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Keyholes

A THESIS

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By

Henry Alexander Shafer

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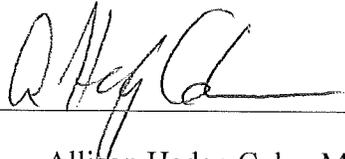
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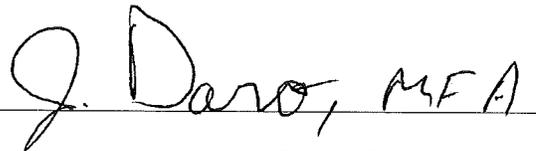
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Henry Alexander Shafer

TITLE: Keyholes

DIRECTOR: Allison Hedge Coke

PAGES: 99

Drawing upon influence from the observational tone of Frank O'Hara's poetry, journalistic writing, and the confessional voice of Billy Childish in conjunction with the people-poet aesthetic of Charles Bukowski, the poetry collection *Keyholes* examines the verisimilitude of overlooked intimate moments in life. Throughout *Keyholes*, these moments are framed in a fashion similar to the view through a door's keyhole. This collection is divided into three sections to show the range of this approach, from voyeuristic to narrative to observational. Relying on voyeurism portrayed in a narrative voice, "Untitled 2013" takes an ekphrastic look at the early photography of native Tulsan Larry Clark. Within this section, the photographs are discussed through metaphor driven description, narration of back story for the pictures, and homage to Clark's work as a film director. "Landlocked," depicts the coming-of-age and experiences encompassing living in the Oklahoma City metro. Frank O'Hara's influence leads this section with the attention to acute details in rendering the subject. The exclusion of the author in most of these poems attempts to create objectivity, like that employed in journalistic writing. The collection's final section, "Messages from a Megaphone," mirrors the focus of the preceding section, but shows a differing perspective. In the commentary and criticisms made in these poems, the compositions are a poetic effort to shed objectivity, while maintaining the strict and controlled focus on a subject.

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, I am unfolding as a writer with the poems. I found myself saying that I started writing while in college, when I declared my major in journalism, and began working for the 15th Street News at Rose State College. In truth, my relationship with writing began to manifest in my high school junior and senior English classes. Without exceptional teachers pushing me to write, I nonchalantly wrote specifically to get at least a B average. Despite my lack of interest in the subject, I found that while my classmates took weeks to finish a paper, my essays were acceptable after a few drafts. This put me days, sometime weeks, ahead of my classmates. By the end of high school, I didn't understand why, but I seemed to have a bit of talent in writing, and if need be, I knew I could call upon it.

I instantly knew journalism was the right choice because I quickly began writing with a purpose. I found that recalling events and spotlighting human interest pieces created a focus—a meditative consciousness—which had me using my talents in ways I had not yet imagined. Each article seemed to be more honed and chiseled than its predecessor. Along with my growth in the journalistic arena, I began *actually* reading, which at this point in my life was new. I started with Hunter S. Thompson because of my ties to his field, then quickly moved on to William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. Although I enjoyed the novels of these particular authors, the thought of writing prose (or poetry for that matter) of my own remained foreign to me, so I stayed steadfast and committed to journalism. However, during the spring semester of 2009, I enrolled in a class unlike any other I took before, which sparked my desire to write as an art form.

After finishing two years at Rose State College, I transferred to the University of Central Oklahoma in order to finish my undergraduate degree. The transfer process was only approved a week before the start of school. Due to enrolling later than I expected, most journalism classes were closed at maximum capacity, causing me to venture outside of my discipline to fulfill the full-time enrollment status required to keep the Ohlap Scholarship awarded to me. During this semester, I ended up enrolled in two journalism classes, and two non-journalism classes: Intro to Marketing (after misreading the course guide) and Intro to Creative Writing I, taught by Dr. Christopher Givan.

I wrote the first poem I had ever written for Creative Writing I, during a lecture in Intro to Marketing. While I wrote, the same sensation of tapping into a meditative consciousness that I discovered with journalism surfaced. Regardless of lacking the control to fully bring this poem to life, my first poem still showed a precise and tight view of concrete and abstract images. Before I knew it, I began to read poetry. I knew poetry would be a challenge upon reading poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Allen Ginsberg. Despite learning and being entertained by these poets, and many others, I still felt I had not found a poet who truly spoke to me. Then I found something that moved me in Billy Childish through his poem, “Chatham Town Welcomes Desperate Men.”

In Childish’s poem, a devotion to a series of defined images and situations in an intimate (almost confessional) voice greatly moved me. His work is often situational (like that of Charles Bukowski) and resonate a focused narrative to drive his subject. “Giving a Homeless Man a Health Bar” is an example of my attempt of incorporating a narrative within situational experiences by criticizing a minuscule effort of charity. Childish’s method cascades from the page as he writes of physical altercations with his father in the following poem:

Father

i wrestled him down
on the setee and
explained to him
that people could never
understand that although
we fight we still love
each other

then i got him under
the desk and dug his
eyes out of his head
with a screw-driver

his head is a sheet
of metal and his 6 eyes
are brass tacks.

This approach lived up to what I imagined poetry to be, which inspired and compelled me to attempt a similar writing style. Reading *Childish* highly influenced me to find the means to defining my perspective of place, people, and how the usage of poetic devices through my own keyhole lens. Discovering *Childish* came at the same time I decided to enter graduate study, and his influence has carried with me throughout my time in the UCO Creative Writing M.F.A. program.

I grew up in a three bedroom house on the southeast side of Midwest City, Oklahoma. The one-car-garage, faded red paint, and basketball goal in the driveway made it appear like any other suburban house along my street. But, if only to me, my house was obviously different. My house came equipped with wooden foldable doors, which separated the dining room from the living room. Because of the vertical slats cut through the middle section, these doors were meant for an out-of-sight, out-of-mind type of privacy. As a boy, I used the obscured view of the slats for spying after being banished to the living room, so the adults could talk or drink at the dinner

table, or the opposite, when my brother watched movies like *Clerks* and *Reservoir Dogs*. In these moments, as a voyeur through the wooden doors, my perception of art, and how I felt it should be viewed, began to take shape. While trying to see as much as possible without being found out, two key elements appeared to me: controlling image and storytelling. Together, these would shape not only how I read poetry and perceive art, but become the basis for my writing style and the geniuses of *Keyholes*.

I saw these devices at work constantly throughout my youth, particularly in films I watched at far too young an age. The images of Vincent Vega shooting up before arriving to his date with Mia Wallace, then stabbing her in the chest with a nearly foot long syringe, along with Marcellus Wallace's rape in a pawn shop dungeon, in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, drive the plot and are burned into my brain. The quick-cuts between teenage sex, the heavy use of unusual drugs, and extreme depictions of violence in Larry Clark's 1995 film, *Kids*, were like swift punches of narrative through image. These images not only shocked and disturbed my pre-pubescent mind, but how they were conveyed kept me watching and, more importantly, thinking. Later, I realized the reason I could not look away came down to the control the filmmakers held portraying images to enhance their plots.

Tarantino managed the images in *Pulp Fiction* through a non-linear plot structure. In doing so, certain images like Jules' Mexican stand-off with Honey-Bunny in the diner are specially placed to propel time and plot in the story. For *Kids*, Clark juxtaposes his scenes of unabashed New York City youth by using quick cuts and tight camera angles to focus on details to create perspective, rather than panning back for a full shot. Harmony Korine's film, *Gummo*, takes a tone similar to Clark's film, but explores images through a non-narrative lens. In relying on a non-narrative plot structure, Korine could be more heavy-handed with image to create metaphor

for the lives that the characters in his film led. These filmmakers control perspective by showing the viewer these images in the context they choose, which is also a goal of mine within idea of keyhole poetry. By applying the metaphor of image control as looking through the keyhole of a door, the poems in this collection attempt to show this same focus. Calling upon the influence of film, I attempt to control the images in my poetry using a running narrative, typically reflecting a character, or subject arc.

In the construction of *Keyholes*, I also chose to employ colloquial language and situational vernacular to create precise images. I chose this approach for two reasons; one, common words and images are applicable to academics and non-academics alike; two, these aspects break a cliché non-poetry readers (certainly myself at one point) may have about the exclusive use of high-language in poetry. Such an approach can be seen in the influential works of Charles Bukowski and Billy Childish. Bukowski use of these methods manifest in the following poem:

I Have Shit Stains in My Underwear Too

I hear them outside:
“does he always type this
late?”
“no, it’s very unusual.”
“he shouldn’t type this late.”
“he hardly ever does.”
“does he drink?”
“I think he does.”
“he went to the mailbox in
his underwear yesterday.”
“I saw him too.”
“he doesn’t have any friends.”
“he’s old.”
“he shouldn’t type this late.”

they go inside and it begins
to rain as
3 gun shots sound half a block
away and one of the skyscrapers in

downtown L.A. begins
burning
25 foot flames licking toward
doom.

In regulating images and sticking to accessible diction, Bukowski eliminates all means of writing over any of his readers' heads. Readers of poetry may look at this poem and comment on how Bukowski juxtaposes the neighbor's gossip with hostile concrete images of violence to personify the speaker's alienation with society; while the straightforward conversational diction Bukowski employs may seem comforting for novice readers.

While writing *Keyholes*, I became interested in attempting narrative voice, using Oklahoma as my universe, and having story bring the poems to life through concrete imagery. Ultimately reminiscent of my exposure to and influence from film, narrative poetry works well for me as a nuance to screenwriting. Robert McKee, author of the screenwriter's bible *Story*, comments on the magnitude a narrative can possess by stating that, "story is not only our most prolific art form but rivals all activities," (11). During a question and answer session following an University of Central Oklahoma reading by Nathan Brown, Oklahoma Poet Laureate, Brown said that "what everyone really wants is a good story." I agree with both of these statements, and have experienced the benefit of using narrative voice and storytelling to encapsulate the reader in my own poems. At times, I create narratives consisting of concrete imagery, other times using a subject arc and rising action, but always, I attempt to reach my reader through story.

Oklahoma City's suburban and urban landscape resonates throughout *Keyholes*, and in order to create poetry defined fully by intimate imagery, driven by a narrative voice, I needed to find a subject interesting enough to view from endless angles. While talking film, a friend reminded me that director Larry Clark began his career not by making movies, but as a photographer. The next

day she sent me several of Clark's photographs from his collections *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust*, and my interest in Clark's work deepened. Though my youth differed, these pictures of unrestricted drug use and sexual exploration by teenagers sustain significance for me because they reflect the same underbelly of suburbia I identify with. Instead of shooting amphetamine, like the subjects in the photographs, my friends and I spray-painted the railroad bridge behind my house and rode our bicycles all night. Regardless of the source, the same sense of growing up in Oklahoma, seemingly with nothing to do, pulled me toward Clark's photographs and, for the first time, gave me a sense of the powerful impact of intimate scene work. Once I felt I fully immersed myself in Clark's photography, I knew I found the muse I sought.

