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BINDWEED AND FIRE

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
at the University of Mississippi

By

JOSHUA DAVIS

August 2012

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ABSTRACT

Bindweed and Fire is a collection of poems in three sections. The first two sections, Drought and Watermarks, contain short metrical lyrics built around images of fire and water. Sabbath, the third section is a long free-verse poetic sequence in three voices. In ekphrastic poems rich with private symbolism, the first voice attempts to refract through the prism of visual art the relationship between a father and son. Providing a counterpoint to the first, the second voice seeks to qualify, correct, and comment on the private symbolism. The third voice tries to give a wider view of the everyday lives of parent and child, their habits, their history, and the tensions at play between them.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my teachers, especially Ann Fisher-Wirth, Gary Short, Mary Hayes, and Annie Finch; to my fellow students, especially Emileigh Barnes, Wendy Buffington, Dorothy Knight, Corinna McClanahan Schroeder, Travis Smith, and Sara Williams; to my sisters and brothers; to Elliot Long.

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Godmother Kahlo

Bearing the heart of a man in my hands,
I kneel at your hem. The thorns at your throat
have rattled like skulls in my sleep since the day
you broke my left foot, the day I was born.
Limping but upright, I walk in your wake.

DROUGHT

Sometimes

So this is what happens when the sky
scrolls blank. The moon sneaks down,
shoes in her hands so that no one hears, to this bar.
And sometimes, on nights like this one, she

lets some man or woman drag out her blues,
She guides the one at the bench through the octaves
of sequins and smoke, every eight notes
another skip from stone to stone across a creek.

The unsuspecting singer never knows
music will always belong to the moon.
The moon owns those fermatas that cut breaths in half,
those arpeggios that rove like a seven-car train,

those rests that taste like a mouthful of black cherries.

Thunderheads

Desert-moored, I pant. I swelter.
Every limb grows spiked and spiny.
Root hairs wilt. Sepals droop.

Dry air cracks my thin green skin.
Now I pray for clearer water
than the water I have known.

Come down, clouds from other planets,
schools of fish from lunar oceans.
Circle, fliers. Claim my branches.

Gather seeds until the storm clouds
trap you in their rain-lined houses
where you sing down through my sleep.

July 2, 1937 8:44 a.m.

Light breaks the sky into mica flecks.
Cold branches like trees, like after-trees.
Static too loud, too thick for talk.
Currents carve staircases into whipped cloud.
O, optimist. O, persistent sister.
Amelia, Amelia.

Lorena Hickok Writes to Amelia Earhart

Congratulations on your newest ads
for soap and sponge cake. Or was it soufflé?
Some buoyant thing. Days grind me flat
as Kansas, and as cold. "Hick, darling, stay,"
you said, and "Yes, I want you too."
Fresh memos, needing typing, flurry down.
The president and *she* are fighting (*you?*).
Our Eleanor, cinched in a too-tight gown,
scandalizes all the frumps at tea,
bragging how you smiled at her once
and touched her shoulder, but she doesn't see
how foolish she sounds, talking school-girl mush.
My aviatrix, how the jilt would sting
if our First Lady knew you wear my ring.

Eleanor Remembers

Amelia, the days devastate me like you,
defiant and total. Brutal, like you.

I collect the clippings. Soon,
Franklin says, they'll stop looking for you.

My aching hands. Glowering clouds. No clues.
Did the waves, envying those altitudes, take you?

When I'm alone, I touch the checkered scarf. It's blue,
the one I wore when I flew with you.

The sky? Quieter than light on a spoon.
Tonight, a woman breathed near my ear. She wasn't you.

Every winged thing's reckless. I knew.
I said, Eleanor, she's not coming back for you.

Spanish Leaves Me

Snake-forked, double-tongued, I had two words for fire.
Each could call flame out of the air and into my mouth—
flame, a long-gone friend who always returned in a new red coat.

I lazed in the hot silk between *granada* and pomegranate. Now, far away
from Florida, *mi Amá otra*, I've lost half the taste of these bright seeds.
I lose an hour of early morning, *madrugada*, and spend a whole day sliding

my tongue over my bottom teeth trying to get it back. The word might lie
gristled there. I can't claim an island, a royal ancestor, or the memory of *abuela*
sighing "*Mijo*" over my crib. I hid inside Spanish like an angry kid

who scurries into the old treehouse then rolls up the rope
ladder behind him. My Spanish flashed like a knife-set
still new in its woodblock, each word a glimmer along the steel.

