

8-2013

History Has the Voice of a Bird-Filled Tree

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HISTORY HAS THE VOICE OF A BIRD-FILLED TREE

A Creative Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the English Department
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Brent Allen Fisk

August 2013

HISTORY HAS THE VOICE OF A BIRD-FILLED TREE

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HISTORY HAS THE VOICE OF A BIRD-FILLED TREE

Brent Fisk

August 2013

62 pages

Directed by: Dr. Tom Hunley, Dr. Kelly Reames, and Dr. Dale Rigby

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This creative thesis, *History Has the Voice of a Bird-Filled Tree*, is a collection of poems about the communal, familial, and physical landscapes we grow up in. The manuscript explores the accidental body of knowledge we accumulate over a lifetime: those lessons we do not actively seek to learn and that no one sets out to teach us, but that mark us, and make us who we are. The landscape of this manuscript is not an exact replication of an existing town or existing family, but what the poet Richard Hugo refers to as a “triggering town.” This removal frees the internal biographer and historian to write openly about experiences without guilt or sanitization of a symbolic past. The narrative is mostly true with just enough fibbery to protect both the innocent and guilty alike.

THE HOUSE ON GYPSY RIDGE

My grandmother's moods turned liquid,
black as the ink of squids. Chameleon in a nightgown,
she'd scramble eggs for one too many plates.
Grandpa's empty chair would rock her.

Cobwebs in the cupboards of her heart,
embers of the woodstove, the smoke
that spins away when a candle is put out.

The house held together
with toothpaste spit, the mud from our boots,
the spindly legs of silverfish. She teetered
atop the step ladder, shook the husks
of ladybugs from the globes of ceiling lamps.

She'd wring the grime from the rags of his shirts
and wipe the dust from lamp cords and table legs.
She wiped our faces raw and swept the darkness
down the cellar stairs. She beat the air
until it came out clean. The gutters could not contain
the steady grief of rain. She closed herself up tight
like a house she planned to leave.

When she loved us again, we thought it was a trick
of the light. Her hands steadied. She sang
to the roosting hens. She gave us heels of bread
for the sparrows. She bought a summer dress
and seasoned a new black skillet. She filled the hollow
of her empty bed with a curl of napping boys.
She dreamed of trilling frogs. She waved again at trains.

BLIZZARD OF '78

The snow swirled and eddied on its own
picket line, slowed the factory in a way the strike
never could. My father worked the clock
like an aching knuckle, lunch pail for a pillow, fitful
dreams for sheets. His mistress was a hot shower.

My brother and I hollowed out the piles of snow,
ate soup boiled in cans on a camping stove,
pierced the darkness with a badgered light,
giggles tethered to wrinkle-skinned restlessness.

Our mother disowned us
when she slept, hard-boiled
and deep, steeping like tea, or dyed eggs in vinegar.
We howled with the wind and rattled the walls
of the cinder block basement.

Too much of anything will take on the scratch
of wool. Another day and we'd have split
our skin, become some feral other.
Chinese torture of slow thaw, the tick tock
of a dripping gutter. I wolfed down sandwiches
of ice and air.

My father fed ore into the ovens,
played nice for the foreman, doubling
the blinds on the hour he came home rich
with matchsticks but poorer for it.
They cut his shifts to rags
like dirty old shirts.

My brother and I took hammers to the frozen
floor of the flooded garage, and my father parked
the station wagon on the street, came up silent
with a snow shovel cradled in his busted hands.
He helped remove what we'd cracked and broken.
Mother floated behind the washed out curtains,
bright as a green spring leaf but less certain.

AT DENTON'S DRIVE-IN

We scrunch in the hard plastic booth
waiting for pizzas. A teenage boy tosses
loose change to the floor and wolfs down his double
burger. My grandfather bends on one knee
and gathers the scattered pennies.

The heat lamp burns in the skin of my cheeks
as the jukebox skips a greasy beat.
Food falls from the mouths of the young boys laughing.
I try to pull in my hair, retract my timid feet.
Eyes closed, I hear our number come up,
feel the tremor of the nearby booth, shiver
of the bell above the door. My grandmother
will not lift her eyes from the menu,
folds her napkin until it can fold no more.

IN THE COAT ROOM

The front door chimed
a hundred times for guests
ringing in with wine and food,
a chill woven through their clothes.

My brother and I wound down
like a pair of forgotten watches,
were stowed in the junk drawer
of our shared bed beside a mound of beaded purses,
Eton-collared coats, coarse wool jackets.
We were skins that dreamed,
dead to the noise, the light, the smoke.

We crept away in sleep
to the dark side of the moon.
Buttons and buckles marred our cheeks
and our bodies were left behind,
sleep cloaking our singular spark
like a light left on in a closet.

We flew, we breathed water,
we ate thorns and fire,
carried time in our cupped hands
like so much wet sand.
In the morning we lay unclaimed.

Another child halfway round the world
wore the night like a stolen coat,
hands dipping into empty pockets,
our names inked, fading with the coming dawn.

PINE LAKE, LATE SUMMER

Life jacket rank and orange
and the boat snagged on a branch beneath the surface.
The heads of snapping turtles bob beyond the oars,
dream of nipping toes.
Small bluegill bite and run.
The boy wants to keep them all,
wants to throw them back.

Tonight the fire pops and hisses
as he listens to the men,
voices low and rhythmic,
waves echoing against the dock.
Sleep nibbles below a tattered sky,
stars sparkling fish scales strewn atop the water.

Memory will flash and scatter like this,
the past so much debris,
like oil shimmering on a liquid surface,
or last night's fire burned to smoldering ash.
The boy wades into the dream of a lake,
each turn in his sleep like the flight of a loon.

BIRTHDAY

A mid-April day without rain.
My younger brother curls on the couch,
dreams of Holland, windmills, tulips.
He's a child who holds back the sea.

My mother wastes piles of rags
on every dirty window.
This labor a small echo
of my brother's birth, a sudden rush
of water from an inner sea.

The house is cool with the windows open.
A cardinal sounds a birthday song.
When Father comes from his extra shift
he wipes the steamy mirror like another dirty window.
He washes away the grime,
a swirl of weariness disappearing down the drain.
He towels off and takes us for dinner.

My brother's quarters slide in the jukebox.
He selects songs at random, the way it sometimes appears
my parents chose each other.
My father's beaten wallet is rich with ones and fives.
His shoulder aches from building seawalls--
his back in knots, each day reclaimed from an ocean
of work. My brother sags in the vinyl booth,
dreams of gold, of treasure maps, of being older
with a dagger clenched in his teeth.
My mother glows at our table,
a small candle that lights our way.

BLACKBERRY SEASON

Berries hit the bottom of the pail,
a sound of caterpillars falling on a tent.
I am three and blunder into a barbed wire fence.
My belly grows bright berries of blood.
I am the heaviest pail my father carries home.
All day I inch toward sleep one sour berry at a time.
The day grows leggy, bolts like a weed near dusk.
Dreams seed earth as rich as tomorrow.