Several months before I began work on the first section in this manuscript titled "Untitled, 2013," as a homage to Clark's subtle photograph titles, I read *Thrall*, by two-time United States Poet Laureate, Natasha Trethewey. I had fallen into a slump producing new writing at the time of the reading, and I became completely seduced by the ekphrastic approach of *Thrall*. I found Trethewey's meditation of art, mostly paintings by Spanish artist, Juan Rodríguez Juárez, intriguing because of the multitude of perspective she attains. Some of these poems, like "Knowledge" and "Miracle of the Black Leg," eloquently describe a work of art, while focusing on intimate details to create a statement or criticism, while others, like "Taxonomy," probe facets of society and culture in the exploration of identity. Absorbing Trethewey's perspective led me out of my creative dry-spell, and I got back to writing.

As I began writing the first poem contained in this section, titled "When Youth Break Glass," I wanted to go further than what the affiliated picture presented. The photograph, simply titled "Untitled, 1963," captures a young man's tired and frustrated expression, reflected in a mirror he cracked punching. The initial pull towards this photography, for me, was the preciseness of the

moment and the relation of the cracks in the glass to the man's reflection, which I saw as symbolic of the subject's emotional state. However, I wanted to question what would possess this teenager to punch his mirror, causing "four fingers to create streams of spider legs / across glass."

To create a narrative, I use images to describe the possible stresses of a teenage boy in Oklahoma; be it jobs, girls, family pressures, or a lack thereof. This stance helped me sustain these poems as a section because, while creating a narrative backstory, I retained the ability to view each photograph from countless perspectives, while exploring them.

Another motivation for using ekphrastic poetry (and Larry Clark's photographs) was manifested in my goal to create poetry which borrowed craft elements from film. As a fan of Clark's movies, my mission became merging image heavy narratives, as homage to his style of storytelling, and to create an aesthetic that matches the tone of Clark's photographs and films. "Two-Toned Naugahyde Backseat" is a prime example of my attempt to do so. Inspired by an untitled photograph of two nude teens, captured in a context implying the moments before sex, this picture both shocked and interested me. I knew if I wrote about it, the same kind of shock and intrigue needed to be present in narrative form.

To achieve my goal in this poem, I chose to create a form reminiscent of a screenplay. The sections were delineated into four parts, signifying three acts and denouement. I began the poem with the fourth part, representing an arc climax and denouement, as homage to Clark's 2002 film, *Ken Park*, which takes a similar perspective. However, to reflect Clark's work truthfully, I attempted to convey the images of "Pixie" (my name for the girl) staring at her ceiling seeing, "giraffes backs & / death's face," "Danner" (my name for the boy) catching his first glimpse of Pixie, and "The Boys," who "throw / bottles on curbs / jive, sing along / & punch each other's

noses,” which mimicked the tight, focused camera angles that Clark uses in film. For “Untitled, 2013,” all facets of the keyhole approach come through because these narrative poems focus on concrete imagery as a means of marrying poetry and cinema.

As a young writer, I struggle to find ways of writing poetry which bare the verisimilitude of my interpretation of the world, my culture, and my environment. Growing up in the Oklahoma City metro area made this location the obvious and elemental choice for me. Here, I created the opportunity to invite a reader into close, intimate moments through elements of what I know and have become familiar with about this area. Many images, such as homeless people, stray dogs, the red of Oklahoma earth, flora and fauna, and the boredom of coming-to-age in a metropolitan with no coast supplied ample inspiration for my poetry.

My intention for this particular strategy transcended all three sections of *Keyholes*, and, I believe, the purpose of this approach perhaps shines brightest in the section, “Landlocked.” The title of the section references a phrase I heard my grandfather say when describing the geography of Oklahoma to me in my youth. My grandfather’s words influenced the initial idea, yet the metaphor of little outside influence available due to this land-locked geography became my intention for this work. This metaphor began to take shape while writing the poem “Cracked Roads,” which detailed various personalities I have witnessed in and around Oklahoma City, Midwest City, Del City, Spencer and Choctaw, Oklahoma. Drawing influence from “Chatham Town Welcomes Desperate Men,” by Billy Childish, “Crack Roads” attempts to show that every aspect of society, conventional or not, has a place. By observing these characters without influencing them, the theme of accepting the influence of a community marks the metaphor in the poem’s final lines, “i love these miles & miles / of cracked roads / & everybody within / because they are me / & i am them.” “Henry Randal” shows another example of how place influenced my

poetry. For this poem, I meshed together parts of my grandfather's, father's, and my own life experiences to achieve a muse essential to my understanding of what it means to be locked in, and influenced by Oklahoma. Told through my father's perspective, "Henry Randal" details fictional and non-fictional events which shaped the three of our lives.

The other theme, taking an observational stance, I used in the creation of "Landlocked" also relates to my early interest in concrete imagery. Inspired by Frank O'Hara's and Charles Bukowski's attention to common and easily missed details, I planned to focus everything within a specific moment, while allowing place to continue influencing.

After writing "His Durable Beet-Red Nose," which my Poetry I professor, Allison Hedge Coke described as a "keyhole view," I felt I had a way of describing my poetry. I understood that by focusing on a subject acting in a normal, yet peculiar fashion, my goal to invite a reader into my own perspective of the scene, the occurrence, was realized. The choice of subject for this poem came to me quickly because I would see the man who inspired the subject character throughout Midwest City, "guiding his rusty red mower above concrete," and talking in "high-pitched mutterings." The peculiar nature of his actions and his personality gave "His Durable Beet-Red Nose," the level of intimacy I hoped for, because, instead of barely noticing him walking, I attempt to force the reader to slow the car down and take a hard look. Portraying my subject character in this poem also serves as an example of my overall goal for poetry to control image, again, like my controlled vision through the wooden sliding-doors.

For the poems collected in the final section of this manuscript, "Messages from a Megaphone," I pushed the approach of "Landlocked" in a different direction by incorporating a commentary to coincide with situational and character-driven themes, and by not exclusively using Oklahoma as a setting. The inspiration for "Messages from a Megaphone," occurred after

reading Bukowski, but developed upon a further reading of Childish.

In his poem, “The Noble Beast,” Childish discusses themes of alienation, isolation, and disenchantment. Playing off these themes, Childish uses the final stanza, “no man can convince me / that any of these things are / exactly loaded with some great / nobility or dignity” (95), to divulge his perspective, working as a volta. I found coupling concrete image with commentary necessary for these poems because, unlike “Landlocked,” it influenced the subjects, creating another way for me to explore my approach. Also, without including the feelings of the speaker these poems would fail to deviate from the stance I take in “Landlocked.” One of the best examples of my work as commentary may be seen in the poem “A Country Cafe.” Once the “steak, eggs & coffee,” “tv hanging on the wall,” and “the straw haired waitress with burnt lips,” became concrete, a sense of loneliness and obsession took hold. I used the level of alienation to transition to narrative within the lines, “& a man like me / wouldn’t rather have / steak & coffee with / anyone other than / you.” In defining how the speaker feels about not only his current surroundings, but the result of his personal choices, I found a way to convey commentary that moves the focus inward.

Due to my experimentation within poetry, *Keyholes* contains a variety of free-verse poems, as well as villanelles and sestinas. I do find that creating a form to coincide with content, for me, is more satisfying than writing in classical, pre-determined forms because the outcome of a free-verse form is organic and without the influence of a set structure. Yet, villanelles and sestinas have proven to be useful for me in times of writer’s block, as a structure already exists, and it is clear how to begin writing and where to end. The rhyme scheme of the villanelle helps me stretch my vocabulary for possibly rhyme schemes, which usually recharges my drive to write. I first became interested in writing sestinas when I realized how the form lent itself to narrative

poetry. After completing a spur-of-the-moment sestina, assigned for Professor Hedge Coke's class, I found in my first sestina, "Mud & Shit," the circular pattern of refrain words interesting. Like the villanelle, I feel I am allowed to obsess over a subject with a sestina until all ways of looking at a subject become exhausted.

In writing my manuscript, I feel my understanding of craft has grown immensely. Much of my earlier poetry concentrated on abstract images and words, lacking the sense life I now strive for. I felt none of the words I wrote moved me to the degree as my favorite poets. After becoming initiated with the works of Billy Childish and Charles Bukowski, I learned precise concrete image and colloquial word choice enhanced my work. Once I began writing more specifically and concretely, I began to not only see my poetry imitate life, but the approach returned me to my beginnings in student-journalism, and to the gaining the perspective as if looking through the foldable wooden doors of my childhood home. Though objectivity often becomes skewed in poetry, I found a kinship with observing characters and situations, without influencing them. When I decided to allow my background to influence me, another opportunity to expand my goals presented itself: using images to bridge the gap between poetry and film. In *Keyholes*, I intended to create concrete image driven, narrative poetry as a vehicle to examine subjects at intimate angles. Like looking through the folding wooding doors in my childhood home, my goal became to control what my readers experience and what they do not, by regulating the context of concrete imagery, as I depict it.

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Keyholes

One:

Untitled, 2013

Based on the Photography of Larry Clark

TWO-TONED NAUGAHYDE BACKSEAT

—after an untitled photograph from *Teenage Lust* by Larry Clark

iv.

oklahoma earth sucked straight dry, left red by the sun's
tongue. hubcaps blind behind the pharmacy,
nearby bottles
& trash
&
burned grass. cats
bounce & radio rumbles low low through a window, cracked
just enough for sweat drops to evaporate
into steam.

i.

then silhouettes of skyscrapers slowly strike from the east.

Danner

never sees the bedroom door slap plaster into dust
above carnation carpet like snow, barely notices
pizza dough throws of clothes from either end of the
room. cracks eyes when brother, arms like tornados,
demands a fucking cigarette! – arches chin, sucks
cheeks in, left then right, gazes up nose, pimples pop,
scratches hair to brow like caesar liberates shirt from
towel rack – chugs juice & cools crotch by condiments,
ignores cigarette smoke blowing demands about juice
from a corner card-table. says he's off, looking for work.