Now the treehouse sits empty, the knives dull or stolen.
Two women push blue strollers. *Chisme* flies around their heads
in a cloud of gnats. I miss the lacquered fan of eavesdrop,

the tingle of overhearing, but more than rumor, more than *Galavisión*
or Marquez in the original, I miss my other name, *Javier*.
I miss the ones who loved me then, wrapped in some other music.

My Mother Talks about Her Hysterectomy

The fields still swell and crash under my palms.
The wind hears me. I raise my arms, commanding
the stalks to bend as I wander these fields

of millet and corn. I've canned through June:
blackberry preserves, pickled okra, tomato chutney.
I learn each day to try to love this cleared-out space.

The next time I cradle the tulip's head in my palm,
I'll remember how I winced when a length of fire
first unfurled in my side. I won't miss it.

I say goodbye to the galaxy of my unborn. Go on.
Walk into the world through some other woman
or sleep the distant sleep of unnamed planets.

The One-Year Servant Talks to Himself

I'll eat the burnt toast, Love, and scrape the crumbs.
Bring me your laundry. I'll treat stains after I shake out the crumbs.

In the basement, I tamp the spots where the pen ink flowered,
daylight through the windows willowed down to crumbs.

You're on your way home—one free hour left.
Broom bristles scratch the tile, chasing crumbs.

Another bland curry, another fist-throated talk—I cook all afternoon.
Your fork constellates the crumbs.

On my walk the next morning, my wet curls freeze, rearing high as snakes.
You brush me off like crumbs.

You walk in on my bath. You sulk. You try to keep me off the phone.
I grind my teeth. In sleep, I tear whole loaves of bread to crumbs.

Sleep's the only place you can't invade. When I read or close the door,
you cry. You say I'm only giving crumbs.

You'll find the note I've left. O, train whistle. O, thicket.
O, hot-mouthed stranger. Take me in. Josh, you've lived too long on crumbs.

Wolf Chant

Let the forest begin in an eye.
Let the eye look out over the trees.
Let the trees spill their light on the lake.
Let the lake call the wolves to come drink.

Come, ageless winds who wear fur for a season.
Come with your dark-bristled hunger, your song.
Come with your muzzles white-stippled in winter.
Come. For this land cannot live in your leaving.

Let the wolves call the lake out of nothing.
Let the lake flood the trees with its light.
Let the trees stare back into the eye.
Let the eye open into a forest.

Walking Home

I hear the sneakers of almost lovers squeak in the rain, their low vowels in the low light. I want to be invisible so I can stand between the man with jeans low on his hips and the woman with the tortoiseshell

comb in her hair. I want to breathe their breath under this umbrella of water-veined leaves. I want to cup the curves of their backs, drum up words from the mud, harder than gravel, harder than sky to protect

the moment her mouth opens, as delicate as a hummingbird, the moment she kisses his neck, and he tastes papaya. I want to fall in love as they do, follow them onto boat houses

hung with paper lanterns and hold their hands as they hold one another's hands over frosted glass tables. I want to guide her fingers to the handful between his thighs. I want to guide his hand to cup the back of her neck

I want to move in with them, vacuum the carpet, dust the lampshades, dry the dishes, wash the blue cotton sheets so they can come home with brown bags brimming with rice, kale, and papaya,

so they can pour cheap red wine, so they can dance to Al Green, so they can shake the bed frame, so they can clip their toenails and finger paint on Sundays. I want to watch over their love as I never watched over my own.

A Poem by Emileigh Barnes

In the window seat overlooking the fire escape,
the light scrawled across your rainy skin,

across my rainy skin. Watching the steeple's green scallops,
I traced your fibonacci earcurve with one finger,

heat feathering, curling red, redder, then down
over the first night noises. There was flare, darkening. Collapse.

Can you count the ions between us?

The Miller's Daughter

Under the wet-beveled bellies of stones,
through fester and strangle, nightshade and nettle,
following moss tangle, wing scratch, root sinews,

she listens for names among pondweed and cloud curd—
messengers fail to bring back the right word—
stepping again where she stepped as a girl,

plain cotton dress snagged by briars and branches.
Neither the deer nor the hare can reveal
which is the whisper she's chased for two days.

