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I TRIED TO LOVE THE GHOST

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

by

PAUL S. DEAN

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

The poems in this manuscript are an attempt to document the formative years of a singular, masculine speaker in the Southern United States. Many of the poems often rely on the knowledge of mythic stories that the speaker believes or at least feels the necessity to recall, in order to understand the past as well as the future. Specifically, the manuscript focuses on the speaker's experiences with the church, encounters with violent and often dysfunctional family members, and his eventual marriage. Throughout the entirety of this manuscript, the speaker questions the idea of manhood and constantly struggles with identity, seeking to separate from his home and the people that still inhabit the region.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, my brother, my friends, and everyone who believed in me, even when I doubted myself. In particular, I thank my wife, Sarah, who will always be my inspiration and guiding light. Also, I thank one of the truest heroes left in this world, my friend, Jimmy.

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Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the following literary publications that published some portions of these poems during my time at the University of Mississippi: *Mary Journal*, *Steel Toe Review*, *The Tulane Review*, and *Palooka*.

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HOME

Lightning

The pale strikes from the heavens
came early in the summer, flashing
indelible scratches without sound. I waited
for the swelling to start up, inside of me.

Easter, 1979

Shoved behind a stack of hymnals
and fishing lures
a photograph—
my father at twenty-five posing
next to a church steeple.

I imagine his father,
the minister,
ferrying a johnboat full of deacons
through the flooded cemetery.
By nightfall, he believes
the prow will push through the stars.

When the river rose up,
his congregation
sandbagged a crooked horseshoe
at the sanctuary's oak doors
and prayed around the silt
that shifted beneath their toes.

The anchor my father hooked
onto the steeple so that his father
could carry out an armful of testaments
now sits beside the fireplace
as nothing more than a paperweight.

I've watched my father with the anchor
and a water-stained book.
He waits until spring to feel
the ink that's dried across the page
like a language I can never understand.

Swimming Pool

The young boy sees a girl by the edge
of the shallow end. They are at the age
when the world around them comes alive.
Crepe myrtle blossoms through the air
and the boy smells the hot stink of trash
from a back alley dumpster. He dog paddles
to the girl, curious as she tosses damp hair
over freckled shoulders just like his mother.
The boy submerges and watches her reclining
in the sun. She rests skinny elbows at the pool's steps
like a woman he once saw on a museum's vase,
frozen in a golden river while a soldier watched
from silent woods. Light slips through the trees
and onto the girl's thighs. He comes out of the water,
ready to embrace this vast and undiscovered realm.

Homecoming

I drive down the wet highway, head full of winter light
and the names of those gone before me, to the prep school

that was never home with its savage architecture. Poison ivy
claims the wrought iron gate, the practice turf pocked

with holes from last season's disappointment.

They grow a new crop each year, boys stretching

their muscled bodies in the sun, swollen with desire
for the tanned girls running hurdles. I imagine myself

flush against the field, a black spear of ants crossing
my leg, arms splayed to the sky. I know spring will come,

the formations rolling like foals in the onion grass. The boys will dream
of the girls who can show them sweet victory in backseats across town.

Their world will never give me the victory I want. I keep my eyes
ahead to the moon, the stars, such unchanging and solitary darkness.

Bright Mornings

The boy walks through pecan groves
to gather a bushel for his uncle to sell.
When he's let back into the house,
the boy watches his uncle crack nuts
while reading from a testament.
If the boy nods off, the older man slips
his fingers between the pliers, sharp
as the beak of an owl and clamps down.
He wants to beat the man who plants
acres of bruises across his knuckles,
this crop that will not wither or wane.

Eagle Lake

And the first muck of morning light, the old man wakes
his daughter's son from a half-dream of scales and ice,

their johnboat drifting through the reeds. The boy fumbles
with the hook's knot, what the old man calls *city hands*,

that know how to dog-ear a storybook and trace
the cursive laces of his sneakers. Not like his grandfather

chucking the anchor near a stump, who lets his body
become part of the lake's calm wind—who in these later years

has tried to forget the fog and gunpowder on the Yalu River.
Sometimes, the old man feels the stiff formations of pines shift closer,

tries to hide the scarred map on his shaking palms.
He can still smell the cinders. When the boat passes

into the shade of a willow tree, a dark coil drops hissing
near the boy. The old man pins the moccasin under an oar

and lops off the head with his skinning knife, its tail scrolling
into a stillness. He stretches the skin out like a serif

across the bow, breaking the boy into a world he's longed for,
bloody words of the past painted against metal.