Pixie

sees white beams through slit blinds, feels weightless
hair consuming pillow. gazes at giraffes' backs &
death's face in ceiling cracks – twists body around
shower head, mascara watered drain. stares through
herself, robed w/ hair like wet sand, lips demanding
just enough blood to lift off baby powder skin – watches
mother fry eggs, father fumble w/ bifocals. eats
grapefruit &, tonguing teeth, lets juice gloss mouth.
tells mother backyard-sunbathing & home for dinner.
then cast rind, colored like summer sun, in trash can to
decompose a night or two. kiss on the cheek,
peck on the head.

ii.

wedged between drug stores
& hotdog shack,

white-heat stabs ice cream cone clouds, burns
danner's skin down & electrifies
the alley way
under the toes of the boys who throw
bottles on curbs,
jive, sing along,
punch each other's noses & danner,
laid-out in back seat, bopping legs,
hears doo-wop croons
& rockabilly booms
crackle from speakers overhead while catching
backseat shade, & stayed
even when four blonde bikini birds,
after flying in, gently float upwards,
then settle on the boys' perch, next
to broken brown and green glass.

Pixie

has only heard doo-wop once, when mother
claimed it *coon-croons* & father's bifocals slipped
to agree, which made the boys howl. liked it
though. could see boys culling her
flock & another carving death's name in arm. &
another, w/ bare feet arched at heels bopping on
street, moving like chained dogs.

Danner

pushes up on elbows, sits straight & fingers his
back, imprinted w/ seatbelt instructions, slumps against
the closed door behind, grabs a silver can & settles. sees a
tip-toe sway. hears doo-wop fade. loses breath
moments before a blond-headed bird latches his knee.

iii.

on what would be pleather, in back
of a '66, wedged
between black & white lining, domed
in cream,
a back door shuts.

a bony boy, sweat-backed slides
on stitched cushion,
a supple girl, sweetly strokes
his knee, shuts eyes

& then,

slips the knot free
& opens her eyes.
his lungs pump.

Pixie
says, "i'm pixie."

Danner
says, "i'm danner."

SEEKING THE RIGHT VEIN

—after an untitled photograph from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

it's necessary
to walk through acidic downpours, peek
in alleyway dumpsters & find only
alligators, rotting paper cups
& fucked up turnips. to walk
w/ bums & buskers, trade sucker
punches w/ ponytailed poppers, breaking
the silence of confused chigger covered sages,
sliding from sidewalk to rooftop. finding no one

is holding, it's necessary to unconsciously
kick dogs or uproot trees in city park because
it's already midnight & even dread-lock
peddling banal pot under purple scented
street lamp is out of work.

so this is war
they say for the children.
or is it
all for profit &
all fucked
all the way back to when chinese & gandy dancers
laid tracks to the pacific
& all los vaqueros were kicked out of texas?

& you, poking an arm in this picture, after
looking for junk, find home in someone
else's living rooms, where christ's portrait
becomes an introvert,
sleepwalking thru withdrawal puked & morning dew.

& when the notion of war
replaces capital coin in the denim
front pockets or those lined in tweed
& leather, you can tiptoe below sewer veins
to add new spider bites to the atlas
leading to an excessive slouch.

it becomes necessary
to prod all angles of the *ell* & webbing
w/ an index, to tongue two or three loose drops
when the works are set for motion. if injection
is a doctor's world, you've smeared the line

like alphabetic excrement
on i-35 bathroom walls.

prod
prod
prod
prod
prod

it's necessary
when guns unload, doors
lock out, birds
give up & the sun waits
somewhere else for no one.

AT CONFLICT

—after an untitled photograph from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

first,
she sits leg-crossed, full term,
holding her bare belly,
unborn child.
hair obscuring features,
a downward stare.

then,
alone w/ window in white room,
sunlight overexposes her
right arm,
glowing bright enough,
the syringe barely noticed.
nor vein.
nor stripped shirt tied
below shoulder,
reason for bare belly.
nor blood entering plunger,
or blood exiting plunger.

& isn't it art,
how a nose curves
from black hair,
black pants fold in the shade,
a pregnant bulge shines
sharp to grain?
how amphetamine enters arm, bonds
to blood cells, as breasts
ripen w/ warm milk.

art,
living. beauty gestating,
not interesting enough. soon
it too becomes art, but
never before eyebrows raise,
which, to me, is where most
people get it wrong.

GRANDFATHER & TEENAGE NIGHT

—after *Acid, Lower East Side, 1968* from *Teenage Lust* by Larry Clark

not until

dinner starts digesting, dishes dry
in dull plastic teeth, the news at
nine rolls credits. not until drapes
close, doors lock or chambers load
will grandfather acid, teenage night,
contort manhattan's dreams w/ howls
& swaying to great spirit night in
dim lit lanes. little to do little to say,
convincing or otherwise. no fear of
screeching cars, the business end of
billie clubs, humid grey cells—
coming down w/ blacked out eyes &
bloodied nose surrounded by pervs,
pimps, punks, drunks & whores alike.

not until

cars line curbs like bridge handrails,
cats are set free & night officers start
shifts. not until skyscrapers silhouette
or cool wind scrapes branches against
windows do thoughts of roof-top
promises, figuring it all out, uncoil &
tangle in gutter fangs, not tonight no—
not when grandfather's at work &
teenage night, face painted like dia de
muertos in may - white roped fringe
dangling from poncho, has only a night
or two left in town.

& not until

carson, murphy bed siesta, some have
stayed up too late & when the city
catches a second wind do street lights
like epiphanies guide his feet into
darkness as teenage night stops for only
a moment in time, his turnabout eyes
pry if anyone else is in.

BLOWING SMOKE RINGS AROUND THE KIDDIE POOL
—after an untitled photograph from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

may have been an hour after school. w/ oklahoma's
days growing shorter, a public pool grows drier,
still, summer falls out slowly like dropping quarters
from downtown rooftops. a plastic kiddie pool, only
a foot deep & blue to illuminate the purity of
spigot water, dead-centered between pines in
a front lawn, the last splash of summer for a tiny
bikini clad tigress & her straight-haired friend who
wore worry in her eyes. this may have been the
scene as larry strolls past, counting cracks as the
camera's strap pulls his gaze down. maybe the
splashes caught his attention when his eyes jumped
several steps in front of his camera & hands.

larry might have said,
“you, dough-eyes,”
to the one too fat for the white bikini
seeping through her water-logged white shirt,
“just sit & stare,
you're playing
the manipulated one.”
once the towels & pink training wheel bikes, toys
& pastel thongs were hidden behind the pines,
“hey you, barbie,”
larry said, sizing-up the dirty blonde, splashing cats,
“stand there.”
maybe larry un-pocketed smokes. lit a match. inhaled.
“you'll be my model,
the star.
here.”

& passed the white stick, already slightly stained
the color of piss, from wolf like
knuckles to the fuck you & index of her
little porcelain left. larry might've
prompted *this* one to come closer,
to angle her elbow, then tuck the other hand,
to control the stick without giving a shit,
to drag the smoke like sipping a coke,
then to kiss it freely out into the air,
or maybe, just to not cough, or wash her
tongue, stained & swollen w/ burned
paper & leafs, clean w/ pool water.

THIS HERE'S DEAD

–after *Dead, 1970* from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

there's a boy waiting cross-legged, on white linen bed
chest bare, bone bulge while he stares, looking for fun
w/ sheer in his eye, colt in his hand– this here's dead.

in sixty-eight, probably dodged military in time, he fled
to suburban sanctuary. below where tulsa skyline hung
there's a cross-legged boy, waiting on white lined bed,

who wrote on white tickets w/ matches, so he had said,
who cocks his face, who steadies his pace, cocking his gun
w/ sheer in his eye & colt in hand, this here's a dead–

end to anyone willing to crack his door, even a thread,
no uncle sam or his pigs, only larry & his lens among
this waiting boy, crossing his legs on his white linen bed.

gripping wooden handle, tapping trigger, he froze, led
in hand, of his own choice, no issued rifle or suit of chameleon,
w/ just colt & sheer in eye, is boy, named dead.

he sits, on the book's cover, cocked as a fist, ready to shred
anyone knocking his door, turning his knob, moving their tongue
waiting, waiting, waiting, cross-legged, on a linen bed,
waiting w/ sheer in eye – waiting, colt in hand – waiting is dead.

WHEN YOUTH BREAK GLASS

—after an untiled photograph from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

it'll break in time.
this mirror,
a cold-cocked right,
the camera—
will splinter
& rapture
after spinning too many tire,
flipping hundreds of burgers & flapjacks,
brooding down hours that turn into
days to weeks then months
waddling knee deep through all this mindless muck,
threatening insubordination, minimum wedge.
they break & so do others like them—
one for every round-eyed girl, face sprinkled
w/ summer freckles,
every neighborhood bird,
every throwaway whore.
they crack like knuckles
against crown, snap
like sun-sucked leather belts, sting
like meatloaf & potato conversations about the future.
& worse,
things like these break over too much of nothing.
over unmotivated, outstretched aggression
without an outlet,
fear without comprehension,
alienation into pigeonholes,
cascading,
converging,
igniting like the lazy cloud's dance,
eaten by bandits,
left for dead. or maybe
these things become non-refundable damaged goods
w/ it all together,
stacked on each other like tenement housing, here,

like a tea kettle
beating the lid's spout, brimming
w/ angst,
a right fist twitches for release
& high pitch whistles of white noise

only seem to calm upon connection, when
each four fingers create streams of spider legs
across glass. & only when
crimson dots the basin, will
solace steep, knowing anything
broke first.

DUMB LUCK

—after *Accidental Gunshot Wound, 1971* from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

a corduroy anaconda,
black belted eyes
takes leg sized bites past his
ankles,
calves,
knees,
loins then hole,
he holds his left arm for mercy,
finding only air.
plasma & blood
contrast a stained white wall like first
steadman strokes
on a death trip canvas of dolphin skin.

his eyes close like electric mouse traps.

hotel bed
uncoiled & soiled w/ maroon sheets & agony.
his teeth & tongue
no longer work as the hole,
like rotten meatball, inches
from corduroy jaws slowly seeps
more sauce on sheets.

the small snail of a gun,
ivory shelled,
accuses the daft on the bed, looking down,
away from the spitting
meatball, into her horse mane.

but luck for them both,
he still has a shirt.
& lucky the shot wasn't any better
or no one would've seen.