One day remains, sun unreeling behind her.
Yet, as the woods awaken around her,
all the sky's windows thistled with rain streaks,

her blood thrums in time with the shimmer and tremble.
For one dappled moment, she breathes, wanting nothing,
away from her throne, her crown, and the cradle.

Tale for My Daughter, As Yet Unborn

The golden kings came for her money. She said, "Sirs, I have none."
She'd long spent her coins on the road that wound west of the sea.

Somewhere she lost the old cloak the north wind wrapped around her,
so the kings tracked her trek through the foothills and over the cliffs.

For too long she'd paid for the kings' gilded hallways and parlors.
For too long she'd honored their laws that would keep her from love.

So she fled to the south, to the queen whose nine women ruled with her,
where the bakers and seamstresses thrived and didn't care whom she kissed.

When the golden kings came for her money, she said, "Sirs, I have none."
"Tithing is over," she told them. "Our mother's come home."

The Ivy Speaks

We're green and ambitious as money.
Stretching, we drag as we rasp.
We climb slow as blood pressure. Watch.
Blindly, our yawns ache for sky.

Stretching, we drag as we rasp,
shiver, billow, and claw.
Blindly, our yawns ache for sky,
spreading a red-threaded tent.

Shiver, billow, and claw—
these are the ways we encroach,
spreading. A red-threaded tent—
circus of hunger and choke.

These are the ways we encroach:
our hooks catch in crannies and crags,
circus of hunger and choke.
We latch. We cluster. We clutch.

Our hooks catch in crannies and crags.
We climb slow as blood pressure. Watch.
We latch. We cluster and clutch.
We're green and ambitious as money.

Harrow

In a season of bindweed and fire
came the day when the plain van appeared,
when the screen door scraped,
when the father turned, handcuffed.
The house sat mute, hollowed of rustlings—

Needlework

When I visit the moon in her cave,
she hands me a heap of white cloth
stretched on a hoop. As I sew,

stitch after stitch starts to bleed,
so I tear out my heart at each X.
“Do it again,” says the moon.

Stain

At the back of my ache,
as if ache were a cave
sits the day, still alive,
when my mother turned eight,

and her father stood close
in the hollow of night,
his scarred thumb on the knot
at her heel, then her knee—

WATERMARKS

Summons

If I were to sit
under the streetlight
with a lapful of oranges,
what night doors might open?

Once the night doors open,
what will sulk its way
out of the ether and rest

its head on my knee as I
peel the oranges and feed it,
slice by slice?

It's the father I call
over and over,
almost not caring
who what whispers back.

Isle Full of Noises

At bedtime, the boy tugs the blue of his comforter,
smoothing its waves and the flounce of its foam.
Sailboat shadows feint. Breezy drapes swill their trim.
A storm turns its clockwork eye onto his room.
Sometimes his father leans in the doorway,
swaying and whistling, smile fierce in the dark.
Sometimes his father sits close, puts his mouth
near the boy's ear, recites, *Be not afraid*.

The Boy Who Wanted to Become a Mermaid

1985

He was born right by the river
in an old shed that fed on the water.
His mouth opened, wanted something,
finding nothing, missing mother.

1990

In the bathtub, before bedtime,
he pours Morton's salt, waiting for scales.
Fins should shimmer any minute.
Father knocks, asks, "Coming out soon?"

1995

Every week, the mermaids taunt him,
their foam green hair oiled with scum.
They'll teach him to talk with bubbles
when they drag him down to meet them.

Submerged

As our blue veins branch under water,
your hand cups the back of my neck.
Parabolic, our wineglass spines arch higher
as your blue veins branch toward mine. Underwater
roots fork—blacker deeper colder.
We trace with our teeth the paths we lick,
ghost veins. Branching and blue under the water,
your hands cup the back of my neck.

Candlemas Prayer

Bridgit, every year you bless
women with unwanted children.

I'd sacrifice my curly hair, my fingernails, my sleep
—every unborn son and daughter—to see these women

cradle that swaddled light, that dimpled promise.
Bring them a baby.

They'll hold her and teach her to name
her world carefully. They'll teach her to grow

impatiens in the garden, to grow her hair
long and untamable. Make an oath, or I'll never

light candles in your name again.
On your feast day, I'll fast. You can starve

on my silence. I'll offer my faith
to any god kinder than you.

Miranda Lies Sleepless

When I was a toddler and restless,
you waved your hands, and the flicker
of candle flames leapt from their wicks.