Saints

In the courtyard of the Presbyterian school,
children file in behind Ms. White,
matron saint of sixth grade New Testament.

They wait to see the stained-glass Christ
and the painted window of ancient fathers.
Poor Man's Bible, the church pamphlet says.

At the back of the line, a boy sketches his heroes
in a catechism. He imagines a whale puking Jonah
onto the sandbar at Nineveh, the storm in Samson's eyes:

full fire and fox tails together, sweet arson
for the Philistine fields. Ms. White guides the children
to the mosaic of a burning bush. The boy mistakes

the whispers of children for some spirit perched
above the rafters and fingers the little silver cross
that his father gave him to latch around his neck.

The boy draws what he believes.
He will always remember the secret struggle
to nail a savior to the page.

In the Year of the Simultaneous Savior

I played the boy Christ
who received royal gifts
from three magi. I posed
as the son of a shepherd,
quaking in angelic spotlight.
The cold air cradled me
while I waited for the cues.
Just for one night, I wanted
to stretch out in snow so rare
when the first slivers fell,
my belief was an instant held up
in praise of a small, infant song.

God in the Bushes

Andrew and I snuck out of the house
to skim the neighbor's drainage ditch for bait.
He kept a lookout for God, the black lab
missing one leg. The neighbors pulled the stray
from under a school bus last fall, found the dark knot
of fur whining near the back tire.
The shelter vet gave him a nub and a new name,
said it was either heaven purged or demon saved.

I felt the seed ticks at my toes,
my sneakers already chucked in the tall grass.
Andrew handed me the net.
The minnows darted like magic needles
in the flashlight's beam.
I heard God rustling in the bushes
before he came panting out
in the moonlight. He hobbled down
until he was at my feet. A shadow formed
across the space of his missing leg.

There are still things that can be made right.

Heaven's Knife

We heard the dogs howling
as the trail opened to fire
and our many fathers stood
with the light dripping down
onto their long swords.
I dropped the box in the dust
like a casket and saw the elder.
He cut the lock and kicked off
the gilded lid of the ark.
The boys gathered around
and saw their own gleaming knives
that they'd carried so many miles.
Each of us stood before our father
and fell prostrate in the dirt.
I listened to them all chanting
this wicked blessing upon us:

*I swear to take up this dagger
against the darkness.
I will lie down with the devil
and his friend, the shade.*

I watched my father usher me
into this ritual, unwilling
to place his shining blade at my throat
as a symbol of the everlasting sacrifice.
With a soot-filled finger, he drew
the blood rood of the savior
and his bandits on my forehead.
I remember the ash and cinders
floating up from the fire
like a message among the ceremony
of ruins, a prayer not yet uttered
across the lips of the silent dead.

When the Father Sleeps

His boy hears voices like water,
leaves the tent to trespass the wilderness.
Moonlight rolls out its map
on the cliffs. He clicks the light off

and remembers the stories
from his father's mother, half-blind
and seeing shadows before sleep.
She rubbed dreams into his head.

*Deep in the most ancient of hills
lies a power, greater than heaven.*

*River angels, some call them,
ghost nymphs blessed by water.*

*Certain nights, the silt stirs
in the caves. Those who meet
them in darkness will see new light.*

When the boy finds the cave,
he guides his hands across the shale
until the hidden pool appears, glistening
with light from a crack in the roof.

He bends over the water to see
there is only stillness reflected,
the younger face of his father
moving in some flared mirror.

*And when lovers lie down
to sleep, each little heart pricked
up, wild with belief and knowing,
even the stars will become orphans.*

With a Name Meaning *God Has Heard*

You stayed awake at night
unable to slip into the world
of dreams, bothered by sleep
as though it were the passing over
more than anything else,
the lack of control that kept you
awake into the long, riddled hours.

