Goetsch read this to the class and then dissect it. Imagine a bald head bobbing with the lines, saying to the class, "Listen to this turn: 'Then I wished, for no reason that I can tell you, / that I had been your dad.' What a turn!" And then at the end: "You would have always been / happy to see me," a dramatic pause, "and never afraid." Then he asks the class, "Does that last line belong there?" And before anyone could answer, he said, sounding more New York than I ever heard him sound, "You're damn right it does." He may as well have been pounding on the table.

And the gall exists in this manuscript. Ghosts (“The Thing about the Old Lady”), September 11 (“Tuesday”), trailer trash (“West Guthrie”), racism and homophobia (“Breathing Mosquitoes”), internet porn (“Internet Porn”), it’s all in there. And the good news is that I didn’t write about anything simply because I thought it would be controversial. I never thought, “I’m going to write about *X* because *X* is off limits!” Instead, I went with whatever struck me at the moment, and I didn’t censor myself.

The Truth and Other Things Worth Writing About

Near the beginning of the Poetry I class, one of my classmates—we’ll call her Matilda—wrote a poem about how she’d had to put a pet bunny out of its misery after one of her kids let the bunny get hold of a Lego piece, which the bunny got lodged in its throat and started choking on.

Matilda didn’t exactly spell out how she put the furry little guy out of this misery. I remember it was something like, “I put my hand over his eyes / and ended him.” Very dramatic, I know. But I was curious, like most of the others were, I’m sure. And I wanted to ask, “So, how did you kill the bunny?” but I didn’t. I thought that would be tactless. And apparently so did everyone else.

But why would I think I could ask that question? “So, how did you kill the bunny?” I thought I could ask that question because I was assuming that the story was true. I wrote about my sister’s house burning down—because my sister’s house burned down and I thought that was poem-worthy. Another one of my classmates—we’ll call him Ray—wrote about his mother shooting his father—because his mother shot his father, and Ray thought that was poem-worthy. Matilda wrote about her husband cheating on her—you get the picture.

But something disconcerting started to happen to the class’s poetry as the semester wore on. We went from writing about houses burning down, mothers shooting fathers, and husbands

sleeping around to writing about stopping at KwikTrip on the way to class, eating spaghetti on the floor of a dorm room, and having writer's block while sitting in Starbuck's.

What was happening to us?

Doug Goetsch knew. We were running out of stories to tell. But that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that we were relying on true stories, personal experience, and a twenty-seven-year-old only has so many life-changing, traumatic events to immortalize in verse.

I remember one conversation we had in class, like concerned soldiers meeting with our commander to tell him we're running out of ammunition. My classmate Ray said in his West Oklahoma accent, "I'm petrified of what'll happen when I run out of things from my life to talk about."

Doug said, "You will run out. And then," he pointed at Ray, "then you *really* begin."

I had been writing about my childhood, my family, college, each of my girlfriends and their respective mental or social afflictions, but it was all based on true stories. Not just true emotions, but true stories. If I read one aloud, you wouldn't learn only about what my writing sounds like or about what themes are important to me. You would learn about something that happened to me in the past. The stories were all real.

I had been living under the delusion that only writers of short stories, novels and plays write fiction. I assumed that poets were people obsessed with divulging their every deep personal secret, confessing to weird habits or embarrassing fears or fetishes.

Doug broke that spell with two things. First, he had us read *The Triggering Town* by Richard Hugo. And second, he let us read his poetry and dared us to ask him if any of it had actually happened.

“Sure,” he would say, “there’s some true stuff in there. But it doesn’t have to be true to be poetry.”

He told us the story of how he read at a workshop a poem about losing his brother. After it was over, a woman came to him, “tears in her eyes,” Doug said, and clasped his shoulders and said, “I want you to know how much your poem touched me.” Doug said thanks, and the woman went on: “I’m so sorry about your brother.” And Doug laughed a high-pitched laugh and consoled her: “It’s okay,” he said. “I never actually had a brother.” The woman was furious. Doug said she clearly felt used and betrayed—duped, even. “This woman,” Doug said, “didn’t understand poetry.”

What I’ve heard in everything I’ve ever read about poetry or writing in general—Hugo’s *Trigger Town*, Stephen Dunn’s *Walking Light*, Tony Hoagland’s *Real Sofistikashun*, John Dufresne’s *The Lie That Tells a Truth*, and so on—is to be loyal to the work, not reality. Give the poem what it needs. Let the characters take the story where they want to take it. You are not bound to the truth.

The worst defense—and in my experience, the most common defense—for a bad piece of writing is, “Well, that’s how it really happened.” I’ve seen it in undergraduate fiction workshops and in the MFA program. I’ve seen it in my own composition classes when I have students write stories and then critique each other.

When it’s in a class I’m teaching, I can usually see it coming before it happens. The class is commenting on a kid’s piece, saying things like, “I liked the idea of this story, but I the part where the hero turns himself in to the cops wasn’t believable.” And I can see the author sitting back in his chair, arms folded over his chest, scowl across his face, his feet tapping impatiently,

waiting for the moment when he gets to tell his classmates how wrong they are and how they can go to hell.

And finally his moment comes. “Well, you see,” he says, leaning forward now so he can condescend to his peers, “the reason I had the hero turn himself in to the cops is because this was a true story. It happened to my uncle. And that’s what he really did. So there.”

But the worst part is that the class buys this as an excuse! There is a collectively sighed “Oh,” as they give up looking over the draft and instead look up to me to see if I’ll let them out of class early. “We might as well go,” they’re all thinking. “We can’t say anything else about this piece. It’s a true story. It’s untouchable.”

And I get to try to explain to this disgruntled kid and the rest of the disheartened class that just because something’s true doesn’t mean it doesn’t have to stand up to the scrutiny of demanding and attentive readers. If the story doesn’t work, change it. If you don’t want to change it (presumably because that will tarnish its “trueness”) then abandon it. As Doug would say, “Set it aside. It was an exercise.”

I’ve known this about prose for a while now. But I had to learn it about poetry for the first time at the start of the MFA program. And I’m glad I did. I don’t remember ever getting to the point where I actually ran out of stories to tell from my personal life, but when I look at the list of poems in my thesis manuscript, so few of them are even based on true incidents. Many of them have what Richard Hugo talks about in *The Trigger Town*—essentially, the thing that gets the story going. But even if that trigger is something true from my life, once the story starts going, it might go a million miles from where it began. And how much more interesting and satisfying to know that I am not limited to only things that have happened in my own boring life.

Poetry Is a Cabinet

The cover of Stephen Dobyns's book *Best Words, Best Order* is divided in half—the top half is a close-up shot of the keys of a typewriter, the old timey kind, the kind of keys that rise up as if on pikes and have round heads. They look like long nails with letters on them. The lower half of the book cover is a close-up shot of nails, long gray nails with round heads—like the keys of an old timey typewriter—being driven in rows into a block of wood.

The pictures on the cover as well as the title make a profound statement: There is nothing magical about poetry (or writing in general, for that matter). It is simply about getting the best words in the best order. It's labor. It's no different than building a cabinet. It's just that when you buy a cabinet from Ikea, it comes with instructions (strange instructions with hilarious cartoon illustrations of a blob man performing each step, but instructions nonetheless). When you write a poem, you have to make up the instructions as you go along.

But it is still manual labor. You hammer away at the keyboard, saw off the dead words, paint over the unnecessary lines, and smooth out the rough line breaks.

I had to have this idea shocked into my system when I first started the MA in creative writing. I had always been told I was a good writer, but it was usually with a pat on the head and without any suggestions for improving. I figured, "No suggestions must mean I can't possibly improve. I'm a genius!"

And it's a good thing I got that kind of feedback, because as it turns out, I was pretty sensitive about what I wrote. I didn't look at those stories or song lyrics or poems as words on a page. They were pieces of my everlasting soul. And how dare any friend or sibling or English teacher suggest ways to improve my soul?

I think some people never get over that. That was the guy who brought a horrible story to the workshop, got lambasted by the blunt but well-meaning group, and then never came back

again. That guy is holed up to this day in his girlfriend's apartment telling her what a bunch of jackasses the people in the fiction workshop are.

I am glad I wasn't that guy. That guy never grows. Or if he does grow, it will be incrementally and it will take so long he will likely give up and enroll in an automotive training program and begin planning his new life as a grease monkey. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.)

Instead, I was the guy who brought in a terrible draft, got lambasted, got knocked off my high horse, and said, "Oh. I'm *not* a genius. I better get to work, then!"

I learned quickly—because it was a survival mechanism—to stop viewing my work as a part of my soul and start viewing it simply as work, something I've built, a task I've undertaken. And if someone happens to read it and say, "Uh oh, you missed a spot!" then bless them for helping me make it better. And if they say, "Hmm, this isn't working. Move on to something else," then they've helped me avoid wasting my time.

I think I've gotten pretty good at divorcing myself from what I write, giving up the kind of emotional attachment that would make me cry, "But no!" if someone were to suggest changing it drastically or even abandoning it.

The true test of this, I think, is when you write about something that's very close to you, maybe something traumatic that happened to you, or a person you wouldn't want criticized in reality.

When I was seventeen years old, I got my first real girlfriend. Our first date was her seventeenth birthday. Less than three months later, she was dead and I was trying to understand why. This is exactly the kind of thing I thought I was supposed to be confessing in my poetry back before I learned that it could be (and in most cases, ought to be) fictive.

It was the chief traumatic experience in my life—the only one, really—and what my shrink calls a “signature moment,” an event that colors your personality or behavior from then on. What great material for a poem!

I think most beginning writers would write about an event like this with the assumption that there is no way the finished work could be anything but remarkable and heartbreaking, since the actual event itself was so. And no one would dare suggest changing or abandoning it. Anyone who read it would be duly affected and comment on the writer’s genius and honesty.

The people who think that are the people who demand their money back after the first week of a workshop.

At any rate, I hesitated to write about this moment in my life. For a while I wasn’t sure if I would be able to handle criticism of a poem about the single most significant event in my life. (I had these thoughts, I should note, before I got married or had a child.)

But I always knew I wanted to at least try to write about it, good material as it is, and so finally, after getting used to the slings and arrows of my classmates—who might say things like, “This line makes absolutely no sense,” or “It starts good, but I’m bored by the middle,” or “It’s not working for you yet”—I decided to give it a try.

I started slowly, alluding to the death of a teenaged girl, but fictionalizing the way she died. (In the poem, I made it a car crash.) But the moment at the end with her mother at the hamburger place was real.

Next Summer

This town moves faster than it seems.
In four years, the kids who couldn’t even make it
on the junior varsity football team
will be managing video stores,
growing thick brown beards,

and marrying pregnant girls.

Roads that lead here are never busy.
 The hills that guard us from the city
 are like breasts with farms nestled between them.
 The billboards have been embellished
 with the same graffiti for decades.
 Most of us don't even notice it.

Eighties music plays through the gray smoke
 at Sam's Place, and pretty teenaged girls I know
 from school bring us hamburgers in paper wrappers.
 You're outside when I see you, sitting in your car,
 almost fifty years old, brown hair, drinking a soda.
 You wave like we're old friends, but I feel you saying,

"My little girl's ghost still sleeps down the hall,
 still sits on the roadside every time I drive to town.
 And I keep asking myself, what did she see
 as she flew out of your car window? Did she look up
 beyond the black fingers of the pines
 and see the stars in the navy blue sky?"

(Notice the slight similarity to Randall Jarrell's "Next Day," at least in the title.)

I thought that was okay, and it got decent reviews from Goetsch and the rest of the class,
 but I wasn't attacking the event head-on like I had intended.

In class, Doug read us "Something I Couldn't Tell You" by Susan Pliner. Talk about
 powerful. The only girl in the class at the time was brought to tears at the lines "I ran to the pond,
 dyed dark with leaves, / dyed red with the shirt of him who happened / to be floating there." We
 were all deeply affected by this poem about a woman whose child drowns in the pond behind
 their house. But we were even more affected when Doug said, "It's a sestina," and then showed
 us what that meant. None of us had known what a sestina was until then, and to see a poet use
 such a tough form with such skill made us all throw our hands up. "I give up," one of my
 classmates said.

But Doug said, “That form was necessary for her telling that story.” He told us the story was true, and that like a good poet will often do, Pliner used the form to restrict herself, to keep her from letting her emotions run wild and incoherent. “Frost,” Doug said, “did the same thing in ‘Home Burial,’” which is in iambic pentameter.

So I thought, “I’ll try that!” I came up with a form for myself, which involved five syllables (not beats) per line, four lines per stanza, and a preposition to begin the fourth line of each stanza. It was ridiculous, and the class told me so. I won’t quote the poem here. But at least I became familiar with the method and gave it a try.

But that version—the “ridiculous form” version—was even more fictionalized than the first version, and it was spoken in the voice of the dead girl. I still was barely touching the actual event, and I wasn’t sharing anything that I saw, I wasn’t speaking from my own perspective. So I tried again.

Lawn Chair

I sat in a lawn chair on my dad’s pontoon boat
 and watched the big walls of the lock close in on us.
 We took lawn chairs up to the roof of the garage
 to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July.
 My little brother and I sat in lawn chairs and stared
 as our beautiful cousins played Frisbee in their bikinis.
 Those scratchy straps held our butts up like twine
 holding ham, and the stubby arms poked our elbows.
 Only one is left, leaning against the wall in the garage,
 worn to shreds like the flag of a WWII frigate, and my mother
 tried to sell it in a yard sale for a dollar, but no one
 was buying. I was mowing the lawn one summer morning
 when my girlfriend’s stepdad came over with tears
 reddening his eyes and told me to sit down.
 The only thing near was a lawn chair.

As you can see, it’s a whole new attack, coming from a different angle. I was still trying to figure out which way to come at this event. I never turned that version in to any class. I wasn’t pleased

with it—the mysterious ending didn't satisfy me. How was the reader supposed to get anything out of it if they didn't know exactly what happened?

So I took another shot, this time starting with a scene that I actually experienced: the funeral. But in the beginning of the poem, it sounds as if the speaker doesn't know the dead girl that well.

Trash Bag Full of Dresses

This sweaty black suit
 swallows me, holds me
 like a snake with a mouse
 in its throat. I wonder if this girl
 ever imaged this moment.
 Is it all she expected? I know
 they say little girls dream
 of their wedding day. Do they
 dream with such passion
 and hope about the day
 their distant relatives, neighbors,
 and the junior varsity basketball team
 sit red-eyed and watch priests
 and teachers speak over their remains?
 Did you ever wonder, in your sixteen years,
 who would give the eulogy,
 which parent would cry
 the most, what cousin
 would stride to the podium,
 her heels snapping on the tile,
 to tell the story of how you
 saved her from drowning
 in a wading pool at age six?
 Do you wonder what songs are
 being sung? I can tell you, I'm not
 a fan of this organ music. I can't
 imagine you would be, either.
 Do you want me to tell you
 how many rows were reserved
 for family? Three on each side
 of the aisle. Did you want to know
 about your dress, your hair, makeup,
 nails? Did you look peaceful, natural?

I can't tell you that. Because...

And it goes on from there for at least that long. But on the advice of my teacher and classmates, I cut all of that beginning away and was left with this:

Trash Bag Full of Dresses

I would really like to tell you
about your hair, your makeup,
your outfit. But when you shoot
yourself in the head, you don't get
an open casket. The man sitting
next to me wonders if it was
a rifle or a shotgun. Did you pull
the trigger with your toes?
Or maybe it was a handgun.
Revolvers are easy. Did your teeth
crack when the gun went off?
Or maybe it was against your temple.
You were always very open
about why you wouldn't watch
the part of Full Metal Jacket
where Vincent D'Onofrio shoots
himself. It reminded you too much,
you said, of how your father
shot himself, and how you, at thirteen,
found him in his bedroom,
his blood reaching for your shoes.
Your mom and step-dad gave me
all of your clothes for some reason.
What am I supposed to do
with a trash bag full of dresses?

I think I had so much in my head, so many details about this incident, it was nearly impossible to know which details were necessary, or which character ought to tell the story. Based on my classmates' and teacher's reviews, I decided to try another angle, to tell bluntly. This would be a little more confessional than they had been before, and it would divulge more information, but by that point in my writing process, I wasn't affected by criticism. I wasn't getting frustrated,

despite striking or fouling out repeatedly. I accepted that it was part of the process, to find the right voice and the right starting point. I tried again. This is the first draft I turned in:

I Killed a Girl Once

I killed a girl once.
Got her pregnant.
It was her finger
that pulled the trigger,
but my sperm did the trick.
If I had believed in Karma,
I might have thought
I was being punished.
If I had believed in God,
I might have thought
it was all part of his plan.
If I had read Nietzsche,
I might have thought
that this would just
make me stronger.
But I was in no mind
to think of any of that.
All I remember is that
her casket was closed,
and I wanted it open
so I could see for myself.
And her parents brought
me a black trash bag
full of her t-shirts and jeans.
Why did they do that?
I'm not sure, but it probably
was for the same reason
that they took pictures
of me at my graduation.

We were reading Langston Hughes in class at the time, and I noticed that Hughes never wastes a word. Consider his "Suicide's Note":

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

So in an exercise that I prize as highly as any I undertook during the MFA program, I cut every word from the above draft that wasn't doing necessary work. Thus:

Once at Seventeen

I killed a girl.
Got her pregnant.
Her finger pulled
the trigger, but my
sperm did the trick.
If I believed in Karma,
I was being punished.
If I went to church,
it was God's plan.
If I had read Nietzsche,
this would make me
stronger. But I
had no mind to think.
All I remember is
her casket was closed
and I wanted it open
to see for myself.
And her parents
brought me a black bag
full of her t-shirts.
Why did they do that?
I'm not sure, but maybe
for the same reason
that they took my
picture at graduation.

Doug Goetsch told me to “get us there faster,” and “make more of the picture at the graduation—that's the only unique thing in this.” (Notice how the resulting draft resembles the shape of Hughes's “Drum.”)

Once

Her finger pulled
the trigger, but my
sperm did the trick.
Her casket was closed,

and I wanted it open
 to see for myself.
 After, her parents
 brought me a black bag
 full of her t-shirts.
 They took my picture
 at graduation. She
 would've been there
 in a cap and gown, too,
 if we had used
 condoms or if she
 had kept taking her
 medication. But we
 didn't, and she didn't,
 and I had to stand there
 alone with my diploma
 on the football field
 and smile for her
 childless parents.

It still wasn't working for my readers, and even I thought it was a little sentimental at the end.

Doug said, "Try making the speaker or the POV characters someone else. What about the parents?" So I had what—at the time—seemed like an epiphany. I thought, "I'll speak in the voice of a parent, but I'll fictionalize it a little bit." In retrospect, I see that I was simply trying anything I could think of, and any idea I had seemed like a great one at first. Here's an excerpt:

If my son grew up,
 got himself a high school girlfriend,
 then flipped his car into a creek and drowned,
 I would probably bag up all his clothes

 and everything else
 and take it all to the girl's house.
 I'd lug it all up the steps and onto her porch
 before I rang the bell, and she'd open the door

 and see it all there, and me.
 I would have boxed up his shoes—
 if we still had the shoe boxes—and put his clothes
 in three different bags: shirts, pants, and church shirts.

.....
and she'd carry all my son's shit into her house
because she wouldn't know how to refuse it,
and I wouldn't know then, like I know now,
that I would be doing it simply because

I would want to believe that there was someone besides me,
some lovely girl, who loved every piece of my boy
and would want to rub her fingers
over every t-shirt or toothbrush he ever owned.

And she would take it all inside,
let me believe that she had planned
to devote her life to my son
from the first moment she saw him in study hall.

She'd let me believe that she was going to keep
every thread of clothing,
every doodled-on sheet from his notebooks,
rather than have her mom drop it at Goodwill

later that week after the funeral.

(from "There Will Be Survivors")

The above excerpt is minus five stanzas from the middle that list all the personal items that would be in boxes and bags, a brief description of the girl, who "would be a petite little thing," and a reference to the son's having been taught to fingerpick his guitar "like Mark Knopfler or Robby Krieger."

Doug likened that draft to a car crash. "You've been trucking it down the Interstate, and you've just plowed into the ditch," he said. "Get back on the road. What about that picture the parents were taking? Stick with that."

So I wrote another draft, this time focusing on the moment the picture was taken at the graduation, the boy filing into the arena past the parents, then walking on the stage as his name is called, then his face when he sees the dead girl's step-dad snapping a picture of him from the sidelines. I delighted in filling the poem with gun references, hinting that the girl had shot

herself. The boy isn't just the subject of the step-dad's picture, he's the "target." And he doesn't come into frame, he walks into the "crosshairs." And the step-dad doesn't push the button or click the shutter, he "pulls the trigger."

"But," Doug said, "you're still with the kid." And I was. I had planned to get away from him and see the moment from the parents' perspective, but the poem was still all about the boy. Doug said, "Try starting with them at their house, *before* the ceremony." So I did.

Her Parents

It was his idea, going,
taking the camera.
So they ate early
that Friday evening and
didn't talk about it.
She did her hair,
frowning in the mirror,
and he picked a tie
and tied it. They left
their new one-bedroom
house for the ceremony,
which started at eight.

As the graduates filed
into the stadium
in purple robes, he left her
in the bleachers
to stand in the grass
where he'd get a good shot
of Tabbetha's last boyfriend.

When he'd gotten it,
he put the camera away
and joined her again
in the stands,
where they clapped
as each name was called,
each diploma handed over,
each smiling teenager stepped
off the stage and toward
a job, a family, and life.

The space where their
daughter's name
should've been
came and passed beneath
them like a ripple
that only they noticed.

After the ceremony and
throwing of caps,
they left as alone
as they had come.

On Monday he developed
the film and bought
a dark five-by-seven frame
and put the smiling boy
in the cap and gown
on the bookshelf.
"You shouldn't have done it,"
she said. "Look at his face."
"He didn't see me," he said.
"No," she said, "he saw."

This was my latest stab at it. It got mixed reviews. I never got a chance to show it to Doug Goetsch, but that didn't matter—I myself wasn't that happy with it. The middle of the poem—the ceremony and the moment the picture is taken, the pivotal moment—is not as powerful as I think it ought to be. And the end is vague. I was never happy with the confusing ending. Like Doug used to say, "You have to find a way out"; or as William Zinsser would say, "Find the door." And the exit I found was hasty and forced.

So, I haven't succeeded yet, but maybe I will someday. And maybe I won't. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that I've learned that criticism of the piece is not criticism of the event itself, or the importance thereof, or my handling thereof. Maybe I wasn't meant to write about this event. I'll keep trying, whenever the mood strikes me, but I might keep fouling out. But that doesn't mean that the thing I'm writing about never happened or wasn't a "signature

moment” in my life. It just means that the cabinet I’m building (shall we say, in remembrance of the event) is a little wobbly at the moment.

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I.

Arizona

I never thought of Colin
as an Arizona guy. That's the desert,
isn't it? We grew up together
in the woody hills of Arkansas,
and we were still young enough
to wrestle on his grandmother's bed
the last time I saw him. I always wanted
his curly blond hair—girls would often
ask to touch it. I heard from him
a couple times after I moved away
in seventh grade.

I thought about calling him
when I found out his mom had died
in a collision on the freeway.
I guess he moved to Arizona
after graduation to play college football.

When I got an e-mail from a friend
and the subject line said *Colin*,
my first reaction was:
What twenty-two-year-old dies
from pneumonia? It's not like he
was trekking the Oregon Trail. It's 2002.
Whatever happened to modern medicine?

Apparently by the time his girlfriend
convinced him to go to the hospital,
the infection was already in his brain.
I could see him refusing to go to the doctor.
It seems like he always had a cold
when we were kids, but he never
stayed home from school.

He probably kept doing two-a-days
with the football team to the horror
of his girlfriend, whoever she was.
If she was an Arizona native,
it means she never got to meet
his mother, and that's a shame,
because she was a lady
who will be remembered for her heart,
not her bad habits,
and I am grateful that she didn't live

to see her only son dead on a gurney.

If there's a heaven, maybe they're together.
If not, then at least she never had to know.
I imagine she sat buckled into her wrecked
driver's seat, bleeding from her head
and imagining her boy growing up,
getting a degree, falling in love with
a blue-eyed girl and having blond
curly-headed kids fill their wooded lawn.

Sixth Grade Fieldtrip to Historic Ft. Smith

The girls watch with Mrs. Hinds
as we ruin our khaki slacks green
rolling down a hill. After sandwiches

and juice boxes, we race each other
to the gallows, a white wooden stage
held up by four thick legs. We shout

as we pound up the stairs, hopping the sign
that says, PLEASE STAY OFF THE GALLOWS—
RESPECT THEM AS AN INSTRUMENT

OF JUSTICE. We stomp and jump
on the bolted-shut trap door. When Mrs. Hinds
marches up and hisses at us to get off,

I get the sense that you shouldn't have fun
around a place where people have died.
Before I climb down, I survey what the hanged

men might have seen in those last moments.
The red brick courthouse, huge like you'd imagine
Noah's Ark. The far trees along the river.

And between the slats underfoot, the grass
below the scaffold, which would've come
into sharper view when the trap door opened.

Finally

When you're sticky
and walking back at 11:30 p.m.
from Tasha Campbell's cabin
to your own, the lake stinks
in a way you never want
to forget. The insects buzz
especially loud. Weeds
brush your bare legs,
and when you get out of the trees,
the stars burn in an adult sky
that is black and marvelous.

And the bright yellow bulb
hangs like a showerhead
over your cabin door,
and your sneakers
shuffle over the dirt
and then up the three wooden steps,
and once inside you find
that everyone has fallen asleep
to the hum of an electric fan
and they are all dreaming
probably of mom and home
while you take your shirt off
and lie back on your cool sheets.

Detention Center

I had long hair at sixteen when I saw myself
in the glass of the guard shack at juvenile hall.
Mississippi is the last place you want
to get arrested, my dad said. I thought juvie
was basically a dormitory, a community
of bunk beds and doors that locked.
But this place was all cells, orange jumpsuits,
lights that stayed on all night, a teenage Alcatraz.

Every inmate had a baby face.
But their bodies were particular. Skinny kid
upstairs doing pushups. Round kid playing cards
alone at a stainless steel picnic table.
Two others—one black, one white—teased me
about my being there for vandalizing a mailbox.
Federal offense, they said. *Up shit creek, fella*.
But they laughed and said, *Nah, we just playing*.

What I can't get over is how precious
this one boy's face was. He would've been
terrifying behind the theater after you accidentally
made a move on his girlfriend.
Big chested, meat fisted, stubble faced.

But in that orange jumpsuit he had baby cheeks
with peach fuzz and his eyes became
shining blue slits when he smiled. He didn't talk
about why he was there or complain
about the food or thin foam mattresses.

It was almost like he wanted to be there.
I wonder if he enjoyed that break from being tough
and drinking until he threw up. I wonder
if it was his father or maybe an older brother
or both who inspired him to slip things
in his pockets at the Jitney Jungle or pull a knife
on his teacher, and what did his mother think,
and what is he telling his kids now that he's thirty
and working hard to keep them out of bloody noses.

Merle

I thought he was rich.
He lived on a corner and had a catcher's mitt
and his mom brought him
all the leftover burgers and fries he could eat
when she came home from work.

Merle had no dad to yell at him.
Instead he had a railroad for walking,
a rocky ravine for climbing,
and a girl his own age to play with.

She was Sarah, dirty blond, lived
down the street somewhere I never saw,
and I got the feeling that her mom or dad—
whichever one she lived with—
neither knew nor cared what Sarah was doing
all day, which, for two weeks in the summer
of 1989, was following Merle and me
down those railroad tracks and into
that rocky red ravine.

Merle decided one day
under the sun that he liked me better
and that he'd had it
with her following us. When she didn't
understand, Merle yelled at her
until he was hysterical and crying.

She turned and walked home
before she was really crying hard.

That night Merle and I watched
scary movies and ate our weight
in fries and we never saw her again.

Skowhegan, Maine

It looks like a quiet town,
but the belching log trucks
that blast through beg to differ.
It's in the middle of the state,
and the trees that surround it

are practically pencils already,
perfectly straight, pointed
at the top, ready to have the bark
peeled off and to be injected
with a rod of lead. I visited

in late July and had to wear
a light jacket most of the time.
Every day was overcast and
a fine cold mist would come down
from the clouds in the afternoon

and form speckles on my glasses.
But still it was summer vacation,
and the kids in my aunt's neighborhood
would be damned if they'd let it
slip by uncelebrated. So they cackled

and splashed until they were blue
and shivering in a pool someone
had erected in a driveway.
The teens here try with every dollar
of their allowance to look hard.

The boys wear wife-beaters
and wallet chains, and every girl
has something on her face
pierced and a hair color that doesn't
occur in nature. They stand

in the sloped parking lots
of pastry shops and curse at
one another. Profanity sounds funny
in that New England fisherman accent.
The seafood places are mediocre,

and there's no sea salt in the air.
The ocean is 70-some-odd miles away.

The mighty presence here is
the Kennebec River, which cuts the town
down the middle. It is wide and quiet

and I think not as slow moving
as it looks from above.
The locals seem largely to have
forgotten it, like a sinkhole
with a parking lot over it.

The river has to tear away a shore
or swallow a car or a house or a child
every now and then to remind the people
it is here. On my way back to the interstate,
I saw a line of five young boys sitting

shoulder to shoulder on the railing
of a foot bridge that spanned the river.
They were shirtless and in swim trunks.
But they only stared down at the water.
Stared like they were waiting

for something to come up out of it.

Distance

This town moves faster than it seems.
In four years, the kids who couldn't make
the junior varsity basketball team
will be managing video stores,
growing thick brown beards,
and marrying pregnant girls.

Roads that lead here are never busy.
The hills that guard us from the next town
are like breasts with farm freckles.
The billboards have been embellished
with the same graffiti for decades.
Most of us don't even notice it anymore.

Eighties music plays through the gray smoke
at Sam's Place, and pretty teenaged girls I know
from school bring us hamburgers in paper wrappers.
After this we will go away and stand
beneath the black fingers of the pines and blow
marijuana smoke into the navy blue sky

and sing in our own way about the folklore
of the town—some which we only heard about
in halls or classrooms or parking lots,
and some which we might have taken part in.

If we reconnect years from now in a hotel room
or coffee shop, what will come back to us?
Several curvy roadside deaths. The fire
at the bank downtown that left
the building a skeleton. A bedroom suicide,
the house still on the market. An overdose
at homecoming. A rape at prom.

If it's been ten years and we come back
and find that the high schoolers are the same,
look the same, ache in the same places,
and complain under the same pines,

I am convinced and afraid that we will be strangers
to them and so foreign that they couldn't imagine
a link between us.

Making a Bong Work

I could never smoke out of a bong
like you. A joint, sure. Pipe, even better.
But I just never learned to make a bong
work. You, on the other hand, would lean
over the coffee table in your bedroom
above your mom's garage, suck that thing
until it bubbled, hold it in, squeak out
a few words about how compact discs
will never sound as clear as vinyl, then
puff out that ass-smell and lean back
and let the couch absorb you.

At school before second hour, you barf
white shredded wheat on the stairs
while freshmen and sophomores dodge
the splashes. Maury Jo is wearing her
cheerleader outfit in the cafeteria
at lunchtime, and you grab yourself
in the open and pretend to slide your
hand down her back. After fifth hour,
Richard Box pushes your face into
a closed locker and walks away.
On the way to the parking lot,
a tenth grade redhead I like comes
toward us. You say her boobs are too big,
so when she walks by and waves,
I wave back, then look at you
and we laugh at her together.

Paying for College

I still have the bad wrist
I got from holding that
weed-eater day after day.
At noon a bell would ring
and the guys who worked

inside on the line
would take a break
from welding pipes
or pushing carts or
dragging pallets
and come outside
to smoke and eat
a bag of potato chips
in the shade by the door.

I would be mowing in the sun,
wearing a respirator and
dirt-dotted safety goggles,
and leaning like a sailor
to keep the old riding mower
from capsizing on the hill.

Those guys with baggy jeans
and goatees and cans of snuff.
I knew they all must have
switchblades, even the short ones,
and I would keep my face
turned down at 3 pm
when the shift changed
and they all walked by
toward the parking lot
and their souped up Trans Ams
as I picked cigarette butts
out of the grass
on my hands and knees.

The Professor

Look at me. I'm the twenty-four-year-old college professor, just hired, and all the children call me "sir," and none of them question my lessons or say, "What's the point of this?" or ask me, "How old are you?" I stay up late every evening

to work on my novel, then I get up early every morning to write lectures on poetry and grammar and Hemmingway, and my God, the pens fly as the class copies down my lecture word for word, whipping over the pages in their notebooks. I have them read

my three favorite books: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and another one, and I walk into the room and say, "What did you think of Holden Caulfield's struggle?" and the arms shoot up all over the classroom, and the students arch their backs and say,

"Professor! Professor!" and I take my time and pick whoever I want, and I say, "You there." A line of students waits to talk to me every day after class, wanting suggestions for supplemental reading or help with papers from other classes.

I consider having an affair with an eighteen-year-old female student, a quiet brunette with shoulders as soft as lip skin, but I decide to ignore her advances and focus on my novel, which I love, and my girlfriend, whom I live with. I take stacks of literary journals to Starbucks

across the street from campus, and I sit there with my laptop and write articles about Camus and pedagogy, which I publish in the university's critical magazine and *The New Yorker*, and one day someone notices my articles and writes me a letter to ask, "Have you ever considered

writing fiction?" and I send him or her some chapters of my novel. I use the money from that first book deal to buy a house in a gated community, and even though I don't need to anymore, I keep teaching, because, God damn it, I care about these kids.

May This Elevator Be Your Death Trap

was the last thing I said
to Midge, my office rival, and
I instantly regretted saying it
in that phony British accent,
because who am I fooling?
I had no idea that Midge would die
not in that elevator but rather
in an ambulance rushing her away
from the parking garage where
she had been clipped in the hip
by a careering Mercedes.
The ambulance, which was struck
by lightning, turned out to be
her death trap, and her coffin,
which we are all now staring at,
is bright blue and florally adorned
and lying beneath a blazing picture
of Midge on the overhead smiling
her teeth out. I have no tales
to tell into the podium microphone,
from which Bob Ablegoff hurts
our ears with stories of how
Midge wowed him in her interview.
I haven't decided if I regret
the time I told everyone else
that Midge was seeing a psychiatrist
because her husband left her.
Neither of those things was true,
but I was still mad about the Slimfast
in my briefcase. Julie Krantz from
the mailroom is about to sing,
and we'll all cry then, and I'm sure
I'll regret every mean thing.
I'm not good at being threatening
anyway. A real Brit would've said *lift*.

Time and a Half

It was the first time
I had ever seen Dad yell
at someone who wasn't
family. It wasn't even one
of the two Bulgarians
he'd hired that day
to help us dig the pit.
It was some drunk or stoned
city wanderer. If he wasn't
homeless, he at least
didn't like where he lived,
because he was a white guy
in a black Lynyrd Skynyrd
t-shirt walking through
a bad part of Tulsa
in the middle of June.
He stopped to ask us what we
were doing digging
a square hole in the parking lot
of an EZ Mart on a Saturday,
and Dad didn't feel
like answering questions
at that temperature, so he
let him have it.
When the guy crept away
without a word, I chuckled
because the Bulgarians did.
One said something
to the other that Dad
couldn't hear and I couldn't
understand. The wanderer
came back by about
thirty minutes later, but with
a girl who was about
sixteen or seventeen, and
none of us laughed then.

Roger

Roger's parents called him Boo when he was little, and they still do sometimes, even though he's an accountant and has a pregnant wife. He married his first girlfriend, who he met in college and lost his virginity to in less than a week.

Roger was the type to get crushes on his teachers and to get nervous if the girl at Starbucks was cute. Wilma was an intern at the firm where Roger worked, and she was much prettier than her name. She was a twenty-year-old business major, and she didn't know that you weren't supposed to have your hair down or wear knee-skirts in the office. It would've shocked her if she'd heard how she was talked about in the men's room, and it would have shocked everyone if they'd known that it would be Roger who would tie Wilma to his wife's bed. Roger had never been with a virgin before.

The Fired Man

He hit a student. Not only that,
but a black girl. He must've known
it was over the moment

his body cooled and his shoulders
untwisted and his right hand,
still fisted, came down again to rest

by his hip. He was escorted
off campus as superintendants
and board members and counselors

and the police and the girl's parents
were called. His room was cleaned out
the next day, posters

and senior pictures of graduated students
torn down by teenaged office aides
who relished being even that much

on the inside of the controversy.
He was already an old man
when I had him years ago, a hunched-over

chemistry teacher whose face
and posture had never recovered
from what had become of young people.

Back then it was us
against the teachers, but there were
a few of us who quietly rooted

for the teachers. I feel sorry
that someone was finally able
to push him to snapping.

And seeing this man who knows
the atomic mass of every element
and fought every day for our attention

now wearing an apron and fondling oranges
makes it hard to shop for groceries here
or to be excited about anything.

Internet Porn

The teacher said, *Write a poem
about what you know,*
so I started writing a poem
called "Internet Porn,"
but I only did it as a joke,
and before I even finished, I knew
I didn't want to read it
in front of X, Y and Z, the guys
around the table who always
hunched over every freewrite
and shaved off words and syllables
in their rewrites in the name
of brevity. I was jealous of them
a little, but more so of the addict
who wrote poems called "Heroin" or
"Waking up behind the Bus Station in
Someone Else's Underwear."

He didn't look like a junkie,
and that's how I knew he was one.
He coughed up verse
the way I cough up phlegm.
He had cracks everywhere—
in his mind, his vision, his soul,
somewhere—and when the waters
of every day experience flowed
over him, the cracks made
the surface dimple, dip and swirl
in a way that made normal people
stop and look while in the meantime
I made up some bullshit about
entering my credit card number
one-handed so I could finish
jacking off to the streaming
three-way hand job MPEG on my laptop.

A Date

A girl I know who knows how beautiful she is
is going out with a boy she dumped

after high school graduation years ago.

She dumped this too-nice guy because she knew

how beautiful she was, and he was too nice
because he knew it, too. And I can't blame

the poor bastard, because I've been there,
the shy guy who by some miracle or mistake

gets noticed by a girl who normally
can avoid such gentle boys.

Knowing you have her, knowing
that you can stand face-to-face with her, make her

laugh, make her listen, hold her hand
is like a dream job, and you will kiss

whatever ass you must not to lose it.
Flowers, a ring, a necklace, another ring,

more flowers, dinner, a poem about the two of you
losing an expected child and then soldiering through

the grief together—all of these, you are sure,
will get you tenure. Of course they will

do the opposite. She will wait to dump you
until summer so she doesn't have to see you

every day and feel guilty. You were, after all,
a really great guy, and she hates to see you hurt.

She hates to see it. But that doesn't mean she
won't do it. And after it's done and you've had

a year or two of college to mature, or five or ten
years of live to age you, you can do one of two things.

One, have some pride in yourself, realize
and accept that she isn't the only beautiful girl

in the world—she's just the only one who has
let you up her shirt. Or two, you can say,

Fuck pride. You bought those rings, that necklace,
those flowers for a reason. You got choked up

when you read her that freaky poem about a baby
dying, and you're still sure, even after all this time,

that you remember a choked-up or otherwise
strained look on her face. She may have moved

onto handsomer and more outgoing and athletic guys,
but by God, there was a time when you knew

all the creases of her hand and exactly how
her tongue felt and tasted, and that's not nothing.

Waffle House

It was the one and only time
I ever ate there. Nine years ago
I had a fried egg sandwich,
which was delicious and horrible
for me, and as the city outside
darkened and then lit up
with headlights and bright white
convenience store windows,
I talked with my ex-girlfriend's
closest girlfriend, who
about the time she was pouring
syrup over her remaining waffle
for the second time, said,
"You know, she stopped taking
her birth control. She wanted you
to knock her up." I hadn't known.
And that is the one part
of the conversation I remember.
That and the part about how
my ex slept with her RadioShack
manager when I was at Niagara
with my folks. But I didn't care
as much that she could have
given me an STD from that
douche bag as I did that I could be
stuck to this day sharing a kid
with her, picking him or her up
Friday evenings, having to like
the new boyfriend, screening calls
about birthday parties and recitals
and sitting next to her
in a desk that fits like handcuffs
at the parent-teacher conference
just like we did in Coach Mann's
health class where we met.
I loved the way she made love
to that dead-faced mannequin
during CPR training, and how she
slapped it in the face and shook it
by the shoulders and then burst
into laughter when she knew
he was dying. That was me.

What Was Her Name?

I didn't want to go to the party
because I knew only the host
but he insisted I come so he could
introduce me to a girl
who would be perfect for me
and who showed up
two hours after I did and with a girlfriend
she claimed was her date.

I was happy to see the girlfriend
was just as uncomfortable
as I was and that she
was gorgeous. At one point
I found her in the driveway with
a cigarette but no lighter.
I privately cursed all the teachers
and parents and older siblings
who admonished me
not to take up smoking
when I was a preteen. But I walked
to her anyway as she dug through
her purse. "I knew I should have gone
to Denver," was the first thing
she said to me. Turns out
a couple she knew had invited her
to fly out with them that afternoon.
I asked her what was in Denver
and she said, "Mountains."

We ended up talking for a half hour
sitting on the curb in the dark
while the party inside the house
got drunker and louder,
then we had sex in the back
of my Jeep Cherokee parked
on the side of the street
in front of my friend's house.

We skipped out on the party altogether
and drove with the radio
off all over the subdivision.
Then I drove us to the reservoir
and sped across the bridge
to the south shore.

She laughed and sat holding her knees.
At 3 a.m. she put her head
in my lap and told me to keep driving.
At 3:30 she woke up enough to tell me
how to find her apartment.
She wouldn't let me
walk her to her door, but she did
let me kiss her in the car.
Her hair was a mess, and she smiled
as she got out.

Three months later was
the next time I saw her. She came
to my work to tell me not
to freak out, but that she was
pregnant. She didn't want me
to hear about it in some
awkward way, and she didn't want
money, and she didn't even know
what she wanted to do with it.
I told her fine, and she left satisfied,
and I've only seen her twice
in the five years since, and she
didn't have a baby with her the first time
or a toddler with her the second.

Virginitv

We would all four go together
to the all-night Total and buy
two thirty-cent cigars apiece,
then drive out to some intersection
of two random county roads to smoke.

We shouted into the night
what we wanted and
what we'd be willing to do for it.

It invariably involved girls we all
knew from school. "I'd give
my left nut for one night with Trisha
Johnston." Sometimes we would all
have the same girl in mind,

some miraculous sophomore who
had an ass or a face that was
ahead of her age, and we would circle
around the idea of her and describe
what we would do to her
either alone or as a gang.

Other times we each wailed
about our own personal love, love that
wasn't really love but hurt
in the place and in the way that

we assumed love must. Mine was
Cynthia, who I hardly knew but knew
I could make happy
for the rest of our lives, even if

we stayed in Danville. I ended up
losing my virginitv not to her but to
my first girlfriend, who had
no virginitv to give to me but took me

to the top of a rocky hill and ordered me
on the ground and we started it there
and then finished on the hood
of her car in the blinking red light

of a radio tower that had watched

the whole thing. I pulled off
the condom afterward and tossed it
into the stiff prickly grass

where it hung like a slimy windsock.
It took us five minutes to get
all the dirt, grass and spiders
out of my hair and off my back.

The drive home was windy and loud,
like a concert, and the next
day at school I felt like a secret
celebrity. And now, years later
and with my own family and hundreds

of miles away from that hill
and those crossroads, I'm still thinking
and writing about it. "It" being
the sex that frustrated and eluded us
for all those antsy nights we spent

in the dark with damp cigars
in our lips. It would be disloyal
to stop talking about it now.

II.

Glowing Garage

The rest of the world
is in cool dark greens, but this garage,
which is behind the house, blazes
like a pink gaping mouth.

From the street I can look up
the driveway and see
every hook on the pegboard
and every vice grip, hammer and
hedge clipper that hangs.

I guess garage lights have to be bright
so husbands and fathers everywhere
can get down deep into dark
engines and still see what their oily
fingers clutch. Nagging wife,
relentless children,
the husband-father escapes
to the garage, keeps his head

under the hood or over
a stack of unstained wood.
Does he tiptoe out there
the way a POW slips noiselessly
from his bunk into the hole that will
eventually become his freedom tunnel?
Or does he go out there into the cool
evening with the encouragement

of his children, who have their own
Lego constructions to worry about,
and with the blessing of his wife,
who knows he needs his time
hunched over a task in his glowing hutch
to keep from feeling like a failure?

A Family of Persians

On the interstate in Connecticut,
you took that wrong exit and then
woke me up with the f-word.
I said, *May as well pull into
that McDonald's so I can pee.*
In the parking lot we
walked behind a family of Persians
or maybe Turks
or Spaniards, I don't know.
Dark skin, tight black hair.
The mother choked a purse strap
and two teenaged boys
followed her, each texting on his own cell phone.

Behind them, a thin girl, about twelve
with baby-horse knees and overall shorts.
The father came up next to her, got close,
put his arm around her, cupped the ball
of her shoulder in his hand and looked
under her bangs to her face.
She wiped her cheeks,
and Dad was saying
quiet things to her and I realized that
if I were a twelve-year-old girl and crying,
I would want a father to put around me
his arm sleeved with dark hair.
He could look into my red eyes and get me
ready to walk into a McDonald's and not care
that everyone would know I had been crying.

Then I wished, for no reason that I can tell you,
that I had been your dad. We wouldn't
be able to make love like we do now,
but I could have watched you
hunt Easter eggs
with your cousins
or play basketball for the church league.
You would have been always happy
to see me and never afraid.

Breathing Mosquitoes

In Robin, Mississippi, you'll breathe mosquitoes
and shoot fireworks on the Fourth of July,

Christmas and Thanksgiving. You will sweat
every season. If you are a man, you will wear

loafers without socks to church or the office.
If you are a woman, you'll stay home

and deal with fire ants in every cabinet
and cupboard. If you are young and black,

you will skip class and smoke pot
together with whites in the woods behind the gym.

If you are white, you will not use the N-word
unless you do, in which case your father

never explained that that word was okay
only when he was a boy but not anymore,

or else he told you it was fine for any occasion,
but only if you really hate the person

or if your black friends say it is okay or they are
in the other room or if you simply

don't have any. If you are new to the South,
a Midwest transfer, you will feel too strange

using the N-word, so you won't, but you will
have the F-word. I don't mean *fuck*, I mean

faggot, and it will work like a balm
for any irritation, anyone who cuts you off

in traffic, makes you look stupid in front
of a girl, borrows a CD and gives it back

scratched. But as you get older, you'll feel it
—like a change in the air pressure—

becoming something you don't say
unless you want to look like a hillbilly or get kicked

off a TV show, and you'll have to teach your sons that they should never use it unless they mean it.

Tom's Life

His plan was to move
to LA and get a job as a
world famous actor, because
the high school drama teacher
had such things to say
about him after he came from
nowhere—or more specifically,
the math club—to win
the role of Mr. Darcy his senior year.

But he was talked out of that
and so many other dreams
by the paycheck given to him
by Scott Welch and Associates,
where he hoped to have
an office by now with a window
and a door but has to settle
for a beige cubicle in a room
with three other men, all older,
all with seniority.

I'd like to say Tom has
a happy marriage, but I'll just say
he has a marriage, and
sometimes when he's reading
magazines in the break room,
he fantasizes about snatching
Traci Stackwell out of her desk
in front of Mr. Feely's office
and heading off to Hollywood
with her and nothing but
the clothes on his back
and the toiletries and underwear
in the emergency overnight bag
he keeps in his trunk, but
when he gets home at 5:30 tonight
and his wife tells him
the happy news, he'll realize
he's not going anywhere.

The Answer

1. The Suburban Answer

When you're seventeen and you think
your girlfriend might be pregnant because

she told you she is, your afterschool purpose
becomes finding a job. So you go

to Dobb's Grocery because you have a buddy
there who said he can get you on.

You show up with your khakis up your ass
and a stiff polo you've never worn before,

and you find your friend lifting boxes
with gloves and whispering that he's not sure

he can help you. When you ask him
to come introduce you to the manager,

he'll say, "I'm lifting these boxes,
I got these gloves, sorry." So you'll find

the manager yourself, and he'll be the man
with a clipboard, a clip-on tie and a hairline

that is eager to start retreating,
and hands too chubby to fit inside a baseball glove.

He'll say the words "fully staffed" to you
and then turn back to his clipboard

and you won't have the nerve to tell him
why you're there because it hasn't really dawned

on you yet, and instead of hitting Subway
or Blockbuster or anywhere else

with applications, you'll go home and watch
Independence Day on VHS. Horrible movie.

2. The Rural Answer

When you're seventeen and you think
your girlfriend might be pregnant because

she's been to the doctor twice and she's
starting to show, you don't change a thing,

because you already work more than full-time
at the grain and feed store, but you might

get a new wallet chain and your kid's name
tattooed on your crowded bicep

as soon as it has a name. And speaking
of the kid's mama, you'll want to marry her,

and neither your parents or hers will object
because that's how they met, and anyway

your fate was set when you were born
in that county hospital to a mother who worked

in a greenhouse and quoted Bible passages
like Leviticus 18:22, and a father who drank

and drove a mail truck for the city
and only hit when you deserved it.

3. The Urban Answer

When you're seventeen and you think
your girlfriend might be pregnant because

she's acting funny and has been ever since
you told her you might like to try

Joanna Martin, you try to stay away from her
until she figures it out, because it's her thing,

and you don't want to get involved.
You have your job to worry about,

and your mama, and you're trying to stay away
from the junk, and if she can in anyway prove

that the kid is yours, you'll have to ride
into Detroit and ask your father—who you call

Richard—for help, and you'd rather die
than take a step into that green-carpeted apartment

over the P & H Pawn Shop on 103rd Street.
Last time you were there, he didn't look away from

a basketball game on TV, and you swore
that that would be the last time.

Boat

It's a seven-foot-long curve
of algae-stained wood,
and it makes this spot
of fish-smelling lake livable.

I hold my breath and swim
in the dark brown underneath it
and pretend I'm drowning
while my dad takes a nap
with his handkerchief over his eyes.

I can't touch out here,
so he told me to wear a life vest.
But sometimes I take it off
and fling it away and then swim
to wherever it splashed down
like I've just burst through the surface
from a sinking ship that is beneath us
and heading for the bottom.

From here I can see colorful families
with mothers that chirp like birds
and command picnics around concrete tables,
or the two-headed monster shapes
of couples who sit entangled
on the cut grass by the shore.

My dad and I had not known
what to get at the grocery store,
so we just bought three different kinds
of cookies and a half gallon of milk,
which we will I guess drink
from the container. It is staying cool,
I hope, and rocking gently
in the cooler under my dad's feet.

Last Easter

We wore white shirts,
filled my aunt's lawn
and patio furniture.
My pervert uncle explained
with wild gestures
to a circle of grass-sitting
youngsters how the chocolate
eggs they were about
to free from tinfoil were tied
to the excruciating death
of Jesus on the cross.

Dad stood near the grill
complaining about
the hamburger smoke in his eyes
and the wasps by the back door.
Mom sat with her sisters
under a pear tree, apologized
for Dad's drunkenness and
Catholicism. No one apologized
for my little sister, sixteen
years old, decked in black,
who refused to throw the Frisbee back
when it got away from us,
but instead walked it over with
a frown, handed it to our cousin
Curt, who had confessed his love
to her just a month before.

The Creation of the Black Sea

I wish I had seen the creation
of the Black Sea, stood
on a precipice and watched
the flood waters break open
the mountains and pour
into the valley, washing away
villages and villagers
for thousands of miles.

I think if I had seen this
it wouldn't have been a big deal
when Annette Fehring went
to the winter formal with
someone else, or when I applied
at Wal-Mart but failed
the drug test, or when Lee Spitz
punched me in the mouth
and made me cry in front of
everyone in the parking lot,
or when the English department
gave the full-time promotion
based on experience
rather than passion, or when
my wife told me she agreed
I was getting love handles
or that she thought she might
love someone she worked with,
or when my son told me
he wished he wasn't mine.

I could just picture all those
flailing arms and gasping faces,
all the shocked trees rocked
and then covered by the roiling foam,
and the sea-sized valley
rising blue and flat, and I would
just flow through anything else
that could ever happen.

Breakfast

I had breakfast with my son
in my head this morning.
I never actually had a son
with my first wife, though
I wanted one and talked her
into trying. It never worked
with her, and we divorced
a year to the day after our
wedding. I was twenty-four,
she was twenty, and I wondered
what it would be like at fifty
to tell my twenty-six-year-old son
why it only took 365 days
for me to decide I wanted his mother
away from me forever.

He could be getting married
himself by now, or even have kids.
He would be ten years older
than my oldest daughter
from my second wife,
and I'd tell him about her cheerleading
and FBLA. He'd have a job
to dress up for, an apartment to drink
a cold beer in with a girl or fiancé.

Would he tell me how he gets along
with his boss or doesn't?
What teams he watches when he
gets home after work. How he met
the girl and how he proposed
or how he plans to.

How would I even invite him
for breakfast? Or would he rather
meet at Kettle's where he can confuse me
with all the other fifty-year-old
lost-looking men who sit alone
and don't talk or who sit
with their families and don't talk.

He'd listen to my life, which is
three daughters, two ex-wives,
and one job in the same uniform

for thirty-three years, and he'd know
he made the right choice
staying in school. He'd feel sorry
for me and not tell me too much
about his life in a sports car
and upstairs office for fear
it would make me hate myself.

He would insist on paying the check
if we met out, then leave quickly
in his car so he wouldn't have to see me
walking to the bus stop.

Advice

While my wife was nine
months along with
our first child, I had a drink
with my dad and asked
if he had any advice, and he said:

“Watch your kids grow up.
Don’t let it happen
while you’re at the shop,
on the road, in the garage, under
the hood, behind a desk, in
front of the TV. You’ll look up
and they’ll be driving cars
and going on dates,
and it’s too late to learn
who your kids are
when they’re teenagers.
You’ll have to wait until they’re
adults, getting married, getting houses,
getting laid off, getting sober,
getting a divorce, and you’ll meet
like strangers on the street
and have to start from scratch
until you agree on how
your relationship will be,
and it won’t be like a child
and a parent. It will be more like
a runner and someone
who once thought about
being a track coach.”

And without thinking, I said,
“Do you really think
I’d let that happen?”
and Dad said, “No,
I suppose you wouldn’t.”

Honeymoon

I have the feeling I should be embarrassed
 about how little sex took place
 on my honeymoon. And when you marry
 a beautiful girl like I did, you want
 your friends to believe you ravaged each other
 in every possible way and every possible room
 of the cabin you rented for the week
 in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia
 and that the walls themselves
 were sweaty and panting and that you ate
 strawberry halves in the nude at sunset
 on a balcony that overlooked nothing
 but wilderness.

But the truth is none of that happened.
 I watched *Ice Road Truckers* on the History Channel
 on the giant TV in the living room while she
 sprawled in her underwear on the king-sized bed upstairs
 and watched *Iron Chef* on the Cooking Channel.
 I played pool in the loft while she cooked dinner,
 and then I found a book
 about the Carolinas in the Revolution
 and a chair by a lamp downstairs
 to read it in while the mountain went to sleep.

We also ate together
 at the 50s-themed ice cream shop
 and found a lake and laid
 on the sandy shore and watched
 the skiers and the clouds behind the hills.

How great it was in the evening
 to sit in a leather chair
 that held me like a hand
 and to read "The South Carolina militia
 was encamped on the plateau
 just north of the British position"
 and know that my beautiful woman was sleeping soundly
 in the other room, and that she wasn't bothered
 by my lamplight, and that I could wake her if I needed to.

Bleeding Away

If my wife were to die,
taking our unborn daughter
with her, the first girl
I would call would be
Robyn, who I worked with
at Mazzio's when I was
twenty. She was sixteen,
had a weird face, bug eyes
and big ears. But
when I sat at a table at IHOP
near her friends, all dressed up
for prom, I couldn't stop
following the lines of the straps
on her salmon-colored dress
crisscrossing her brown
shoulder blades.

And after her, if I knew
it would just be a one-time thing,
I'd call Johnna, girl with one
leg who sat at the front
of our history class.
She would sit with her leg
stretched out toward the professor,
and I would stare
at her stump and the metal
replacement limb coming
out of it. She wasn't pretty.
She lost that leg to a Great White
while swimming with family
in the Carribean.
It hit her like a VW Bus
from underneath, took her leg
off like it was saltwater taffy,
then left her to flail her way back
to the bubbling surface.
She wasn't afraid
to talk about it. Wasn't afraid
of anything.

I'd let Robyn stare
at me with those bug eyes,
and Johnna could wrap
her one leg around me

and I'd forget
my wife and daughter,
what the trip to the ER
was like, how fast
I drove, how the water tasted
from the fountain
in the waiting room
and how I was sure
once we got there
that everything would be fine.

Leftovers

You and the cat
having dinner together.
There's nothing

questionable about that.
Get him some canned food,
the moist kind

that he never gets,
so he won't bother you
while you eat your spaghetti

on the living room floor.
It's hard with no couch,
so fold up a towel to sit on.

You still have the armoire
and the TV and you'll feel
like you're in a movie theatre

looking up at it from your
hardwood. That was one thing
that attracted you both

to this place, the hardwood floor,
and good thing you liked it too,
because now it's one

of the few things you still have.
Next time put more
of the furniture in your name.

Drink a Coke from the can.
Watch *Aliens* or some other sci-fi.
And let the cat lick your bowl

when you're done. He's
been hurt, too. And it's tougher
on him, because his cat brain

can't really understand why
yet, and might never. So
let him sleep on the air mattress

with you. And before you go
to bed, unplug the phone. If
she doesn't want to call, fuck her.

Her Questions

Yes, I think you only called me
to make me feel bad, and no,
I don't feel bad at all. And yes,
I was with her when you came
and pounded on the door,
and I was with her once before
when I told you my department
supervisor needed me to help him
sort applications, and I
was with her once before that
at least, and yes, I'm sorry
your house got broken into,
and no, I don't know who
would've done such a thing,
and yes, I do think it means
you're a racist if you assumed
the burglar was black.

The Orpheus Myth

Your mother was my Eurydice.
That's what I will want

you to believe one day. Probably
when you're a teenager

and becoming old enough
both to ask questions and

to study the Greeks. I will want
you to believe that it was

inevitable, that I did all I could,
that I did the modern equivalent

of traveling to the underworld
with a sad song to make Hades cry.

I sometimes wonder if
the real Orpheus made the story up

for his own kids because, like me,
he didn't want them to find out

the truth: that things
simply didn't work out; that he

probably didn't do as much
as he could have; and that there was no

single moment that doomed them,
but hundreds of muffled

dull-eyed last looks that came
after arguments and disappointments

were stretched over months
and years. She would stand

in the door of my office and say,
"I'm making lunch," when she really

meant something else. I would look up
and say, "Fine." She would be

beautiful. And then she would be gone.

A Message from the Afterlife

Heaven, I gotta tell you,
is a little disappointing.
That girl you liked, the one
you were so sure you “loved”—
well, she ain’t here.
They’ll tell you she is.
They’ll show her to you.
She’ll look just like she did
back in Jr. High or college
or whenever. She’ll smell
and feel just like you
always thought she would,
and she’ll be as agreeable
as she always was in your
fantasies. Maybe you actually
had this girl back when you
were alive. Maybe you even
nailed her. Maybe you two
married. Or maybe she
was your wife’s best friend
or your best friend’s wife,
the smiling brunette with thighs
you always imagined touching.
Or maybe she sat in front
of you in church and let her
perfume get on you because she
was bored and knew how
damned startling her blue eyes
could be. Either way, she was
the girl you pictured lying
with you in a field watching
the eternal sunset. That’s what
you thought of heaven. And
it sure will look like her, and
she’ll smile as she follows you
down the dipping pastures,
laugh when you put your arm
around her waist, and lay her
soft head on you when you lie
back in the long grass. This
is what you’ve always wanted.
Right? But what will you do
when you realize that your girl
is a fake and does anything

you tell her to? Me, I didn't
much care, but I've walked
with my baby past many a sad
and lonely looking fellow
sitting with folded hands
on sloping sunset fields. They
set their lovely partners free
back into the purgatory woods.

III.

West Guthrie

Deirdre wears her sexiest
extra-large tank top—which is yellow
under the arms—to Love’s
where she complains to the cab driver
and anyone else who can hear
how her ex-boyfriend told everyone
that she was on meth
when he left her.
Her new boyfriend has brown-rimmed
fingernails and a job
on weekends behind a counter and
a job on weekdays behind
a steering wheel. Deirdre gave
her little boy a buzz so she
wouldn’t have to wash muddy hair.
Her girl is eleven
and climbs trees and creek beds barefoot.
Deirdre takes the kids to Walmart
late during the summer
since it’s air-conditioned.
Sometimes they sleep in the car
at the park. It’s quieter
than their house, which sits
twenty yards from the train tracks.
Deirdre is twenty-seven,
and she doesn’t know it yet, but she’ll
have a grandchild in four years,
and her mother will raise it.

The Thing about the Old Lady

She thinks there is a man
in the house. Her family
tells her it's only noises,
a door that closes on its own
from a drafty suction
between the hallway and
poorly caulked windows.
The room is empty, they say,
and those footsteps are acorns
falling on the roof, and it is
the cat who keeps eating
the leftovers on the kitchen
counter, and the police department
is damned tired of coming
out at 11 p.m. to check
the attic and scour the back yard
with flashlights. But they are all
wrong. There isn't just a man.
There's also a woman, a child,
a talent scout, a claims adjuster,
a script supervisor, and the ghost
of a murdered adolescent girl.
But don't worry about the ghost.
She's just lost, and keeps mostly
to herself. Just don't open
the guest room closet after dark.

Miami Homeless

When you're homeless in Miami, you lose
your shoes and eventually your feet turn
into asphalt, black, cracked and hard.
The sun will tan you into a minority and bleach
your hair sandy blond. You will sleep
in a shallow alley and bathe at the beach.
You will journey from dumpster to dumpster,
stopping to check coin returns
at every Coke machine and payphone.
Restaurant owners will put cushioned chairs
on the sidewalk for customers when they open
in the morning, and tempted, you will stop
to rest in one. But the maître d' will spot you,
cuss, then dump you out onto the sidewalk,
bearded, old and shoeless,
and he will continue to curse at you
despite the onlooking Midwestern tourists.
Everyone will look, but no one will do anything.

I Met Carla on the Bus

She was born right after WWII.
She doesn't like baseball
because of the spitting.
She can't dissect bodies
because she's allergic
to formaldehyde.
She slapped a monsignor
who called her kid stupid.
She says the best job for me
would be translator,
and she wants me to go back
to church. She's a widow,
and tomorrow she's going to ask
the doctor flat out
how many years she has left.

Next Door

He found her during Korea, and now
he's gone and she just wants time
to die, too, but his kids want the house,
but she doesn't want to move
to assisted living because she knows
the walls and rooms and light switches
here. She is in bed by the time
the sun goes down. I know this because
I never see any lights on after dark.
I imagine she is up at dawn, dusting
and scrubbing and straightening
like she's waiting for someone or some
time. I'm not sure who hires
the two-man Hispanic crew to mow
and trim her unfenced yard, but
when I do mine I am careful not to
cross the invisible line between.
Though we've never met, I think that's
something she would appreciate.

The Last Place You'll Live

You're always cold,
and for the second time in your life,
you wear diapers. Your apartment
is ninety-five percent smaller
than the four-bedroom house
you sold in December,
and it is a tedious elevator ride
and a long walk
down a boring hallway from your door
to anything green or alive.

You gave up your license
before you realized
the shuttle bus doesn't go near
the library or tobacco shop
for some God damned reason.
There's no smoking anyway.
Your neighbors drink cider instead
And decorate their doors with wreaths
that apply to every holiday and season.

Your bed is a twin
and it's in the living room because
it's also the bedroom,
and the only visitors you get
are the Vietnamese you shot
because you thought
they were going to shoot you.
They come while you sleep,
and when you wake
you can still smell
the jungle for a moment
before the carpet cleaner and
wallpaper glue replace everything,
and the cold, wet feeling
reminds you to change yourself.

To My Brother, Dead in Iraq

You loved not telling girls
that you had a twin
because you loved seeing their faces
when you brought them home
to the one bedroom house we shared
across from campus
and they saw another one of you
sitting on the couch eating a pot pie.

Dad says you died
to give freedom to every American.
“You see that guy pruning his tree?”
Dad asks. “Teddy gave him the freedom
to do that. And you see
that little girl riding her bike
alone in the street?”

He goes on like this for days
in my head. I think to myself
that you must have given
the tan blond in the mini skirt
the freedom to fall asleep and drool
on her desk next to me in government class.
And to the Papa John’s delivery guy,
you gave the freedom to text
with both hands and steer with his knees.

Your humvee hit a landmine,
flipped over and folded you in half like paper
so that the woman next door
could change her mind,
drop the charges, and allow her boyfriend back
into her house and her children’s lives.

Your lungs filled with blood
so the truck full of hillbillies
across the street right now could curse
and laugh and blare their horn in the pouring rain
as they throw old beer cans
and wadded Arby’s bags at our homeless guy
who was trying to rest under the awning
of the Seven-Eleven.

I wouldn’t be mad

if I went to our bedroom and found it closed
and your belt around the knob.
I'd know you were in there with a girl,
and I'd fall asleep on the couch.
I might open the front door later
so I could listen to the rain and the cars
sloshing through on their way to night classes.
Or I could lie back
in the black dimpled river
forming in the street out front
and let it carry me to the sea
or to wherever you really are now.

Tuesday

I didn't have class
so I blocked the sun
with my arm
and slept. My girlfriend
had stayed the night but
left early for her chem lab.

Shawnee, Oklahoma, slept
in duplexes and trailer homes
and schools and grocery stores
with pillows over their faces
or heads on their desks,
as their hands sacked groceries
and their teachers lectured.

I don't remember what I was dreaming
when Mom called to tell me
someone had flown
into the World Trade Center,
whatever that was, and
that they thought it was
a small plane and
that I should turn on
the news. I took a shower
instead, and when I got out
and went to the living room
in my towel, another plane
had hit the second tower.

I had breakfast: sausage and eggs,
no toast. And the first tower fell.
I dressed and drove to school,
and the other tower fell, too.

The professor of my
Intrapersonal Communications class
took us downstairs
to the cafeteria, which
had a television. He gave us paper
and told us to write
a letter to ourselves about
how we felt. I remember
putting the word "angry" down
as Dan Rather or whoever

took us from New York
to DC to New York.

We gave the letters
to the teacher, and he said
he'd give them back
at the end of the term.
(He either forgot or lost them.)

I hugged my girlfriend
in the parking lot,
and my dad called to tell me
to fill up my tank, but
there were lines at every gas station,
so we went to Denny's
and slept as our waitress,
who was also sleeping,
brought pancakes
topped with strawberries.

House on 10th Street

If you're from Townsend, you know
about the house on 10th Street
and why it's empty. You know why
no kids walk through the yard or swing
on the tire swing that hangs in the shade
of the big willow.

You know about the woman
and what happened in the bedroom,
why no one peeks in the windows
and why the roof leaks when it rains.

You know about the flashing lights
and fire trucks that night, and you know
that the neighbors won't talk, and you know
who to this day comes every other week
to keep the grass mowed and
the driveway swept.

Eight Bodies

Picture eight teenaged bodies
crumpled and red under black

tarps at the intersection
of Sorghum Road and

what we now call "Old" Highway Nine.
Imagine being the cop or paramedic

who had to pull out the ones
who didn't get thrown out on impact,

laying them straight and
untying and unrolling the tarps.

Or even, imagine being the farmhand
who found them, the engines still

smoking, windshields smashed,
the cars grimacing and spread apart,

shocked, like two strangers
after an accidental and violent kiss.

Or before that, see them riding,
both cars full and windows down,

teenaged curls blowing and bouncing,
dark trees waving, the world passing

beneath them like the sea.

Or the day before, all eight of them

in different places, grocery shopping
with mom, reading a romance novel

on a porch swing, on a first date
with the boy from church,

playing a guitar alone in the garage,
throwing rocks into a creek

with a little sister, eating cake
at grandpa's eighty-third birthday,

shelving boxes of nails
at the hardware store for \$1.25 an hour,

buying a white cashmere sweater
at Penney's in the city.

What Happens Next

Imagine your daughter won't talk
to you, and neither will your son
or your wife, and they all talk
about you like you're dead and never
coming back, and they cry
sometimes even when the stories
are funny, and your wife sits alone
with her oatmeal at the breakfast table
where she used to sit with you,
and no one can even see you except
the dog, whose barking
is getting on everyone's last nerve.
So you sit with him all night outside
where your wife now has him
caged up even though he wants nothing
more than to be let back in the house
where he can be part of the family again.
Sometimes he follows you
out of the gate in the afternoon
when you wander the block,
and you know the neighbors are talking
about calling animal control,
but you don't know how you know.

Death Comes to Your House

I learned about Michael Jackson
while swimming with my eyes open
in the perfect blue pool
of a warm Ft. Lauderdale hotel.

Radio speakers on the patio
announced it and then
confidently rained out nothing
but “Rock with You” and “Billie Jean”
and so on for the next two days.

Every TV in every window glowed
with his face above a news ticker.
Homicide, suicide, accident, and
“Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough.”

A maid and a guest checking in
watched together on the lobby’s big screen.
The bartender made hamburgers
and brought them out to the poolside
as the speakers played
“The Way You Make Me Feel.”

Death had followed me on vacation.
But sometimes death
pulls right into your driveway
in the form of your mom
or your best friend’s sister
or your girlfriend’s step-father,
waves you over to an empty lawn
chair and says, “Sit down, man,”
and there is no music.

Completion

I thought we were all
supposed to get closure

in that sobbing sniffling
church. Her casket had sat

closed. I remember wanting
it open to see for myself.

I got no peace from the eulogy,
the prayers or singing, nor

from the drive to the cemetery
or the preacher's speech there

under the tent or the
handshaking and back-patting

afterward. So I stayed to see her
into the ground. I watched

two middle-aged men operate
a backhoe. Gravediggers

I guess. They looked like
anybody. They were good

enough not to smile
while they worked.

A few days later, a family friend
told me how he had dug

his brother's grave himself.
That was how he grieved.

And I wished I had been the one
to make the first break in the dirt,

to cut the thin grass with
the tip of my shovel and press it

down with my heel, toss it
into a brown circle and watch

my pile grow, and then,
at the first point of exhaustion,

slide down into the hole
and carve out a rectangle

with my hands if I had to,
to give it four corners

and smooth walls, and measure
the depth with my own height.

It would have been like
making a bed for her, which I did

plenty of times before
while she dozed on the couch.

Cleaning out My Mother's Trailer Home

My sister said she'd deal with
the complicated stuff, like
the old letters and shoeboxes of necklaces.
She wanted me to go in first, though,
and make the place bearable.

The bed was a blank, sheetless mattress
on a box spring with God knows what
underneath. Her pillow
and longest quilt were on the couch
where she'd been sleeping.

A glass of orange juice perched
on the window sill with a dime-sized island
of green mold floating in it.
The mug of milk on the counter
had formed a solid crust over the surface.

When I picked up a pile of laundry
so I could get to the closet, I uncovered
a spider, which ran under the closet door.

I didn't know what all I should do,
so I cleaned the toilet and Windex'd
the mirror, they were chores I knew.

After, I sat on the couch where she
would've. Out the window a neighbor man
was throwing a rope over a high tree branch
to make a swing for a son or daughter.
From where I sat it looked like he
was standing on Mom's television.

The remote was on the coffee table.
Next to it was a novel which she had
laid down open to hold her page.
It made me think of how a person must look
after falling or jumping from a ledge
and landing face down
with their arms spread wide like wings
that didn't work. I picked the book up to see
where she'd left off.

When I saw that it was open

to the end of a chapter, I wondered
if she had put it down to go to sleep
or maybe to get some orange juice or milk
from the fridge, or if she ever intended
to come back to it, or if she had gotten tired
of the story and given up.

Think of all the things she'll never find out.
Who the killer was, for instance,
if it was that kind of book.
Did the secret lovers end up together?
Or did the scientist find a cure for the boy's
heart. I took the book with me to finish it for her.

What I Hope

Once you're dead
and the debris is brushed away—
because you are a fighter,
and your death will leave debris—
I will wipe the house clean of
you and empty your half
of the closet to make room
for the next person, or
persons, because it might be
a twenty-year-old girl
from one of my classes, or
an old buddy from high school
and garage band days, or
maybe a middle-aged woman
with a single toddler
who will either call me Dad
or John, or maybe it'll be a homeless man
I meet at an intersection by the mall
who turns out to be great with housework
and check book balancing.

Whatever the case, I will
scrub you out of the carpets and drapes
in preparation of this new cast,
flinging like rug dust out the back door
every memory of you,
like your hair after a nap,
or the dip of your lower back
when you lay on the floor
on your stomach to watch TV,
or your voice calling me
across the house to come kill a spider
or kiss you. It will be
as if you were never here.