You told me my mother loved music.
You told me she played the piano.
Now, after spindrifts of pages, no sleep

heavy as plums and as dark—
long night tunes each key as the tide
opens its mouth slick with foam.

Father, I wake up each night,
so motherless even the moon
doesn't notice when I clatter down

the lattice that leads to my room.
Out here, in this air braised with salt,
I lie on the lawn with my hands

folded in prayer to the middle of me
and wait for my mother to come.

Miranda's Request

Just give me one detail. Were her eyes green?
When I unbraid my hair or look toward the cliffs,

hand at my eyebrows to slice down the sun,
I've seen you stare at me, harrowed by memory.

Mimic her voice or uncork her laugh.
You've bottled it somewhere. You shepherd the clouds

and corral the four winds. You turn breezes to birds.
Use one of your cantrips to conjure her face.

And, if your bright tricks have dimmed too much with time,
tell me the story of how her hair spilled

down her neck when you met on the hill in the cold—
how, when you waved your hand, snow warmed into rain.

Did she kiss your mouth? Did you say her name?
Repeat it to me, then. I've never heard it.

Miranda Tries to Conjure Sisters

While the sun sleeps curled in its cave,
my salt-lashed feet dance into riot.

*When did we stop and start growing
Into the halls of tall stone?*

Stay with me, other men's daughters.
I'm tired of "only" and "first."

The wind lulls. The braid of our voices
grows slack as the night starts to fade.

*How did it turn out that water
Was only a place we could drown?*

I've gathered verbena and thistle,
owl feathers, wormwood, and willow.

These words are a call to my sisters.
Their voices call back through the quiet.

*We played by the water, ran barefoot.
We opened our eyes and grew brown.*

Miranda Along the Jetty

Stars cork the dark. I yank the corks, one by one:
blood and milk, blood and milk.

Mares climb out of the foam, their manes smooth as ink.
When I touch them, they reel. The wave glint, the grit.

Gull cry, cinder light, a constellation of sand fleas,
a woman whose skin is the color of mine in summer.

The woman's mouth traces shapes I don't know.
She cuts a lock of her own hair.

The lock twists and lengthens, rooting into the earth.
Leaf-saddled branches stretch wide and high,

so I climb. I could pluck the moon
and carry home that bright fruit.

Miranda Writes in the Sand

A lover of edges and verges, I unspool my thoughts where I know the foam will take them up and wash them out. I find a stick and etch in scratches. A swirl, a dot, a wave. I name the days after blossoms: ghost orchid, stargazer. Sometimes I count an hour with one word: sky, cliff, frond. I say what I like: I wish my were dead. I repeat myself. I repeat myself. When I want to write mother, I slash a blank. Then I wait and watch the water lap up that nothing.

If I Told You I Lived in the Planetarium,

would you believe me or not?

It's true. I can chart an invisible line
connecting the moles on your neck

with the ones on your hand and left thigh.

Bottled storm, the windows are open.

Take my hand. Walk me through every room:

the hallways where thunderheads cluster and brood,
dim alcoves lit only by schools of bright fish,
the smoky-blue pool room, where women

take women into their arms like wrapped parcels,
and men watch themselves in the mirror glow,
the glint of skin stretched over their hearts, fingernails

trilling down the keys of another man's spine.

Let your fingers fall half-step by half-step,
and when we're sick of smoke and hibiscus,

we'll wander among the apiary rows.

I'll let that sugared singing teach me how to praise
you—all things buzzing, all things sweet.

Lost

Nobody watches the toddler and newborn.
His cries burst purple and red in the air.
Their mother left hours ago, with a man.
Sulking, the toddler can't carry her brother.

Some loose-shadowed boy chased by a light
could kidnap the infant home to an island
perched on a star. But what of the sister
alone with a woman who'd never grow up?

Tiamat

Open your endless mouth, salt mother Tiamat.
I'm not like Jonah. Whale ribs won't harbor me.
Mirrored with tide pools, pillared with water spouts,
cradle me cold in the brine of your chaos.

Too many years of calling on goddesses
leave me afraid when my too-human mother
threatens to drown herself so I'll swim after her,
both of us caught in the music of undertows.

But, Tiamat, if I let you devour me,
how can I blame her for wanting to die?

Waterbreathing

We float, gilled and thirstless.
Windows flood. Red lamps blear
in the jellyfish hall.
Curling their crepe, men-of-war.