You remembered an old story
of heaven's voice like a sword
tearing through the temple curtains,
that blessed song hissed over water,
saying, *Samuel, Samuel*, a sound
that any small boy could mistake
for a mere man or high priest,
who will send him back to listen
for the Lord's prophetic whisper.

So you got up and walked alone
in the hallways of your father's house
until your small feet found the bed
where your parents slept and you
whispered, *Here I am*, face anointed
in the shadow of the bathroom light.
Neither woke and you wandered.

No light yet risen to measure silence,
you knelt and listened for the calling,
waiting to hear, awoken for answers.

The Summer Before

My teenage heart turned evil
for the thighs of private school girls,
the woman appeared in the driveway.

My father counted out her hundreds
on the hood of his car and took the sign
from the window before signing over the title.

Even the cops would wonder the reason
she drove toward the murky water
and pulled a pistol out of her purse.

I imagine her barefoot at the reservoir
and hanging a white dress on the antenna,
the tattered flag from heaven's crest.

Some nights, when the wind howls
through the trees and the moon gleams
in its shell, I believe in a different world.

I know a place of water that comes only
from a long way out of town toward God
through the trespassed breakers of a dark heart.

In The Sanctuary's Back Pews

I watched a man pretending
to be Christ stagger up the aisle
with a two by four on his shoulder.

Two soldiers with Roman plumes
flanked him, ready to slap
his back with those Jesus whips.

My brother said they were real
cat o' nine tails from Egypt, but I knew
they were from some county barn.

At center stage, they bound him
at the ankles and pushed a crown
of barbed wire around his forehead.

When the soldiers raised Jesus up
in front of the audience, he bit down
on the blood capsules and howled.

As every head bowed, we slipped
out before the collection, kept dollars
hidden until we were in the parking lot.

We heard the organ start up, bet
each other on who made it home first
through the silent, congregation of night.

Made Known in the Signs of His Early Years

The small terror came
for the infant at night:

his mother sensed peril,
and checked the crib.

When she saw the baby
trembling and his eyes

roll back, she swaddled
the boy in a thick blanket

and shook the husband,
hoping the child's short breaths

wouldn't cease until town
flashed up like a struck flare.

The young father shifted
the pickup into a higher gear

and hid worry in hopes
that the hospital would appear

before he lost the new son
to an unknown darkness.

*

Teachers at the religious school
said that he was touched

by the spirit and explained
how mysterious power

manifested in such ways
The old stories were preached

over again. In the chapel,
the children heard of men

afflicted by God: roaming wild
the earth with boils, private

lusts of warrior kings, secret
urges toward evil in the desert.

They spoke to the masses
of children, boy in back, saying:

*So some of us are chosen,
so some of us must be bled.*

*

When the boy fainted
in class and twitched

on the linoleum, gone
already into some realm,

each child grew afraid
by the presence of the spirit.

At the clinic by the school,
the nurse subjected the boy

to many tests and pointed
at his brain on an x-ray film.

She held out a long ruler
asking the boy to answer

when he felt the problem.
Is it here? she pointed.

Each time his nurse was close
to the brain, the boy shook

his head, not believing
that the inside of his body

splayed up in neon
solved the fear in his chest.

*

Every year, worry would start
deep within the family

that the trances could claim
his life. No specific diagnosis

for fits that bloomed inside his brain,
reckless misfires, windblown

like a smattering of pollen.
The mother learned to pray

harder than before, on knees
worn down from all the hours

spent prostrate by her son
who slept through the night.

She begged a higher power
to take away the affliction.

When she fell asleep,
the father remained vigilant,

standing as a guardian
whispering *abide, abide in this.*

REVIVAL

I Woke Up From a Vision

that John lay down in bed
with his hospice gown
and high water socks on
whistling “Shall We Gather at the River.”
I heard the sound of croaking
bullfrogs at midnight.
Brother Larry woke me up,
said it was visiting time.
We drove up the hill in the Pontiac
and knocked so hard the hinges broke.
The door opened like the tomb
of an old king that fell
on his own blade.
Cigarettes fumed in an offering plate
turned ashtray.
Larry wiped his forehead
with a handkerchief,
said it was hotter than hellfire.
I plucked a coin from the plate
and put it in John’s palm
to pay the old man’s toll.
His eyes rolled back
toward the ceiling fan.
I thought this is what you did
back in the younger days
when the moon was full
and hot like it was searching
for a prisoner at the ferry
without the fare to cross
the water to the other side.