FATHER, BABE, & CIGARETTE – TULSA – 1963
–after an untitled photograph from *Tulsa* by Larry Clark

as the sun went on shining elsewhere, a new babe, fresh father, lay awake
waiting, bedside lamp illuminating his last smoke.
when the sun shifts & ground cools, a babe, new father, stay awake
in wonder, father dragging, bedside, his last smoke.
coming to past midnight, grease still in hair & babe still breathing short,
tight puffs on his lap, father reaches right to strike his match.
passed out till past midnight, hair stuck to pillow & babe breathing short
low puffs, father strikes, against the bedside table, a match.
wide-eyed babe wonders at the gray & glass cylinder, father, at the side
to nowhere, not mystic, wonders of realization, of kissing the past hello.
there is babe, eyes wide as the hypnotic gray & glass lens, & father, side
gazing to anywhere, not mystifying but realizing how he kissed the past hello.

on a similar night, not a year before, between the pulsing of slick thighs,
a cool oklahoma night, hardly a year ago, between bulging thighs,
father, not yet a father, feels the warmth of lips on ear, hears words,
a boy like any other, hears her hiss, feels her pleading words,
now a father, w/ babe in lap, he whispers the same soft syllables,
a father now, the proof breathing gurgles in his lap, whispers her soft syllables,
& though it was nearly a year before, he hears them now loud as loud,
babe on his belly, not longer whispering, he says the syllable aloud,
just keep going,
keep on going.
& later, in a room no different, she laid across him, as babe does now,
afterwards, in this same room, young nudity draped him, as it does now,

his babe of the past, would look up at him taking a drag of completion,
& say she feels it; a hot scoop of velvet.
his grown babe, would watch him take his cliché of completion,
& say she feels it move, effortlessly, like stoking velvet.
prays for solace, of hands tangling her brown strands,
& also for no worry.
prays that hands weave comfort through brown strands,
but, together, worry.
her pleas, his apathy, one girl & a fella, a shroud in their nudity, upon this bed,
as he punches-out the cigarette, became three.
her pleas, his apathy, a girl, a fella, die in their nudity, upon this bed,
when he crushes the smoke's smolder, two become three.

on a night, similar, barely a year before, a father not yet a father,
one cool oklahoma night, not a year ago, in wonder, a father,
awakes past midnight, babe on his chest, sucks one last smoke,
awakes to his babe's hiccups, & picks-up a final smoke.

dragging & wondering on the warmth of her words, kiss kiss kissing,
drag, dragging in the wonder of her words, kiss kissing
the past hello... hello... hello?
laying on this same bed kissing the past hello.
her pleas, his apathy, one girl & a fella, a shroud in their nudity, upon this bed,
her pleas, his apathy, a girl, a fella, die in their nudity, upon this bed,
as he punches-out the cigarette, three become two,
when he crushed the smoke's smolder, three became two.

Two:
Landlocked

HIS DURABLY BEET-RED NOSE

the busted asphalt under his smooth soled-shoes is what he knows best. he walks the streets, muttering, always in his red sweater, his nose, durably beet red. he looks like he will fall, wandering alone when i pass him in my car. in the summertime, w/ growing grass, i've found him cutting neighborhoods for a dollar or so, or guiding his rusty red mower above concrete, in his inundated red sweater & his nose stained w/ the smug beat of oklahoma summer, high pitched-muttering of a day's work well done. he spends the rest of the year scanning plastic & cloth items, in the little store on the east end of town, where the red of his sweater is contrasted against the white of his name tag & where his double master's of philosophy & english have no merit & where his slow vibrating hands agitate patrons & where his muttering of kant & dostoyevsky, black friday savings & store member-ship, without taking a breath, aggravates patrons. during the winter snow his meandering slows, weighed down & bundled w/ black coats & throwaway hats, & a nose frost-slapped, red as fresh blood. i heard he started muttering & wandering alone when the young red head he loved at university, met the drunk at petersberg & 3rd. often, i think to stop & give him a ride, but like before he will only say, "no." the day passes & he limps along alone, but at least today his red sweater is clean.

AT NW 23RD & SHARTEL

& in another world, i could've ran him
down in my big black jeep.
thrown his plain blue baseball cap
across the intersection. torn the
pockets from his pants, ripped the
buttons & burned the back
of his coat from skidding the street.
knocked his thin metal cart
on plastic casters
full of carefully placed black trash bags
from his hand to the curb. spraying
the cart's contents, like a fire-hose,
from that pothole on 23rd
to the skid marks ten
feet down shartel. i might've watched him
as his baltic blue eyes run to rusty rose.
& as the long white beard
covering his mouth & chest turns
a pink
to a red
to black, & blacker.
maybe in an alternate universe, my hands
would shake dialing for help (or maybe
they wouldn't) as his
quivered w/ diminishing life.
maybe i'd get out, maybe i wouldn't.
maybe.

but today, sometime in late january,
a crimson compact turning left ahead
causes me to slow. & in *this* universe
he is an old man in blue jeans,
a black coat, blue baseball cap, w/
a long white beard, covering
his mouth & chest, w/ his life
meticulously bundled in black
trash bags, stacked on a thin metal
cart, which he pushes on plastic casters
across nw 23rd & shartel.

CRACKED ROADS

i love everyone on these
cracked roads
which stretch for miles
in all directions,
the ones who've lived
three generations long
w/ dirty rim plastic glasses
an out-of-date ideal of
societal standards
& self-conduct
& a healthy appetite for
gold coins
in indian casinos,
& those who eat at fake
chinese restaurants
who are ran by ½-chinese
who look chinese
& act chinese
who ain't really chinese,
i embrace the colonels
the master sergeants
the privates
& the recently enlisted
convicted of violent
offenses, i even care
for those who gangbang
w/ fists full of spray paint
cans, 40-oz bottles of
3.2 & sixty-dollar cash
pay checks, on
street corners
shopping center alleyways
parks
corner stores
& your front lawn,
i love the sports fanatic
& his shouting,
the used car salesman
lying through his teeth,
the mommies w/ short haircuts
bedazzled oklahoma
shirts & the sudden ability
to text message, & the daddies,
either silently accept their

wives
typing out text messages
& water the grass every
other day, or
are boisterously hollering
& shaking their fists
during their pill addicted son's
junior high basketball game
for kicks
& false sense of success,
of course i couldn't forget
the store & shop
owners, the iltalian
grocer, who lies
about the sausages,
the pakistani side-shop
clerk, who sells
hash pipes at ½ price
cheaper than anywhere
else in town,
& the korean doughnut
shop owner, who ain't
so good at selling
doughnuts & only seems
to serve cold shit coffee,
the wal-mart shoppers
the target shoppers
the pawners of televisions
& always those who
sell car insurance
drugs & tires & cocktails
to middle-aged divorcees
& junior college dropouts
on the same night,
& by the way
the divorcee
& the dropout too,
i love them & everybody else
eaten up about
religion or flesh
leaving or staying
truth or lie,
& especially those who hate
winter
because of cumbersome
snows, then stand in the

summer
street & curse the heat,
admirable are
the passerbys
the homeowners
the drunks
the board of education
tv junkies
the cutters of hair
& not to mention the dull
teenager walking
alone at night,
i'm loyal to the
high school art teacher
plumber
punk rocker
poet
prostitute
priest
hospital janitor
& everybody else
accused of only wearing
black shirts,
& also those who practice
faith as religion
eat the body of christ
on sunday, play golf
on tuesday
visit their mother
on wednesday
& get busted sorting through
dirty magazine racks
on friday, & even
the ones who condemn
sinners & the sinner being
condemned by sinners.
from the sewage pond
to housing editions,
the shopping mall
to military base,
i love these miles & miles
of cracked road
& everybody within,
because they are me
& i am them.

I HUNGER TOO LIKE STREETS FULL OF AIMLESS DOGS

i see 'em about all the time. licking water puddles formed in busted asphalt
wandering for friend & home & food; rotten handkerchiefs tethered
around their necks & yearning to stay alive forever, if eternity
allows, dodging cars & death, no distinction,
or second thought given, like making a friend after too much vodka.
& i hunger too, like streets full of aimless dogs.

last week, walking alone where street invades grass, one of the dogs
walked opposite me. well, he's a wolf see, not really a dog (the distinction
is in the fur, like most things), & knowing neither him or i had an eternity
we both pressed over twigs & trash & everything else the asphalt
caught on the way. on my way to the cheapest bar for vodka
& sympathy, but he just seemed to be on his way, only tethered

to hunger. so i stayed to my side of the road. not tethered
w/ fear, but this wolf only had three legs. he limped the asphalt
& i thought of his back left leg. a car, birth defect, an owner w/ vodka
breath, god only knows. yet, he limped along, not quite like other dogs
but w/ a sort of symmetry or allure. & fast, not needing an eternity
despite his ghost leg or tail's effort to become one. a distinction,

i doubt he & his tail figured out. but like perception, distinction
is up to you, me & that wolf. he walked by me longer than most dogs
do & after a while, looking down the road (a car), he crossed & tethered
himself to the back of my heel. i said nothing to him of the vodka
& together we pressed over twigs & trash & everything else the asphalt
caught on the way. but now, our walk slowed, & our eternal

concept of time, matched & thrown to the wind, carefully taking an eternity
falling like snow on the wolf & me. thirty steps ahead, the asphalt
split & drawing closer i eyed the wolf, knowing a distinction
needed to be made. i wouldn't care for the others. i'd leaved 'em tethered
to a pole or fence if they tagged along my heel, like few dogs
caught up on the road do. at the split, i motioned towards the vodka

& the wolf stopped, paralyzed, as if feeling the burn of a vodka
soaked wound. he didn't move. not one of the three legs budged. an eternity
later & i knew the wolf subsided. he was as hungry as i & tethered
to the grassy street, he let out a howl, which straighten other dog's
scruff on end. & as we both were, where street invades grass, a distinction
took the wolf left. hunger took me right. we were again divided by asphalt.

never saw the wolf walking the asphalt again, but after countless vodka nights, i hoped seeing him among other dogs or tethered to the wind, mastering his time catching a frisbee, eternally thrown by an owner of great distinction.

& THEN SPRING CAME BLOWIN' IN

oklahoma wind blows hard today
& faintly smells of dog piss, so surely
spring is near.
but i love the scent,
i welcome the stench.
the scent of winter's diminishing grip
on our wardrobes & driving habits.
endless trees along every walking
path, which sprouted only death
during winter, are littered w/ palm
sized white flowers, like single scoops
of vanilla ice cream.
you don't notice them most of the year.
they are trees.
until spring, then they're dogwood.
each gust blows the oklahoma spring
scent up my nose & the small white
dogwood pedals fall on my hat & shirt
sleeves, like weightless hail.
a few finches hopscotch the bits of
resurrected branch, rejuvenated
w/ the same sappy pulse, pushing
up the dog piss flowers.
further on, the form, a single blue
bird splits the sunbeams saturating
the concrete at my feet.
down the block i pass a bum sleeping
in a garage entrance.
his t-shirt covers his face & crown,
exposing his fat front sparsely
sprinkled w/ hair.
another bum, chicago, been kicking
around the corner for years, asks for money.
says he'll wash my windows & my rims.
i'm on foot, i tell him, & haven't
got rims anyhow.
up ahead is the boneyard at the end
of the neighborhood, where dogwood
surrounds the fence from all sides.
a locked gate at dusk caused me to climb
the nearest tree. dogwood.
high enough to look over the fence, i

take a final handful of branch & total
a flower or two.
nearly knocked a gravestone on end,
but stick the landing.
standing straight & opening my hand,
i look down at the mutilated flowers
as dog piss ran down my wrist to elbow.

it's springtime, oklahoma.