AT THE FIVE AND DIME, NEAR CHRISTMAS, 1972

Shoppers bustle by in woolen coats,
brush static through my hair. Shoes scuff
the hardwood floor as the tingling bell
above the door sings out proud as a wren.

My grandmother shifts hip to hip,
a metronome of sagging arms, aching bones, lacy slip.
She comes to shave away the whiskered
pain my grandfather can no longer bear.
He is a gasping fish in the palm of his bed.
He makes sleep into a salted dish, a favorite course.
Sweat beads on his forehead, a constellation
bright as the hot spots on his x-rays.
He names newfound stars after his different shames—
here an old man needs a bath, like a baby in a bassinet.
Here, a change of underwear, a shave,
his white hair unplastered from his scalp.

I disappear like the air he aches to breathe,
hide in a rack of clothes.
I pocket a fallen quarter, a pack of gum, a rubber ball.
Gone too, a mini-stapler, a deck of cards.
This is the way a life is stolen, bit by bit—
each hour as thin and cold as the air, phantoms around a bed.
His bland-eyed, blind face wistful, gasping, gone.
A thievery necessary as diapers, morphine,
the warmth in a hand.
I feel the needle stick of loss,
the silent-halled shuffle of his going,
his sleep-toss ebbing toward stillness,
nothing now but the hollow-boned weight
of gone.

TO BE WAKED AGAIN

I remember the stiffness of the living,
the sudden ill fit of our skin,
the too-open eyes of the mourners.

His father sensed
his son Jerrod's life on our clothes,
as if we'd been caught smoking
under the bleachers at school.
I did not see his mother,
or anyone who could have been his mother.
Perhaps she stayed home, prepared
a bed for his absence.

His dead face did not look angelic,
and some said he slept,
but if he slept at all, he did not sleep well.
His cheeks were strangely pink and cottoned.

In the parking lot the leaves fell sideways.
Autumn tattered to a close.
I wished his mother could wake him again,
the crisp morning wildly blue.
His whole life fenced in by ragged vine and wire,
fields laced with ice, fallow and wanting.

MISSED CALL

My mother's voice was settled, sad.
She'd called earlier to say Grandfather was slipping.
Just an hour later there she was again,
blinking steadily on the answering machine.

I'd taken out the trash and gone for dinner.
Nothing stirred in the trees, the junipers
sprawled on the sidewalk as usual,
and the sparrows filtered through the cherry blossoms.

Only the doorknob had an odd feel,
knotty and dented like an old man's knee.
I played the message twice, once for the news,
once to hear what lay hidden
in my mother's voice.

I held the phone out trying to think of her
number, held it out away from me
like the hat of a stranger just leaving.

A WINTER, LONG AFTER HIS DEATH

When ice falls from the branches
of a tree, it makes the sound of angels.
I knew winter was another name for death
even before I had a word for either.
I look back at the pages
of a grade school yearbook, ask
my mother about an old friend.
Tracing a line back to a time when I knew him
is like looking through a frost covered window.
To touch his face was to thaw time,
the way putting a palm to a frozen window
burns a hole in ice.

A YARD SALE OFF STATE ROAD 27, CHICKALAH, ARKANSAS

Yard sale yarn, a quarter per skein
and books that bleed when exposed
to rain, and old records in crates
that make only the daddy long legs dance.

A large housewife squats on a couch cushion
she's dragged to her front porch. She sips coffee
from a flamingo mug and makes change
from a cigar box wedged between her legs.

Things on the lawn that for years have only seen
the swinging light of attic bulbs. The siding is green
with envy. Thin scrawl of red-inked prices
on masking tape pressed to denim dresses

with buckles missing, stacks of plastic cups,
junk jewelry in a ballerina box. She no longer twirls.
If it barely sparkles but holds together, it's for sale.
The bushes smell of cat pee and rot-damp leaves.

A young boy cries because he's pulled away
from an armadillo stuffed like a chair. My mother wipes clean
silver picture frames and I brush the cocoons
from the centerfolds of comics.

The homeowner lights another slender cigarette.
The silver trails of slugs and snails wander cursive on the walk.
A young girl dreams near a wedding dress sheathed in plastic,
a basket of scuffed patent-leather shoes. She barely breathes.

I'll take fifty for the lot. The young girl touches sequins,
a bit of lace, a stiletto heel. Smoke snakes between
the woman's fingertips. A baby cries deep inside
the house. *Fifty for the lot,* she calls, rises, disappears.

MIGRATION

My grandmother's thin lips
shine with grease.
On a white plate,
a small mound of dark bones.

Years before I knew her,
she was capable of flight,
her own bones hollow but strong.

There are wings
bright as a wedding dress
boxed somewhere in the attic
or beneath a bed.

She'd fly until she found the river
shining up through autumn's thinning leaves.
The memory of it falls around her now
like the soft down of flightless birds.

When I was small she sang to me of this.

A SMALL CEMETERY, MAMMOTH CAVE NATIONAL PARK

The growing oak and hickory sink
eyetooth roots through
the splinters of old pine boxes,
the slivered heirloom bone.

Water will not stand here,
it filters down like the sun.
The names slide back to simple rock,
each limestone letter fades.

Here in the moss, signs of deer:
the two-pronged track left behind
instead of lilywhites, a spray of fern.
Half the plots are infant-filled,
day olds and stillborns, their first crib a coffin.
Here a lamb curls in the rock, lichen-wooled and green.
Here a hand points to heaven, one slender finger of blame.

The cart ruts give way to trees
as we all give way to trees,
eyes shining, near death, like acorns,
skin pallid as a hickory nut,
each heart echoing away
like the report of a distant gun,
or the ghost of a woodpecker carving doors
where once there were none.

THE REMEDY

When I hear cancer is taking your mother,
I dream of curative potions: a potent broth
of interstellar dust, a bouillon of fennel
seasoned with the light of a nova, a few thin rings
of Saturn's sautéed in a pan. A salad
of cat whiskers plucked from the nests of birds,
lint from hoop dresses of long-dead queens
still waltzing through a wee-houred morning.
A roux of bone powder and whispers stirred
with a spoon of wind.

It all boils down to loss.
Absent her hair and the extra weight
she once carried on her hip like a happy child.
Her eyes shine with the wetness of emptied bowls.
Here is the pewter spoon that holds her last breath.
Our lives too thin without her,
stale as an old cracker.

If only we knew our grandmother's tricks
for stretching out the meaty parts, for stealing
sustenance from the refrigerator light,
bright yolks separated from cloudy whites
and seasoned with the salt of grief.

VIEW FROM ABOVE

Workers on the street below cough,
the quick smoke break between the broken
asphalt and heaving sidewalk
severs the jackhammer routine.