The Anointing

They took the boy's aunt outside the house
on a surplus army cot to deliberate
the matter of her sanctified soul.
The congregation always believed
its special daughter should go under
river water in baptism before passing over.
The boy listened in the hallway, waited
for the deacons to start humming
a hymn in the yard. He clicked a lamp
in the empty bedroom and saw
a wheelchair folded up in the corner
and a host of china dolls peering out
like watchful guardians over the bureau.
He shifted to the window
and looked down into the cold night.
One man draped a white vestment
around her shoulders. She opened
her ghost mouth and wailed at the stars.
Flashlights beamed the dark.
When they buried her the next week,
the boy didn't forget the procession
of the penitent believers as they moved
towards the creek with the covenant
daughter sitting upright on their shoulders.
Moonlight bowed low in the pines.
They were all changed.

Gauges

And in this dream you see him again, your father
in the city with clouds forming above. A black suit
lies wrinkled on the floor, his own father buried
only a week ago, your father keeps the single news clipping
as proof. He smooths his hands over a shoebox
labeled *Son* and removes the only things left to him, rain
gauge and a watch. These small parts to measure
out a life, in time and water. The power is off, not paid.
He rinses the gauge and places it outside the windowsill.
Dust covers the world that groans for baptism.
The sky closes its black umbrella, shrinks dark, slow.

Eagle Lake Revisited

The boy was young.
There was water and light.
The sun bore its belly over the pines
and his father stuck a hand in the dark water
to pull out a small gar,
wanted to gut the fish,
but thought he heard whispers in the sky
or from the woods behind him,
that said, *be still I swim out among you.*

The tide slapped the boat,
the father looked down into the eddy
that swirled across the eye of the fish,
the quick twitch on the chopping block.
He laid down the skinning knife,
tossed the fish into a cooler
and aimed for home, wanting his son
to skin the scales and let blood
and water wash off the hands in sacrifice.

The boy saw the gar as a puny wonder,
would not take his father's blade,
but dropped the fish in a Mason jar
and woke to the rain before dawn.
He shined a flashlight through the black eyes
on the nightstand and swore the fish grew.
His father slammed the front door
and watched the muck forming in the front yard.
God punched his fist in the levee, his father said.

The lake became a river and rose to the house
and the house became a wide gulf.
They hopped in the johnboat,
but the water swept the Evinrude away
and the gar huffed air. His father tied
an anchor to the fish, and the fish dove
into the water and towed them toward the stars.

The Prophet of North State Street

He stumbles out of the cemetery
and takes a swig from a bottle
of Old Crow before trudging past
the steps of the federal courthouse.

Most days by noon, he's downtown
begging money with a harmonica,
ready to whistle out some hymns
for anyone willing to listen.

But today, he seems moved by the spirit
and shouts at the governor to come out
of his mansion and be judged or else
he will call down heavenly fire.

When the governor fails to respond,
the prophet sees the money changers,
those suited men walking through doors
that swivel across the marbled bank.

He stands between two giant pillars
with his arms spread wide, pushing
so hard that sweat formed on his forehead,
sun glinting like gray fire through his beard.

Before the mission is carried out,
two blue lights flash at the corner
and the officers see the broken bottle
between his feet, cuff the cursing man.

The crowd disperses when they know
that their prophet will be born away
by motored chariot, gilded by the city's seal—
great work unfinished, the crime his own.

Dream Gospel, Vicksburg

My city is dead before I am born.
A lone soldier drags a hollow mule carcass
to the dead road. He nails it across two
railroad ties, its hide a message braying,
Look at what we've done, brothers. Their own
bluecoat line washed with sweat, and the wails
of the half dead shrieking for mercy.
The earth groans for the widows in the caves.
Buzzards fork a man's eyes out, drop them low
near the gunboats. The river curves slow
around the siege like a postman
on horseback, with a sack full of hands.

