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THE BARREN SPRINGS SONGBOOK

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


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

By
Caroline Sutphin

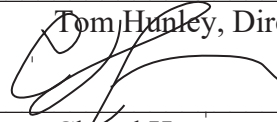
August 2020

THE BARREN SPRINGS SONGBOOK

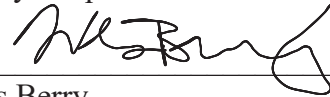
Date Recommended 07/02/2020



Tom Hunley, Director of Thesis



Cheryl Hopson



Wes Berry



Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education

I dedicate this thesis to the memories of Henry Sutphin, India McNeely, and Myrtle Sutphin. This work could not exist without their stories, their inspiration, and the passion with which they each lived their lives.

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I would like to acknowledge the WKU English faculty for their support and feedback on this work, especially Dr. Tom Hunley and my other committee members Dr. Cheryl Hopson and Dr. Wes Berry. I would also like to thank the members of my MFA cohort for their role as early readers and encouragers of this work. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Tim and Cathy Sutphin, and my extended family for supplementing my knowledge of these characters with their own experiences and memories.

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THE BARREN SPRINGS SONGBOOK

Caroline Sutphin

August 2020

75 Pages

Directed by: Tom Hunley, Cheryl Hopson, and Wes Berry

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

The Barren Springs Songbook is a poetry collection exploring Appalachian themes through the lens of three representative characters and my own experience. The poems presented are in blank verse and lean heavily on musicality, as each poem features an epigraph from my own Great Uncle Henry's song lyrics. The poetry explores themes of poverty, folklore, feminism, and Christianity within the context of Barren Springs, an insular Appalachian community. The characters of Henry, India, and Myrtle provide a glimpse into how things have been in my family history, and the more modern poems representing myself show the cultural shifts that are underway. With careful attention given to sound and imagery, the collection represents a cohesive voice uniting the poems and developing a layered narrative on the current state of Appalachia. The collection attempts a balanced approach to every aspect of the subject matter, offering an honest portrayal of the beautiful and the disappointing aspects of this rural world I was born into.

Introduction

Within my thesis project, entitled *The Barren Springs Songbook*, my poetry explores character, place, and various generational divides in the context of a small Appalachian community. The initial inspiration came from my own Great Uncle Henry, a man I never knew in life but, from what I now know, both aligned with and defied Appalachian stereotypes. Henry Sutphin lacked formal education, was usually unemployed, and likely could count on one hand the times he had left the isolated Barren Springs community. However, he was also a skilled musician and possessed some idealistic dreamer qualities I see repeated in myself. The result of his dreams was a songbook containing hundreds of pages of Henry's original lyrics, typed on his own computer and printed at the local copy shop for his friends and family. This piece of family history came into my hands, and Henry's wisdom, humor, and optimism in the face of struggles allowed me to get to know him and inspired this body of work. Henry's words form the epigraphs starting every poem in this collection, bringing his voice into the cross-generational conversation. This concept was my initial framework that the poetry developed around and from which the major themes emerged.

This work joins the Appalachian literary tradition, as I expand on Appalachian themes and draw inspiration from other regional poets. During my time writing *The Barren Springs Songbook*, I read poetry and other genres exploring Appalachian identity from many writers, including Rose McLarney, Jesse Graves, Scott McClanahan, Frank X Walker, and Linda Parsons Marion. Their influence and my broader, scholarly understanding of Appalachian heritage inform my work. While sharing some commonalities, Appalachian literature is distinct from Southern literature, often exploring

the results of the region's isolation and attempting to understand and bridge the gap between Appalachian culture and contemporary America (Goode 34). While Appalachia is far more diverse than typically represented, the unifying theme appears to be that place and geographic connection inherently affect values (Cooper et. al. 28). Contemporary Appalachian writers have complicated the conversation on Appalachian culture, addressing social and environmental activism, feminist issues, race, and identity conflict, highlighting while also challenging the culture of poverty assigned to the region (Smith et. al. 56). While scholars disagree on what Appalachian identity means, it is clear that Appalachians need to tell their own stories, as depictions from the outside often do the region more harm than good (Smith et. al. 61). My own contribution in this poetry collection provides my individual perspective on Appalachian identity through my experiential filter and the lives of the central characters that populate this work.

For this work, I wanted to incorporate storytelling and narratives into my poetry, which is accomplished through the characters of Henry, India, and Myrtle. In considering character development and story in a poetry collection, I found inspiration in other writers, particularly in Rita Dove's famous work *Thomas and Beulah*. Through her characters, Dove brings history and the people of another time to life, giving their emotions and motivations the immediacy of the present. I also attempt to bring my characters to life and show their relevancy to my contemporary life, despite many of the events described in my collection occurring before I was born. In short, I hope to convey in these poems more than just nostalgia. My first character is, of course, Henry, who lends his voice to the work in addition to my exploration of his story. Henry's story starts and ends with his love of music and his unrealized dreams, and within his poems I

explore his loneliness, his lack of education, and the role of religion in his life. India is inspired by another of my family members, and her story fulfills several thematic functions within the work. She connects most clearly to traditional Appalachian culture, being a skilled quilter and a granny midwife for the community. India is written as a strong woman and artist in her own right, with a story that is ultimately feminist in her rejection of traditional gender roles upon the death of her husband. My final central character is Myrtle, who was perhaps the most challenging character to write about because I knew her the best in life. Myrtle's character shows a quiet strength in enduring the hardships of a complicated marriage to her husband Tom, surviving severe poverty, and performing the role of a matriarch. Myrtle is also key in the exploration of religious themes as her authentically-felt faith is offered as a contrast to more troubling religious expressions in the region.

However, not every poem is focused on these three characters. Some of the poems explore my own experience, offering a more modern contrast to the main characters. Other poems offer unnamed composite characters that serve the function of characterizing Barren Springs and therefore Appalachia in general as I've known it. The poems about myself explore both the joys and difficulties of growing up in a rural environment, my own religious struggles, and my connections to the previous generations. The poems about myself also include the complementary poems "Beneath the Old Baltimore Bridge" and the closing "I'm Gone," which establish my own adventurous personality that eventually pulls me out of the region. Some of the poems about myself explore my origins as a creator, connecting thematically to Henry's songwriting and India's quilting and sewing, which is described metaphorically as

storytelling in multiple poems, as in “India: The First Family Poet” and “India’s Cinderellas.” The poems about unnamed characters that are not myself include “Do I Fit?” and “Two Doors Down in Barren Springs,” which offer a more contemporary picture of poverty in the region. These follow my understanding of those my own age in Appalachia struggling with addiction, poverty, and inability to escape their circumstances. The series of poems entitled “Mountain Country,” which serves as a kind of interlude in the middle of the collection, also seeks more to characterize the place of Barren Springs through vignettes rather than directly addressing the central characters.

While I considered sectioning the collection, these poems outside of the main characters complicated the issue and ultimately contributed to a general aesthetic more conducive to the organization I decided on. In my ability to shift back and forth between different characters, perspectives, and time periods, I was able to achieve a patchwork effect appropriate for the subject matter: cohesive and balanced while allowing each idea, thought, and image to feel distinct.

Another important element of this collection is my choice to write only metered poetry, with every poem largely in the form of blank verse with occasional single line exceptions. In my initial planning of the collection, I thought I would explore more metrical variety, but ultimately wanted the consistency the meter lent to my voice. The inspiration behind this decision came in part from Maurice Manning’s *Bucolics*, which is largely written in iambic tetrameter with some variation in line length. The result is an entrancing fluidity connecting one poem to the next. While my own work in *The Barren Springs Songbook* is not quite so continuous, the meter provides a uniting element among the poems. I also aimed to make the poetry itself feel musical, as song lyrics start every

poem and musical themes arise throughout the collection. The rhythm certainly contributes to that effect. Additionally, I created more musicality through the use of various sound elements throughout the collection, including internal rhyme and alliteration. Rose McLarney is an Appalachian poet who uses sound elements in similar ways, and I can see her influence on my work in both these musical, sound elements and in my imagery.

