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The Milk Carton Age

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THE MILK CARTON AGE

By
Dalton Owen Huerkamp

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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Reader: Dr. Kathryn McKee

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ABSTRACT
DALTON OWEN HUERKAMP: The Milk Carton Age
(Under the Direction of Matt Bondurant)

This thesis is a collection of poetry that examines masculinity and violence in the contemporary American South. Taking place in the states of Arkansas and Mississippi, these poems gather memories, voices and vistas to develop an understanding of place and identity that challenges traditional narratives about the region. Note: names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

INTRODUCTION

The poems collected in this thesis were written between February 19th, 2016 and April 11th, 2018. The earliest poem, “Ballad for H.B. 1523,” was written outside of the classroom, but the remaining poems either originated in prompts from workshop courses or were written specifically for this thesis. That is not to say that this collection was assembled piecemeal. Rather, in writing poems to develop a creative voice, I found that all the work I had produced shared similar concerns about place and identity. When gathered together these poems, I believe, build upon each other to form a broader statement about masculinity and violence in the contemporary American South.

In this introduction, I will briefly outline the cycle of inspiration, inception, editing and sequencing that went into this project.

When I announced to friends and family that I had started work on a thesis in creative writing, the response was unanimous confusion. My major area of study is Public Policy Leadership with a minor in English, and even in my English studies I was focused early on with writing fiction. Poetry, however, came back into my writing life through courses with poets Molly Brown and Beth Spencer.

Molly Brown’s English 301 in the fall of 2016 was my first experience with creative writing as an undergraduate. This course covered poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction, but I was most drawn to poetry and fiction by the end of the course. I attribute my developed interest in poetry to Molly Brown’s passion for writing and teaching poetry, a dedication that was evident in the pieces she read to our class from the then-unreleased *The Virginia State Colony For Epileptics and Feeble-minded*. That semester I wrote early drafts of three poems that are included in this thesis: “Ballad for H.B. 1523” (my second draft), “Deer Head” and “Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays” (originally titled “those Meet the Press sundays”).

In Beth Spencer’s poetry workshop the following spring, I felt myself becoming more comfortable in the poetic forms I began working with in the fall. Much of my fiction at that same time was first-person, high-concept and dialogue-heavy. I loathed writing in third person, and having to produce pages of setup I wasn’t proud of in order to hit a stride was not for me. Poetry, which offers a broader venue for strong voices and big ideas, was a relief from these frustrations as well as a better fit for many my creative goals. So in producing poetry assignments that spring, I brought with me the ideas I had reserved for prose.

Many of the poems included in the Mississippi section of this collection come from that spring of 2017: “Buckner’s Trestle,” “The Church of Hatsune Miku” and “Water Towers.” Though I wasn’t conscious of it at the time, much of my writing then was about Oxford and Mississippi. I had just spent the last summer in town working as an orientation leader (my first summer not at home), and my junior year marked my third year living in Mississippi after growing up in the state of Arkansas.

In Arkansas, some of my earliest writing in middle and high school had been poems. The first piece I ever wrote, titled “To the Girl Who Was Divine,” was a rambling, free-verse poem about a girl. Despite being a bad poem, it was published in a student

literary magazine contest at Ouachita Baptist University in my hometown. Around that time I also started to read poetry collections, like Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I also remember being struck by individual poems, some I found on my own or some assigned to me in class.

Ginsberg's "In Society," for example, was one of my favorite poems in high school. I stumbled upon it while reading a sample from Ginsburg's *Collected Poems* on my Kindle, and I was struck by the way Ginsberg used his line breaks and specific word choices to build an internal rhythm and tension on the page. Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" was assigned to me in AP Literature, and the way Plath used personification to make an everyday phenomenon feel fresh was a trick I've been attempting ever since. A third poem I remember loving, and still love, is Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." Dickinson is an endlessly fascinating poet and her choices in this piece, from the capitalization to minute visual details, all carry a heavy existential weight and humor in just a few stanzas.

Studying other poets suggested by my readers provided further inspiration for this collection. Marcus Wicker's *Silencer* provided examples of how to write poems both personal and political, and his integration of elements from music informed references to lyrics in some of my poems. John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* inspired me to draw from my dream journal to write "Deer Head," the opening poem. Beth Ann Fennelly's recent *Heating and Cooling*, while not exactly poetry, excited me enough to include my own "micro-memoir." David Kirby's wicked sense of humor in *The House on Boulevard St.* showed me how to accomplish jokes in poems. Along with these, I also read the works of other contemporary poets: Jericho Brown, Ross Gay, Billy Collins, Claudia Rankine, Warsan Shire and Rodney Jones.

With this basis of poets as inspiration, I began writing new and editing existing poems for this collection. The majority of the poems below are free verse, narrative and persona poems. Free verse and narrative were forms I felt comfortable in writing before returning to poetry, but persona poems became a recurring theme in Melissa Ginsburg's advanced poetry workshop in the fall of 2017. My first poem for the class was "Teeth Puller," and the positive response in workshop inspired me to continue with others like "Frankie Avalon's Italian Sonnet for Frenchy," "Travel Tee-Ball Tournament" and "Coup De Grâce."

Outside of the classroom my writing process is as follows: I've kept an observation journal since the spring of 2017. In it I like to record quotes, tweets, overheard conversations, definitions, doodles, movies and wrestling matches to watch, random lines for a poem and concepts for poems. A majority of the time I will start a poem going off of an idea I recorded in my journal. "Final Thoughts of the Dog Hung by Mike Huckabee's Son at Camp Pioneer in Hatfield, AR in 1998," for example, started as an idea note in my journal before becoming a fleshed-out piece. If I'm stuck on a poem I've already started I'll thumb through my journal and try to find a note for inspiration. In revising "Ballad for H.B. 1523," I integrated some stray lines I had saved as notes in my journal.

I always write my first draft of a poem out on a legal pad in pencil and then type it to save on my laptop. I've found that typing after writing in longhand is the best editing tool. The speed with which you can write on a keyboard can reveal the success of attempted rhythms and line breaks. Reading poems aloud after typing them also helps with this, plus it also tests riskier word choices. If reading a specific word aloud sounds awkward, I will change it to a word that better suits a performance of the poem.

I've also included works in forms such as the sonnet, sestina, haibun, and pantoum. One of my personal creative achievements in this project was not just working with these forms, but also finding ways to not be confined by them. My introduction to many of these, including the haibun and pantoum, came through class assignments. While some pieces remain close to their original draft (like "Coup De Grâce"), other assignments were discarded and their forms applied to different or new poems.

I didn't want to work in traditional forms for the sake of working in traditional forms. The choices I made in matching narratives or personas to forms were to find structures that complimented and enhanced the stories I wanted to tell. For example, "Shannon" originated as a journal entry, but I wanted to somehow integrate it into this thesis. I thought this character fit well with the themes I was developing, and I also wanted to use his forestry studies to touch on Kentucky's natural landscape. The haibun, combining prose and haiku, allowed for this kind of piece to work as a poem.

Their organization into two sections, Arkansas and Mississippi, reflects not just their settings but also a mindset in which the poems were written. As I mentioned earlier, many of my early undergraduate poems concerned Mississippi but when I was presented with a choice of going to graduate school in Mississippi or Arkansas, my poems started to concern where I grew up. That is not to say my intention wasn't to turn this thesis into a pro-con list about both state. This issue of state identity and what it means to call a place home was on my mind throughout writing, revision and sequencing.

In early sequencing I became inspired by the R.E.M. album *Fables of the Reconstruction* from 1985 and Randy Newman's 1974 album *Good Ole Boys*. Early albums by R.E.M. do not follow a Side A and Side B format. Instead, the band would give each side an arbitrary name that didn't tell the listener which side should be heard first or second, like the names "A Side" and "Another Side" on *Fables*. This interchangeable order is something I can't accomplish in this collection (unless it is published as a tête-bêche book), but the way the tracks on both the album's sides reflect and contrast one another was something I was inspired by. The track listing of Newman's *Good Ole Boys* also inspired some sequencing choices. The way the album jumps across perspectives, time and spaces was something I wanted to replicate in the collection. Both artists intended their respective concept albums to reckon with the contemporary South and its history, and I wanted the overall order of the poems in the Arkansas and Mississippi sections to reflect my similar intent.

I've come to understand through this project that to be a Southern writer, whether that be in prose, poetry or nonfiction, is to be a speculative writer. Let me explain: the American South fits the criteria established by Lewis's *Narina*, Le Guin's *Earthsea*, Herbert's *Arrakis* and others: it is a place whose borders, citizenship and cosmology

exists only in our collective imagination. If you were to ask a series of strangers to draw a map of the South, identify who is a Southerner or to even *define* the South, you would get wildly different answers from each person. All we have to really go on is a past, and to write about this place is to grapple with the world-building conducted by competing interests over generations. This understanding of the South and what it means to be a Southerner comes from Dr. Kathryn McKee, one of my readers for this thesis. Her Southern Studies 101 course, which I took in the fall of 2015, introduced me to concepts like simulacra and time-space compression and applied them to the region I grew up in.

But growing up, I was disinterested in such reading about or study of the South. Much of the media I consumed was escapist genre works like science fiction and fantasy. Even now, though I am interested in Southern writing and writers, I still find myself drawn these genre works for entertainment. With the basics of poetry from course work and these new ideas introduced by Dr. McKee, I started seeing these two worlds, the stark realities of the contemporary South and the imaginative possibilities of speculative writing, interesting in these poems.

My main intention with these poems and this collection is to give voice to the kind of Speculative South I've sought out as a reader. Poems like "Water Towers," "Reptar Crossing the Mississippi" and "The Church of Hatsune Miku" are the most direct attempts at this. I have found some similar concerns in recent books like Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*, Michael Farris Smith's *Rivers* and Alissa Nutting's *Made for Love*, but those are novels. For my goals, poetry is the medium where pure language can alienate, heighten and reveal truths about the world that has been made for us.

I had the pleasure of meeting Marcus Wicker in Beth Ann Fennelly's class this semester, and his comments on the role of the poet in society and academia expressed ideas I had about the subject for some time. In our class discussion, Wicker talked about how he hated how poets were writing for a select crowd of academics and students of poetry. To paraphrase his comments, poetry should be accessible to general populace and speak to and share the experiences of everyday lives.

I share this view of the role of poetry and the poet in society. The poet's role, to me, is to bring a different perspective to readers, a perspective outside their own that adds to a social, cultural and academic discourse about a time and place. The poems a poet produces can be experiments, statements, rants, stories, or take on any shape it pleases; what remains important is that the poet aims to transmit concepts or images that, for a moment, give the reader a different and interesting perspective.

This collection represents my attempt to reach what it means to be a poet by developing an understanding of the region where I grew up and continue to live. By gathering memories, voices and vistas from my own life and from the lives of others, I am engaging in my own kind of world-building. I could have written these poems in the tradition of the Great White Dead Oxford writers (Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Hannah's New South and even Brown's Rough South), but I believe their sandboxes are inadequate for this century. In the larger world of poetry, I want this collection to add to the voices of other contemporary Southern writers who are all searching for their own

ways to define, critique and change this, to borrow a phrase, beautifully complicated place.

In closing, I want to return to a concern I had early on in this thesis project. My major course of study is still Public Policy Leadership, but this thesis only fulfills my minor in English. Politics is a theme in many of my poems (see “Ballad for H.B. 1523” and “Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays”), but I also consider this a thesis in public policy, albeit a nontraditional one. In addition to the same line of thinking concerning the role of poetry in society, I also believe that poets have an obligation to use their talents to combat our current politic’s scarcity of imagination.

So often in our political debates, the only two options appear to be slow, incremental forward progress or rapid devolution back towards an idealized past. Utopias, it seems, are out of style in contemporary media. This quote from one of my favorite writers, Ursula K. Le Guin, is a succinct statement of what poetry can accomplish as political statements:

“We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.”

In this new age of political activism through poetry, with this thesis and my background in policy, I want to lend a voice to and pursue positive change in my community, state and region. This collection is just a first step in this journey towards depicting and enacting larger change, presenting a snapshot of my early creative and personal life. In my future poems, I look to expand upon the ideas and ideals presented in this introduction. I remain proud of the output I’ve accomplished thus far, and even in moments of frustration in editing I am inspired knowing this is only the beginning of my writing life.

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Part One:
Arkansas

Entrance

I am the Grand Admiral Welder
and I come out to my theme music
 “Ain’t it Funny” by Danny Brown
dressed in a waterfall of white
The epaulettes, the medals, the ribbons and devices
jut and overhang like precarious rocks
streaming a bedazzled wall of cape to the stage’s floor

On my face I wear
a mask of my own design
a winged forehead
a unicorn’s horn
ears like an elf
gills like a merman
and I carry a spiked metal chair
in my left hand.

Behind me walks my wife
Akira Hokuto
in a black wedding dress
I don’t look at the crowd
 despite its size
I look to the ring
where stands some shadow opponent:
 a jobber jabroni

I step forward
into the cacophony of lazer lights
stepping as if RuPaul is watching

I’ve already won
I’ve already won

For Maddie

I.

I'm looking at you
through rose-tinted
binoculars, through
your black bedroom
window, into your
looking glass,
where you brush your bangs.

II.

That night
in the old Earle Hotel,
I remember
standing in the mildewed
staircase, in an off-the-rack
blazer, modeling my father's
Purple Heart on my sleeve.

Up that staircase
in the decrepit ballroom we collided,
a coincidence of assigned seating,
sitting in those "late to Easter service
no empty pews
back of the sanctuary"
kinda chairs.

Must I write
how you looked that night?
You yourself know,
but I've sketched it so many times
the image in my mind has faded
like a picture
overexposed by time.

We fox-trotted on linoleum,
later, to the tune of "Hey There Delilah"
playing out of a cassette player.
I stepped on your toes.

In return,
you stepped on mine.
We laughed

over store-bought
cheesecake and
Shirley Temples.
A mother, either
mine or yours,
took a photo that night
that I could never find after.

III.

And how I looked.
That was the Fall Ball.
That winter I drew maps,
wrote fan-fiction,
charted flight plans
for another collision
at the Spring Ball.

And I looked for you
through a thousand Maddie files:
no hard copy photo,
not on my mother's hard drive,
no intel,
no Instagram.
It was 2001.

Those nights,
tossing turnless,
I escaped through my window
playing "Hey There
Delilah" on repeat,
following streetlight
nightlights, calling out your name.

IV.

Come Spring Ball,
police scanning the kids
in the hall:

no sign.

over store-bought
king cake and
Mary Badhams:
no sign.

on linoleum
goose-stepping
to the tune of
“Low (ft. T-Pain)”:
still no sign.

I am crowned King of the Ring
and even up on shoulders:
no sign.

by mother-son dance
I am crying
accusing her of stepping on my toes
as an excuse

V.

Maddie, I have a hundred crushes
planted across Clark County
like land mines.
But your name,
your name,
Mah-dee:
you are an atom bomb
and my heart still stands
in the shadow
of your detonation.

The Great Vagina

In middle school, there was a hole at the edge of the playground. My friends and I would congregate around the hole during recess and drink chocolate milk. The hole was wide enough for just one of us to stand in, barely a foot deep. While the girls sat in the shade of the rotting gazebo and the other boys played touch football down the hill, we would take turns standing in the hole.

We called it the Great Vagina.

Around the uninitiated, we referred to it as “TGV.” We became obsessed with its origin: was someone trying to dig under the fence to escape? Was it a portal to Hell? We started to make sacrifices to the Great Vagina. Crinkled Cheeto bags, pepper packets, mechanical pencil lead; any detritus we found in the halls or blown by the wind we dropped into the Great Vagina.

In April, just before summer break, I told a girl about the Great Vagina. To my friends, this was the ultimate betrayal; the breaking of a circle that must remain unbroken. I told her during lunch and, by recess, word had spread to all of the girls. When I brought them to the hole my friends were leaning on the fence, arms crossed, disgusted.

The girls looked at the hole and said, “that’s not what a vagina looks like.”

“Yes it does,” I said.

Frankie Avalon's Italian Sonnet for Frenchy

Though I descend from Malt Shop in the Sky,
not Christ, nor bird, nor hunk do I appear;
forever gilded, 'mongst the permed and spry,
these locks oblige dye black and mousse cohered.
But Pink! Hence Paul, Damascus Rd. beneath,
take heed my academic counseling:
return to Venice High, your brush bequeath
for glare of Principal McGee, lapsing
your beauty school hairdressing daydreams now.
It could be worse, you could be me: allowed
relief from Heaven's glare exclusively
to gift (impart) advice in manner "thou."
Oh, Sisyphus of Tartarus, aloud
I pray for boulders over truant deeds!

Auctioneer

Failed Soundcloud rapper
Now working the family gig
Spitting out cattle prices
at the Texarkana Auction Barn

There's manure in the cracks of his Yeezy's
The gavel's smack makes his headache worse
These gallon hats can tell he's slurring
Did Lil Peep ever feel like this?

Maybe he'll move out to Houston
Maybe he'll make moonshine with the family still
 Sell it at the barn after hours
 Make enough to buy that Neumann mic

Then the gallon hats'll stop calling him wigger
Then they'll start buying what he's got
But the still scheme wouldn't, couldn't work
So he'll just have to fill a mason jar with water

Practicing behind the barn's dumpster:

“Gathered here today to say, I say,
like Foghorn Leghorn
Born to brew this corn but I should warn
before you're stillborn
This shit make you still like Custer's Hill
at Little Bighorn
Last stand that trip X what else you
expect from Prof. X
I may be messin' 'bout that mason
but not Amex so
if you want effects it ain't complex:
personal effects
like rocks, socks, glocks and clocks, locks, blocs and
cash, cards and checks
you know I perplex, know I get sex,
know I'm up next.”

Travel Tee-Ball Tournament

There's a body in the Yeti
in the back of my SUV. I

am driving to Texarkana
with my fucking family. I

see my wife, she's in scrubs, and my
son, he's in cleats, saying, "gee, I

hope we win." They better win,
or swear to Lord almighty I

will kick that coach's ass in front
of God and everybody. I

am not fucking around. Think I
am? Take a look at the body. I

shot the spic crossing the border,
right through his cranial cavity. I

bagged our militia's first casualty.
I've fulfilled the fantasy. I

am now tasked with disposing of
him, under Red River realty, but I

can't get these cleats wet. And if we
get pulled over, better believe I'll

pull out my AR and kill them,
my wife and my son, and myself, me.

Final Thoughts of the Dog Hung by Mike Huckabee's Son at Camp Pioneer in Hatfield,
AR in 1998

Allegedly
Allegedly
A llegendly
a legend he
a rope from behind the cabin
a ledge
my mouth
no my neck
a tree
Hanging but not
Hanging not hanging out
Hanging and swinging
swinging
like the rope is in my mouth
in my neck
in the rope
is climbing
I have ears
I hear laughing but I can't see
someone laughing
someone screaming
I have no neck
my head
distant
from my body
my body
sharp
distance
dis stance
this stance
dis can't
this can't
can't stand
can't
cannot
can
can kick
kick
kick
kicked

Deer Head

A cloud moves west
over the peak sun
as the mud and blood besiege
the last of the tap water

The drops fly off my face
leaping and glittering
back into the male end
of the garden hose
my mother holds

We four are all standing
dirty
again
and my mother opens her mouth
making a sound
like a VCR
before she drops the hose and moonwalks
back to the driveway

We moonwalk
down the path to the brown water
of Mill Creek

When we reach that place
the sun reveals it
and the three fall in line
as I float
into the red water
and extend

my arm shakes as the ripples besiege it
the antler leaps into my hand
the head blinks
the mouth opens
and it vomits
glittering black tape
that circles my head and crowns me
creating antlers of my own

My Other Cheek

And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

—Matthew 5:40-41 (ESV)

That red riverbed
that clay drilled by cleats and drills
That twin tumulus
that splitting railroad
those graffitied boxcars
the power lines
lining the way towards town
That tornado
its shadow still downtown with
its feed store and pound
That collapsed turret
that twisted rebar and broken
wall atop walls atop walls

But atop even that
above my other cheek
I see it all
I can see for yards and yards
the empty fiefdoms of moons passed
the unmanned towers of mascots dead
the unguarded citizens of meritocracies toppled
and over the Ozarks: Mount Comfort
and over the Mississippi: the Long-Lost Brothers
over and over
the crow cry uncovers the battlefield

Reptar Crossing the Mississippi

Pressing craters into the river bank,
soft as an infant's posterior fontanelle,
It never looks down; lizard eyes locked,
Its glare is for the opposite shore: a stretch
of deep Delta emerald, a farm downstate
of endless roaming.

The last crater for the eye, into the Earth's
scabbed embankment, brings lapping
brown to Reptar's scaled feet:

Like John 13:5

Like the rusted, barnacled hull of a ghost ship dividing the water
like a deck of cards.

The moment does not last.

The next step touches water first, then earth.
water climbs Its body like a thermometer in heat,
cooling the cold-blooded king.
From my vantage, up on the bridge,
looking not down or up,
but straight across at Its t-rex arms,
i think to myself
can it even swim?

It doesn't have to.
Even at river's deepest part,
the brown mercury does not even exceed Its chest.
The river's flow flowing around It,
i wonder to myself

*can Its presence,
in the middle of the river,
can that be felt in the beginning water?
all the way up in Minnesota or down in the Gulf?*

Its presence is flooding both shores,
burying craters behind and watering emerald ahead.
Even in the middle, in the deepest, he stands.

Though his ignorant wandering has destroyed farmland, townland and cityland
across Arkansas, sending me now for refuge in Mississippi,
he seems to understand
that where he stands is the division between two words:
a division not drawn up in ink
but taken as itself a mark
because it is a force of nature,
like Himself.

National Guards from both states guard
on their respective shores,
waiting for his next move,
watching to make sure he does not destroy
the bridge I am on with other cars and other drivers.
Yet I feel no fear.

White smoke escapes Reptar's nostrils.
Not a threat, I pray,
but maybe
he has finally picked a new Pope.

Part Two:
Mississippi

Coup De Grâce

I saw Finn Bálor wrestle
one Sunday in Tupelo,
Mississippi by myself.
I drove forty-five minutes
and paid twenty-five dollars
to see him live, in person,

foot-stomp another person
from the top rope of the wrestling
ring. Twenty-five dollars
well spent at the Tupelo
Arena for some minutes
of peace and calm for myself.

The drive up there by myself
was long. I'm now a person
who drives forty-five minutes
to watch just one pro-wrestler.
I forgot that Tupelo
was Elvis's birthplace (ten dollars

per tour). Just ten dollars
to see the place, for yourself,
where a boy from Tupelo
began his ascent from person
to Star Child, garbed like wrestlers
future. Apt it's minutes

from the arena, minutes
I won't spend because ten dollars
is not worth missing wrestler
Finn Bálor. By myself,
I watched the other person
take that stomp in Tupelo.

I don't think that Tupelo
crowd grasped those precious minutes.
To see an ascendant per-
son is worth ten times the dollars
I saved and spent myself

to see the world's best wrestler.

I saw Finn Bálor wrestle
that Sunday in Tupelo,
Mississippi by myself.
I drove forty-five minutes
and paid twenty-five dollars
to see him stomp me.

Buckner's Trestle

“Built by the Mississippi Central Railroad
in the late 1850s, this trestle was the site of
two train wrecks in 1870 and 1928. The 1928
wreck injured forty-two passengers, including several
University of Mississippi students and faculty.”
—Mississippi Department of
Archives and History, 2013

Magnolia, memorialize them,
our splintered bodies.
It was the Lord's will
for us to shatter like lanterns,
for our smoke to rise up.
Magnolia, report the number
of soulless bodies
never to ascend.
And now
build atop our carcasses.

Magnolia, amend us,
our sprained student body.
It was our will and testament
testing our flame in rain,
to shift the mountain trunk.
Magnolia, gather our luggage,
and the pages on the wind
descending into the town.
And now
we live as truants of heaven.

The Church of Hatsune Miku

I visited the Church of
Hatsune Miku one Sunday.
The congregation was in blazers,
VR headsets, seersucker dresses.
We passed the Bitcoin offering
plate as the choir streamed
for half a cent per hymn.
The sermon, periscoped in
from Jackson, ran long;
mothers had to silence
their babies, grandfathers snored.
I gave it a thumbs down
as we all rushed out for mimosas.

Ballad for H.B. 1523

Wooden crosses on the side of the highway
missing signs on a telephone pole
yellow tape across a dark alleyway
and a stone marking where there's man in a hole

All of these things they put up for you
all of these things mark what they cannot undo
but these are the things that they never would do
if you were alive and still hiding what's true

We fell in love when we were just kids
still believing that our hearts were corrupt
corrupted by thoughts that our Lord forbids
but no thought of damnation could interrupt

The love notes between us were emoji hearts
and Snapchats shot across town like little red darts
Even the words we exchanged in the dark
were softened by these cartoon postmarks

Our game went on like this until our senior year
never a word in the field house or the halls
and despite the way that we tried to appear
those who would kill you still saw through it all

Our last semester during homecoming week
you promised for Friday the thing we'd postponed
that after we left our dates with a kiss on the cheek
we would find a dirt road and kiss on our own

Out in that country laying flat in your truck bed
both under the blanket of a darkened oak cove
the headlights surrounded us with the squeak of tire tread
and the dark figures snatched you, threw you in and away they drove

I parked your truck next to mine at the high school
I didn't call the police, your parents or your phone
I looked out for myself and I know it sounds cruel
but the paralyzing guilt was something I could not postpone

But I thought of you at wooden crosses on the side of the highway
And I putting missing signs on up telephone poles
and when the yellow tape went up across a dark alleyway
I cried by the stone where they put you in a hole

All of these things we put up for you
all of these things mark what I cannot undo
but these are the things that they never would do
if their corrupted hearts didn't make laws against our own

Teeth Puller

call me "Dentist Dalty"
i'll stare into your void
i'll scrape the plaque
 (like a painter in reverse)
i'll fill your fillings with fingernails

have you been seeing other dentists?
is there an "Orthodontist Owen" on the side?
i can feel a pulse
in your breathing
vantablack atop vantablack

Autocorrect-Generated Beat Poem

I.

My name is Dalton and I am still not going to the show
I am so sorry for that sir
I think you should come pick it
and you can pick me
your shirt for me
your welcome sir

II.

I was born a year old but I'm not a fan
but I'm not going as a fan
I don't have a fan but I'm sure it would never be a bad thing
but I'm about it

III.

I was born to a good man and he is my lord
I am so far off my lord and he said it is my god
I am a good lord
I love it
he said he was the lord who was a good man
to good and holy holy god god is god holy holy
god god I am holy god

IV.

I don't think you can get a hold of me
your love is a good man
and he is a good man
and he is a good man
and he is a good map
and he is a goop man
and he is a god map
and she is a good man
and he is a good

V.

is that god is a man that god I love ❤️

god i hope 🙏

god has been god holy god god holy hell he was god

holy god god holy man god is holy

Ode to the Granny that Fell in Square Books

Of all
the places
on the Square
to trip:
the curbs,
the potholes,
the balconies,
you chose
the most
operatic.

The missed step,
a perfectly
executed
en pointe
on air;
your arms,
thrown
out;
floating,
like Dalí's
Christ;
your hair,
immaculate,
still,
like Doris Roberts;
your chin,
tucked, and your face,
unperturbed.

Your body
has remained
intact
for decades
in spite of
leaded gasoline
saturated fats,
colds wars,
high heels,
hurricanes.

You know
how to fall;
you are a
professional
at plummets.
And here,
in this
mecca
for the
elderly,
you are
putting on
a clinic
for your
peers,
doing
the most
before
your warranty
expires.

Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays
or, Barron

“Will be having many meetings this weekend at The Southern White House. Big 5:00 P.M. speech in Melbourne, Florida. A lot to talk about!”

—President Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), 6:51 AM - 18 Feb 2017

sundays, too, the pack
would arrive at dawn
and reveal their backs
in the verdant heat.
Then, with ungloved
hands that ripped
and swam in their dance
made tangled brambles fumble.
I thanked them so much.

I'd bake and glean
that neighboring drone, sizzle.
When the line died,
he'd call,
and lickety-split
I would leap and fan,
fearing the chronic
fumings of that room.

Mumbling distant to him,
Midas, who will soon
drive out the Others
and soil my good
name as well.
What does he know
What does he know
of gilded and lonely Oval Offices?

Shannon

Last fall, I visited Kentucky for the first time with my roommate Sam. Instead of getting a hotel we stayed with a guy named Shannon, a friend of Sam's from his hometown. Shannon was a fine host, but he was an eccentric one. I discovered, over the three days we stayed in his sparse, one-bedroom apartment, that he has many quirks.

For example, on Saturday morning, Shannon said he went to bed at five in the morning and woke up at seven in the morning. He said the same thing Sunday morning. Also, every time we went out for meals, all weekend, Sam and I would order food and Shannon wouldn't get anything (other than a drink or two). The only thing I saw him eat all weekend was a stale loaf of bread from Jimmy John's on Saturday night. He would also vape, if that counts as food.

At a crowded bar on Friday night, Shannon showed me his collection of nude photos he said "girls from home always send me randomly." The next night, at another crowded bar, he told me he was "genetically superior" to every guy around him and could "kick their asses if they tried anything." Then there was his tattoo: Shannon had a tattoo on his right shoulder depicting a man and woman, both in medieval garb, with the man holding a dagger, standing defensively in front of the woman. He told me he designed it himself, said it represents his life motto: "to get to her, you have to get through me." Sam later told me the woman on the tattoo looked just like the girl who had rejected him at his last college.

Shannon had transferred to Kentucky from Purdue to study forestry just a year ago. When he wasn't working a part-time job as a J.V. football coach for his uncle, he was exploring the forest behind his apartment. He told us about a creek he found, one that had tunneled its way through the underground root system of an impending tree line and bubbled back up to the forest floor. We asked him to show us the creek, but he never took us.

a Kentucky creek
a line of reddening trees
what eats at their roots?

Water Towers

kudzu crawls over the mass graves like the cover of the R.E.M. record up the
stairs and to the landing up the stairs into the hall of my doorknob tractor that
I pilot to clear the vines and churn the hills sowing roses in my wake
from Metcalfe to Scooba Walnut to Pascagula my sideline the Flood Zone and
my guidepost rusted water towers Big Daddy would say to me as I would
bundle bouquets of weeds in the yard son the only thing you'll be is a
ditch digger and he was right about that and right about faster horses younger
men older me and no more money he didn't live to see our Worker's State
and he didn't live to see his work ethic in me in our Relaxation Plantation
fifteen an hour for fifteen a week I'm making overtime making time in my
revolutionary combine and I know I have either run over him or will run over
him over in some sarcophagus in some charmin shaw you had to die
Big Daddy you had to die for full communism you had to die you were
bad and bougie and I can't look down or I'll die I like to look up
through the icy windshield through the mirage and wave to the folks
fanning blue tarps as I pass now I prefer henbit to be quite frank but
thorns keep your ghost below until planting season comes again

Pantoum on Hugh

He begins with a lie and ends with the truth.

Do you recall the Nutt Administration?

Ten years prior, one state over?

Oh, what a clusterfuck his malice has wrought!

“Do you recall the Nutt Administration?”

I remember breaking the news on the radio.

Oh, what a clusterfuck his malice has wrought!

Falling for Bathshebas like a preacher or politician.

I remember breaking the news on the radio.

The way he tried to make the letters of his words red,

with vague warnings about falling for Bathsheba’s like a preacher or politician.

But isn’t a football coach a preacher and a politician?

Oh, the way Hugh tried to make the letters of his words red,

tried to invoke the forgiveness clause in his contract.

Isn’t a football coach a preacher and a politician?

Laying tracks for the next election, the next congregation.

But can he invoke the forgiveness clause in his contract?

I remember him at the front row of the Church of Hatsune Miku,

laying tracks for the next election, the next congregation.

They did love it when he raised his hands to the ceiling.

I remember him at the Church of Hatsune Miku.

Even the true believers say he hurt his family,

but they loved it when he raised his hands to the ceiling.

And they’ll love him at the next congregation.

Even the true believers say he hurt our family:

our brand, our narrative, our moral integrity.

They’ll love him at the next congregation,

but will he be bitter, like Nutt?

Our brand, our narrative, our moral integrity,

carefully crafted by boosters in Hallmark TV movies.

Will he be bitter like Nutt,

and smash the next idol, a new Ozymandias,

carefully crafted by boosters in Hallmark TV movies,
a new Nebuchadnezzar in a Nike visor, and even he will
smash the next idol, a new Ozymandias, one
more incarnation of Moorcock's Eternal Loser.

A new Nebuchadnezzar in a Nike visor...
Do you remember the Freeze Administration?
Another incarnation of Moorcock's Eternal Loser.
That's what it will be remembered as.

Do you foresee the next Freeze Administration?
It will begin with a lie and end with the truth.
That's what it will be remembered as.
Ten years future, one state over.

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