Night Patrol

You hid your hands from the stars
while the moon flipped through the trees
you threw a knife from your boot
and the sky sagged low

while the moon flipped through the trees
you kept stalking crows in the wind
and the sky sagged low
you weren't lost yet

so you stalked the crows in the wind
and saw small fires burning near the river
you couldn't be lost
the blade sang when you cleaned it

and those small fires still burned at the river
though you didn't want to get close
to the blade that sang when you cleaned it
because the fires came from the shadows of men

though you kept getting closer
you hid your hands from the stars
because the fires came from the shadows of men
You threw a knife and crawled to the boat

Before There Was Water

there were scales
hidden under lawns

the moon blossomed
across the sky

I searched the ditch
with a flashlight

before my bed
was a pallet of shingles

the white stones
held small secrets

bottlecap baling wire
nickel tinfoil razorblade

those objects
that distract a boy

before river silt
stained the wallpaper

I named the stars
my brothers my lovers

the night coiled
underneath my feet

Fable: Two Brothers

Two brothers set out for the cold
with death's black quilt spread out
over the field. One holds a knife
in his fist, the other a cluster of feathers.

An owl steers from the oaks
and pours a shadow like salt
over them. The boy with the knife
slashed his bed, gave his brother

the feathers to return them to the wild.
The two of them crouch in the barn
and shiver, wait to bed down. They want
to sever the moon from its white thread.

It will not be sewn back. A great eye
blotted out by time and the mercy
of the wilderness. They believe
they are alone in this great darkness.

Young Blood

Not even noon, and the sun brands
the practice fields with its mark—

you slap the goalpost's hot metal
and hustle back into the huddle.

You can't drop another pass,
believe you'll puke up a lung

from this disciplined running,
not an ounce of pride left in you.

*

After flipping tractor tires
up a hill for twenty minutes,

the coach calls the team up
to midfield for a meeting.

He disappears behind bleachers
and holds up the glinting metal

of an old battle saber, saying
This to thine enemy, boys.

*

When you take off the day's armor—
helmet and shoulder pads—

you strip down naked and scrub
off the mud and sweat, wish

that you didn't have to exist
in this time of blood

and its dirty language left
to circle the shower's drain.

By now, the locker room
is a storm of hissing showers.

*

You dream of a different life,
where your head stays healed

from the inside and your father
grows like a tree even after death.

Driving home in the dark,
you see the outline of a sword

stuck in the turf at midfield, shadow
stretched out under the hot lights.

In the Basement of the Chapel

I found hell on Halloween night.
The congregation decided
to scare the youth off a path
of sins we'd yet to commit.
The women were howling
in black leotards and eye paint
and the children threw ash
in front of a box fan
like it was the devil's birthday.
I knew how it felt to fall
on my knees with the spirit
rising up between my chest
and stayed up mumbling
to be forgiven for my sins.
When we got to the room
marked *Heaven*, I watched
my mechanic with a fake beard
gesture to all of us to follow
him through an unmarked door.
I feigned sickness and slipped out
among other friends to lie down
in fields that would soon be gone.
Looking up at the sky, I searched
for other lives where I tried to love
the ghost who rolled back his stone.

The Black Spot

I hid in the attic, waiting
for my brother to find me.

With a wooden sword,
I called myself a marauder

and pretended the silver
threads of brown recluses

were enemy sails. I cut an x
in one and a hole through another,

riddled by enemy cannon fire.
My brother spotted me

with his Maglite, I came out
from my hiding spot

so that we could explore
the forbidden crawl space

in our moment's truce.
Behind the bassinet, I found

the dusty trunk stamped
with our family crest. I flipped it

open, saw the saber in a battle flag.
I held the hilt and shined the light

across a sacred past that we carried
with us, draped only in memory.

Water Makers

In the oldest of stories
that were spoken as myth
more than truth, grandfather
went upstate with the Corps
as his wife's belly swelled
with their firstborn.
He had a chance at back pay
to ride out the war.
I imagine him marching
with the company to blast out
a hole in the mountains.
They chipped away at the limestone
heart for the river to spill over
into a reservoir. The rains came
in the spring before the dam
was finished. Each man slept
in a canoe ready to row toward town.
I can't say whether I believe these tales,
but when I watched him pass
over into another realm,
he talked of nothing but floods,
the water that kept him apart
from his wife and child.
*You can't baptize
my baby without me,*
he said, gazing at the oar
encased in glass on the mantle,
a storm clouding over his eyes.

Y2K

Are you prepared? my mother says,
shelving canned beans in our fallout shelter.

The racks are full of toilet paper and gunpowder,
one to wipe our asses before ascending into heaven,

the other to blow the head off whatever else crawls out
from the grave. I could've gone out with friends

and drunk whiskey in a field, gotten laid,
but I helped my father board up the windows

to the storage shed. We spray painted the doorjambs red
in case the Holy Ghost couldn't find us. I'd rather see Christ

pick his teeth with a sword than watch him pass judgment
on this computer glitch. My mother flips through her testament,

looking for a secret to keep us safe in these last seconds.
The midnight hour comes upon us with an explosion

of fireworks that tears across the curtain of sky.
My father snores in the easy chair with a pistol in his lap.

I slip out the back door into a world
changed by snowfall, yard glazed like a new promise.

In Front of the Science Museum

An ancient sign reads:

See Vast Nature Conjured Behind Glass.

The man peers inside the dusty window
and rattles the chains draped across
the door handles, closed for years
like so many forgotten memories.

He sees an aquarium half-full
of dirty water, sunlight streaming
through a makeshift skylight.

The man came here on a whim
after all these years for some relic
of the past. He busts a window
with his elbow and crawls through
the empty hallway. Full of shadows,
neither dead nor living reside in this place.
Among feathers and broken glass, the man
sorts through yellowed newspapers,
until he finds a bucket of paint buried
in the mass of old news. He pries open the lid
with his pocket knife. Something moves
inside him and he dips fingers in paint
and begins to smear crude memory
across the brick wall, not sure
if these images ever graced this house
of artifacts or his own sleeping nights.
Soon, a white gar is slapped up
on the scant bricks, jawbone strung up
by baling wire, a copperhead
with a garden stake driven
through its neck and a black bear
scaling a tree. He steps back
and looks at the wild record of animals
dripping back at him from his youth
and knows that stranger ones
are still hidden out in the world,
not fully formed nor forsaken by men.
He walks out into the daylight and feels
the wind through the trees, his record scrawled
across the broken wall, a name
to those that come after him, searching
for answers among clouds or the slant
of light let down from the rafters.

MEND

I Tried to Burn the Sin Out

When nothing else worked,
I believed that the darkness
full of all its primal ghosts

would set me free. Unafraid,
I searched the shed outside
for a blade and a matchbox.

The crudeness of such fire
would replace the riddled
gnawing that kept me awake.

With a flame more naked
and dancing over the knife,
I carved the jagged cross

into my forearm, mumbled
*Ancient spirits, how long
this hold until you release me?*

Blasphemy

Mornings, naked sadness
of ritual, the gnawing started
again inside my stomach,
a black crow pecking its way
out to perch on the scale.
I pulled him out with fingers
soaked in bile, that feeling
of daggers. How I longed
to see the self inside myself
and not the boy looking back
in the mirror, his spine
knotting up through skin
too thin and bruised.
Each week, the pews grew
harder, holy words forming
into a sharpened stone
that I rid from my hollow gut,
my body, a temple of ruin,
crumbling by my own hands.

Gypsy Mary

When grandmother was young,
there were horses downtown.
The children called her Gypsy Mary.
She pulled her mother's curtains down
and wrapped them like a shawl around her.
When banks failed, she walked the streets
with whorepainted eyes and told fortunes,
a white-washed snow globe at her side.

She could tell your baby sister would float
down the Pearl on a washboard with moccasins
at her throat. She could tell you war was coming.
She couldn't predict her insides would turn
black against her like the dirt she shoveled
on her mother's coffin lid one morning.

Now, the spells start to come late at night.
Baby Moon's in my apron, grandmother says,
cradling a half-peeled orange.
I sit up with her and let grandfather sleep.
She loses her bifocals and conjures
until her jaw goes slack.

I pry open her mouth with my fingers
and pop two blue pills down her throat.
One curler dangles loose.
I can see the night in her eyes
like a cat crawling out of a storm
and under the porch.

The Believers

I mowed the quadriplegic's backyard
while his wife was at the prayer meeting.
She had the blood of a Cherokee princess

who led her people west, away
from plundered land and hearts.
The husband sat watchful like a crow

from the window, envious to feel grass
beneath his feet for a moment once again.
I thought about abandoning him

in that wheelchair controlled with one finger.
When his wife came home, I saw her
through the window. I went inside

to collect my twenty. She rummaged
through her purse and came around the table
with one good hand, a hook in place of the other.

She parted her husband's hair with a gentle hand
and stretched out the bill folded between the hook.
I took the money, though I didn't want it anymore,

the broken least of me awestruck and given over
to the embrace of that cold hook crying out to me,
this is my body, take it, every last bone.

Long Before You Know What Love Means

You sleep under bridges for the hell of it
and drink with the vets at the river,
who got kicked out of the Jesus house.

Warmed by the fire from a burning trash can,
you pretend to be broken-down, think it good
to learn from that company of misfit men.

You ward off the news of your brother, who traded
freedom for a jumpsuit at the county jail. You spend
long nights busking in the rain for money.

Before sleep will come, you hear the frightened
mumbling of the men with ticking dreams
that keep riddling them into the nightmare sun.

You can't make out what any of the graffiti say,
splayed up code on concrete. If only a secret
rested in the writing on the wall for kings such as these.

After Three Weddings in One Day

She wants me to play house.
There's water boiling on the stove
and her Army father stands at the counter
sharpening a chopping knife.

He'll smell the whiskey on my breath,
suspect the worst from me. But he doesn't know
I've parted his daughter's legs in a starlit parking lot.
At least he remembers my name this time.

The first night I met her, she taught me things
I didn't care to learn. I wasn't interested
in how to fold laundry or chop any damn onion.
I only wanted to shotgun a beer and kill my liver.

I look at her father's face. His eyes seem to say
Keep the knife steady, boy, as though manhood
is about pretending more than anything else.
He hands me a pepper, the one vegetable I remember

how to cut because I've gotten it wrong so many times.
I cut a circle around the core and pull out the thick stem.
The seeds spill out into the sink. His daughter falls asleep
on the kitchen table. Her mother comes out of the bedroom

in a bathrobe and touches her daughter's head. They show me
a picture of a crooked tombstone marked with the name
of their only son, buried in a book of photographs.
But when they look up from the pages, they only see me.

Ceremony at the Altar of Lorca

You walk ahead of me this early
in our marriage, the beloved one,
first daughter of your father. I am
learning what it means to behold
another body that is not my own.
Winter light streams over Madrid
as you snap a photograph, framing
a boy chasing pigeons across stones.
We move to the plaza's center,
hold hands in front of a bronzed statue
of Lorca. He cradles a wounded dove
in his palm, just before releasing
it back into the air. Not part of the bronze,
someone from the Left has threaded
a red rose through the dove's beak.
In Spain, the past is still contested
as a member from the Right will take
the flower away soon. Such symbols
as these are not ours to translate.
May we be blessed by the tongues
of dead poets, words like commandments
carved in stone that will turn
bright in the everlasting fire.

Blackout, Late Summer

It's midnight, the heat
of Mississippi just now
bowing low near the bed.

I light a candle, listen
to dirt daubers scratch
the woodwork, imagine

their thin, small bodies
patching pipe organ nests.
What a small symphony

these insects pull down
from the rafters like black
violins to hum the veiled dark.

I've seen the work they've laid
out while I slept, knocked down
the dirt pocked high with a broom

or a hose. I hold the candle
up, watch them dart and let
the wick burn down low.

I think of my wife in bed,
her body laced in moonlight.
She twists the cigarette, blows

a plume of smoke that blooms
in the ceiling fan. How swift
the procession at night. Here,

the language of lying down,
every hand left wanting,
a bed, a spirit, a home.

Divination

Their last night in the old house,
the young husband lies awake
on the air mattress, wife dozing
beside him. The U-Haul's packed
outside the driveway with boxes
of china, books, and wooden easels
crammed between bed slats and hutch.
Morning, they will drive south
through the wide land of their birth
to a new city nestled along the riverbank.
Neither husband nor wife can foretell
what waits to disrupt a bond amid lovers.
The husband looks for some sign
in the stars floating in the dark sky.
He can only remember their first night here
and the many portraits of beginning desire—
a multitude of dragonflies dancing at sunset,
an orchard ripening with fruit, her polished
grin spread across an upturned wine glass.
This memory calms the man enough
that he can rest. Before falling asleep,
he watches the shadows become shapes
in the empty house. He will dream of wings.

After the Break-In

The young husband stands vigilant
in the dark with a buck knife
and a baseball bat, hoping
the burglar doesn't return.

At the broken threshold, he snaps
the pieces of splintered wood
where a crowbar cracked
the fragile doorframe.

Deciding against phoning the wife,
for fear that she won't ever come home
from the party, the contents of a life
scattered across the hardwood floor,

he sits down in the chair and opens
a secret fifth of whiskey, stashed
above the hutch, not found
by the intruder in darkness.

After a month in the city,
he still comes home unprepared
for the small space of the one-room
apartment that drives them apart.

There are images to remember—
many winter mornings, the farmhouse
upstate cloaked in snowfall. He watched
her sleep while everything froze around them.

Those were the easier days
before the husband's wrath,
his new language of slammed doors,
and the wife weeping in the bathroom.

Sweating in the humid midnight, he wakes
and jerry-rigs the door back to its hinges,
decides to go out and search the streetlights
for the woman he knew months ago.

Calligraphy

One year, I didn't love anything
but the rain, longed for the rattle

in the gutters outside my house.
I sat underneath the wide porch

and waited for the pavement
to glisten with heaven's water.

Because I believed my scrawl
would appear in the grey mortar,

I traced my fingers until flashes
of lightning lanced close.

Even the past begins to fade
from memory and I move

farther away from ritual.
I long to soak myself again,

to bend down in belief
and write your name.

I know it will be sent back
and washed into memory,

such undeniable script
of celestial knowledge.

VITA

EDUCATION

2005-2009 THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI: Oxford, MS
Bachelor of Arts: English
Minor: Southern Studies

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2010- July 2012 UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI
Instructor: Oxford, MS

- Engl 317: Beginning Poetry Workshop, Summer 2011
- Writ 101: First Year Writing, Fall 2011
- Writ 102: Environmental Writing, Spring 2012

Teaching Assistant: Oxford, MS

- Engl 222, World Literature, Fall 2010
- Engl 222, World Literature, Spring 2011

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

2012-Present SMARTISH PACE: Literary Magazine
Intern (from a distance): Baltimore, MD

- Evaluate submissions for publication
- Promote events through list serves, email, & social media

2010-2012 THE YALOBUSHA REVIEW
Editorial Assistant: Oxford, MS

- Evaluated submissions for publication

PUBLICATIONS

Spring 2013 POETRY PUBLISHED
The Tulane Review, “God in the Bushes” and “The Summer Before”

Summer 2012	<i>Steel Toe Review</i> , “Gypsy Mary” and “Saints”
Fall 2011	<i>Burnt Bridge Magazine</i> , “four poems from Prizefighter”
	<i>Palooka Journal</i> , “Fable: Two Brothers, Gauges”
Summer 2011	<i>Mary Journal</i> , “Dream Gospel”
	INTERVIEW PUBLISHED
May 2012	<i>Country Dog Review</i> , interview with poet Greg Brownderville

HONORS & AWARDS

2012	ELVIS MEETS EINSTEIN FINALIST: Poetry competition
May-June 2012	SUMMER RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP: University of MS
2008-present	GAMME BETA PHI: Honors Society
2007-present	SIGMA TAU DELTA: English Honors Society
	ETA SIGMA PHI: Classics Honors Society
2006-present	NATIONAL SOCIETY OF COLLEGIATE SCHOLARS

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

April 2013	GULF COAST CREATIVE WRITING TEACHERS CONFERENCE: Reader, Fairhope, AL
July 2012	SOUTHERN WRITERS, SOUTERN WRITING CONFERENCE: <i>Creative chair, Oxford, MS</i>
June 2008	KENYON REVIEW: Writers Conference: Participant, <i>Kenyon, OH</i>
July 2008	SQUAW VALLEY COMMUNITY OF WRITERS: Participant, <i>Squaw Valley, CA</i>