Richness in the imagery was very important to me in this collection, as it becomes a marker of my voice and often brings in themes that tie the poems together. This was a challenge to achieve while also maintaining the meter, but I believe this focus constructs one of the primary features of the collection. Not only does the imagery add vividness to each individual poem, I use parallel imagery and metaphors to connect various characters and themes across the collection. This can be observed in the parallel language used in “Beneath the Old Baltimore Bridge” and “I’m Gone,” and the language of storytelling used in connection to India with “India: The First Family Poet,” Myrtle’s husband in “Myrtle Hears Tom’s Tales,” and several other poems. For Myrtle’s character, similar imagery and words are used to describe her premature birth and her marriage at a very young age.

Musical imagery also pervades the collection far beyond the explicitly musical character of Henry, presenting itself metaphorically in Myrtle’s rhythmic cooking and her husband’s occasional self-aggrandizement as a kind of rock star. Music is thematically very important to the collection on several different levels, just as music is a central feature of Appalachian culture. The various branches of bluegrass, old-time country, gospel, and soul in Appalachian music led to many distinct, individual musical voices

and experimentation from all levels of songwriting success (Andrade et. al. 152). For myself, music was ubiquitous in my upbringing, from the radio hits to the songwriters and musicians whose performances were mostly reserved for family reunions. Henry is the primary musical character, and his taste influences what is included in *The Barren Springs Songbook*. For instance, Hank Williams Sr. held a special place in Henry's heart and therefore appears multiple times in these poems.

A small amount of research contributed to the poetry as well, particularly in the kind of folk knowledge that marks the writing as distinctly Appalachian. This research comes into the poetry in the poems that explore India's role as a midwife in a community that was at the time disconnected from modern medicine. My own knowledge of the births she attended and her practices was blended with research on the folk superstitions and herbal medicinal practices that India likely shared with other granny midwives of the region. While folklore elements are not a primary focus of the collection, they add some authenticity and another layer of cultural understanding in interpreting my character's motivations. My interest in these elements is partly inspired by Rose McLarney's *Its Day Being Gone*, which explores folklore directly and thoroughly through the medium of poetry.

In several poems, I explore religious themes, considering how Christianity plays a role in the lives of my individual characters and my own struggles with religion as a more modern contrast. It was clear from Henry's songbook that Christianity was a theme worth exploring for both of us, as he had written many gospel songs and many contrasting songs addressing his doubt. Writing on this topic was about striking a balance that was honest, without being overly cynical or sugarcoating my criticisms. "Do I Fit?," "For the

Birds,” “Henry Writes His Doubt,” and “India’s Last Church Sunday” all explore religious themes, critiquing the cultures of judgement and seeking a more positive way to incorporate religion in one’s life. Myrtle is key in this collection as a representative of authentic religious feeling rooted in love, as is displayed in many of her poems, most notably in “To Be Saved Is...”

Similarly to many Appalachians entering more academic spaces and perhaps moving away from the region completely, I have certainly felt a sense of otherness, guilt, and discomfort with my Appalachian identity. These feelings represent themselves in this collection in both explicit and subtle ways, comprising another thematic layer. Several poems address these themes, including “Florence: 4,602 Miles From Home” and the closing poem that describes me leaving Appalachia, “I’m Gone.” In more nuanced ways throughout the collection, I blend literary allusions and markers of my own knowledge beyond the region in combination with descriptions of Barren Springs, allowing the language itself to balance on the cultural line I feel myself on in life. This involves touches of Greek mythology, Dante, and Tolkien references and imagery, which occasionally bring myself as a reader into the text. I find similar moments in *Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine* by Jesse Graves, a collection I consider an influence on this work.

I also explore in this collection women’s issues and feminism in this rural environment, for myself and the female characters of India and Myrtle. Appalachia is considered on the whole to be behind the curve on feminism, exhibiting expected gender roles in a patriarchal structure. The family unit is central to a woman’s role, and reproduction and household duties are expected to be the primary aims of a woman’s life

(Swank et. al. 127). However, in my own experience and in the stories represented in *The Barren Springs Songbook*, the women in Appalachia are far more than they are assumed to be. Upon the death of her husband, India adopts a traditionally male role in operating a dairy farm, for which she receives judgement from the community, as discussed in the poems “India, Widowed” and “India’s Last Church Sunday.” Myrtle, while seeming to be closer to the tight gender roles assigned to her, actually defies them still as she grows in her poems into a matriarch for her family and a strong match for her husband. Women like this were my role models, and my own denial of traditional gender roles are represented in the work, particularly in the poem “The Rooted Tree.” Independent womanhood is therefore passed down and shared across generations, a theme that is similarly explored in Linda Parsons Marion’s *Mother Land*, another collection I take inspiration from.

These characters are fictionalized versions of real people in my family tree, and bringing real stories onto the page presents unique challenges. I wanted to be fair to my characters and to also be aware of how my writing may affect the Appalachian community. Certainly enough stereotypes exist about the region; my representation aims to be balanced and to allow my characters to be as complicated and rich as space allows so they may accurately represent the people they inspire in the real world. In particular what I was wary of in my writing is the culture of poverty that is assigned to Appalachian people, essentially asserting that poverty is a result of undesirable values the people hold and need to change (Fisher 16). This viewpoint is largely harmful for the people of Appalachia and ignores the diversity and various intersections among them. All three of my characters are working class; however, their personalities are too complex to fit in

working-class stereotypes and are distinctive from one another. Poverty is an inevitable factor in *The Barren Springs Songbook*, but I hope the collection is more than a lament on those struggles. I also aimed in my writing to show Appalachia and the community of Barren Springs as one not merely stuck in the past but as alive and changing as anywhere through my characters. Culture in Appalachia is not a fixed, immutable factor as it is sometimes portrayed, and the contrast of the more modern poems in the collection show that (Obermiller and Maloney 105).

Through these interworking layers of meaning, form, and imagery, the poetry in *The Barren Springs Songbook* represents my own complicated relationship with the Appalachian region. I hoped to create a cohesive collection, where the individual poems were connected in subject matter, imagery, and meter. My poetry on the region is not always positive; I certainly grapple in this collection with my frustration with various aspects of the culture. However, I ultimately write about Barren Springs and its people with love and empathy, which I believe is the surest step to writing about vulnerable populations with fairness. This work has consumed me for a long time and represents the culmination of years of experience and thought with the subject matter and with my craft. However, as every creative work will be, its scope is limited, and I look forward to exploring other ideas in future works.

THE BARREN SPRINGS SONGBOOK

Writing With Henry

Oh , how I am haunted just by you

His inch-thick songbook lies upon my shelf,
the printer pages bound by plastic rings,
a copy of a copy, precious few
remaining. To a brother, to a friend,
he gave his core, the molten, golden dream
of songs never recorded, spread his one
lone dandelion seed that found its earth
in me, a home for springtime bloom. I read

his words of love and God and loving God,
the valley breeze and ginseng mountain peaks,
heartbroken heroes wearing cowboy boots
and men lost in the bottle. Henry sings

to me. His bluegrass verse intrudes my veins,
my heart receives new rhythms guiding pen
strokes to the page. He sings to me, and in
these poems, I answer, our full-bloomed duet.

Dramatis Personae

*'Cause there just don't seam to be a'nuff
Kinfolks of my kind (dadburn it)*

Henry: Great uncle, brother of paternal grandfather

He wore suspenders with his shorts, no shirt
beneath on weekdays, best clean button-up
on Sundays matching chambray blue in his
clear eyes. His skin was freckled by the sun,
his hands worked worn and calloused by the years
of plucking music on his lonely red
dirt stage that stained each stitch in all his boots.

India: Great grandmother, mother of maternal grandfather

Her cheeks were high, two smooth cliff faces hung
beneath the midnight sky in her dark eyes.
Her graying hair was bound above her neck,
an uncut mane of river strands allowed
to fall at night upon a farm-sore back,
her weathered fingers nimbly freeing pins.

Myrtle: paternal grandmother

She was herself in white capris and bits
of costume jewelry sourced from Goodwill, bright
as summer sun, with eyes a dragonfly
blue iridescent shade. Her hands were small
and gentle, softened by her babies' touch
and warmed by acts of biscuit-baking love.

Welcome to Barren Springs

*the new river and you
I've known for many a year*

No interstate will take you there, no bus
or train runs through that oft-forgotten bend,
the pocket of the river valley some
ironic voice once called Old Barren Springs.

But if you follow Route 100 out
over the mountain, through the Draper wood,
you'll land in Barren Springs and see the brand
new Dollar General and the old Sai Mart.

Be careful of the thick red mud that grabs
at once-white shoes. Before you sense its hold,
you'll be sucked down and planted like the roots
of all their ancient family trees and might

as well go buy a trailer all your own.
And then beware the kudzu vine that drains
your life while tendrils blind and cover up
those ancient family trees so they can't see

the sun or even one another. And
remember each closed door may hide unknown
dark lives, and even when you look straight on
and face the horrors of these hills or see

the grace in love, survival, dinners on
a Sunday noon, the world remaining will
still turn its eyes away and think with ease
of simpler things than crumbling Barren Springs.

India: The First Family Poet

*I will write down a few more storys
If i live to see another day or two*

A story in a stitch, she weaved her threads
and cloth in quilted novels where a prince

rides over checkered squares and fairies bloom
from starburst shapes in symmetry. A tale

told fireside to threadbare children whose
own stories fall unravelled, tangled at

the hem before they even see the holes,
the patchwork they won't get. She was a bard,

a Shakespeare with her silver needles matched
against her thimble. Poetry in close

work, every scrap a word fresh-plucked and shined
from her mind's tree. And when her fingers ceased

obeying, dropping stitches, missing bricks
in storied castles, India turned to yarns

and larger needles, webbing tales of streams
and seas, great pirate ships sailing down scarves.

Three Divine Pounds, Myrtle is Born

*I came into this world with nothing I'll leave with the same
IF IT WASN'T FOR NOTHING I wouldn't have a thing*

Thirteenth of January on a jinxed
dark Friday, someone must have swept the porch
or lifted arms too high in praise or said
the baby's unborn name, and guided some
old curse in through the leaking gaps around
the crumbling Alderman door frame, and no
amount of raspberry leaf tea could stop
the premature arrival of a girl

named Myrtle. Just three pounds of rosy flesh,
her little arms exposed to the first harsh
reality of cold, then trembling out
with fresh pink life, like primrose buds that bloom
at night, defiant of the cold moon's gaze.
And as she was so small, they gently pinned
her little dress onto the sheets so as
to not lose her among the quilted folds
and carried her between their breasts to keep
her from the blowing snow. But still they knew

she would survive, the evidence in God's
divined pale fire eyes.

Beneath the Old Baltimore Road Bridge

*Just get all your thoughts
Just put em all in a sack and throw
Then in a creek or a river
And then just hope the rain and high water
Just takes them a-way forever*

My bright white shoes and lacy socks lie by
the creek bank, shining sheddings mark my path
and wait for my return. My bare feet wade
into the lively stream, sun dancing off
the water's surface to clear nature's flute.

I glide downstream and stir up clouds of mud,
the coolest depths cling between my toes as if
the creek bed hates to see me go. I find

myself beneath the bridge and lean against
the cool concrete, awaiting magic from
above. I feel the dampness on my skin,
I'm hushed by cool wind catching in my troll's
escape, a swirl of life that carries worlds
unknown. And when a truck drives overhead,
I close my eyes and feel the wonder of
blue thunder on a sunny day.

Henry's Porch

*What ever I write ain't gonna be so big
That the earth and sky want hold it*

The twilight crickets find the rhythm, fill
the evening air with humming beats to back
up Henry's honey strums on his guitar.
A melody of mountain men and born

against that dissipates into the night
air, curling down the concrete steps to fall
on bald grass patches, errant weeds, no ears
for miles but his own to hear his voice,

a warbling ode to Hank Sr, a song
for country boys who pick up picks instead
of pipes. Between two calloused fingers pinched,
his pick, a tortoise-shell connection to

some warm-toned magic played for corners of
a lonely valley, feeding Nashville dreams
that turn a crumbling porch into a light-
soaked stage, an empty field into his fans

swaying like blades of grass in choral wind.

Myrtle's Wedding Day

*They had the molebeans and the
Sunflowers for a witness to it all*

Just barely out of bows, her cheeks still pink
with rosy schoolyard glow, her hands still touched
by pencil lead and ink, Tom slipped a ring
onto her finger. Bridal jitters shook
her painted lips as Myrtle took her step

outside her father's home and put her care
into another. Grinning boyhood shine,
his smile like a sunbeam bouncing off
a lake, so sure and bright and shining that
she felt it could sustain her. Farmer's hands

reached out to her, his with a golden band
below his dirt-stained knuckle. To their home
he carried her, a sunset garden dream.
Sunflowers and the mole bean bushes gave
their witness to a children's union.

India, the Midwife

*if i make it , i make it
if i don't , then i don't
What it all amounts to is ,.!?
I will or i won't ,...
But , thank god either way ,.*

They passed it through the years, the ways of old
to catch a newborn life, and India knew
just how to care for mom and child, and how
to ward away bad luck that creeps through cracks
in walls and catches victims unaware.

She knew the steps should not be swept when night
has fallen on the birthing house and doves
can't rest on open windowsills. She knew
to never raise her hands above her head
and not to cut a newborn's hair, the tricks
to keep dark fate at bay. And when they called,
she came, across red mud and creeks run low,
through summer storms that shook the ground, through wind
that lays the cool grass flat, through snow that falls,
the heavy curse that sought to smother her.

An axe under the bed will cut the pain
in half with sips of catnip tea, and where
the wood witch met the protestant, a prayer
for safe delivery. Because sometimes
she lost the omens, missed the doves, her spells
fell short and left her with the will of God.

Do I Fit?

*Lord . I know nothing but a life of sin and sorrow .
Pain and woe but in you I hope I fit*

I go to the revival looking for
some peace or lasting thing that feels as good
as children running breakneck down a slope.
Their hands catch friendly stings from passing grass
and make the windless waves their wake, or grace
that feels as good as benders, in the first
few moments when you feel its touch and find
each inch of skin has come alive, as if
a prodding breeze says, "Look. Your every cell
is real and pulsing, don't you feel it now?"

A man who sweats and darkens under tents
says Hell is where I'm destined, paints a view
of licking flames and tortured screams, which seems
too real in heavy August heat that weighs
on people screeching tongues, their heads thrown back
into the sky where they commune with God
or some unknown Devil.

He's right, I know I'm meant for methhead Hell,
some place that burns with want without relief.

And then some woman grabs my hand between
her cooling palms and takes me in with two
pale fire eyes. "God bless you," pierces me
so simply, with those eyes that know my wants,
"God bless you" storms my heart, too good, too kind
for me. I run, the tent behind me fades,
the woman left with outstretched hands, and then
I'm on a downhill slope at breakneck speed
and thinking peace is easy found but hard
to claim.

When Tom Came Home to Myrtle

*A man should be able at any time to do
The things he wants to do*

No good could come from late night romps around
the fields with bottles gripped in whitened hands.
The stumbling, off-beat dance eventually
would end in front of his and Myrtle's door.
She left the light on, drawing home the moths
and Tom, all pulled in, magnets tearing home.
She saw his eyes, blood pumping through the strained
and weary veins, jaw slackened, shoulders stooped
beneath the weight of unseen hands, beneath
some manly burden she could not have known.
He wandered with destructive freedom, she

was left to wipe the dirt-smudged noses with
a rough and frayed cloth and to roll
the biscuit dough in leaping flour clouds,
to tuck in loose quilt edges and to roam
from room to room to flip each switch and leave
consoling darkness in her wake, only
to end the night by guiding Tom to bed,
her lips pressed tight, the silence of a good wife.

Florence: 4,602 Miles From Home

*Thou, I've only been just a few miles
a-past my own home state line*

I walk the streets of cobblestone and light.
The warmth of sun-baked walls that line my path
reflects like gold against my skin. This place,
a foreign planet where the laundry flies
as cheerfully as flags above the street,
where people dance and sing and shout their words,
a honey-dripping language. And I too
enjoy the drips of *sole e luce*.

But then I'm hit by distance thrown across
the ocean like the weight of that whole sea
has fallen on my head. I'm crushed by space,
a chasm wider than I've ever known,
or any of my blood has ever known,
not since some starving Irishmen sailed out
the way I came to find new mountains like
their own, the rolling mountains that they claimed.

Beneath Atlantic weight, I feel the coal
black guilt of distance, sharpen, harden to
the diamond truth that I'll come back one day.
That mountain home cannot trap me away.

Henry's Hoard

*"for in my house he said , are so
Many mansions " and I want one you see?
I've always had to be a homeless
While other folks owns the world around me*

A stack of songbooks piled by the bed,
Hank Williams Sr, Johnny Cash on top,
a fiddle, banjo, and guitar leaned in
the corner, cases battered, once-plucked strings
in broken twists, some loose picks scattered in
each dresser drawer, and one pearlescent pick
laid on the coffee table, charms and hunks
of metal brought up from the earth so old,
their use unclear, four folded quilts, three pairs
of patched blue jeans, some dirty overalls,
five trucker hats, and everywhere the notes
on scraps of paper, little maps to beds
of ginseng, starting lines for stories, words
to songs that float around the house.

Friday Nights with Myrtle

*well , i cant help but love you a new
(love you a new)*

Her scent was blown out birthday candles, joy
in infant flames and romping tendrils blown
around the makeshift toppers: plastic cows
corralled in frosting fences, matchbox cars
on sugar pavement, cloth poinsettias from

the Christmas tree. Her voice was nightlight warm,
the tortoise lamp's soft orange shell that lit
the carpet path from midnight pillow forts
to her queen refuge bed, and in her speech
embrace, a glowing fire burning out

a child's fear of ghosts. Her step was soft,
as if a mossy bed appeared before
each movement, easy over earth and stone,
linoleum and asphalt. And her hands,
all age and veins, were like a robin's nest,

a friendly perch to block the wind and keep
all precious things in woven shelter.

A Tornado Takes Pulaski

THIS HOUSE OF OUR DREAMS

Is falling to the ground

And the only thing it will make

Is an awful sound

The sky turns yellow, sickly swirls of cloud
infecting earth, an airborne plague. I smell
the storm like ancient dirt stirred up by rain
before I see the windows darken like
some god has tucked the valleys in and trapped
a world beneath the folds. My skin looks thin
in amber light, my veins exposed to show
I'm nothing more than blood and bone, one step

from death, decay. "You're small," some god says then,
and turns the clouds to prove that hateful truth.
The sky leans down and with its twirling hands,
it tears and blends the wounded earth with air.

In school, they told me that tornadoes could
not hurt me, shielded by the mountain bowl
of rounded peaks, sentinels against
the sky. But when the sky reached down to earth,
it crawled across the Draper Mountain ridge,
and it was just a hill, a joke. There is
no safety to be found. These mountains are
a lie.

Miss India's Snow Cream

*And to beat it all , this winter has been mighty
Extra cold*

The snow fell wet and heavy, weighty flakes
like white fuzz moths that drift in coiling gusts
and pool in valley nooks, and when the hills
of snow began to rival hills of earth,
the local kids showed up at India's home,
in search of hot woodstoves and gracious hands.
They warmed themselves on humble hearth and watched
Miss India mix snow with milk straight from
her cows, a winter treat for treatless lives,
a simple sweet that cooled the children's mouths
and warmed their spirits, sent back out to work
and toil, hungry nights like monsters in
the storm to catch them once they left her stoop.

Myrtle Hears Tom's Tales

*The old folks 'gather 'round their fire places
And tell their tales of tales*

Tom thought he matched the speed of sound out on
old Route 100, Red Avanti growled
and shook his shirtless sweating body in
some memory or fantasy. And Tom

believed he fell in love, and with no less
than six Korean girls who smiled more
and listened better, full red lips sealed tight,
in such a way that Myrtle's never were.

And Tom would swear with little prompting that
he once assisted Dolly Parton, car
broke down beside the interstate, her rhine-
stones glinting in the sun and blinding him.

And Tom believed he clocked a hulking man,
took down a monster twice his size in some
bar fight, lit red and hazy, smoke and time
that blur the details of the lie. Myrtle

let tales be sewn from drifting scraps on her
white kitchen table, technicolor dreams
he weaved from dun and dim burlap-pale hues,
and she did not believe a single word.

Henry the Dropout

*I guess its because i just don't know too many
Fancy love words
That is why i very seldom ever try to speak*

His final day of school blew past without
the pomp and circumstance of Dad wearing
a tie and Mom dressed up in Easter best
and caps that mingle with balloons when tossed.

The school bell rang like any other day,
and Henry, padded still with baby fat,
the duck fuzz shadow on his upper lip,
not quite grown in, last year's jeans hiked up

like waders, face still round with childhood's sun,
the light not set, he walked out heavy doors
that clang metallicly behind his wake,
a screaming send-off not quite like applause.

He did not know it was his last, that he
would soon abandon pencils, paper and
the other crisp accessories of school
and childhood and possibility.

India's Hoard

*And make the best of what you've got
Which, just ain't one hell of a lot*

A mason jar of threads, a tangled mess
of cut loose ends, three wire baskets full
of fabric trimmings, feedsack patches, and
curled twists of yarn, tin chickens roosting on
the kitchen table, two cast iron pans,
a mound of quilts in every cupboard, bowls
for mixing, pails for milking, photo books
of family peering through a sepia haze,
a grave brass frog to hold the door for kids
and travellers passing by, a dusty chest
of Sunday best long faded out of style,
and one untouched wood dresser full of plaid
and denim overalls and the green scent
that lingers in the folds.

The Hummingbirds of Barren Springs

*I don't have no worries
And i don't have no fears
'Cause i ain't a-goin' no where*

A hummingbird flies down from mountain peaks
and zips around my valley home, a flash
of green, an iridescent dart that dives
in joyous tremors, searching for some pool
of sweetness, hidden in the core, thousands
of flowers holding half a droplet each.

I watch it sail the breezy currents, glide
among unkempt grass blades to hover by
the Walmart feeder dangling up above
the cinderblock steps, plastic flowers glint
like luring candy and the hummingbird
is breathless, effort blurs its shape. I feel
my heartbeat rise with her, who flies
so hard to stay so still for plastic flowers.

I watch the hummingbird exert and fight
and strain for every second in the air
and find I'm like the mountain hummingbird,
with every muscle working just to stay
afloat.

Henry and Hank

I LEARNED how to read from the BIBLE

And hank sr's song folio's

He drank in battered pages, cradled by
molasses lyrics of the weeping moon
and lonesome whippoorwills, long after school
house doors were shut behind him. ABCs

were traded in; his child's mind was formed
by crooners at the church, a wave of warmth
that felt like summer air when draped across
his shoulders. Churches never closed their doors

and gospel songs were like the sparrow as
he catches wind, a tearful joy. He sang
he saw the light. Perhaps he did, the glow
of lightning bugs before him gathering to
celestial spotlight on his lonely soul.

But when the psalms were folded back in pews
and proverbs paused, the worship hall tucked in
to sleep, it was Hank Williams Sr. and
his Alabama honey voice that held
his soul in wondrous reverie.

Myrtle's Hoard

*What more can i say a-bout the way you lived
Except to say , she told her own story*

Plush heaps of cloudy sweaters with petite
arms folded back, five china sets, passed on
from friends and yard sales, patterned in rosebuds
and the soft bend of lilies, lily white
and cobalt porcelain vases huddled on
the mantelpiece, a dozen angels caught
in sparkling, glassy poses, every gold
or bronze award won by three sons, a frayed
and faded blanket stitched with dime-sized fruit
to wrap up grandbabies, a box of lights
and tinsel wrapped around a Santa Claus
that sways to Silent Night, a hundred dolls
with painted cheeks and rosy skin, their arms
of porcelain wrapped in lace and silk, two floors
of house fulfilled with every shining yard
sale treasure, every Goodwill jewel, and each
lost beauty found in Barren Springs red mud.

In the Valleys

*For some glad day we all are gonna
Be out of here*

The mountains squeeze against each other like
a cattle herd that bottlenecks towards chutes

unseen past the horizon, leaving dark
and narrow valleys in their gaps, carved with

the crumbling lines of asphalt black. The pools
of shadows gather like a dam downstream

has backed the clouds up to our doors. And we
go out and wade through fog, the grasping dew

embraces on our ready skin to find
the break, so thin and sharp, the golden blade

that cuts the dark, the needle shine that falls
on only lucky few young blades of grass.

Tom and Myrtle Attend a Funeral

*For I've heard it said, that you just can't
Take an old hogs ear and turn it into a purse*

“And where is Tom today?” they asked, and she replied, “I’m on my own, but you will see him at the gravesite.” What she wished to say

was “Tom has not been to a funeral in twenty years, but he always goes to the grave and waits for the procession from the outer fence, a buzzard perched outside a barn, awaiting death to ring the bell for dinner. Like he really wants to be that Crazy Old Man Sutphin, or he’s just avoiding stepping into church again.

And when you see him he will be in his version of Sunday best, a flannel that’s been buttoned all the way and jeans held up with leather belt and hair combed back under his trucker hat and aviators with a greenish tint, an odd match next to my white string of pearls and black shift dress and neat peach lipstick lined in a mourner’s smile. Yes,

we’ll go home separately because Tom is exactly who he is, a crazy old man buzzard. I am here all on my own, I’m always on my own.”

Might Get One More Cut Before the Summer's Over

*The coalminer tunnels throu the mountains
And the poor ole farmer he still tends the land*

The field is freshly mowed, then raked, then baled,
a meadow worked to perfect symmetry,

the grid of man's most even placed design
through cogs in a machine. Such order, like

a plain square quilt tamed into army folds
and corners, or a braid, one perfect plait

that hangs down on my back. But even with
life's edges smoothed, there's no machine to pick

up bales for barn delivery, a task
that's left to human hands, the life and love

lines raw and burning from the cutting twine.
There's little perfect in the heaving lifts,

off balance in each step, my trembling arms
as delicate as fallen leaves. The last

bale drops down with the sun, and I drop, too,
not caring for red ants and ticks, but just

the weight of every limb, the sweetness of
the earth. I feel as if I'm sinking as

the new grass grows again.

Caroline's Hoard

*And I'm singing my heart out
To a blue lonely room*

A box of ticket stubs in sunset shades
from five buck movie nights, neon bouquets
of severed haunted house wristbands, a prim
white china set newspaper packed within
a box, a shelf of DVDs arranged
in rainbow order, albums filled with sun
drenched photos, sparkling European stills,
ten multicolored vases, every shape
and size, a rainbow quilt hung limp across
an heirloom chair, a small green box with pins
and brooches stiff with generational
wear, books stacked on overflowing shelves,
words held in covers secondhand, the long
forgotten crafts of threads and needles, and
one fiddle in a beaten case, the last
blue traces of a song there's no one left
to hear.

Mountain Country

*I just ain't the only poor man
For life is so hard on everyone
At least back here in the ole country of Wythe*

I. In 1960, 46% of Central Appalachian homes did not have indoor plumbing.

A midnight outhouse run, grass clings onto
my calves and leaves dew-dampened fingerprints
that bead upon my skin. The night's alive
and pulsing with the glow of lightening bugs.
The green trail dimly lights my way. The house,
a rotted wooden door concealing dark
so black, my eyes will lose my own two hands.
Coyotes in the distance howl like a
Greek chorus that laments my luck and sings
of open plains and white-sand beaches I
can only guess at. Crickets hum and sing,
each voice no more than falling pins that add
to their unending sundown roar, these packs
with common instinct songs that make the small
outhouse grow smaller, paneled wood grows tight,
the mountain bowl on the horizon closer
and closer every day.

II. In 1970, 35% of Central Appalachian homes did not have a telephone.

I eavesdrop on the party line, a link
to every other house in Barren Springs,
the plastic warmed by careful silent breaths
and clinging hands, hungry for gossip,
the spoken trails of our humanity.
The link to every late-night fight, the spray
of raging alcohol that flies across
receivers like the stinging dust that drifts
above hay-making day, the lives of grass
chopped at the root and blown into your eyes
and every honey-dripping love you like
the salve the farmer spreads on bloodied cracked
palms, soothing blisters for a time, enough
to sleep through drumbeat throbs, but when he wakes
and starts again, the wounds open anew.
The link to every plea for help and each
escaped and stirring sigh, the hushed exchange,
and every hello and goodbye, goodbye.

III. In 1980, 25% of Central Appalachian homes were still heated with wood or coal.

I come in from a winter storm and still
the frost can reach my bones, an icy brush
by wind-whipped, snow dust hands that penetrate
my flesh, a feeble guarding for my soul
when mountains turn to white and spindly trees
all turn to black and harvest is long gone.
My legs drag forward through the house as if
the snow still blocks their path, like phantom waves
that move your body even after you
arrive on solid ground.

I light the stove and call back life, a thaw
with sting, molasses slow, that grows from just
the very tips of stiff fingers up through
each joint. I test the movement like the Tin
Man kissed all over by his oil can
and drop my layers one by one, a scarf
here, thermal shirt dropped there until my skin
is all that's left, the blue extremities
begin to flush with red.

IV. In 2000, one in four in Central Appalachia lived in mobile homes.

It's strange, the remnants smoking still of one
small trailer home that fell to hungry flames,
no time to even cool its wounds before
a hulking double-wide pulls in and drops
not fifty feet away from wreckage, all
those trailer bones exposed and black and lost
as soon as fallen sparks from cigarettes
were caught in kindling carpet. All the weeds,
a perfect circle of the thistle leaves
and dandelion blooms around the house
turned gray and crumbled, all the brightness seeped
from wildflower lives, the flames, a death
that spreads like plague, ash radiating out.

And now it's dead, or dying still and I
can't help but think the double-wide is wrong,
a tactless brother dancing on her grave.

V. Appalachians are 25% less likely than the rest of the country to have a bachelor's degree.

The polyester cap and gown sits wrong against my skin. It digs into my scalp and itches where the hemline grazes past my shin with each unsteady step under the football stadium lights, and everyone else smiles in the heat, the first day of their lives. But I don't want to celebrate.

And I don't want the first burden, the price of being first to walk across some stage covered in scratchy outdoor carpeting to shake the hand of some man who forgot my name because I don't feel special or exceptional or worthy of more than my mother or my father or my friends

who didn't make it quite so far. The cap's elastic band grows tighter and the sleeve's hems rise unnaturally. The zipper won't stay up, my toes are pinched in heels. Even my uniform knows, I do not belong.

VI. Appalachians are 20% more likely to have a divorce.

They scream, the trailer shakes like thunder, shouts
glide through the feeble walls with ease. It's just
another Friday. They'll look back and say
"this fight was different," but I'll know the truth.

Like Granny's cuckoo clock, they're little dolls
who have to dance the same old dance, each strike
upon the clock, all blending into one
long fight, where jabs about gained weight blend with
the unpaid gas bill screams and sharpened yells
about my latest disappointment, and
I know that when he walks out of the house,

it's not because this fight is special. This
is not the straw that breaks their backs, is not
the drop that overflows the bucket. It's just
another night and I am not surprised.

VII. In Appalachia, the infant mortality rate is 16% higher than the rest of the country.

When India stepped out, a stricken-faced
pale son in tow, she paused to witness there
a crumbling creek bank, steep and jagged, blood
of earth exposed in glistening red mud,
the violent ugliness under her feet.

Back in the quiet home she left, there is
another ugliness that feels like trees
that still glow green after a fall, taking
on moss and vines, adopted leafy joys.
Inside that house is like the sun that throws
its rays through sprays of rain, the elders look
outside and say “The devil beats his wife
today.” Inside is like a cliff jump to
a lake where one jump lands a pocket deep
enough to catch you, one jump hits a slab
of rock that aims to break you. India won
with Mary Lou torn from the womb, a small
and breathing child. But in the twins was twice

the risk, a smaller pool to catch you. Creek
banks slide in rain, ravines grow wider, and
sometimes cruel fates will win their game.

VIII. Central Appalachia has the highest overdose rate in the nation.

Wolfe wrote “You can’t go home again,” and if
my home is ties and needles, life that shrinks
down to those trailer walls that drive you mad,
an ugly world, then yes you can’t go home
again. If home is rattling final pills,
and hoping one will turn to two by will,
then yes you can’t go home again. And if
you try, you’ll find you can’t withstand the home
you once could take, a dropped threshold from which
you can’t recover.

IX. In Central Appalachia, the mortality rate is double compared to the rest of the country.

The little box was sealed with ribbons, white
and silky, neatly filled with butterflies,
a dozen monarchs dozing royally, wings
drawn back like little flames on pause, and when
the lid was opened, it was meant to breathe
like dragon's breath a stream of life above
the tight collection, mourners shifting on
uneven folding chairs that wobble in
the grass. Perhaps it was the breezy cold
or expectations high enough to make
them want to blush and hide. They did not stir
from velvet perches till a stoic son
in mourning shook them free, an underwhelmed
crowd watched so many butterflies fall out
like crumbs brushed off a blouse onto the grave.
The freshly stirred dark earth makes landing soft,
if not so dignified.

To Be Saved Is...

*Oh, you must come to the alter
For your sins to be forgiven'
And then you must be baptized
so a new life you can be livin'*

...like cooling rain from summer evening clouds
that falls on skin made hard by dirt and sweat,
the products of a long day's work, that slide
away under the raindrop pull, brown creeks
that follow contours in her flesh and pool
behind her knees or in the hollow gap
between her thumbnail and her fragile skin,
the watershed upon her surface, streams
that carry dust back down to dust,

like pointed breezes tear her seedling heart
away from her dry dandelion core,
the gentlest fissure, wind-split break she needs
to fly on autumn air, a dizzying rise
over the earth that plants her where she's meant
to grow,

like forest fires catching every dead
and fallen tree, the choked and tangled weeds
that burst in opaque smoke, carried away
in pillars of rebirth that leave the ground
so fresh and open for new glowing growth.

And so it starts in her pale fire eyes,
a glimpse into the flames that flicker up
from Myrtle's willing heart.

Henry Hunts Ginseng in the Company Woods

*So what's the use of me ever tryin' to work
Any at all*

When Henry felt his pockets light, he hiked
the woods in search of coy, elusive plants,
the ginseng hidden under forest beds,
a treasure hunt for ancient bounty, like
the worn-dull arrowheads and bullets from
some poorly-aimed old muskets and ear tags
of metal made for long-dead cows, the stuffs

of long-gone times, like near-extinct green leaves
of ginseng, made to heal a million ails,
some lingering native cure-all smelling of
midwifery and not-so-quick bucks. He'd
go back to where he found the ginseng last
with steps measured and silent, meant to hide
the not quite legal act from peering eyes.

He searched in midnight hope that might result
in finding ginseng, but hardly enough
to make a poor man rich in anything
but drinking stories.

Burning Day

*You've got to have went throu , hell
And half of georgia*

I wander hell and find it's just the same
as burning trash in Barren Springs, the smoke
of noxious plastic fumes amongst the charred
forgotten bits of final notices
that dance in glowing spirals, red ink lost
to summer stagnant air. The cloud of gray
and darkened fragments hangs above the park,
a shade that stings the eyes, a ghost that harms.

Men watch the flames and kick their boots against
the porch rails, tossing beer cans as they drink,
the orange fingers licking frosty peaks
of mountain labels. Women hide inside
and watch TV and count each watered blink
that blurs the screen and find they hide from sun
and time but smoke will find its way inside.

The people in their trailers, hopeless in
monotony, each day the same the same
again, they're stung by immobility,
the smoke that strokes their eyes and chars their lungs,
the ever-hanging shroud of lifelessness,
that means they'll never pass state lines, much less
through half of Georgia.

At Age 64, He Suffered from a Blood Clot While Recovering from a Heart Attack

*You're just a-leaving a life time of hurt
Just back here in old virginia
In the county of wythe*

In India's life, she did not crumble at the earthquake, shaking her foundation. Her sharp stony soul remained and could not be reduced to pebbles and grief-stricken dust.

Tornadoes didn't steal her from the ground with grasping cyclone hands. Her roots were forged too deep; the earth below her loved her dear and would not let her go to heavens far.

The lightning storm threw bolts down at her feet, a flash so bright it showed the fragile veins within her eyes, a crash so loud her ears like church bells rang. But still she did not fall.

The floods would rise and seek her, crawling from the creek beds, seeping through the valley like black death. She was not swept away but grew above the waterline, a tree untouched.

She did not crumble at the earthquake, no disaster brought her to her knees. And in the end, the rage of nature could not find her fatal crack. It was the rolling sigh,

the aftershock, the mountain's last exhale, that shook her soul like leaves upon the wind.

For the Birds

*So if its wrong to love
Anything but , god
I pray god will forgive me*

At bible school, I paint a birdhouse blue.
I'd like to have the time to paint the eaves
with anxious care, to grow the leafy vines
and flowers I can see around the door
inside my mind. And when the preacher speaks,

all I can think about are blank windows,
the pale pine roof that haunts my dreams, all left
undone on pages from the Southwest Times.
He says some things like "Jesus loves me (this
I know)." I long to add some sunshine to

the perch, a yellow foothold for a blue
jay or a robin or the cardinal flock
that flies around my head. He says I must
be saved, or maybe save the homeless birds

with pink, soft scalloped trim, perhaps a row
of white to make a picket fence. He says
I'll burn if I'm an evil child. But I

just want to dip my fingers into paint
and spot the walls with mesmerizing swirls.
I want to bring the wood to life, to light,
to see the sun bounce off my rainbow home.

Tom and Myrtle's Pretty Love Words

*Cause every time you sing ' I lose my blues
ANGELS SING PRETTY at least you do*

Tom sidled past the stove, boots clapping on
the beige linoleum and leaving trails
of garden earth behind. He walked through clouds
of Sunday dinner steam and Myrtle there,

a cloud herself that flowed above it all
in fleece and denim, teased-up hair that waved
to whistled tunes, the song of biscuit pats,
the rhythm of potato peeling. Tom

walked through and could not help disrupt the flow.
He turned down burners, silencing the boil's
percussion, stirring pots against the beat.
His lyrics brought the dance to its abrupt

and crashing end. "You burnt the beans." And all
the stovetop hell broke through, a flood of notes,
discordant, and two out-of-sync foamed waves
that fought for every inch of land.

India, Widowed

While the trees themselves is hangin' onto the earth

He's gone, and now she has to dig for fence posts, opening blisters like red-furied prim-rose buds on every trembling finger joint.

He's gone, and now she has to lay salt blocks, the smooth-edged squares providing little grip as she dragged them across the fields, bent at the waist like trampled stalks of yellow corn.

He's gone, and now she has to don the torn and faded overalls that once were his to pick the beans on hands and knees, the stains like medals, honors won for keeping food on desperate tables, medals no one gave.

But is he gone? She felt the trace of him in spaces between the cotton sheets, under the fraying quilted folds, suspended just outside of her low earthly reach, but yes

he's gone, and now she has to rise at dawn, the sun her puppeteer that pulls her to the barn to milk, eye-level with their grass-stained hocks and leaning towards their mother warmth.

Somehow, he's gone, and now she has to stand, a lonely tree resisting splits and breaks and even when the lightning strikes and her whole world is tilted violently, her roots still fiercely hang onto the earth.

Henry at the Family Reunion

*Whenever he would pick and sing for you
I just wish I could turn back the hands
Of the good times past and gone*

His guitar plucking washed out like the waves
upon the toes of passing family, pooled
around their ankles, cooling pull towards song.

Amongst the laughter, overflowing plates
of beans, sweet ham, warm rolls, the pearls of sweat,
and swaying grass, the smallest feet first felt
the current pull of melody and bobbed
on waves up to the porch's edge. They swayed

and planted down like hungry daffodils
with glowing petals turned to soak in all
of Henry's sunshine voice. He did not think
that when the movement stopped, they'd all go home,

and leave a stagnant pool, just rarely touched
by passing dragonflies. For now he was
the sun and moon, delighting in creation.

Two Doors Down in Barren Springs

*For you'll be just like a wanted man
But , you'll lose your own reward*

The Goodwill t-shirts bearing twenty year
old local sport mascots and cigarette
burns, ashes fallen in uneven blots
on polyester-cotton blends. The shell
and sweater sets in pastel shades that lost
their luster after Easter '89.

All pushed aside and scattered, searching for
the folded bills she hides inside unworn
old socks and in the folds of too tight jeans,
a cash reward from Granny's drawers to spend
just two doors down, a smoky living room
with blackout curtains and some girl he knew
in high school, nursing tracks on bone-thin legs,

that cramped gray room, the center of his
small, tightening world, and he can't help it. Those
upturned drawers still hold his key.

Rummy Game #459

*Yes , I need you right now here by my side
For I want you to be my sweet loving bride*

Tom rubbed his stubbled cheek and swiped at fruit flies buzzing. Myrtle moved a well-used card, the corners soft and split, across her fan of spades and hearts, a quiet dance between her painted fingernails, a humble jig.

With each card placed, he smiled a gummy grin that said he's sure to win, and in his mind, the cricket songs that drift past the screen door were roars of fans alive with Tom's slick move. He saw the singing crickets clambering up

the highest stalks of grass to gain a clear raised view. And with each childlike smile, she rolled her eyes to heaven's creamy clouds and scoffed under her breath. She nimbly moved the cards again, her hand searching for patterns, eyes

trained on the frozen royals pinched between her fingers. When the final card was laid, the evening's win was Myrtle's, added to her lead: two hundred thirty-three to Tom's two hundred twenty-six.

Henry's Mama

*And if I get to heaven I'll meet her there
As shore as there's life beyond death
For I believe my mother's soul is in
Heaven somewhere*

He was a boy, still wearing baseball caps
to pick up plates of Mama's cooking for
his dinner every night, a ten pace trip
from door to door. A boy with gray hairs in
his ears and wrinkles by his eyes, he checked
in on her stooping frame, unclear on who
was taking care of whom. He never crossed

that hazy line between the boyhood life,
all nights out wading in the creek and days
in strumming reveries, and being grown,

the bank accounts and factory jobs that weigh
the years to crouched routine. He held enough
to just get by, a mama's boy, content
in front porch dreaming and the cornbread baked
for him.

Sinking Beneath the Falls

*When you life here on this earth is over
and you're walking heavens fields of clover
You'll never have anymore pain
and woe and sorrow*

Out on the county edge, the trailer homes
are sprinkled out like downtown dandruff, few
and fewer as I drive still deeper in
the rolling woods that line the darkest vein
of road to the extremities of green
and heavy silence. Then the road dissolves
to dirt and ends within black trees, so I

proceed on foot and follow trails of those
who curled around the woods before and left
the quiet deaths of stomped soft grasses in
their seeking wake. The trail takes me into
the mountain depths until I find the falls.
I hear the roar before my eyes can catch
a million drops churned white and thrown over

the cliff above. A great frenzied display,
but on this side, the pool is calm and black
and when I bend to see what lives below
that perfect skin, it only gives me back
my own reflection, blank echoes, this self
of water. As I slip my boots off and
I shed my coat, I find I want to know her,
the self beneath the surface, want to feel
the floating hair pass through my fingers, want
to sink under my own bewitching weight.

India and Cathy Sue

*We used to be so close together
Till we only casted one shadow*

Two shadows walked across the fields of blue
cornflower, blushing buds that glanced up at
their passing queen in overalls, a dark
haired girl in pigtails at her side. The girl
looked out upon the shadows and reached out
a hand to see the figures become one,
all while the shadows stretched to giants in

the setting sun. And in the kitchen chair,
she broke green beans with snaps as crisp as drops
of rain on Barren Creek. The pigtailed girl
sat on the floor and watched the breaking song
be played by shadowed fingers on the wood

floorboards. And deep into the night, the girl
saw lamplight wash upon the wall and her
blue silhouette bent over thread and cloth,
her needle working up and down to make
a school dress for some starved girl down the road,
the shadow of a skirt then taking shape.

Henry's Imagined Lovers

*WITHOUT YOU , BABE i am nothing but , a
Lonely and a gray old man without a dream*

Her hair burned bright, an autumn blaze of sparks
that drift above the camp when sunlight hits
one red and bouncing lock. Or maybe she
absorbed his lover songs and trapped his truth
in raven curls. She wore on sharpened nails

a glitter pink that sparkled like the sides
of great skyscrapers at sunrise, or they
were matte and round, the shade a Georgia peach
to graze his stubbled cheek. And maybe she

wore cowgirl boots well broken in with fades
around the angles of her toes or black
and shining patent heels that broke his heart
with shattering, clacking steps. And when she left

his porch, she left behind a banjo with
a love note tucked beneath the silver strings
or make-up on the pillowcase or gloves
that smell of perfume deftly dabbed on white

thin wrists, the scent that shifted every day
to match the face that morphed with every song,
a woman born from smoke with every line.

Piddlin' Myrtle

She just slaved each day of her life a-way

Just piddlin', Myrtle hummingbirds about
the house, reorienting stacks of mail
into her world's dimensions, sweeping up
the dust and biscuit crumbs from breakfast. She

scrubs down spotless countertops and picks
lint from the couch, while emptying the trash
in little wicker cans, discreetly stored
in every room to hold tobacco spit,

the blackened hearts that spoil porcelain girls
in gowns and accent pillows fluffed. She leans
into the corners, duster in her hand
to catch the webs, their threads reborn each night.

She fills the day with brooms and dustpans, bleach
and polish, never sitting still, just piddlin'.

Shearing Day

*You'll go back to
The ole you used to be*

I melt sometimes. The summer stinging sun
beats down on wooly backs of sheep. My sweat
is mixed with lanolin and grime. The smell
of grass-stained meat and salt block dirt surrounds
and buries me. I'm six feet under, mass

of cloudy hair above me. Flies buzz round
my nose on lazy drifts of breath, and burrs
caught in the wool around me graze against
my arms and tear fine needle lines of skin.

I melt, and stifling wool absorbs my drips;
my flesh is liquified, my essence brown
and grim as dust on Ash Wednesday. I pool
beneath my feet, my open pores release

me to the flock's collected coats until
I dwindle down to nothing more than dust
returned, evaporated, gone.

Myrtle Says Goodbye

*Oh , that old graveyard seem so dark and dingy
'Cause I'll be left here by my self so all a-lone
And just a rose will brighten my pathway*

His body lays in silk ten feet away,
and cousins giggled, blue-stained lips pinched round
the stolen icy pops they found in the
youth club room, banging knees against pastel
squat table edges, dropping paintings of
the coat of many colors. In his coat

of gray, the body lays ten feet away
from squawking aunts that took and put aside
with ease the topics of their pantyhose,
the biblical apocalypse, and what
warm casserole monstrosity they dropped
in mourning arms. His body lays ten feet

away, and men in Sunday flannels pulled
their belts above beer guts and gruffly grunt
about the good old days and yields of hay
and what Tom drove in 1986.

His body lays ten feet away with hands
across his heart, and Myrtle, clutching white
tissues in trembling fingers, hovered one
warm hand an inch above his frozen skin.

Sai Mart, Barren Springs

*Oh , please pass me the bottle one more time
Here boys, you can have my very last dime*

I sit out on the Sai Mart porch among
the rusted quarter rides and paper stands
and watch the Sunday clouds go by. A man

comes down the road on foot, with grass stains on
his knees, a sunburnt chest left bare. He buys
a pack of Marlboros with crumpled ones
and quarters, lighting up before he leaves

the lot. A woman pulls up in her car
too nice and hair too neat to live nearby
and can't decode the antiquated pump.
A clerk comes out to help and chat, hand up

to block the sun. A little woman parks
with two grandkids in tow with freckled limbs
that sprouted past their sleeves. They're in and out
with ice creams from the freezer. Then the clerk

comes out and offers me a paper sack
with grease spots from the tiny kitchen, home
in a grilled cheese.

Fiddle Strings

*I'm with you today but , i just can not say
About tomorrow*

Hey, Henry, did you mean to leave Tom
your fiddle, broken strings curled back like blades
of bluegrass that recoil in wind, a case
that crumbles with a touch, the leather dried

to dust? And did you think some baby niece
you hardly knew would save your fiddle from
the demolition of Tom's house and all
its dated carpet and tobacco stains
and ancient ghosts? And Henry, why did you
compose so many songs of love that drip

with moonlight milk over the state fair scenes
and truck beds at the drive-in movie when
you never met a girl in white at some
church on a hill, or even for a date?

And, Henry, when you wrote your life in song,
why did you leave behind just words? Your tunes

and melodies are lost to time,
the fiddle strings are silent.

The Rooted Tree

*When a man swings his ax back and forth
A tree don't have too much of a choice*

The little house I could've lived in has
four shrinking walls that inch together with
the passing years, a falling ceiling pushed

by time to catch the restless feet that go
off wandering far too long. A rooted tree
stands straight, I've seen, their leaves are plenty, stretched

out to the sky, disguising distant hills
in greenery veils. But when the ax man comes,
a rooted tree has little choice to stand

or fall. I'd rather be an Ent tree, trunk
untethered, wander through the forests of
my choosing, see the new horizon's hills
with clarity.

India's Last Church Sunday

*Just pray whenever that you can
And thank the good , lord that you're a man*

A widow shouldn't run a dairy farm
and come to church with nailbeds marked by dirt.
The black earth clinging to each valley in
her fingerprints reminded Sunday crowds
of long-dead husbands, cattle-milking dawns,
realities they'd rather never see.

A widow shouldn't wear men's clothes and flaunt
her flannels, overalls, and heavy boots,
the trappings of a working man on curves
not meant to work the fields or nurse the calves
or carry bales of hay. Her hands should be
like creamy chamomile with blush-touched nails
and rosy perfumes, but her hands were lined
by rough-edged twine and dried by dusty feed.

A widow should just sell the farm and fade
away, should leave her life behind, should end
herself in mourning him. A widow should
first keep her two hands clean and then survive.

Horseback Dawn

*And the clouds will drift on the wind
And the wind will help clear the sky
And a blue sky leaves a pretty heaven
And a pretty heaven will make the earth
Surely look good*

I saddle up, my red-chilled fingers hook
the leather straps and rub his warm gold neck
to feel his thrumming strength in steady breaths,
to take some scent of hay and leather in
my skin. Our breaths are mingling clouds in dim

dawn air. Mine fly, staccato puffs, and meet
his massive dancing streams of fog. I mount
and our smooth harmony of airy notes
becomes red motion. With my slightest shift,
his legs follow the rhythm of a trot

or canter like the ladies of the court
once danced a country line with joyous curls
of hair broke loose. I move my weight with him,
a water dance in stirrups like a waltz.
We cross over the gently bobbing waves

of earth, a perfect beastly ship that sails
the grassy knolls with ease. We come upon
a hill, the hill that rises closest to
the sky, the sun's first break hidden from
the western side. I point him towards the peak

and push a gallop. As we greet the sun
upon the crest, our neat court dancing fades
to wild flight.

Goodbye, Myrtle

*My dreams have ended , and here I am wide a wake
Let my heart be so happy if its to heaven “ I take “*

A lazy susan of rotating guests:
when one decides to leave, another takes
their place, and some effective hospital
director puts them in the biggest room,
a breezy corner filled with dressed-up flesh
in gray anxiety, a buzzing hive

around a fading queen who sleeps and fights
the unseen tendrils of the Kudzu vine.
Her tree of life is drowning under their
green shade, and it will be a sweet relief
to sink. Her life is simple feedsack scraps
that weave into a rich landscape of love
and floral scents and biscuit flour, and

to everyone, she is the favorite star,
her eyes forever shining in their minds,
her fire always hard to see straight on,
forever burning close to God.

India's Cinderellas

*I found you in a
Garden of roses*

For little girls too underfed to fill
the silk and satin, lacy-frilled neat forms
of factory-made dresses, little girls
too smudged to enter the department stores,
she sewed by night beneath the halo of

warm lantern light, conceived full skirts and cap
sleeves, rosy buttons and round collars, held
by straight hems, double-stitched with care. And she
then birthed fresh floral elegance from scraps,
the trimmings from their mothers' clothes, the hoards
of patterned feed sacks sourced from every farm
in Barren Springs. They came to her in soot

and cinders, seeking out her magic wand,
a silver needle bossing cloth and thread.
They left transformed with starlight shifting in
their eyes and dreams of royal balls, or at
the least, a day at school with bright and clean
starched dignity.

Henry Writes His Doubt

*Is heaven just a man made up thing to us all ,.?
Just some dreamers thought up skeamers
That really don't have no true means
Just a glitter in someone's mind*

He felt so small, a flake of snow that rode
in on a coated shoulder, melted long
before the man could see his shape, before
the world could know the crystal patterns of
his faith. Would God just leave him all alone,
the last surviving blade of grass on cracked
earth after years of drought and doubt? The doubt,

a tsunami breaking over mountain peaks.
He was crushed before he drowned. And in the night,
he wrote his doubt in cutting ink, a slice
of blood in every letter in the white. He wrote
in manic spill, a burst within his chest.

But with the dawn, the burst had trickled down,
the final drop was purged, the lake within
was calmed. The words of night were set aside,
another day of sunny worship songs.

I Dream of Myrtle's Table

*When all of heaven is a-lookin' down
darlin' i keep needin' you*

The frying basket pops and sizzles on
the stove, the golden oil roiling to
consume the chicken legs and frozen shrimp
and sliced potatoes. Myrtle watches all,

the keeper of the kitchen, whistling tunes,
soft sounds and airy notes that drown under
the homey buzz of sons debating games
of baseball, grandkids in a Disney trance,
and Tom out in the yard, the crunching cans
of emptied beer whose rhythmic song comes in
the kitchen window, bending Myrtle's tune

to its soft beat. When dinner's done, she calls
them in, a horde that looks with eyes like hers
and reaches hands with her same form and speaks
with voices bright as hers, a world she has
created, held together by the ties
of blood and food.

Henry Rides to the Moon

*If I could catch me a ride to the moon
I'd done went there*

He hitchhiked once off Route 100 to
the crumbling edge of Johnson City, where
the strangers dumped him roadside off the truck
bed, strewn with hay and rolling bottles, the door
that carried him across state lines, the first
time in his twenty-two long years. Turns out

that Tennessee could catch his footfalls quite
the same as Barren Springs, and as he searched
for his ride home, he thought he didn't drive
out far enough. The thundering wonder of
his daydream lay in Nashville, dancing through
the neon lights and swirling opry notes.

He dreamt of landing there among the stars
of city skylines and the steady hum
of city pavement. But he didn't see
the years ahead, his tramping circle closed
and tightened round his house, the earth stomped dead
beneath his restless cycling feet.

India's Last Quilt

Forever

*But , let that wish sink like a heavy stone in deep
Water*

I crawl across a multicolored field
of even squares, with bold red checks and blue
cornflower gardens, yellow polka dots
and inky purple hearts that almost thump
right off the fabric, little window views
to brighter scenes, each stitched in rhythmic strokes
with clean white threads that hold so many worlds
together. Now they hold my shape. I'm wrapped
in folds of summer joy, a quilt that feels

like India's hands, that calloused pair that once
first held each newborn child that screamed into
this mountain world, each line and crease, a child,
a memory of first eyes opened, first
cries found, and first unsteady breaths. Those hands
that milked the cows before the sun came up
and carried home a frothy pail of life,
that toiled days and nights away. The stove,
the farm, the silver sewing needle were
their constant charges. Hands that smoothed with love
our fears like nothing more than ruffled feathers.

Her hands that drifted over scraps and saw
oceans of grace, and through her needle flowed
a steady stream of thread, a river bright
and calm that made a mound of scraps into
forever.

I'm Gone

*I'd might as well forget you , you're gone on down
The river The end*

My rearview's blocked by boxes filled with thrift
store books and knick knacks wrapped in newspapers
concealing painted glass and dust-like peach
fuzz, softening the icy faces of
house miniatures and candlesticks. In mud,

my tires spin as if the red clay hates
to see me go, the splatters clinging to
my bumper, desperate cockaburrs in wool.

I find the asphalt stream and sail into
the sky. The Blue Ridge Mountains breathe me out,
a sigh across the gentler sloping fields.
The perfumed pines release me. I am gone,
and goldenrods and daisies mourn me, bent

beneath my wake. I mourn them, too. But in
my soul I feel the rumbling road ahead,
anticipation thrumming from the earth
that rolls beneath me, and the wonder of
blue thunder on a sunny day.

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