The purple fans of fighting fish,
anemones, unnamed
drifters— hoverers. Faint
across hot shoulders, ears, ankles,

light wavers, strummed by fins.
We long to iridesce.
Ignoring scales and spiracles,
we slide, all mouths and heat.

SABBATH

My Father and Me as a Still Life

Two blue glass bowls sit side by side, both cracked.
Buried light hails hard through blue stained glass.
One large bowl holds a pomegranate, split in half.

The smaller bowl is empty, shadow-crammed,
and in a corner, on the table cloth, a blood stain
swells. The wall behind the table—blue as well—

traps the light. A mirror hangs. The room
lies doubled there in all its blue and red.

Tell them why the pomegranate.
Tell them how your father lived
in hell. He fed you

six seeds so you would live there too.
You could have called him king
of winter, for all the days he lingered

on the couch. Tell them how
even when his numbers were good,
he watched reruns and chain smoked.

Tell them he read to you
every night 'til you were five.
Tell them no one reads to you now.

Like A Prisoner of Hard Words

after C.D. Wright

A father sits on the terrazzo.
His child cuts a chain of paper dolls.
The dolls touch hands as the child unfolds them.
Father and child smell the honeysuckle near the window.
Neither perceives the hum of the telephone wires.
In his closet, the child pretends to read.
Inflatable animals populate the child's bedroom.
When the father vomits, the child listens behind a door.
No one wants to name the illness.
The father teaches the child to catch rain on his tongue.
In the yard, a thorn thicket grows.
At the keyboard, the child struggles with his left hand.
Someone has lost the key to the shed.
The child craves the mother's name.
The child prefers to play by himself.
Orange pill bottles empty too quickly.
Televisions glow in every room.
Father and child doze in the afternoon.
Gleaming on the table, the scissors.
Cabinets open and slam when the father yells.
The monthly blood tests promise little.
The ice cream truck groans through the neighborhood.
The child admits he can't describe the sting of the snow cone.
Someone loads the mailbox with a cherry bomb.
Garage door paint peels. The child turns angry.
The father's shirts sway, cigarette-burnt, in the closet.
Empty hangers dangle on the rack.
No one can hear heaven in that house.

My Father as a Tea Leaf Reading

At first, no shape coheres. Then an arrow sharpens.
Hold the cup closer to the light.
Turn it in your hand. Don't

be distracted by the moles
on your wrist, three in a row,
like the three moles on dad's wrist,

deliberate as ink dots
copied, one sheet to another.
Return to the cup. The arrow bends,

there a sickle, now a moon—yes, the curve,
the curve of dad's ear where you pressed
your temple as he listened for echoes in the blood.

When my she was eight, my grandmother
borrowed white gloves and went to a party
in a Chicago high rise. A hired woman read tea leaves,

but my grandma refused to ask, too scared to hear,
what the leaves predicted. I suspect
my grandma knew then how her mother

would fire the gun at her own heart. I suspect
my grandmother had already rehearsed the day
she'd take too many pills, just as my father

advertised his own deaths, each one
the opening of a play with an infinite audience.
No augur could have prepared him for the stage-heat
for the rows of empty red velveteen seats.

Like a Prisoner of Hard Words, II

A father sits on the terrazzo.
His child scissors a paper doll.
Cabinets slam when the child whines.
Neither can name the smell of the honeysuckle.
Father and child doze in the afternoon.
The child detects the telephone wire's hum.
In the curtained bedroom, the television glows.
The father hears the ice cream truck.
He will never recall the snow cone's sting.
Someone launches a firecracker into the yard.
The father hides cash in plastic bags in the closet.
When the father fevers, the child stands on a stool to wet a washcloth.
Sometimes the neighbor boys laugh at the father as he shears the hedge.
The child opens and closes, opens and closes the pantry door.
He wants to make soup cans disappear.
In his frayed blue bathrobe, the father dances on the terrazzo.
The child leans against the back door.
The porch sounds like a house of rain, as if rain were birds to be kept.
The kitchen is heavy with heat and tape hiss as the cassette slows.
The child begs for dinner from the drive-through window.
By the time they reach the driveway, one of them is angry.
The child holds scissors too close to his thumb.

My Father and Me as Aftermath

The pier is shorter, jellyfish upturned.
Beachcombers stay under their blue-tarp shelters.
Chased by thicker, blacker sky, fresh clouds struggle

to gather. A red plastic bucket, a shredded banner,
an ogham of seaweed—these are the markers,
the tenants of disaster. I sit close enough to let

tide spray splash my calves. I need to hold
battered things right now, to touch what was here,
to touch what remains.