FIVE DAYS LATE ON RENT

so i sat up in bed,
spun right & put
my feet in cat shit
standing up. both.
it was a wet one,
fresh & my maine-
coon kneaded the
trail i made going
in the bathroom.
after making one
myself, i had a
smoke & a coffee.

i asked the bank
teller about her
day, her reply
was my balance,
handing it to
me in twenties.
not much, just
enough. an alert
cop watched as i
pocketed the
cheddar & headed
for the door. he
sniffed the air
as i exited. then,

i headed south. 75,
80, 85, who cares?
waiting side-saddle
on his motorcycle
under an overpass,
another one saw
me & i saw him
pointing one of his
guns. said he'd
"caught a-buncha"
jeeps like mine.
"why don't you
pick on some other
make?" i asked.
he asked the jeep's
year. "oh-one." he's

probably making a
list or trying to
win a bet back at
the station. the land-

lord's office closes at
four & i stretch in five
till. while i wait in
line to pay-up, a
secretary argues on
the phone. "it's not
our property, ma'am,
we can't go inside."
"i don't understand
how i can help
you." "please, you
own the house, check
on it yourself." &

on & on. the cop in
the corner looked
up from his iphone
at the secretary,
then locked eyes
w/ me. shaking his
head he said, "some
folks are just bad
news," then picked
up where he left off.
i hand over the bills,
said "no kidding" as
i passed the cop &
back out to the jeep
to head back north,
where i come from.

SNOWDRIFTS ON A FEBRUARY MORNING

i could've gone up down or back, suppose now
left, to the south where there is little to be

found, was hasty. the eastside, like the thinning
of a man's forehead, few follicles of faded & broken

business buildings spout from the brown snow
covered concrete. some, whose windows inhale

february mornings. out west, squinting my eyes,
two cops take a shirtless busker off a bench. his

guitar left resting its neck on the green bench as
he's cuffed & hauled off. straight up is the only

direction i don't see, smash-blocked w/ skyscrapers
& that endless fountain— the frozen river road,

cracked from underneath— the sun drenched men
w/ year long breads & that familiar stench—

i step through the snowy mud mounds, my dirty
brown boots absorb mud & ice in my handkerchief

socks & drifts of snow part the slick grey roads
beneath. turning down wanda's way, behind what

use to be willie's dead cold saloon, where for fifteen
minutes & a quarter bottle, an old bluesman will tell

your future, i catch myself in a ½ busted mirror.
the year long beard covering my mouth & neck

found warmth, gracefully woven in the
button holes of my immaculate, black jacket.

MEMORY OF A FORGOTTEN FRIEND

we met sometime after
boys started wiping their noses
& girls gave up dolls, but before
either could
drink,
or vote,
or drive.
she was the new girl
guys in jr high got hard for
& who received hateful
compliments about her
skirts & shirts
from other girls.
at this age
human beings
haven't the capacity
for more than
riding bikes in circles,
eating frozen food
& making fun—easy for her.
 –your hair is too long,
 she said,
 –too long, too curly. like a bird's nest.
each time
delivering words,
w/ a chewed
pen-cap,
or small scratch of paper
or penny
or dime
or fingernail
on top of my bird's crown.
& when her mother
got ill
she'd talk about feelings,
& i'd listen to her feelings
& feel nothing about it later.

at fifteen,
i let my friend borrow my bed
to fuck her in
while i skateboarded
the busted drive at
my mother's house.

& when they were done,
my friend displayed her naked body
standing in the center of the room
under my ceiling fan
w/ arms straight at her sides.
she smiled & stared in my eyes
when my friend said,
 –check it out, man.
then, smiling back i said,
 –yeah.

at her feet
were his socks
saturated w/ his juvenile seed.

STAINED GLASS

there between brick walls of comfort
where sunlight
springs around
the red & orange
of a worn
glass window.

there between the smug beat of summer
where cool nights
follow the soft silence
of crickets & cicadas
exhaled by wind.

there between the crawl & walk
where seeing disconnects
the need to believe in
more than sunbeams
split—
by a cracked
linoleum meadow.

there between anger & a smile
where an empty bottle & a reclined chair
can only be seen
as the blue eyes of sky
reside—
'till morning.

there between the light & night
where summer convenes w/ fall
green & yellow
shine dim—

MUD & SHIT

i woke this morning & my shoes
were stained, but not wet, w/ caked mud
& still drunk, i held my head, thinking of you,
us & the rest of the boys, shit–
kicking & swaging through saturday nights, an end
was the last thing on everybody's mind, including me.

sitting on my bed, hands full of dirty sneakers, no consoling me,
no means of creating new thoughts of you
not even easily forgettable memories, like swapping shoes
for the night, or dirtying up our jeeps in the mud,
or drinking the bar to an end,
or staying out far too late, or just plain not giving a shit.

i drop my kicks at the corner of the bed, thinking of the shit
that went down the night before, me
½ wasted, convinced i could make the drive, till my jeep spun in mud,
nearly hitting a road sign & stopped abruptly. my shoes
sank deeper in the sludge w/ every step. the sign read “dead end”
& i doubled-over, crying, thinking of you.

standing from my bed, looking in the mirror, i hope to see you,
your reflection standing behind me,
squint-eyed due to smiling from ear to ear. ruffled hair & mud
splattered on your shirt, not wearing any shoes,
but closing my eyes, trying to sleep at night, all i see is miles of shit,
& you at your end.

floating stagnate, listening to abby road from beginning to end
keeps my brain a bit sane because it was your favorite beatles shit,
& because thinking of seeing you
for the last time, me
& the boys around your casket, all wearing converse shoes,
was as heavy & thick & unforgiving as mud.

when i woke this morning, my clothes were covered in mud,
& although my dirty appearance has nothing to do w/ shit,
i have to think it was you
there, as i trembled on the side of i-35, feeling something next to me,
when the rain came & the night drew to an end.
this morning my girlfriend said i better get a new pair of shoes,

but i told her that idea wasn't worth shit

to me because in the end, the mud
collected on these shoes is evidence of you.

A DISCLAIMER

to whoever buys the light orange & white house w/ a two car garage & red picnic table near the front door.

the one 1/2 way down north glenhaven without any trees in the never over-grown front lawn.

one of the houses butting up to the baseball-sized field full of bull frogs, perfect for kite flying & arrow shooting. if you're still not sure, check for a plastic tire swing hanging from the tree painted white from midsection to roots out back & on your way look for the silver bulldogs waiting on the gate top.

if you're buying, know my grandfather died in the back right bedroom on apr the 9th.

don't worry, it was painless.

grandmother woke, set the kettle, had a marlboro in the garage, then nearly hit his head w/ the door when she found him laying sideways on the floor. then the kettle warmed up a whistle, till it wailed wildly like a grieving old woman.

he wore white shorts, undershirt & a pillow under his head & it was apr the 9th.

she said, "you could see he was smiling even though he had no teeth."

his eyes were 1/2 open too. mother told me one apr the 9th, that on another she laid on her side opposite my grandfather & smiled back. her eyes, wide open.

i'm telling you all of this because if it were me, i'd like to know where to put the bed so i wouldn't walk on someone's grave stepping out

HENRY RANDAL

BIRTH TO AGE 22

growing up, i thought
one way, but ended up
havin to live another.
got born in 54. rapidly
i learned i wouldn't get
my way by crying or
tugging at ma's sleeve
or spittin up on dad's
shirt or shittin my
diapers. however, being
a cute little fellow w/
sandy brown hair cocked
gently to the side of my
forehead, havin nothing
to say, & smilin through
family photos for the
church directory, would
earn me a hand full of
cheap wafers. for my
sixth birthday, my
parents got me a sister,
robin. ma & dad paid more
attention to robin's
spittin & shittin, which
aggravated me & in no
time i discovered cuttin
her dollie's hair &
eventually, head off &
buryin them in two &
½ feet of mud wouldn't
fix my problems. only
practicin arithmetic
alone in my room
offered some relief
though ma always had
a problem with locked
bedroom doors. i tried
forgettin about it & by
nine i looked forward to
my teenage years, but
by then i couldn't sleep

at night. not long after,
dad's left fist taught me
kickin our yappy dog,
bernard, wouldn't solve
my sleepless nights.
by sixteen i owned two
broken motorcycles, a
monthly payment on a
62 fairlane & a tongue
eager for the taste of
budweiser. a dangerous
combination i'd digest
w/ help from the okc
police, a broken stop
sign, uprooted against
the curb of lilac street,
& the back of dad's
right hand in a muggy
gray cell.

–the cleanliness of a
person's drivin record
equates to their quality
of life.

he'd tell me, windin
back to town at 3 a m
that saturday night.
advice, which melted
from the acid & sticky
green leafs helping me
form a taste of music
& gave my high school
algebra teacher the
notion that i had a
deranged understanding
of imaginary numbers.
by eighteen, everythin
seemed simple & orderly.
i had my waded up
diploma stuffed in my
ass pocket w/ a small
bottle of kd, then dad
decided it was time to
find my own place. ma
didn't agree w/ him

until the afternoon i
spat budweiser in her
hair out on the front
lawn after hearing her
talk about my drinking.
once, at fourteen, dad
sat across the kitchen
table, holdin a
diminishing cup of
coffee w/ his left hand
& commanding camel
non-filters w/ his right,
& told me about his
twenties. his favorite.
met ma at twenty-two,
started the business at
twenty-five, got word
of me at twenty-nine.

–good times,
 he told me,

–make the right
 decisions & the same
 will be true for you,
 son

–you were right,
 i told him

through a pay phone
on my lunch break in
downtown okc at
twenty-two. yeah, dad
was right, though we
never discussed our
diverse interpretation
of good choices. for me,
drivin through the
night, two joints down
& a bottle of bottom
shelf vodka rottin my
gut, lookin for women
w/ long dark hair in
bellbottom jeans to
fuck in the back of the

fairlane liberated my
ambition & knowin
nobody could say
nothin about it was
enough justification.
unlike dad, i wasn't
lookin for a ma or a
business or children
or dogs or shiny new
white-walls to match
a shiny new white car.
-not me.

AGE 23 TO AGE 35

i didn't realize it till twenty-three.

rock-n-roll & young dark-haired
girls in bellbottom jeans weren't as
fulfillin as dad's lessons, which for
years i ignored w/ help from fast
drivin & vodka & quaaludes. at my
age, dad had his business, owed
nobody nothin & a wife who never
let his whiskey glass sink below a
¼ full. so, six months past my twenty-
forth birthday, i started comin around
the house again. my younger brothers
moved on to mechanic & manual
positions, leavin only ma, dad, & lorie
& also, lorie's little friend, jacyn. jaclyn
marie. jackie for short. ma forgave me

enough to let me back, when my
downtown paintin job dried up & i
started feelin effects of ford's stagflation
ridden term. between ma's meals &
trying to answer dad's questions about
the amount of money in my pocket, i
watched lorie & jackie sip grape juice
from small glasses while watchin
bandstand & happy days a foot & ½ from
the t.v. jackie's long swoopin curls hung

from her head like little deep brown

tidal waves breakin against tenement
walls & the way she'd peek through
the strands up at me – immaculately –
left me inquisitive, nightly. in six
months time, i saw little of the recently
graduated jackie, who forewent college
to start a family w/ a med student who
would never love her & who gladly
sprayed his seed all about town. at
the same time dad rang me one morning,

–roger, from back when, needs a driver at
the warehouse.

one hand-me-down chocolate colored suit
& a tuesday afternoon interview later, i
found myself growin intimate w/ the
cracked & beaten roads of oklahoma city
in a school-room-white box-truck. durin
those days drivin from okc to norman to
midwest city, shawnee, el reno, edmond
& back again, i began embracin dad's
workin man's outlook on life. each day, as
my left arm grew tanner & my left ear
deafier from the box truck's lack of a/c, my
grin also grew also w/ every weekly addition
to my collection of dead presidents. around
spring of '80, while droppin off a shipment
to one of the three gas stations in my
hometown, i saw jackie in a rush, fillin up
her pinto, colored like a #2 pencil, w/ a baby
boy strapped to the right rear seat. her
waves of brown hair, even longer now,
wrapped around her shoulders & neck &
back like a sort of organic scarf.
once, dad told me,

–in oklahoma, you always greet
your neighbor.

& so my newly found approach to life led
me to a two & ½ minute conversation,
endin w/ jackie's phone number in my
right pocket & italian on the menu for
friday. "good seeing you, randy," she
told me, placin the bit of parchment

paper in my hand. italian food led to weekend trips to eufaula , then a two bedroom apt. in nw okc, to mentorin jackie's son, jason, then a springtime catholic weddin, to matchin volkswagons, then a house in midwest city, then another house in midwest city, & finally to 1985. ten months before my

thirtieth-fifth birthday, jackie baked acorn squash, my favorite, in our linoleum floored kitchen, while i watched jason watching t.v. & watched a .750 of absolut vanish as i laid in a lazy-boy in the livin room. after dinner that night, layin in our bed, jackie told me i'd be a father. her two front teeth never seemed as prominent before as when she smiled sayin it.

—we can't have a child,
i told her.

—we'll be livin on gov't aid w/ two children.
there's no option.

jackie also saw only one option, but finances weren't on her mind. i woke up on ma & dad's front porch the next day. ma had nothin to say to me, ashamed as if i was still goin around spittin booze on people i love. neither did dad till we had a drink. dad sat me down next to the cooler of highlife in his tool shop, sawdust blanketed everything, includin the beer.

—you'll be fine, son,
he told me,

—got a job & the rest will fall in place.

later that afternoon, i stood on our front porch, sobbin & diggin within myself to gather the guts to knock & tell jackie everythin would be alright. that we'd be better off for it. that i wasted my words.

but before i could make our brass knocker
sing, the lock shifted & jackie appeared,
her brown waves coverin up her lack of
sleep & cryin. i told her we'd be fine, that
everything would fall in place. then she
tightly hugged my neck & told me our son
would be called henry alexander.
alex for short.

AGE 36 TO AGE 44

i'll never forget holdin alex's freshly toweled tiny
body, still sprinkled w/ dabs of blood, as he struggled
to figure out how his lungs work, & knowin nothin
about the future, i whispered his name for the first
time, "buddy?" i asked understandin only that he
couldn't understand me. dad once told me a man has
to have purpose if anythin was goin to get done.

—otherwise,
 he told me,
 we just get swept up in dust & wind.

around three & ½ months, or 122 days as jackie would
put it, after alex got born, on christmas eve, i dumped
a ¾ lb bag of grass i bought off my old paintin partner,
gary, down the toilet. jackie didn't get it, but i told her
it was time to take on my responsibility, to show dad's
insight would be passed on. finally at thirty-six, i lived
differently, like dad. a year earlier, i traded in the box-

truck keys for particle board desk in a 25 X 25 office
w/out a window, a hunter green inventory book, & 200
bucks more to my name every other friday. six months
after that, i had completely retrained my fingers from
clickin turn signals, makin birds & pointin at birds,
to clicking out numbers & totals of stock on a
10-key at record pace. but that only led to a heavier

work load. "tim in receivin is behind," said the bloated,
alcohol redden-faced old man behind the rich, walnut
desk, puffin out cigar smoke circles. & then i couldn't
help but drink, which was the one thing dad never
taught me about, didn't have to. maybe workin a 9 to 5,
& weekends does that to a man or maybe it's the only

reward for a true days work well done or maybe i just

couldn't help myself. by thirty-nine, my fingers had sealed me job security, had begun to honor lawn mowers as therapeutic devices & achieved the perfect grip on any .750 you could throw at them. & life slowed down. alex's hair grew longer & browner each day & jason went off to try his luck in the city. i remember seein jackie sob in the dishes about it, but only in the mornins & never straight after work. being a stay at

home mother, alex ate most of jackie's time, leavin me sittin on a lazy-boy w/ nothin but the nine o'clock news. one of these evenins a pot of boiling water woke me up & jackie stood over me. small strands of gray shined off the channel 9 news center background, highlighted in jackie's deep brown hair, which in 1986 was chopped to her ears. w/out her waves, i found it

harder to justify her & a three hour argument later, i walked out the door, a ½ stuffed suitcase in one hand & a bottle of absolut danglin between my index & forefinger like a prosthetic claw. a year or so later, i stood in the same doorway, drunk, it was my day w/ alex & lookin into my eyes he told me, "i ain't goin if you're drinkin." i left that day alone &

on my way i thought of my dad, how he'd let me down

w/ his advice i'd been swallowin up like a blue whale.

had the job, got the money, had the family. but for a while.

AGE 45 TO...

at first sight she had short red hair, long enough only to cover the tips of her ears. cheryl. i met her once by chance, when jackie & i were on the

outs. i talked about inventory & paintin. she smiled through the dignified gap in her front teeth & talked about cardiology. showed me a detailed

chalk drawin of the human heart. every chamber, vein & pump, labeled in white & blue. by the end, jackie got the house. i lived in a light orange &

white house, like a dreamsicle on lockheed, which dad rented to me &

where alex visited on weekends. every other thursdays too. & on one

tuesday night, i cracked the knockin front door to short strawberry hair & an invitin bottle of merlot. the next mornin, bacon, eggs, french toast &

coffee i pretended to drink - better than the bagel-tea breakfast me & alex ate. within weeks, cheryl left extra clothes in the dreamsicle between x-

rays, cardio scans & patients, patients, patients & knew my grandma's breakfast danish recipe, like english. however, dulled between 9 am to 5

p m, i nearly welcomed when the warehouse folded, like a swiss knife. then, like before, i had only dad to look at. i thought i made my way. family. job.

security. house. car. another car. but in the dirt nearly ten years, the old man still had me on one thing. so, as forty-nine years came to an end, i took

dad on one last time. that winter, printed hundreds of little white cards, lavished w/ a pink paint can. bought some brushes. got paint. borrowed

ladders when needed. used razor blades for scrappers. wore a white hat & white shirts & white pants. my only employee, alex, sweated through my

hand-me-down over-alls, guidin his brush in van gogh strokes. a year or so later, he stood next to me, sweatin through a white collared shirt as i held

cheryl's left hand in a springtime backyard wedding. & for the first time, life really did slow down. dad didn't teach me that. suppose he

didn't have to. he taught me to work hard, & harder. but i didn't feel like drinkin because of the adoration of my turbulent teenager & my pixie

cut redhead. years earlier, while dad dampened his death bed at st. michael's, he told me,

-you worry about small stuff. forget it while you can.

so i work on the cabin at eufaula, where dad took me growin up, where i took jackie for a while, where i take alex at times, where i take cheryl

always. i ready that cabin, red as rusty, for slow future, an elemental future of my own device. i settle into a new lazy-boy in a new livin room & if you

drive by in winter, my house will illuminate the streets w/ the red & green of christmas & a 3 & 1/2 foot tall santa will be wavin.

Three:

Messages from a Megaphone

TO A DEAR SWEET BROTHER

my dear sweet brother, hate
burned by fleeting fathers of your younger days;
i sing sweet words, so not to relate.

o the first, he was fueled to fornicate
as much as pleased, w/ no way to raise
my dear sweet brother, hate.

he came, then left, aimed to complicate
a new wife w/ an old; in many ways
i sing sweet words, so not to relate.

then sweet spoken words, which wouldn't hesitate
the slick-headed man came in like a blaze;
my dear sweet brother, hate.

later he'd say "no way to communicate"
& like the first only saw you in a young phase;
icing, his sweet words, so not to relate.

now we look old, no time to procrastinate
at dawn, your daughter born & the past in a haze.
my dear sweet brother, relate!
i sing sweet words, so not to hate.

CAN'T THE WORLD SHUT UP A MINUTE?

& just like that, you could be sitting by
your grandmother's deathbed holding
her frail, translucent hand.

& maybe she's your last, or the first to
go but when she's gone, the world will
still turn.

comforting to some, but you might wish
for button or switch or lever to pause
it all in frame.

america, china & russian have buttons
& levers like that.

north korea might, but we'll never know.
& these are buttons & levers you'll never
throw, so the world will spin on, like the
clay pots *my* grandmother kneaded &
kilned in her garage.

& a few days after the last breath, you'll
have to give her up to the earth, but the
world won't seem to care.

the world can't cry over one grandmother
when a west texas fertilizer fire takes
twelve.

the world aches 18 years after 168 & a
federal building in okc explode & shake,
as if destroyed by earthquake.

& as i stood at *my* grandmother's headstone,
hundreds of thousands of the bloodied &
beaten newly amputees, the shocked &
dazed cried in boston & for boston,
where some people push buttons
& throw levers.

& i saw the photos of the bloodied
beaten bodies, heard the radio, read the
news, & alienated tears only come
when holding a antique fountain pen
w/ grandmother's name etched
in gold or navajo turquoise resting on a
small sterling band.

& unfortunately, you might loose your
grand in kansas, texas, arkansas,
missouri or oklahoma during april or may,
where wild wind & earthquake litter the
lips of everyone, like leaves in rain gutters.

& no one cries about the winds &
earth-sakes, but rather anguish over
home insurance, liability.