My father wrecked his legs and back
carrying my brother and me above this
day-to-day collision of body and hard labor.
He taught us to hunger after what was soft
and sometimes now that hunger becomes a hollowness,
as if the soft pads of my fingertips
could never hold a precious thing because
my body had not earned it.

My father wore his cough like a tie,
shined his Sunday shoes with sweat,
and though his bone-crack knees and hips
woke me like a clock strike, all we have
in common now is a love for my mother
and a river of coffee brown as a raging stream.

I daydream of work,
of tossing loosened curb into a wheelbarrow,
of rocking a pry bar into crevices, of making a giant hole
in the shape of my father's scrawny hope.

DAY LABORERS, JUDY'S DINER, SLAUGHTERS, KENTUCKY

Heavy August rains
keep the men from their roofs. They abandon
hammers and nail guns for a few sweet
hours. The waitress drowns
them in tea and chatter, brings platters
of brown-fried potatoes.

Twitchy, fibrous arms push
spilled sugar to the floor. Listen to the cracking way
their necks unkink, scabbed hands rubbing
at the faded ink of forearms, the fissures of a cheek.

I drive the same squalid quarter mile they walk
back to motel shacks with sour towels and sheets,
black-spotted mirrors clinging to the walls,
lights left burning behind thick curtains.

One old timer stubs out a cigarette, growls
of a friend who slipped from a gabled Victorian
and adorned an ornate fence until the firemen cut him free.
He swears he lives still down in Alabama
and soaks in tattered summer hours mucking for catfish
in mud-banked tributaries.

I look at the wash of sky, a tepid yellow.
The streetlamps pop to life. I head home
to an empty bed, the light left
on over my kitchen sink. Cicadae wind their wings,
overlay the tap's incessant drip. I think of the roofers
trying to sleep, dim mirrors reflecting dingy
rooms, small beds acrawl with vacant dreams.

JESSAMINE COUNTY, BALLARD WASHOUT ROAD

Old briars darken the wire fence.
The White Parks are in the cornfield muck,
bright hides setting off the sumac's glow.

November is a late riser, all its light
through bed sheets, waxed paper,
wood smoke.

My brother and I head in the truck toward Zion,
past the mop head opossums dead in the road,
past the honeyed hickory, the bone-white sycamore.

Autumn cloaks the roadside in weed rags,
wind-shattered seed heads, bare saplings
in fence rows. We take the way

we know in our bones, county road off ramp
like sinew connected to muscle. Visit the plain
and sagging houses, the bent aerials pulling
at the clapboards, roof shingles
stained with the rot of leaves.

The metal knob on the screen door
so cold it burns the hand. The television
with the sound down low. We eavesdrop
on a dialogue of clocks.

RECOVERY

The voices have not been silenced
in spite of the constant drip. A nurse asks
about the final game, the last desperate
shot disappearing in the air.

I go to the dark closet of my body,
feel the dream fabric hanging above my head
like a tattered suit. The incision
is a crack of light, a line
where the door to my body won't close.

I think of when they found Mr. Jenkins
dead on his kitchen floor, how he sprawled
there empty-eyed, a broken
glass in his hand and a mouth open to flies.
Two days of the screen door's incessant banging
before someone stumbled in with a shout.

Now I have a stranger's hands inside me.
How many times
does a doctor make this cut
before he's used to this sort of parting,
skin and fat and muscle fiber, hand steady
as the flow of blood?

I will wake in a phantom hour,
eyes aflutter, a strong wind beyond
the window glass, controlled
burn of pain. My parents climb through the wall
of searing heat, everything wavering, eroding,
except the trickle-whisper of conversation,
the warmth of hands curious with love.

WIDOW

Like a black marble with legs,
she wobbles toward her web,
so easy to knock into a pail.
If my mother discovered
this shiver of a thing, she'd dance
like a Shaker in a dry old church.

Spiders teeter, touch their webs
like doctors testing for a pulse.
I let one shelter in the window of a shed,
a slow carpet of husks spreading below.
When a cotton ball of an egg sac appeared,
the spider crept into my dreams.

My mother whispered brooms
into the corners of my sleep, and
when the full moon slipped behind the clouds,
became cocoon, my fingers had their own bad dreams,
willed me through a net of nerves
to reach for the weight of hammers.
I crushed the widow
like the silk top hat once favored by undertakers.
I sowed it in the soil like a seed, but nothing grew.
The moon mourned without a sound,
shone like the wet face of a widowed woman
who will not speak of loss.

NEAR DEATH

You see everyone gather. They drink wine
until they break the dangling lights.
There are no doors for you
to enter, just thin windows
to look through, to see
the bright red skirts, the flash of zippers
on black dresses. Someone says your name.
You hear what could be laughter.
The last of the lights go out.
People dance in the darkness.
You take off your body like a sweaty coat.

Listen, there are other parties high in the trees,
beneath the rocks that litter small creeks.
The music of a nursing rabbit, a snake
curled beneath an old cinder block.
You wait in the street like a fallen branch.
You dream of ice,
of the movement of ice.

DEATHBED CONFESSION

I can tell you now
that you are my favorite.
You have outlasted all the rest.

As a boy I said straight to your face
that I loved my other grandmother but you
not at all. In an instant you grew tall

and distant, but I bounced away
to the playroom and gouged the eyes
of my mother's old dolls.

Now you shrink and close in on yourself.
You set your face to the light
while the empty hours
pull dust around them like a shawl.

JUNE, SWEET PEAS CLIMBING THE WIRE

Palms abraded in the gravel drive,
I'm splayed out in my brothers' wake
like a lizard near the cistern's lip.

I rise and hobble to the fencerow,
old wooden posts grooved like stalks of celery.
I am the youngest brother who plays
with metal cars beneath the yews,
cries over broken blue eggs on the walk.

I know the details of the treasure map,
three paces to the left of the downspout,
the root-foot of the oak, mossy crook
where I've buried baby teeth and agate.

Some days I am my brothers' favorite target.
Today they outdistance me, slip across the road
where I'm not allowed to follow.
I tell mother they're smoking grape vine
and cornsilk beneath the culvert. She cuts
a singing switch from the willow,
won't wait for my father to welt them.

My palms sting with this secret pleasure.
I am the youngest brother.
My anger burns third-child slow.

LUNAR ECLIPSE

The surface like a white page
going smoky and yellow.
November is a month of aching bones.
We watch the eclipse unfold,
the stone steps draw on our warmth.
The cold spreads like ink spilled from a well.
We throw on the warm wool of winter,
let the grass crack like breaking glass.
Ice traps everything,
the tongue in my mouth,
the last insects not gone deep,
water standing in a pail.
And which of us is the moon,
and which the shadow?
The beauty of the night sky
is not ephemeral
like lost moths fluttering
or the troubled looks
through the last whisper of darkness
that passes across a sleeping face.

INVENTION, MISSOURI, POP. UNDETERMINED

I have created drunken uncles from sackcloth,
lovers from a blue jay's fallen tail feathers.
My brother's excited voice rose
like the bark of a wet tire on asphalt.
The wobble of my grandmother's head
is the broken wheel of a shopping cart.
My sudden fear, birds kicked up in the thornbrush.

Whole towns rise from empty boxes,
skylines twinkling like a fritzed strand of X-mas lights.
The small shops smell of astringent, old books.
Low-slung diners idle along railroad tracks,
tiger lilies and Johnson grass erupting near dumpsters,
one shredded cigar rolling near the door.
Inside, a waitress sweeps quarters from a table,
her forearm now sticky with sugar.
I give her dreams of Chicago,
a produce wholesaler named Brad
who hit her only once but kissed her many times.
I will her my old family farm—
its orchard of apples and pears, hornets carving the fruit hollow.
A possum that trundles the driveway at dusk
while honeysuckle collapses a fence.
And though she wants to idle on the porch, dream of Brad,
I will make her cheek sting, send mosquitoes to drive her in.
I will hire a kind-hearted busboy with a bright future.
Work them the same odd shifts, install a jukebox,
dot the round tables with ugly farmers,
salesmen with liver spots, deviated septums, wrecked voices.
I'll allow dancing in the aisles of the restaurant. Let them have Thursdays off.
And Saturdays, the restaurant closes after lunch.
The rest I'll leave to them.
The rest is up to them.

Matriarch of Springwater Flats

My uncle drank so much
he forgot the dimensions of his house.
Walked off the green-painted porch
and broke his one good leg.

He punched the neighbor's dog
who thought his writhing was play.
The poor thing howled at the end of its chain,
groomed itself calm beneath the holly scrub.
When the ambulance bounced up on the curb
he was screaming for another drink.
His sweat-soaked body had a street light sheen.

I dreamed for weeks of his strapped-down arms,
the sharp holly leaves stuck to his skin like ticks.
Sheriff's deputies gathered in the shadows
looking for dope and counting the open cans of beer.
Their sniggering dried up in the heat
of my Grandmother's moonlight stare.

No one dared offer a ride to the ER.
No one said, *Momma, you should really come in.*
Laughter slipped through the kitchen window
as one young deputy clacked toward his car,
a crushed beer can making a high heel of his boot.
He never took his hand from the butt of his gun.
She never looked him directly in the eye.
She never looked away.

FOUND OBJECTS

I'm a widow now, and my dreams fill
with strange sorts of flight. No lift beyond
the tree tops really. I wake, muscles sore.

The feather he knifed into a quill
made me promise to scribble love letters
when he was long-haul trucking.

But the black feather split, left nothing
but blots and smudges. Four hawk feathers
gathered in Colorado, a fence-cut sapling

bent into a dream catcher, but the contraption
moved oddly in the dark, twisted up
my sleep, drained the color from the morning.

A sad collection of headdresses, beaded
flapper belts, a slow accumulation of haphazard
feathers from crow, blue jay, cardinal, and titmouse.

I kept them for his love, imagined
his thick and clumsy fingers constructing charms
in the dark cab of his truck, down time hours

swirling back to me. I keep them in a box
beneath our bed, one owl feather found on a walk
tacked to the bird's-eye headboard.

His presence has found its way back home,
spins like a feather above the bed, chases dreams
away before their natural ends, small sounds
attacking the windows, trees of restless birds.

CANTICLE FOR THE WABASH VALLEY

At dusk the midge clouds grow damp
in the last thin haze. A low plane banks
some silent distance away
and the corn sways silver above the curving road.
The August heat tames the tiger lilies
and blackberries come at the cost
of chiggers and a host of thorns.

There were days when driving was an art
with restless, reckless trips through sleeping
towns and countryside. Dark shops waited
for early birds, and parking lots cast light against the bellies
of water towers. I was not a god, not even

a small one, but I sent blessings into space
and wished a good life to every friend,
the minor miracles of fidelity and a comfortable bed,
a boss that didn't kick or bite, graves that remain
unused. I passed the empty car wash and the homely beauty
supply store. I passed the city park and its delinquent, noisy geese.

I turned the car where the road grew fat,
backtracked through the recent past, headlights
clipping guardrails, the blue reflectors marking driveways.
The radio played its soft gospel of static.
I drove as if movement itself were a prayer.

GASPER RIVER IN THE DARK

My brother, drunk again, lurches toward
the dark river. Sycamores hiss and metal boats
knock against the dock. Loose-papered limbs
sway and creak. I run
for a flashlight, a frail beam to stir the shadows,
but deep within, a temptation to let him go
and find his precious river.

But there were days before the bottle,
two boys in another storm, and he would shine
a light against the wall, make lame shadow puppets and funny talk,
creatures timid and as terrified of the lightning as me,
of the thunder that chased them down.
He might play the flashlight like a bright trumpet,
light disappearing in his mouth, Dizzy Gillespie out his cheeks
into fat red balloons, all that blood rushing to his mouth.

And now, homeless and unshowered,
this, his only place to go. All day I've discovered
bottles in Pringles cans, in the vegetable bin,
floating in the tank behind the toilet. When I drain
them in the sink, he's lost his family.

So now he slips to the river, for what? Another hidden
bottle, a midnight swim, a boat ride to the levee
where he can test his nerve on the man-made lake,
lightning looking for fools, thunder rattling
the water's windows.
My brother, a shadow cast into the trees.

INTERVIEW ABOUT A GIRL HE MAY HAVE KNOWN

How many shallow graves
mar the fields and woods?
The long grass holds secrets, whispers
to the bones cradled in loam.

As the light bleeds out, a dusky stir
of breeze recalls the sound
of a girl running in a crinoline dress.
The corn looms above the gravel road
and electric towers hum
like certain thoughts.

And there in the evening kitchen,
a balding man lets his eyes go soft,
remembers buried treasure as he kisses
his sons good night, dismembers
old monsters in the black closets of his past.

His hands work the tension from the neck
of the woman who will one day say she loved him
blindly, a flimsy door closing
on strangers who want to know all about the man
she can't quite picture
digging holes in the forest floor.

His face hovers in family photographs
above her children's smiles.
His eyes, their eyes,
their soft breathing, his soft breathing.

A BEE IN THE CAR

Gently on the back of my hand,
it lands, legs like eyelashes
thick with mascara.

The spring wind shakes the car.
I lower my window as my wife
does her EEK-a-mouse.
I have lived through the presence of many stingers,
know slow movement will not draw venom.

The bee flies into the backseat,
angry huzz of confinement, small yellow fear
like the flutter in a stomach. It must be all those years
of swallowing it in, the failed flight of a fist,
gentle tremor of a hand.

I pull to the shoulder, wax-cup the bee
to open air. Large trucks throttle down
but barely brake, aftermath of kicked up winter
grit, acrid diesel, thick and blue as the past.

PASSING AN OUTDOOR CAFE

Walking home from work with a list in my head,
the looping buzz of things to do,
I pass the book bags and tight black purses
of college girls drinking away an afternoon.

A gray-coated dog hangs its tail low
and snuffles up what's dropped to the ground.
Those gathered here are years away
from mortgages and student loans coming due.
They don't even dream of giving up
smoking. Their bodies don't whisper,
cell to cell, hints of what they lose. They're full
of hard laughter and beer.

I dip beneath the limbed-up holly,
a crepe myrtle still winter-boned
and think of the garden shed trashed with leaves,
snake skins, a pan flute of dauber nests.
Last spring behind a stack of terra cotta pots
I found a mouse skull, a bird wing, a goose egg
toothed open and cleaned of yolk.

As I wait to cross the street, the gray dog
trots behind. Collarless and lost,
he's ribbed with an affable hunger. Nameless,
we walk together, our feet in tandem
a soft song that eases the heat from the light.
Already I dream of my wife plying us with food,
soothing us from our shaggy chores
with a care that's almost feral.

IN TRANSIT

My life is a steady diet of diesel fumes,
crackers toppled from vending machines.

In the restroom of a Louisville bus station,
a shirtless man soaps his armpits, half bathes.
A straight razor rocks on the sink basin.

Perhaps this man also has a father
he hasn't seen in years. He nods
as if we pass each other every morning.
The door is racked by the winter wind.
Heaters hang from the ceiling, glow orange,
false suns.

Years of shiftless drifting
and I have a sudden hunger for the ocean,
a walk through winter's barren dunes
as the noon tide rises and consumes the beach.
Gusts free the stinging salt, polish glass
into something useless and beautiful.

DUTCH'S TAVERN

Next to a table full of amber bottles
one old man leans in, sends a feathered dart
at the eye of a hurricane,
the red center like the heart of a flower.

There's heat in the way he flicks his wrist,
a smoldering desire to strike
at the ghosts who haunt him.
Here his dead father stumbles
through the yellow smoke, goes down
the long hallway of the past.
He has passed on his leather belt,
his rough knuckles, a smile
more sleet than rain.

The old man gathers darts into a small bouquet,
each petal she loves me not.
And he still dreams of his daughter,
how she bounced back to her mother like a bad check.
She's grown now, all sharp teeth and teased hair.

Love goes stale and flat like beer,
but the man's eyes are keen. Look at
the flight of his darts. See how
they hit home, sharp, true.
If only it were all in the wrists.
If only his dead eye still saw.

DEAF AND DUMB

Mother talked to Father's back
as he scanned the paper, corners fluttering
like the ears of a sleeping cat.

My brother and I called his name
from the threshold of the kitchen,
our lips stiff as a sly ventriloquist as we watched
his face for recognition.

It was our mother we drove crazy.
She'd scramble around the table,
apron dishwater damp, washrag at our ears.

At night I'd listen to my father snoring,
his mumbled cries, the artillery of his dreams
walking down the hall toward our position.
Screaming shells made shrapnel of his sleep.

Mother would wake him gently with her hands,
keep his heart in his chest, whisper comfort to dead ears.
Guilt kept me awake like a pounding heart.
I tried to sleep, a hand smothering each good ear.

THE FERRY AT CANNELTON

We'd come for a dog, knelt in a barn
full of swallows, hay dust swirling
as an old man leaned into the darkness
beneath a stack of wood
and pulled the runt from the litter.

My brother nudged the puppy with his feet
until it peed on the floorboard.
The road bumped along, half gravel, half dirt,
until we topped a hill. It disappeared into a river.

We idled in the evening breeze
as driftwood and coal barges passed.
My father could not say he was lost.
With the map spread on the hood, he rubbed
the ache from his neck.

Why does this memory come flooding back today?
Something the flight of a bird must have triggered,
a dog barking at my approach, its sudden scurry out of sight.
Once the past came unbidden, it lingered, unfolding
like those thin roads that lead the lost
away from rivers, ferries long gone idle.

My father got his bearings.
We stuck around to listen to the dry reeds,
to the hidden birds piping from the grass, to songs made up
of soft blue sky and the report of rock against stick.
A nameless hour brought forth from an endless litter,
though there are whole days that will not come though called.

TRESSPASSING

We hike a dry branch of the Ripsaw Creek,
kick at the glint of feldspar and sand. My daughter
slows in the autumn heat, puffs at a strand of hair.
She finds treasure in what nature's discarded:
mouse skull, turkey feather, a tattered nest
she pokes with a stick. She wrinkles her nose
in the persistent light. Rough globes of hedge apples thud
from the Bodark. We hum to the lullaby
of the wind-stirred maple, the rattle of sycamore leaves.
My daughter is wandering away
into the wilds of adulthood too soon.

I cherish those small fingers of wonder she once lost in my beard,
her easy breathing curled close to my chest.
Now the rattle and rack of distant cattle intrude.
Donkeys stand watchful, ear-splayed and dumb.
I lift her over the fur-barbed fence and we parse a path
through the haphazard dung and head home. In the grapevines
the warning of titmice and wrens.
Watch where I'm going, my daughter sings.
As if there were anything else in the world
a father could possibly do.

MAKING A LIVING

I'm dreaming of the place in the woods
where the deer sleeps, the hole in the grass where it hid.
Mother dreams of coffee cups rimmed with lipstick,
of white plates, knife-marked, stacked along a counter.
And father has gone to the factory,
leaves only a space in the snow where the car covered gravel,
leaked oil, a few paw prints where the cat kept warm.
My father banging on the beaten hood
scared the cat to safety and me from sleep.
I float at the fringe of dawn,
sense my mother's still sleeping, my father not long gone.
Sleep has the warmth of blankets.
Years of scraped ice accumulate,
and decades of cars fighting movement like cold knuckles.
Even in his sleep my father works,
dreams of snipped wires, of clocking in,
of waiting for the whistled shift change,
that stream of pot-bellied men gray with wolfish beards,
their safety glasses and steel-toed boots,
their rough hands clutching time cards like lottery tickets.
More ice scraping, the mailbox stuffed with bills,
all the bad news at six o'clock, a tough pot roast, a ratty afghan.
The water heater ticks away like a clock.
Today pulls out, a punctual train,
and already tomorrow triggers the crossing gate.
Hours pass like cattle cars, and way at the end—
retirement's sad caboose.
This train flattens men like worn pennies.
This train waits for the end of my father.
The hole of him sitting at the end of my bed,
waiting for me to wake and take his place.

MT. NEBO, ARKANSAS, LATE AUGUST

There will come a day when the cough won't fade,
when the shadow on the lung won't clear.

Now we're coming home, clipping off the toll booths
one by one. Biopsy results are for Wednesdays, 9 a.m.

Until then you are purely my father buying breakfast
and time, growing drowsy behind the wheel.

Wake up old man and see how the heat blurs the road ahead.
We were lost soon as we crossed on the ferry.

You crave more coffee, another cigarette, ten more
good years of setting up our camper on a concrete pad,

stepping into flip flops on Mt. Nebo and shuffling off
through the acorns and hickories on the way to the public bath.

The hot showers steam the mirror so you don't see
how ashen you've become. Steady on, wobble home

if you can. The daddy-longlegs flatten against the wall.
The mist burns off over Dardenelle and we take

the switchbacks one by one. All those *drop deads*
I gave you years ago—I never thought you'd follow through.

Fish out one more pack of Camels, let the cellophane blacken
in the smoking fire. We have interstate to sleep through,

raccoons to rob us blind. So let's steal one more week of daylight—
dream of owls winking deep in the spruce,

cardinals rising up the thermal mountain, my hand
on your cool shoulder shaking you awake.

THE ENDLESS STATE

After the third accident--not his fault--,
Amtrak desked my Uncle Dave for good. At family
gatherings he leaned against the wall like a tree
planted too close to the house. He buckled
the sidewalks with his feet, downed power lines
with his tight smile, and bourbons.

When I was young he had a quarter
for every coarse word, another when we cracked
his back with our socked feet.
I remember waiting up late as he drove the snowy interstate
from Dearborne to Newburgh, his face at the window
high on the door, a soft knock, a wisp
of hair floating above his woolen cap, saying,
Indiana is a goddamned endless state.

He loved his drinks over ice, the sprawl of us
wrapped around his neck or leg, peppered by our southern drawl,
Are there bears in Chicago, lions in Detroit?
Do Polacks really run the streets?
He told us of drunks stripped naked in cars,
deer ghosting the fringe of the train's strong light.

The house sagged when his haversack leaned
near the door. He'd find a less direct route home, run
parallel to the old freight ways. I think of him whenever I see
a lone goose fallen from the flock's steady vee.
The call of the others pulling him along
on a wake of blue air and fading light.

BIOLOGICAL CLOCK

A boy's virginity is never lost—
it's more a coat cast off in heat,
a firecracker flicked away.
Mine I could have given to a timid smoker
already two months pregnant with another guy's child,
but waited, not for love, but out of fear.
Her shyness was the moon behind clouds,
but a hunger also made her shine.

Now I watch for her at reunions,
imagine frosted hair, bulky sweaters,
her eyes a washed out blue so good at drawing in.
When I'd say goodnight, the storm door scraped the stoop.
And through the picture window I saw a cuckoo
clock, its weights near the floor, the chains run long.

LOW TIDE AT SUNDOWN

Instead of pearls the woman wears
flies, a kelp dress, a fine shade of blue for her eyes.
She needs the sun, the poor pale thing,
as we need a door in the ocean floor, a way back
to yesterday's buckets and moats, the deflated
floats and the long-tailed kites that snapped their strings.

But the sky drains of light and color
and the moon shines deep in her skin.
If the sun escapes we will be left to see
her body merge with the dark, her flesh settle
into the same sand we've buried our feet in all week.
The stinging wind drives away the red
buckets, wears down the castles, and tumbles inadequate
shovels. Naked, she's swallowed her name. Nothing left
to call her but dead.

CANDLING

The wren scours the yard for seed,
dips from eave to sagging clothesline to shed.
Her six white eggs will not hatch though she holds hard
to the soft thatch of the dead nest.

Those determined daily flights leave me blue.
I wonder, can something that moves so swiftly
ever be drawn down by grief?

Her song filters through the undergrowth,
dappled and bright as June, more endless
than the cloud shadows that creep
the yard like a hungry cat.

She wobbles on a dogwood twig,
works her beak through her pale brown feathers.
A wasp bumps up the clapboard wall,
begins its own fragile nest.

My girls will scramble from the bus in an hour,
a long swollen summer before them. Some days I wish
I could hold their futures to a strong light,
know if what's there is vital and good.
But that knowledge, like the wasp, could sting and sting again.
I will love blindly like the wren,
weave a nest of worry and hope,
a home of thorns and down.

TRAIL GONE COLD

Listen to the leaves restless
and glistening, when just weeks ago
woodpeckers knocked holes
in the fading light.

Yellow jackets menaced
the skin at our wrists and Muscadine
fell blue to the trail, set off the hickory's yellow,
the reds of the sumac and dogwood.
I looked for the mirrored moon tracks
that marked the passage of deer,
the rare buckeye slipped from its case.

Is what keeps the gray squirrel
bounding tree to tree, the chipmunk edgy
in the shattered scree also what stills our mouths
and turns our minds to winter?

I've felt the warmth give way
as the sun dips behind the hill.
Your hand fell from mine
like a leaf that burned bright
just so it could let go.

Trail blazes disappear with dusk.
We must trust our feet to take us home,
our mouths to find a way back to words.

Sometimes in shallow sleep
when the moon is blacked out
over February's barest branches,
you feel a keen chill and seek my hand.

HANDS IN THE SMALL OF THE BACK

in a blue dress
the janitor's daughter
sweeps through
remnant crepe.

back of the class, eyes
all fall
on the shift
of maple leaves

her arm broken
when the swing
let go
as all things do.

I will love her forever
at the edge of sleep, also
those moments at dusk
when the day gives way,
sweet loss
of heat.

wind
soft as a wisp of hair
grazing a face,
a slow dance's awkward
grace, her crooked

arm around my neck,
pupils black as birds
flying into light.

NOTES ON HOW TO STAY IN LOVE

Go days as if you swallowed your tongue.
Subsist on stale crackers, buy zinnias
with pocket change, spend a paycheck
on parakeets and let them go in wreck-stopped traffic.

Open the windows of your apartment at dusk
and listen to sprinklers whisper to concrete stoops.
Steal vowels from a Scrabble game
and drop them down a crawdad hole.

When desire cools like August parking lots,
drop ice cream on the weedy cracks,
let your wanderlust fade like plywood billboards
in the tree lines near muggy southern interstates.

What I know about love could fill a peanut shell,
a dimpled thimble on a bedside stand,
a rumpled hide-a-bed or the graceful curl
of a sleeping hand. Let the movement be like sugar
from a cat-spilled bowl across a Sunday morning table.
Do not clean it up. Let your forearms
grow sticky with its presence.

VESPERS

At dusk the rabbits grow fearless,
jack themselves into velvet air, tango
to the pennywhistle of distant traffic.

I have felt that way too, the park swings
swaying empty, pools of water in the crosswalk
shining back at the moon.

The bills pile up but I've lost
interest. My life comes down
to what's forgotten in pockets, ten spots folded
in ancient jackets. Fortunes hidden in walls. My father calls
like a far-off loon. I remember the hood of his Mercury, the faint
prints of cats gone missing, love letting go like a rotten rope.

I cannot break free from the orbit
of prayer circles. My mother in Tupelo
keeps meaning to call. She tells me my candles
will not stay lit, asks after Gretchen from two lives ago.

One trailer lost to bourbon, eyes closed
on a wink of sleep, heart-leap
of a grease fire's consuming growl.
Oh those long conversations with the scuff
of my shoes. Regret, a tree full of birds.
I've learned to burn when the wind is low,
bad poems, love letters scrawled
in lemon juice, the thin skin
that covers the wrist.

The night is stiff as an old broken finger.
The breadcrumb of stars dwindles off.
Bob and weave, bob and weave like there's no tomorrow.
I dream of sleep in its soft red dress,
sucker punch of my favorite dance—
her voice crisp as the tail end of winter
one two, she says, *one two*

ALONG THE PATH TOWARD SHANNY TAVERN

In the pallid light of dusk my father looked less
beaten, the black eye from the brawl gone gray.

When he suffered those empty pockets, it became
his job to drain all bottles, amber, clear and green.

As if his idle hands were hollow, he tried to break
them against a stranger's body.

He hopped down the steps of the trailer sober, mother quiet
through the kitchen curtain. He knew his whisky

could mix too well with our blood. The soft light
of dawn brought him home singing,

his lilting voice so separate from us,
those lullabies of oil and water.

AT MESKER ZOO

Why we went mid-winter, I don't remember,
with a cold rain just blown through,
and paths so slick we slid from pen to pen.
The eyes of the gray wolves anything but dead.
Two tigers in a cage: one listless, one restless—
a whole wing built from the stink of an elephant.

Your hair had met a crazy razor,
a dye job pink as a lost flamingo.
When we found the peeping chick near the owl cage,
we slipped him in your hat,
took him to the green-suited keeper
who pushed a stiff-bristled broom.
The hatchling is food, he whispered
and when our silence warmed him enough
he let us spirit it away, free it
in the tall grass and dead leaves.

I knew without looking he watched where we put it,
heard him sweeping again. God it was cold
but I loved you. The words so solid on my tongue,
but when I opened my mouth,
nothing but steam.

BECAUSE IN DREAMS

bad men always enter through doors,
I take a ball peen hammer to the knobs
damaging badly what will not break.

As for the keys, the small ones I've swallowed,
the large ones I've dropped through the cracks of the floor.
This is my disguise: a look of disgust, a wig of cobwebs,
a dress of burning paper, on the arm of the couch I wait for another
of mother's haggard beaus to enter bright-fisted and drunk,
hands balled and swinging like light bulbs loose on their cords.

I'd give them toasters in the bath tub if I could,
extension cords for this electric hate.
Come into the kitchen where knives and gas stoves wait.
I will look out from this nest, mouse-small, bare
toes bleeding in the broken glass,
another knock-down drag-out aftermath.

They do what they do while they are awake.
I take my cue from rats, nocturnal movement masked
by the wash of drunken snores. The ER is too good for you, you goof.
I'll mail you off piece by bloody piece, send you to the dead
letter office, no return address. Touch my mother
in anger again. Sneer at me behind my tepid milk, go on believing
there are only calm fish swimming through my glass bowl thoughts.
I give this face to you so you will sleep.
From behind the clouds I rise, not like the milk-fed moon,
but like a burning sea. Mother with her temples wet,
the last and latest beast lies still, my father's
hand-me-down nightshirt newly torn.
I cut paper dolls from the bed sheets,
become a bloody ghost.

BOOK SALE IN THE RAIN

Strange desire, to purchase snow-flaked ink,
the dead-hand scrawl of inscriptions bleeding out
in the downpour. To slip broken-spined
books beneath my flannel shirt and run
for cover. A woman hips one sale table
beneath the safety of an awning. The rain hisses
at villains on the street. The shop owner's too late to change
what the weather has done to his books --
their leaves like the homely feathers of drenched birds.

At an outdoor table beneath a large umbrella,
a young woman sits across from me,
her blouse, opalescent and wet, shows the blackness of her bra.
On a power line two birds huddle
where yesterday a tangle of sneakers hung.

In the coffee shop window, our pale reflections
mingle as the glass vibrates with traffic noise,
the shoosh of water on the move. I daydream
of stars and dandelions gone shaggy. My head is cottoned
with slow thought, old towels that keep out the draft.
I am all yellow traffic light, sputtering candle,
wet wool, old dog that can't lie down.
I would strike up a conversation,
but my tongue is a damp book of matches.

The cold puts end stops on her flesh.
The young woman is another word for gone,
a sentence fragment dashing between taxis,
a gray newspaper above her head.
Lipstick on a napkin, coffee grounds in a white cup.
All the words I've ever known float by on scraps of paper,
dry cleaning receipts that contain love letters,
fortune cookie aphorisms with all my lucky numbers.
Somewhere her name is hidden in the neon of a sign,
an S-curl of smoke slipping from beneath an umbrella.

HOUSEKEEPING

Your father keeps the house
dim, all the light bulbs symbolic
of bad ideas, like the cigarettes
he first smoked at ten.
All weekend he's in and out
of sleep, your mother cooking meals
he can't come to the table to eat.
She watches out the back door as deer shiver
at road edge before leaping the overgrown
ditch. Their white tails disappear
into the sparse woods, wisps of smoke rising
where something's extinguished.

STILL LIFE, CHRISTMAS EVE

I've seen how faith can fall away.
Tethered by late hours and unforgiving
shifts, I've watched a waitress as her apron grew
tight against her belly's curve. She took a week
when she first spotted. Fruitless bed rest and stale air,
the baleful TV flicker.

The grilled cheese went to hell
and wrinkled dollars found more fertile pockets.
She came back thinner and a regular said
she almost glowed. She bundled silverware in paper napkins,
each table knifed and spooned. The fry cook knew
to mind his business. The boyfriend sold his cycle on the Net, flew
back east. Said he wanted to fix things
with his hands. Hard to nail down what went wrong,
but the neon sign lent a shiver to the snow.

*Before the baby we'd go to the beach, she says one night to no one
particular. He'd bury my feet, my arms and waist.
Said he never wanted to become his father.
I thought the unknown scared him more than me.
Our mistake was naming it too soon.*

That's always a danger with love.

Tonight a hard-faced preacher takes a boot
after sitting up late with the dead. He folds
his hands over his fries, modest
slaw, leaves a leatherette New Testament, his only
tip. Heavy plows clear the roads. The bus boy hides
behind a strand of hair, works toward the wobbly
tree, mop slopping the empty gifts
Santa's left the unbelieving.

BURNING LEAVES IN ODON, INDIANA

Too much to tend to, eleven acres
of persimmon and walnut, nothing but a wire
to keep the weeds at bay.
Here the deer slip through at dusk,
heads of the Queen Anne's Lace bent low,
the purple pokes' shattered stalks.

I gather wet leaves the last of winter
before they kill the grass.
The shepherd mix with the dodgy hip
noses reeds near the pond. The grass carp
sleep beneath the thaw-cracked ice.

My hands are stiff with cold. My father-in-law dreams
the dim day away, a blackness he can't shake
from his lungs. His daughter tries to burn
the brush, but everything's soaked.

We drag out the oldest fallen
tree and open its bone-white core.
Burning the heartwood's a snap, but nothing remains
when it's gone except the pine bough's slow green
hiss, the damp leaves' reluctant ghosts.

INHERITANCE

The summer I turned forty
my father-in-law's truck passed to me.
Deep blue, dull and rusted through
over wheel well and fender.

The cab reeked of Pall Malls, leaf gall, worn
leather gloves. And one day when I slowed
for a yellow light, I felt like God
pulled a dry rag through my body
and left me nothing but spirals of dust.

The consignment store across the road
sat boarded tight. All the tulips had lost their heads,
yellow foliage knotted near the ground.
Billboards promised falling
rates, declared *We Will Not Be Undersold*.

In the days that followed the service, his absence
was a name I couldn't place. We drove out past the house
where he was born, mere stones. His schoolhouse
buried in a soy bean field, his church
burned open to the sky.

I accelerate with the green light, fight the turning
wheel, jagged ring of keys slapping the dash.
I have to guess what's left in the tank,
all the gauges sprung and useless. Odd, this guilt
at drawing breath, the simple joy
in touching his daughter's hip.

Our memories are a last cathedral,
this unwashed window through which he watched
the world's slow crawl toward light.

TERMINAL

Your mother gets it now, stage four
of ignorance is bliss. No one lies
around waiting for the death
of happiness. She's seen the spots
on the x-rays, read the faces of the doctors
in the dark. But it's her high school sweetheart blanketed
on the day bed who refuses both ice cream and sausages.

She sleeps until noon, good ear buried
in the pillow. I've made cheesy omelets
for the four of us, but the dog gets one.
Sitting up has become a room in hell.
Your father has the eyes of a dead fish, a rheumy drunk.
He's late to the end of his own sentences.

Outside, daffodils bust through to light.
The dog's nose is deep in the ditch.
Inside, he's swallowed up in his clothes,
so I nail a new hole in his leather belt.
An Amish buggy clatters past, vibrant
brown sheen of a horse working hard.
That image is all he's held down in a week,
sunlight on a sweaty flank, the world
disappearing in the mystery of dust.

OUTERBANKS

I come home one day to discover
your painting's been moved to the attic, the unfinished
one with the blue boat moored loosely to a buoy.
A suggestion of sea gulls takes wing,
arc above the waves toward a slip of the sun.

There are mornings when your loss
is a distant roar, a metallic shine
that glimmers at horizon's edge, low rumble
and boom of the tide.

From the gray shelter of the beach house
we'd watch the trawlers work
beyond the breakers, a cloud of whirling sea birds,
dolphins flashing in their wake.

Late afternoons when the days lost heat,
you'd bend your back to the beach, fingers sifting
surf-trampled shells for something whole and true.

Your daughter has washed away
the last of her grief. Or she has found
the perfect shell and hides the soft hurt
in its endless curl.

TEA LEAVES

Winter is a bed of cold hands.
I brew a pot of tea, let the loose leaves steep,
swirl the spoon like an oar in a muddy river.
We look for hope in strange places.
In the bottom of my cup,
tea leaves are black as the tadpoles
I'd shadow through the shallows of the lake.
Hidden in the reeds, thin snakes
essed across the water's surface.
When I was a child I could not swim
where I knew others had drowned.

Tea leaves are as mysterious to me
as the Chinese newsprint packed in boxes
to keep things unbroken.
I have come close to breaking through ice.
In the spring my body may yet wash ashore.

HISTORY HAS THE VOICE OF A BIRD-FILLED TREE

I have never told my father.
I don't tell my fourth graders now.
A first memory of the 1970s:
a car rumbling to life, snow sticking
to a wool coat thrown over a night gown,
a snake of steam rising from her mouth
as she finally let him chase her away.

My father sanded the rough edges of sleep,
snoring away his boilermakers.
I existed out of time, bent space,
craved the taste of light.
That moment comes and goes
like the memory of my estranged mother's face.

When I teach history it slips into the room,
a draft, bends light like old glass,
takes up space in the coat pockets of our past
like letters that beg forgiveness,
wedding rings turned into fool's gold,
pennies meant for wishing wells
flattened by the weight of trains.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the editors of the magazines where these poems first appeared, sometimes in slightly different versions.

Eclectica "House on GypsyRidge," "June, Sweet Peas Climbing the Wires," "Song of the Saltbox," "At a Yard Sale Off State Road 27, Chickalah, Arkansas," "Found Objects," "Outerbanks," and "Trespassing," *Minnetonka Review* "Blizzard of '78," *Valparaiso Review* and *Exit 13* "Pine Lake, Late Summer," *Southern Poetry Review* "Birthday," *Concho River Review* "Blackberry Season," *Quercus Review* "At the Five and Dime, Near Christmas, 1972," *Roanoke Review* "To Be Waked Again," *Greensboro Review* "Missed Call," *Kansas Quarterly* "A Winter, Long After His Death," *Lake Effect* "Migration," *Descant* "At a Small Cemetery, Mammoth Cave Nat'l Park," and "Remedy," *Louisville Review* "At Denton's Drive-In," "Inheritance" and "Terminal," *Potomac Review* "In the Coat Room," and "Widow," *Riverwind* "View from Above," *Furnace Review* "Day Laborers at Judy's Diner, Slaughters, Kentucky," *Debris* "Jessamine Country, Ballard Washout Road," *Qaartsiluni* "Recovery," and "Mt. Nebo, Arkansas, Late August," *Bitter Oleander* "Lunar Eclipse," *Shit Creek Review* "Invention, Missouri, Pop. Undetermined," and "Matriarch of Springwater Flats," *Barnwood* "Canticle for the Wabash Valley," *Prick of the Spindle* "Gasper River in the Dark," *Innisfree Journal* "Passing an Outdoor Café," *Hobble Creek* "In Transit," and "Candling," *Clare* "Dutch's Tavern," *Hollins Critic* "Deaf and Dumb," and "Tea Leaves," *Rattle* "Making a Living," *Coe Review* "Biological Clock," *Autumn Sky Poetry* "Low Tide at Sundown," and "A Bee in the Car," *Tipton Poetry Review* "Notes on How to Stay in Love," *Southeast Review* "At Mesker Park Zoo, 1984" *Avatar Review* "Because in Dreams," and "Book Sale in the Rain," *Tongues of the Ocean* "Still Life, Christmas Eve," *Third Wednesday* "Trail Gone Cold," *Booth* "The Endless State," *Backwards City Review* "History Has the Voice of a Bird-filled Tree."

Bio

I came to college at WKU back in 1989 and have lived in Bowling Green ever since. I have hiked hundreds of miles in the state and national parks in Kentucky and love the beauty of the landscape. I am a librarian and adjunct professor of English at WKU and this is my first full length manuscript.