Tell about the times your father held you
against his chest, scratching your shoulders.
Tell how you wished you could have had strings,

a harp, a guitar. You wanted to hear how he made
you from mud, how you sprung from his knee,
his head, or his thigh. Now that he's dead,

you want to know where you're supposed
to ache for the lack of a maker. You want to know
which bones should sing out for his bones now burnt.

Like A Prisoner of Hard Words, III

The porch sounds like a house of rainclouds.
The father likes to forget the name of the illness.
In front of the mirror, the child spells the letters with his lips.
Two VCRs blink in harmony, recording the rented videos.
The Halloween candy hardens in the bucket on top of the fridge.
The child lies on the kitchen floor.
Old oranges and chip bags sway in wire baskets.
The father installs a light under the macramé table.
Over the couch, Marilyn Monroe points one foot toward the child's head.
Wires sing with overheard conversation.
The child hears the father coughing in the morning.
The father's coffee spoon against the mug, a breaking.
Neither can remove the stain where the child tripped.
The televisions in every room sit blank and quiet.
In the closet, the child makes a pallet on the floor.
A book lies open on the coffee table, but no one reads it.
The father lies feverish in the evening.
The child continues to stare at cloud shapes.
Wet paintbrushes linger too long in the Mason jar.
A knick in the tablecloth reminds the child where to place his fork.
The parakeets molt in the wooden cage.
An ice cream truck groans through the neighborhood.
The father lays another wet cloth over his forehead.
The child is too small to reach the dials on the stovetop.

My Father and Me as a Rothko

Two horizontal smears of blue, thick, a blur
of prison bars, melting. The background hums in darker blue.
In the center, a white box leers.

Beneath the box, the blues stack like mattresses,
and though a red swatch glows beneath them,
it's too tired to burn its way out.

The edges of the canvas drown
in gauzes and gauzes of blue.

Start with the jail time. Start with the day
the world broke like a bell in your belly.
Why not say blue was dad's favorite color?

Sleep's the thief of time, dad used to say.
He sold his vicodin, went to prison,
wouldn't talk about it, wouldn't talk.

Your uncle refused to donate the clothes,
holey—or is that holy?—as they were
with cigarette burns.

Like A Prisoner of Hard Words, IV

When the father yells, the pantry slams open.
The bulbs in the hall burn out on the same day every time.
The father covers the umbrella with a length of black rayon.
Later, the child finds the magazine page where the macaw lost its head.
Oatmeal grows cold on the table.
The child takes the umbrella out in a windstorm.
The child wants to cling to the handle and fly.
Orange pill bottles empty too quickly.
On Halloween, the father sweats on the couch.
The older boy guides the child from house to webbed house.
The child can't forget the name of the illness.
Neither spells the letters on his lips.
The child kneels in an island of newsprint on the terrazzo.
He struggles to finish the paint-by-number tiger.
Neither the child nor the father can remember to fill the threes with yellow.
Mud hardens in the ridges of their sneakers.
The television snows in the living room.
Window frames swell in the heat, and the fan won't run.
A bloodstain in the driveway marks the spot where the child tripped.
The father lets the ice cream avalanche down the child's arm.
They spend the monthly check on fireworks.
The paintbrushes lie paint-slick and matted in the mason jar.
When the child yells back, the cabinets slam closed.

My Father as a Medieval Tapestry

One of the hunters holds back,
bow at his side, pointed down.
None of the others will shoot.

Unicorns flee into green.
Fountain mouths pour only sand.
Apples turn soft on the branch.

Now the third hunter lies down
deep in the eye of the glen.
Unicorns shimmer but pass.

None lays its head in his lap.
None touches its horn to his breast.

I knew no cure would come.
“Blood work” seeped into a single word,
like woodwork or needlework,

as if blood were a craft
to be improved or repaired.
Apples mattered to us then,

as did anything that dared to blush or soften.
Sometimes when I came home
and found him napping, I’d wait,

watching his hands on his chest
pitch like an ark, pitch like an ark on the sea.