& the world turns on, comforting to some
but no amount of oil spills, gun control
stock market crashes, social media, fat
celebrities, bombings, thin celebrities, fires,
terrorist attacks, or children, god not
even worrying for the children possesses
the conviction you may one day feel for the
world to stop turning, shut up,
& think of your grandmother.

GIVING A HOMELESS MAN A HEATH BAR

seems noble, or even righteous.
you'd imagine the lining of his
gut, blundered by years of booze,
inundated w/ acid & twisted in
the hunger of twelve dogs. perhaps,
you'd think, a dollar'd stay put, & at
least it's food. so, toffee shelled in
chocolate, held in brown plastic
like a locket settles in the man's hand.
only would've cost a buck 29. cash
already spent. once it's done, maybe

you'd roll up the window, continuing
down the road or stride lighter on
sidewalks, saying "god bless," to more
buskers & thieves, w/ fraudulent grandeurs
stuck in folds of your paisley button-downs.
later, you might end up grasping a mug's
chilled grip, husked in a room of buskers &
thieves of a different cloth, packed like
postal trucks at a limp lit bar. & when they
ask, perhaps you'll tell them because
they'll likely think it's noble, righteous

even. they may get your round, swear to
stories of their own, or somebody else's
stories. but meanwhile, sugar & toffee,
natural flavorings & chocolate, swiftly
digest to bits of smaller bits of bile &
nothing changes. at least a buck's only three
from six in *his* math. three from soaked
tongue & foul breath, from silencing
twisted gut, from the dilution of internal
acid. three from a man's brain no longer
considering his stomach, passing—

A COUNTRY CAFE

is a kinda place a man
can retreat from the
impossible
unforgiving wind.
a man can still get a
steak, eggs & coffee,
quick, at nine a.m.
the steak, a bit past
medium & chewy.
eggs ain't that great
either, but the coffee
pours like cut
calf capillaries.
hot too & strong.
there's always an
old tv hanging on
plaster walls, yellowed
like smoker's teeth
or prompted on
vulnerable linoleum
table tops, or stacked
on pairs of
previous year's
phone books.
at nine a.m. – the news.
at nine p.m. – strong
man competition.
but neither would
come through at any
hour without a wrap
of tin foil.
& here at this
or any country
cafe, when the
eggs & meat are
gone, a man can drag
a marlboro at the
table & sip the little
bit of coffee left, until
the straw-haired
waitress w/ burnt
lips *fills you up*.

& a man like me
wouldn't rather have
steak & coffee w/
anyone other than
you, though you've
never come back since
the time your
burger was burnt
& they sent out
a diet coke
instead of your iced tea
w/ lemon.
you called your
fries fettuccine
& so i tried two.
you were right, a
little ketchup
helped i thought.
so, i sit in the booth,
meditating on mostly
cooked meat &
hot sauce from eggs
still burns like hell
as i finish my coffee.
punching out my marlboro
butt, i think of you dancing
in our living room or
talking to strangers bars
or shouting at cars.
next time, maybe i'll be
more persuasive.

WHEN JIMMY PAGE ALWAYS HAD A BOTTLE OF JACK DANIEL'S IN HAND
—after a photograph by Neal Preston

through black & white a basket of fruit, a jug of
water & little else litters the table stretching

to the bottom right frame. john-paul stands
in the middle, dressed in black as he smokes w/

his left hand, holding his right bent as if injured
or mechanically reviewing meticulous bass scales

to saturate an indianapolis crowd, like a shower.
choking up smoke, struggling w/ words or lyric,

robert, the only one facing the lens, moments
from the stage, bare chest, w/ closed eyes. a

man hunches between, coated black back in view.
he could be bonham or manager or roadie. either

way, his shoulders sag & back bends from road
burn. the cinderblock wall, painted white, subtly

illuminates the careless folds of a light colored
trench coat. as he sits, his face is perfectly shaded

& obscured by jimmy's elbow, cocked at a 90,
emptying a black-labeled bottle of bravado,

as he leans back further than the chair
allows. gazing like a wall-fly, the trench coated

man's eyes, his only visible feature, pop & protrude
at jimmy's 90. all a total mistake of aligned stars in

the back stage universe, taken in a single shot, like
rock-n-roll. this is what everybody sees. zoso clad

jimmy w/ black hair curling down his back, drowning
a bottle, conjuring licks & riffs, bent bow solos. not

jonesy in black, not bare chested robert, not back turned

bonzo, not preston or his camera, & certainly not ever

the out of place human-fly sitting in his tan trench
coat, face skewed by jimmy's appetite for lightning.

DURING SPRING SHOWERS

light
poles
strain,

above
&
below
pools
of rain.

THE WORST WAY TO SAY HELLO TO A PESSIMIST

whatcha know? is the worst way to say hello
because it's abrasive, invasive, & rude
& as a greeting, is really hollow.

on the bus, heard a man shout in his tell-o-
phone & laugh at the joke in a smug attitude,
whatcha know? ain't a way to say hello.

another time, got asked by a homeless fellow
whatcha know, white boy? spare some scratch for food?
his greeting grew quite hollow.

just now, heard a man with a beard & no bravado
speak of good fortune, starting with the interlude
well what do you know? i'm even weary without the "hello."

challenging what i'm suppose to know
in a hello, serious or light, can only allude
that this greeting really is hollow.

really, i can't stand the expression in any falsetto,
any context or inflection only leaves a crude
taste in my mouth, sounding bland & hollow,
because *whatcha know?*, by far, is the worst way to say hello.

HANDS

the fool on the hill, has taken up residence in my head.
& then on the couch, smoking my lungs blacker each
drab day. my fool eats whatever is thrown close enough
but the best cuts of meat are thoughts & hands. the same
fool who, w/ best intentions, led me to bickering
relationships w/ women, drudging days of bank
work, microwave nachos & regular day long arrested
development marathons, which made me question life.

that fool takes my hand, searching through stacks of un—
educated this & that. & is always sure to keep me
comfortably uninspired & like wrists hog-tied to a couch.
it's only when i drive, alone from the bank, my head
becomes clear, & music cha-chings from ear to ear, as if
my black jeeps cab creates some kind of homebase.
but inevitably, the needle scratches the record & my fool

comes to mind. driving thirty-five down twenty-third
takes the piss out of me, i pass homeless like they were
starbucks. the music now sounds dull & the thoughts
stop. only thing coming to mind whether or not to take
mom up on the offer & call doc for free anti-depressants.

that & the bums. i bet they got some fools, too. click—
clacking fool's voices in the ears of every busted home—
less on street corners, highway exits & barhall parking lots,
who i refuse to pay out for fear a buck less brings me a
step closer to them. these hands, when i drive alone, ache
to collect my thoughts, yet at the end of everyday are

stuffed sweating through the denim of my pockets, or
demolished between my ass & a couch cushion, while i
stare up at the ceiling fan on hi, like a fool, focusing on
each blade, trying to figure what i should already know.
barhalls & couches have nothing to do w/ hands. banks
& cigarettes have little to do w/ hands. knowing this,
all thats left to do is flip the fuckin' fan the finger
& get on w/ the day.

THE AGED UNDERWEAR EXPRESSES INSECURITY ABOUT ITS CHANGING APPEARANCE

sometimes i am can extend my frayed faded grass stained green band out of your denim lining in florescent departments & see plastic packages of bright bound-together fibers. you eyeing them thumbing the price- some hang back on hooks like legless skinned cows some become my roommates but always my fibers thin & fall out thinking of it questioning my place each time. i hear you talk about my once pristine bands grasping your thick hair thighs i hear your girlfriend talk about the drooping & sagging of my w/ **new** folds how my fibers still undiluted by laundry water would cradle you softly like a hand holding the glove. now i suppose i'm split hardly holding on & at my awful angles i can hear complaints about your ass having a full view if food caused this, i'd consider bulimia if sprays or foams existed to thicken my fibers surgeries to tighten my bands injections to fill the hole you hate as i wait in a wad among the other **newer** ones noticing their orange & blue brands still shining even through this darkness i flip i roll i wring but only find silver stitches. today i am not w/ the others. now isolated between espresso grounds banana skins & tins of cat food a few more fibers fall from my band & i soak in the new stink of this trash-can-liner coffin. but despite my thinning fibers loose grip & holes am i not still the great divider of balls, ass & denim? though i've thinned split loosened ripped i still catch most of your piss.

WRECKING A PERFECTLY GOOD BICYCLE DURING SPRINGTIME

vans slip off
metal pedals,

after stepping in
-puddles.

THE FASCINATION W/ SOMEONE ELSE'S BEDROOM

—after Vincent Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles*

there is no bedroom the same as any
other bedroom, even a bedroom of
three.
all apparent.
all intelligible.
all elegant.
dull shades reverberate through this
first, once consumed by rhone flood.
owns walls of light blue or lighter violet,
wooden chairs, bed like butter
but the corner table, dark
as burned bark.
blue doors & blue washbasin
depress into walls like camouflage,
ambiguous portraits stare down on
daffodil pillows & scarlet sheet.
a green slime seeps through a browner
than cornflour floorboard & the lone
dilapidated cloth, red & blue stripped,
hangs useless on lone nail above basin.
replacement bedroom, matching
content, brighter than the before.
as if vincent hit the light on his way in.
corner table, like chocolate.
bed sheet, like blood.
daffodil pillows, bleached.
even the rag on the wall & basin
unused – absolute in nature.
everything rhone waters washed
away, rejuvenated.
straw chair cushions, jean jackets
hanging on rack, portraits,
planks of wood, all highlighted
in black & brown outline.
& like imperial moss converging
on deadwood, teal overtakes
floorboards from corners in, w/
lamenting impressionism latent
from walls to floor.
& his last bedrooms, smaller
scale than before.

yet eternally w/ bed, chairs, corner
table, hanging portraits over the bed
& jackets behind a tucked, folded in
red bed & towel opposite.
still one window, still doors, still a
floor to put all this upon.
only more design, more feature.
the portraits become
the poet & the lover.
the rag supported on the single nail,
cleansed; the nail, prominent.
all his *things* - basin, brush, bottle,
cup – uncoiled & settled atop
mahogany in the corner, proclaiming
as if they hadn't before.
details, no doubt, designed for
a mother & a sister.
evidence in cleanly swept brown
floors, where every age ring of wood
is focused like bare brush strokes
of a painter.
all apparent.
all elegant.
all complete w/ a continually green
pained window, which lets any
daylight in.

LIKE A GRAPE CAKE

i sat opposite a
wild-haired friend,
who wore someone
else's clothes, on
bar stools as we
sipped cold glasses
of beer, brimming
w/ head.
at night,
hip suburb kids
in tight shirts
litter these
bar stools
looking for other
hip suburb kids
in tight shirts
to fight or fuck.
but at 3 p.m.
only the
disenchanted
dawn this bar.

“there are certain
things that just
can't happen in
the world,” he said,
denying a smoke.

the whore can't
run for office.
the octopus can't
squeeze the dirt
of dry land in
its tentacles.
some folks can't
think.
kids can't
tie shoe laces
or wipe their
noses.
band-aids can't
really heal wounds.
college freshmen
can't write

short stories.

i stared him
up & down
through the
bottom of the
glass as the last
foamy drops
ran down his
throat.

“take me,” he said,
replacing the
empty to the bar.
said he’d never
run fast,
never eat
mushrooms,
never warm
the heart of
some girl,
or her
mother’s heart.
he’d never make
a film,
never throw
shot-put,
never be a
railroad worker.

i suppose he’s
right, in a sense.
i’m as likely to
make cakes
from grapes
as i am to
work in offices
w/ padded walls,
drink instant coffee,
remember to water
the plants,
go to war,
exchange stocks,
have children,
build houses or
bulldoze houses.

sometimes
somethings
just can't
or won't
happen.
might as well
better myself
against the
cannots w/
poetry.

THE COPPERHEAD

settled, i
walked the cabin's east side,
looking for the black croppy,
years in the dirt. the second
fish ever caught w/ grandpa on
a 60s *snoopy* pole, rusty red hook
& vibrating purple worm. "how
'bout *oscar*? you like at name?"

we were
somewhere east, just shy of
woody's oklahoma hometown,
when i heard it the first time.
dad, the driver & i in shotgun
took left on the gravel entrance.
1/2 the way in dad said, "about
here, your granddad hit that
copperhead w/ his push mower,
didn't even see it. i seen it though."
unpacking, said he'd seen it
winding up the drive, inching
towards our red cabin's single
step oak porch & white shutters.
about *this long*, tan & brown like
leaves. an instant later, gone. mostly.
never saw it, whole, or another again,
he said.

broken gravel
roads, turns back to the red cabin
killed *oscar*, grandpa knew that &
also, fish w/ names shouldn't
be eaten. well, before hotdogs
& chips, grandpa took *oscar*
& i outside. w/ no shoebox, we
dropped him in the small
hole, laid the dirt & said
nothing else except, "hope
some dog or som'thing don't
dig 'em up." never found him

or his grave.
like the nameless copperhead
nothing could be found. animals

w/ names aren't fit to eat, forgotten
graves seem more suitable.

EYE (PRONOUN POEM #1)

—a found poem

eye me mine.
i don't care
i [just] don't care,
i ain't sayin
i don't like the man i am
i [just] can't stand it,
i don't belong.
i ain't got no home,
i ~~am~~ ain't the walrus
i am waiting [but]
i am [not exactly] the sea.
eye[s] can see for miles
i can see the pines ~~are~~ dancing,
i can be a frog [or]
i can go on, [but either or]
(i can't get no) satisfaction
i just don't know what to do with myself
i['ve been] save[ing] cigarette butts [lately],
eye[s] saw a ghost
i [always] get nervous
[i wanna be sedated]
(i really wanna get) fucked up on a saturday night,
i hate pretending
i hate [having] the blues
i hate the sun[shine]
i have no fun [w/ anyone]
i don't really want to be social.

i think i've had it
i just wanna have something to do, [so i]
i do dig a certain girl,
i dig [her] pony [when]
i saw her standing there
i can't get [her] off my mind,
i know ~~yer~~ [she's] insane, [but]
i can't get away
i wanna be the only one
i only want [her]
i wanna be [her] dog
i wanna make it wit [her],
i better be quiet now.

WE ALL DROP THINGS

like white dishes & clear cups,
a flower vase or 3 inch pietà
made out of clay & they all spray,
like water from a hose, when
they rapture on the ground
from the hand of the clumsy fool
or the raging bull.
either way we all drop things.

& ink drops slowly on paper,
like, snow before pages & pages
drop into leather. paint drops on
canvases, like rain, & the folks
who like rain, drop the cash on
canvas. we drop eyes on pages,
on canvases, we drop knowledge,
like sages, before we all drop out
& leave college. both burn-out &
graduate drop it all like a magic trick.

we drop 'em all, from high
school wannabes to college-
couldabes. we drop girls &
friends & dogs from roof tops
to bitter ends, like some
impossible joke making us
choke, till blue in the gut &
throat. & if you drop 'em
once, drop 'em twice.

we drop time in thoughts,
time after time, like walnuts
into paper cups to sort later,
or drop time dead, like a dog
in the dirt, w/ six bullet side
shooter. but time is a cat,
dying again & again to be
born again & again to witness
everything dropping to an end.

AN ELEMENTAL LIFE

i said i got a
honey-skinned
girl w/ wild
brown curl-cues
from the root,
blonde at the tip.
traded a girl
w/ every
color hair, who
told me too much
of what i be should
doing, for her.
got two cats,
boy & girl. once, i
had a hedgehog
who left quills in
my carpet. live in
a little apartment
in a historic
neighborhood,
overrun w/ cigarette
butts & bums & stray
dogs & patches of
overgrown grass -
but i used to live w/
my mother. i drive
my own jeep,
it's black.
all black. they say
the motor never
changes in a jeep.
got a band.
had a few before
that played too
many chords. now
we play 3, maybe 4
w/ less transgression.
had brown hair to
my shoulders that
needed to be cleaned
& rinsed. then i
started finding
them on my pillow
& in the drain. still

nothing a razor's
edge couldn't mend.

but i still smoke
cigarettes & curse
people in cars. still
sleep too much at
the wrong times &
not enough otherwise.
still hate spiders. still
wear black. still fight
no one & still laugh
at everyone. & i'm
saying it's
perfect enough,
said, i'm saying it's
perfect enough.

BABY BLUES (PRONOUN POEM #2)

-a found poem

it's a bad wind
that don't blow somebody
some good. it won't be long—
it's a long way back, it's a long long
way [home],
it overtakes me, it's just too much.
[but] it's alright, ma
(i'm only bleeding). [i said]
it's all alright. [now] it's
[up to] you. it's your turn [i said]
it's all you, [but] it's so useless [when]

it's nearly over. [so] it's o.k.
[yeah, it's o.k.] (we've all
seen better days). [&] it's natural
to be afraid, ['cause] it's all gonna break
[anyway]. it is obvious it kills, it killed
mom. it's not easy (oh baby) ain't so easy,
it's only love [& always] it's not
true. [they
say] it takes a married man to sing
a worried song [but that] it ain't me,
babe (naw, naw, naw) it ain't me, babe.
it's true that we love one another, [but all
i know is] it's only rock & roll
(but i like it) [&] it's all over now.

MORPHINE, SUGAR WATER, & STRYCHNINE

at around 2 a.m. nurse toppan prepares
a dose for mister davis, who waits
restlessly under blankets & fear
in boston during winter, nineteen-nineteen.

she walks through davis' darken hallway, stopping
in each room, kissing out every candle w/
her red painted lips before staring down
the hall's last room, where davis lays

quiet & alone

on a bed, yellowed from months of
supporting his slowly decomposing body.

—are we ready for a nighttime sip?
asks nurse toppan.

thinking about the man's weakening heart,
she gathers up a syringe from the medical
bag that she'd been telling people for years
was given to her at cambridge w/ nothing
more to say. she grabs out
three ½ bottles of clear liquids
w/ white labels.

—morphine's for the pains,
she says showing davis the bottle.
—sugar water
—& a bit-a strychnine for good measure.

davis lays motionless in bed six months
now, only able to tilt his head upward,
to keep from drowning in shallow
sips of water. he eyes nurse toppan's
forward advance, the needle

dripping clear penhead drops of so-called
emancipation, pokes out of her right
hand, till she stands hovering above his face.

—shhh
she whispers
holding the needle to her lips. backing

away nurse toppan softly unzips her white
coat riddled w/ yellow stains & removes
her black leather shoes. davis' eyelids dispatch

out a single tear closing, as if seizing up when
he feels his left arm for the first time in
months. & removing the needle, a small dab of
blood lands on davis' bed-side-table. nurse toppan,
slipping innocently next to him, presses against his
body w/ her arms around his chest,

she holds him tightly & whispers
—now stop breathing

DEVIL (PRONOUN POEM #7)

—a found poem

me & the devil blues, [&]
he's waitin' [see],
he took your place [in]
me & my head.
me & the devil blues,
he [wants]
me & [my] doll
me & my arrow
me & my [sp]arrow [too].
me, [i hate] the devil blue.
he would have laughed
[as] he turns down
me & [my] doll[ar],
he laughed.
me & the devil blues,
he [wants] war [w/]
me & my arrow. [that's how]
he's waitin'
me & the devil blues.

SNOQUALMIE FALLS

here brings me closer
to nature in a way that sprawling
rivers of busted asphalt, separating
tree lines, never could.
evergreens and big leaf maples
cover dirt & rocks & everything else
surrounding snoqualmie's gaping
mouth. from a lookout point over
the watery falls, a sole trail
winding downwards to
snoqualmie's mouth enters my
view. a sudden & dusty wind
then throws little pebbles
at the backs of my calves, &

the big maples shade my
charging feet, as i pass over a
thin hemlock bridge & into the
forest. the sun's high hanging
glow submits to a tree-line of
spruce & maple & larch. but also
the nursing trees, which after
experiencing death by lighting
bolt, lumberjack or innovation
of man, sprout baby seedlings
from their hollow trunks, & over
time, explode with evergreen life.
mother nature's offering of trees
growing out of trees. life growing

from death. eventually, the tree-line
breaks, shining light at the trail's
dead end, dangling above a fifteen
foot drop down into snoqualmie's
mouth. all at once, i panic but
press on, deafened by snoqualmie
as she rains rivers of water two hundred
feet before baptizing rocks gathered
in her mouth, till i stand all but alone
at the waterline. snoqualmie's water,
once blue, now the color of ever—
green from algae velcroed to the
surface. little ripples of water,

dying off from the falls

impact, collide against my dirty
stained feet & i bend down for a
look at my reflection. instead,
snoqualmie paints a brown faced
girl w/ black hair balancing on
a rock-ledge draping over
the lagoon. she dances
circles w/ arms raised up to god,
as if reaching for his hand or for
the hand of a snoqualmie mother
& screams on the stone altar
when neither hand appears. turning

away from my false reflection, the
snoqualmie girl stands on a boulder
behind me. her toes wrap around rock's
edge for dear life as she looks through
my eyes & straight into the water. without
notice, she lets her knees buckle, like the
trunk of a tree under a lumberjack's
axe. my ankle loosens above the rocky
beach, lunging for her as she
falls onto the rocks below.