Like A Prisoner of Hard Words, V

The child takes the umbrella out in a windstorm.
In the morning, a windbreaker hangs from a skeletal tree.
The child will never forget the clang of the father's coffee spoon.
Some nights the father can't leave his bedroom.
At 4 a.m., the father scrubs the stovetop.
One cube of bouillon dissolves into broth.
The father hangs paper lanterns in the child's bedroom.
The lanterns glow red. The lanterns glow red.
Sometimes the child almost hears the letters his father won't say aloud.
The child stamps silly putty onto a mugshot on the newspaper's front page.
When it rains, the child and his father lie on their backs on the carpet and listen.
No one turns off the television, which leaks its blue light into every room.
The child falls asleep under the crab apple tree.
When the father calls him for lunch, the child pretends to be dead.
The father fidgets with scissors while the child reads in his bedroom closet.
Window frames swell in the heat, and the fan won't run.
Neither the child nor his father can name the scent of the honeysuckle.
The ice cream trunk cranks its tune through their midday sleep.
The child relishes the cold terrazzo on his bare feet.
The father shakes a clutch of dice in a plastic cup. The child hears bones.
The child tries to bleach his name from the waistband of his underwear.
When it rains, the father and child watch too many movies.
The child reads alone in his bedroom closet.
On Friday nights, the father squeezes too much chocolate syrup into the blender.
Orange pill bottles empty too quickly. The bathroom mirror clouds.
When the paramedics come, the child hides behind the speakers.
The speakers stand black and monolithic, but the paramedics notice.
The paint-brushes waste in their half-full mason jar.
The child won't say the name of the illness.
The child hides the letters under his tongue.
A mylar balloon bumbles around the hospital room ceiling.
No one will guess whether the father might come home.

My Father and Me as a Kahlo

Along the fat waxy green flap of an elephant ear,
my father and I lie prostrate in the temple of the open air.
Still water drips at our feet. We could be brothers.

We could be lovers. In my father's hand, a gardenia shines.
In my hand, a hummingbird threatens to flee.
The elephant ear that cradles us lies rooted in red dirt.

The red dirt is the belly of a woman. She is huge and unreachable.
One eye holds a milky tear poised to spill. The other eye is blind.
My father and I don't touch, bound as we are by thin red threads.

The elephant ears grew so high
we could see them over our roof.
My father and I never looked alike.

He was always dying. Then he died.
He believed I had my mother's gift
with dogs, sparrows, and bees.

His mother raised us both.
I almost forget. I don't know
what to do with his name, with mine
with anything.

Like A Prisoner of Hard Words, VI

The father squeezes too much chocolate syrup into the blender.
When it rains, the child and his father watch too many movies.
They spend the monthly checks on chips and cookies.
The cat has too many fleas and must go to live elsewhere.
The child can't forget the name of the illness.
The results of the blood test promise little.
When the child breaks into chicken pox, the father sends him away.
The father doesn't sleep while the child is gone.
The child misspells "attack" on his spelling test.
Neither the child nor his father can complete the paint-by-numbers tiger.
The inflatable zoo stands guard over the child's deserted bedroom.
The mylar balloon lies crumpled in a corner.
Orange pill bottles empty too quickly.
The father and the child sleep shirtless in the afternoon heat.
The child shakes dice in a plastic cup. The father hears bones.
When the cable goes out, the televisions snow.
Heats anvils the father and child into shirtless midday sleep.
On the coffee table, a jigsaw puzzle stays unfinished.
The child's favorite story begins with a little girl lost in the forest.
The father lets the ice cream avalanche down the child's arm.
When it rains, the child and his father lie on their backs on the carpet and listen.
No one notices the television, which leaks its blue light into every room.
Someone loads the mailbox with another cherry bomb, but the police do nothing.
Garage door paint peels. The child turns angry again.
The father's shirts sway, cigarette-burnt, in the closet.
No one yells. The high cabinets still slam open and closed.
The child no longer opens and shuts the pantry door.
The child knows the soup cans will not disappear.
Empty hangers dangle on the rack.

Notes

“Miranda Tries to Conjure Sisters” borrows its italicized lines from Annie Finch's “Daughters of Men.”

Despite its title, “A Poem by Emileigh Barnes” is mine. Its twin, “A Poem by Josh Davis,” appears in Emileigh Barnes's *Given*.

In name and in structure, “Like a Prisoner of Hard Words” owes an obvious debt to C.D. Wright's “Like a Prisoner of Soft Words.”

VITA

I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. In 2007, I graduated from Saint Leo University with a B.A. in English. In 2009, I earned an M.A. in English from Pittsburg State University. In 2011, I obtained an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine.