Beat the Church Crowd

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BEAT THE CHURCH CROWD

by

Alston Tyer

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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ABSTRACT
ALSTON TYER: Beat the Church Crowd
(Under the direction of Blair Hobbs)

Beat the Church Crowd is a collection of poems that explores a variety of topics and themes, from personal family legacy and natural disasters to bestiary, ekphrastic, and southern locale poems. It is divided into four sections: “Blue Danube,” “Anecdotes,” “Urban Legends,” and “Something Worth Protecting.” While the subject matter and forms of the poems vary, the common thread weaving each poem to the next is the slight touch of the macabre.
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INTRODUCTION

Difficulty exists in loving a place with your whole heart, but seeing the worsening cracks in ceilings and knowing the bathtub could have used a good caulking ten years ago. Difficulty exists in loving a family member unconditionally, and still knowing that they have affected you for the worse. One of my favorite television shows is Planet Earth, and though my mother asks me to turn it off every time I watch it in the living room, as she “doesn’t want to see those animals eating each other,” I love it because it shows the beauty of the world laid bare: it is breathtaking, it is heartrending. At times, it is morbid. Life.

Beat the Church Crowd is my aim in seeing things as they are, or at least trying to understand why I see things the way I do. The bulk of the “Blue Danube” section is made up of poems that try to grapple with the lives of my deceased family members: great-grandparents, great-great grandparents, second cousins. I never met these people, though their lives and choices color my own life and the lives of those I care the most about. And just like in Planet Earth, which will have you cheering for the wildebeest escaping a lion pride at one moment, the next have you misty-eyed because the infant lion cubs might starve to death, I never wanted to shy away from the grisly. I never wanted to shy away from the fact that every choice has consequences, positive or negative.

The “Blue Danube” section, and indeed Beat the Church Crowd as a whole, was inspired by my love of the Southern Gothic genre. Stories like “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” by Flannery O’Connor, and “Désirée’s Baby,” by Kate Chopin, illustrated to me that one of the best ways to expose flaws in society (specifically Southern society), or in
family dynamics, was to get almost hyperbolic in the grittiness and violence in my poems. The influence of stories like “A Rose for Emily,” by William Faulkner, are evident in poems that deal with the South’s obsession with femininity, such as the poems “Diamonds” and “Ode to Dead Stump.” The poem “Elegy for James Stone” has an epigraph from *The Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner, for a variety of reasons. One, the poem has to deal with family legacy and reputation, which I felt analogous to the themes of the novel. Second, James Stone was my actual great-great grandfather who lived in Oxford at the same time as William Faulkner. The Stone family was close with the Faulkner’s (my Uncle Phil Stone was one of Faulkner’s pallbearers), and in Susan Snell’s biography *Phil Stone of Oxford, A Vicarious Life*, Snell posits that elements of the people in Faulkner’s Oxford showed up as characters in his works. Phil Stone confirmed this, saying that “anybody who knew Jim Stone would recognize him by the way Jason talks” in *The Sound and the Fury* (Snell 209). Ordinarily, this tentative link to literary history would be incredible. However, this legacy is complicated by Jason’s status as a virulent racist and sexist, and what I know from conversations with my grandmother about James Stone, these descriptions of James were not far off from the man himself.

Another genre that heavily influenced my poetry is that of dystopia/post-apocalyptic. Relating again to extreme circumstances giving way to exposure of current states of affair, my love of books such as *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, and *On the Beach*, by Nevil Shute, influenced my more fantastical poems, such as “Arc,” “Plague,” and “Fish in a Barrel.” The things I love most about those novels, and poems such as “There Will Come Soft Rains,” by Sara Teasdale, is the interconnectivity between humanity and nature, and the little details that emerge through examination of that
relationship. For example, one of the most striking parts of *The Road*, to me, is when McCarthy describes the post-apocalyptic countryside, detailing a barn that has “Visit Rock City” painted on it. While this image is meaningful to anyone who has ever been within five-hundred miles of Tennessee, it works to bridge the gap between a broken humanity and an equally broken nature. In some ways, I aim to bridge the same gaps with my poetry.

Apart from Southern Gothic and Dystopian literature, one of my biggest influences, particularly in the section titled “Something Worth Protecting,” is that of the subject of geology. I am not a scientist, never have been, and never will be. However, the natural world has always fascinated me, and learning how it formed and how it functions was cause for ceaseless wonder. Subtle touches of geology can be seen in several of my poems, even apart from the “Something Worth Protecting” section. For example, “Changes in Latitude, Changes in Latitude” references hurricanes and “Diamonds” has a brief reference to the formation of diamonds and other minerals. After a class lecture on Mass Wasting, the geologic umbrella term that covers landslides, mudslides, and the like, I stumbled upon a video of the Pantai Remis Landslide of 1993. The level of destruction, watching the ocean overflow into an abandoned tin mine, was captivating. Despite the low camera quality, it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. What made it even more beautiful was that I knew exactly why the land barrier between ocean and open mine had failed: thus, the poem “Liquefaction” was born.

There is an awful beauty in seeing things as they are. An unsettling thought is that there may be no set way that things are, just changes and shifts in perspective, light
fracturing through a crystal prism. *Beat the Church Crowd* is my attempt at using poetry to understand the world around me, for all its magnificence and for all its horror.
Blue Danube

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”
-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
At a Calhoun County Cemetery

My mother gave me a great-grandmother’s name. Not yours, Irene, and I wonder if that slight set you off as much as it did your daughter, if your bone fist balled up and struck the lid of your coffin, cutting deep, carving grooves with your dusted knucklebones on the spot where I stand above you. My grandmother pats your stone once, twice, tells me she brought me out to this place because once she’s gone, you’ll truly be gone, Irene, and I, the last living Spraberry who isn’t dead to her, must pass down your lifetime to children who haven’t been born, who won’t be born for years and years, if at all. That’s too much power for a young woman’s hands.

You handed down your faults, your grievances, maybe a virtue or two (though no one ever spoke of you kindly) to your daughter, she to her son, he to his daughter. Me. A generational game of slap-hands bullfrog, balancing a candle in the palm of your hand as you smack it down the line, and you curse furies when the candle falls, white wax dripping through fingers, down sunken palm lines, when the flame extinguishes in the dirt below.

The twin names on your tombstone leak black, brackish tears, a doppelganger image, rain, sun weathering cold rock in humid weather, day in, day out. A few years will pass. Your name will sink into the stone like a body decaying. My grandmother, your daughter, knew the way to you without thinking, without a map, guided by a beaten road and ghosts of buildings, a child’s home, looking for a pecan grove that burned to the last root, lost to the same fire (faulty duct-taped wire – a fireman’s field day) that devastated the house your husband built. The house he died in. I forget as soon as we drive away.

What am I to tell those who are yet to come? That their great-great-grandfather, Dennis Lavon, cursed the Japanese and their cars until the day he died for shooting down overthrown sailors, shipwreck survivors, in the waters of the Pacific Theater, passed that hate down to his daughter. The two of them ignored the Fat Man and the Little Boy, who mushroomed and turned civilians
to ash, to shadows. War is war. And you, Irene Fontaine,
what shall I tell them of you? I know but fragments,
your life a mirror fallen from a third story window.
I try to piece the shards together, but can only see
my own face, reflected back tenfold in every sliver.
You're sandwiched between two men
in the sepia stained withered photograph.
I know the one on your right – my left –
is Grandpa Larry because the way he squints
into the camera is the same way Dad does,
the same way I do, when a photographer
tells you to smile, and the sun makes a
perfect halo around his head as it burns your eyes.

There’s no way you could have known,
your arm around Larry, cigarette in hand
(the rebel you are, with your short skirt
and your shirt untucked) that the baby
you hadn’t had yet – you look far too young –
as well as you, and Grandpa Larry, would
stand up like dominos and keel over
one after the other, thirty years out
in a suffocating Mississippi summer.

Larry with his shirt untucked died
during the funeral of his only son.
Cancer whittled down his bones.
When Dad, fresh-faced and little,
stopped by to see his grandpa after
they put his father in the ground,
(did you know Multiple Sclerosis can kill you?)
he saw a bed, starch-white sheets,
and the indentation of a grandpa
who’d been there just two hours ago.

Where were you, Jewel? It’s hollow,
seeing the cigarette in your fingers
dangling loosely, knowing even then
your lungs were blackening, your cells
eaten up like a newspaper, wicking and
curling in a fireplace. Did you see the shadows
of your husband and son cast long on the walls
of your hospital room as you coughed and wheezed and died?
Elegy for James Stone

“The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.”
–William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*

They found Jimmy Stone’s body at the bottom of a well, built beneath the arms of a sprawling Magnolia, glass broken from his bourbon bottle scattered, thrown as if he’d tried to guide his way home, dropped breadcrumbs and ribbons tied to every tenth tree, to remember the way back as he made the sign of the cross and jumped. No Stone ever fell off any wagon, but straightened their ties or gathered their skirts and plunged off themselves, skulls thick, minds made. Rust stained a stone wet halfway down, a war diamond, and days later when the boys down the road helped haul Jimmy’s bloated corpse out of the well, they’d found it run dry. Empty, like Jimmy’s checkbook the day he’d stumbled out into the woods, fresh from an ill-fated game of Blackjack. His granddaughter came after, chewing at the inside of her cheek. She brought a beer, smashed it on the well’s rock lip and watched the shards plummet down the passage, like sparks ricocheting off a telephone pole struck by lightning, brown dust pasted on the shards. The family drowned the Jimmy-sized hole in their hearts as he did best, a quiet memorial in the bottom of a shot glass, or fallen down dizzy at the foot of a staircase, cupfuls of the liquor he lost in his downfall turning, shattering in the dirt, sinking deep into the roots, sinking deeper down into the earth, farther down than Jimmy ever could have fallen.
Diamonds

Matsy was left with twelve diamonds, a dead husband, her girls to watch for. Matsy married an heiress’s son, not knowing he’d drink away his fortune on the heels of a world at war. Matsy molded perfect women, all for her girls.

Sewing, sock darning, she taught her girls baking, Bible verses. Her daughters, diamonds, once coal, under pressure, beautiful. Matsy saw her world. Her husband died for her to understand what is real: fortune in family is priceless to what gold cannot touch. She’d played cards, they did not measure to the sight of her sleeping girls, sneaking goodnight kisses worth a fortune, a hand thrust skyward to God, full of diamonds. She asked for more time with them, begged for her girls to stay little. To love her, prayed Matsy.

Her love drawn and quartered, Matsy hid the world, taught her baby girls to not make the damned mistakes of their father, for she saw different parts of him in all the girls. To a jeweler she took the whole of her diamonds, estimated that the brave are favored by fortune.

She split the rest of what was left of her fortune. Three jewels for each daughter, what Matsy saw as insurance, an investment in diamonds for who her little girls would become. Not a dowry auctioned to the noisiest bidder, her girls held legacies, a promise, something to look for.

Into rings and necklaces they set, trinkets for passing down to daughters, little fortunes all their own. For her girls had their own girls had their own girls in turn, passing down Matsy’s love even if unknown. The heirloom ring did not celebrate marriage. Each love created diamonds.
A mother of three girls wears the silver ring for
the day diamonds tarnish and lay waste to fortune.
Glinting lights reminisce Matsy. She is here and she is not.
Bouquet

Everything turns in on itself.
I tear ahead, bouquet in hand.

I remember the bunches 
of red and blue flowers 
on tablecloths in the tent.
Strewn outwards like a fountain 
frozen in time. The light blue 
Larkspur a stark turn from the 
spectators’ navy. First quarter, 
see and be seen. Second, 
keep an eye on Mother, 
who complains about the heat. 
Halftime comes. A plea 
to leave with us ignored. 
Aren’t these flowers lovely?

Door opens. I throw the bouquet 
on the island, then unlock 
my own door. Strewn across the floor 
and counter, the delphiniums 
are the blue blood of Ajax; 
not that my mother has ever 
one once had the tailgate catered. 
Murmurs of an ambulance. 
That’s not necessary, she says. 
Just need rest. She turns to me: 
Do you have a vase for those flowers?
Margaritas

You sit across from your best friend and you both drink salt-lipped margaritas. *I wish they made these in smaller sizes,* you laugh. *One of these bad boys is enough to make me silly.* She pours salt on the chips and you raise your eyebrows, mutter *cholesterol* under your breath while your head swims, and the jingle of your car keys makes you giggle like you, your fobs, trinkets, and keys share a schoolgirl’s secret as you slide them across the table to her.

The heirloom Jacob’s Ladder toy dies with you. You lit a bonfire and your hand held a knife over it, close enough to flame that the tiny hairs on your arm stood on end. A handful burnt off and turned to ash, teetotaling to the wheeling flames below. You took that burning knife as it coughed cinders and severed a ribbon, cauterizing stray threads that plastic blackened, an unfortunate inheritance you don’t want, never wanted, but might be court-ordered to keep. You know the hours you can get a dollar off margaritas at your second favorite restaurant. You know which places around town have the best cocktails. You look back down at the ladder you burned and realize, with horror, that it grew back, doubled in length. To calm frayed nerves you pour yourself a drink and your shaking hands spill ice cubes under the refrigerator. Look and see how they melt over time in puddles of themselves.
Hospital Sketches

The first time it snowed in my new state
I watched flakes casting ash past yellowed streetlamps from a hospital waiting room.
I have eaten dirt. I have been wrapped in plaster when my young spine wrenched like a splintered green wood sapling hit once then twice by a lumberjack’s axe.
Wet strips of papier-mâché laid next to my spine on the ground laid next to the wriggling serpent that people forget lived in Eden too.
Kids had flu. Kids had cancer. Kids had twisted back deformities years strapped in a brace couldn’t fix. I have slept in as my mother’s heart seized. I have worn face masks and set gloved chickens loose when doctors let us finally be.

When my sister was born I poked her blinking eyes. When my sister was born I was inconvenienced. My father snuck whiskey miniatures in his pocket, past tired nurses and night watchmen. We passed an old man, skin like paper, gurney-bound, wheeled and parked in front of a waiting room’s broken TV. A second cousin’s husband committed her to hospice, said Take her off machines, broke Christmas plans. Wanting her leaden, dead-weight stand mixer back, she refused to die and held onto an ice-cold Diet Doctor Pepper until her long-dead cat jumped to her bed’s end and meowed. A strict March deadline. My back, her throat, her eyes, his head, her heart, our lives, until we get the call to collect a rosewood box: sealed, placed on the mantle, burning, heavy.
Anecdotes

“I had a funny feeling as I saw the house disappear, as though I had written a poem and it was very good and I had lost it and would never remember it again.”
-Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*
Ode to Dead Stump

After the Easter Sunday meal,
I stood outside in my
pink petal dress with
white polka dots
(I wore that dress
to cotillion, my pair
of white gloves holding
the sweaty hands
of a mystery boy,
the two of us locked
in a toe-stepping waltz)

The mist of a rain
that wasn’t quite rainfall
hung overhead,
the kind that ruined
my hot-roller curls
despite my White Rain,
and I wiped away the wisps
of hair the wind
blew into my face,
bow strung, arrow nocked.

I let it loose,
arrows after arrows
aiming for you,
the stump on the hill,
your wood dead long enough
that when I got a good shot
the bolt sunk in
with a thunk,
unless, of course, I aimed too high,
arrows whistling into grey sky,
fletching vanes spiraling
like Icarus.

Backyard half-rot,
you must’ve towered
high in your hey-day,
looking down at the
odd double-fence
that separated us from
the back-door neighbors,
the one I climbed over,
little hands gripping,
twice over, twice back
as I brought home arrows
that flew too close to the sun.
Dentist’s Ghazal

I left sixth grade early, flossing my teeth on the ride to the dentist
I’d rather see the doctor a million times before I went, eyes wide, to the dentist.

“How do you floss all your teeth twice daily?” Asked the man, his wrinkled
white coat too big on his shoulders. “Oh yes!” I smiled back, as I lied to the dentist.

If inflicting human suffering is your passion, don’t fret! Look at all the ways you can
cause people harm: root canal, crowns. The job’s a substitute for homicide, to the dentist.

I brush my teeth pearly out of fear of the snakes. One day I’ll lash back –
One cavity filling too far, and I’ll give my dose of nitrous oxide to the dentist.

Mouth prop, bite block, they lined my teeth with bubblegum grit, slip,
stab, “Alston, do you really floss?” Metal in mouth, mumbling, I cried to the dentist.
Pine Needle Tea

We found the recipe for pine needle tea online, back when I was young enough to be swept up in adventure, unafraid of dirt beneath fingernails, pulling ticks off my own legs, flicking off crawlers. We gathered wet underbrush and sticks to set a fire, but I’d quit Girl Scouts too early to use flint or tinder. Her father had lighter fluid, kept in the laundry room that held a doomsday prepper’s pantry, hanging clothes, and the oldest computer known to man. We set a log cabin but her house sat atop a hill that sloped down to a creek we only visited once the twenty years I knew her. Twigs stacked Lincoln Logs rolled downhill, away, head over end faster than we could ever hope to catch. She threw handfuls of pulpy leaves at the foot of a tree only a day ago held the upside-down carcass of a deer, feet bound and dangling over a cracked plaster bucket.

She held the bottle with both hands. Lighter fluid smothered rain-stained leaves until the match spark skeletonized the pile. I held the metal pot, filled halfway with tap water and garnished with the fallen pine needles of a past fall, hands wavering, watching pieces of mud we failed to brush off flake apart and break the surface. I spilled the sweaty broth on the ground, managed to catch some in twin mugs we’d packed in our rucksacks, but when we clinked ceramics together and took the first sip, she spat it out, onto the ground. I did the same, coughing as I dumped the rest onto the hiccupping fire. The pan in my hands caught the forgotten ingredient, a teaspoon of lighter fluid, coating our hands, our lips, our teeth, our throats. I, the summer Southerner city-mouse, dropped my mug as I stood under the tree where her father and sister on either side struggled to roll deer skin down, tacky blackened blood dripping between gloved fingertips.
The Price of Candy

It’s after midnight on Halloween, the doorbell’s stopped ringing, and I am so brave and fifteen that I can watch *The Silence of the Lambs* because it’s a thriller, not horror, so it’s different, and I sneak back downstairs at three in the morning with all my mother-coveted Butterfingers, put them back in the bowl one-by-one, because Buffalo Bill only grabbed fat women for his skin suit and everyone knows I only run if I’m being chased.
Invasive Species

A demon drove to the grocery store just ahead of me to hook a clawed, gnarled hand behind the five dollar pints of coffee chocolate ice cream to seize towards itself, dropping gelatos in quick succession into its handheld plastic basket like lemmings shoved one after the next off a sheer cliff face. I’ve done the unthinkable, something unfathomable to earn its ire, but the acid-orange drink that knocked me out cold in my teenaged-riddled insomnia days disappeared from the shelf and energy drinks crawled forth in its absence and spanned and multiplied like zebra mussels slipping through a water treatment plant’s rusted utility grate, mollusks growing and bloating to crowd with their fire-forged teammates. Mussel judges gave a standing ovation, a black-and-white scorecard 10: they’d blocked the pipes feeding Lake Champlain and God help the person who tried to pry them off. A boy cried to my sister when he couldn’t shake his monstrous Red Bull habit. The cynic who set up a black-and-white detective’s office in the noir corner of my brain, who’s got legs for days and blinks against striped rectangle lights seeping in through window blinds, wished nothing more than for his heart to explode so he leaves her house for good and she never has to smell the enriched flour of a cardboard, quick-and-ready pizza ever again.
To the Front-Row Intellectual

What is a poem if not incomprehensible? If it makes students want to throw their collections of Robert Frost at a wall, scribble “I Hate Robert Frost” on top of every page of notes, or trudge off the road less travelled by to bushwhack with a machete and fall face first into fresh snow and stay there – is that not the quintessence of the craft? Words will stuff tubes down students’ throats, inflate egos with helium: Well, in Beowulf – Oh, I’m sorry, have you heard of Beowulf? Have you heard of Beowulf? Let me ask a question not because I wish to know an answer, but to show you that I have, in fact, read Beowulf. Grendel had a mother? A single tear rolls down an oily face. Their silence is dark, lovely, deep. Oh, I knew that, of course, for I have read Beowulf. Let me demonstrate sesquipedalian loquaciousness because in my infinite intellect I know people must loathe me not because I am insufferable, but because I am surely more intelligent than they.
Gold Medal

Out of solidarity and faith
you hate her roommate –
This friend-of-a-friend who
never does her dishes,
who brings back boys and shakes
the walls and shoots drugs
up in her good clean home, earning
half a grand from not
kissing until she can drive a car.
Fingers crossed, uncrossed:
Girls who sit like this want this like that.
Wine is pink and soothes
the house of red Olympians,
the crowd, the two-dollar
pizza cut, and while you use all
your focus to read the side-hanging wall mugs, how to hold
the coffee cup you drink
out of for the fourth time, six-dollar
cut of the college wine,
the girl you hate because you’re
a good friend, and good friends
spew vitriol and spite to protect those
who would dash them against
rocks – she laughs and dangles lanky
arms over your shoulders.
She plants a drunken feather kiss
square on your cheek,
whispers words you cannot remember
as you scan the room for
witnesses. You wish the cheers of American
gold snowboarding victories came
a second sooner so you could turn
your head just so: you, the
girl you hate, the girl who sees you,
the den of lions distracted.
I was dog-sick and carless, waking up in the middle of the night unable to breathe through my nose, sitting on a folded toilet seat – sink on, shower on, as hot as water would go, filling the room with steam that I tried to breathe, but instead ate in clouded gasps as I took a shot of whiskey – or maybe it was scotch – I don’t know the difference, like bourbon and whiskey back home. (Whiskey forever – bourbon is Kentucky and Kentucky is nothing but a cowboy hat placed on Tennessee’s pool-side lounger. Don’t tell me the barrels are better. Jack Daniels himself cried into this bottle, stood on a dock or the deck of yacht and threw it into the ocean, it found its way to me, displaced expatriate.) Alcohol kills germs. Alcohol kills lots of things, I told myself, and I felt better, though I still couldn’t breathe through my nose. When I could breathe through one nostril
I decided to climb
the dead volcano.
Not to the top –
I’d done it twice
and with the lungs
of a trusty, lifelong
secondhand smoker,
with the strong heart
that might take me
at forty-three, god unwilling.
The cliffs (or crags) seemed
an option better suited
for me, the girl who stopped
and read every plaque
at the history museum,
who tried to look
Dolly the Sheep in her
taxidermied, miracle
eyes, but the glass case
revolved in slow circles,
giving schoolchildren a shot
to see. She oscillated back,
head thrown to the side,
as if she’d just kicked up
some of the hay surrounding
her lifeless mutton legs.
As she turned to me,
turned away again, an
endless undulation,
turning and finding the edges,
the new frontiers of a round,
lived-in Earth, I would’ve sworn
that Dolly, in her hour of death,
motioned with her trotters,
(are they truly her hooves,
or the combined thrice-cloven
hooves of her three mothers?)
summoned her caretaker,
bahhhed sweetly in their ear: Take
me to the National Museum
of Scotland, for far in the future
a girl will come here, hard with
her R’s. American, and everything
we’ve worked for here in this lab
will be for naught if I’m not
stuffed with cotton, given
glass eyes, and put on display
for her to see. You will know
her when you see her, or hear
her talk or breathe, for her nose
is pugged and half-blocked.
Please take her aside, this Chosen
One, and give her a Sudafed.
Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes
*After the song by Jimmy Buffett*

Jimmy Buffett loves the beach. Alston Tyer loves the beach. Parrot on her head, Alston Tyer loops Boat Drinks in Mississippi and sips a Pina Colada and thinks: if I don’t go to the beach right now, I’ll die. Jimmy croons as Avery speeds and hits the brakes and we smack the car in front of us. No damage but a crack to her hood, the girls in front of us open and shut their jeep back and wave us on: Island Time unites better than tragedy and mass destruction, hysteria, links hearts with margarita havens better than the uprooted palms, shattered boardwalks of hurricanes. Even grey, churning, riptide ocean waves crash in tandem to heartbeats in ears – even when a clouded sky necessitates sunscreen Alston Tyer doesn’t wear – the seagull’s screech an ear-balm, every day is a countdown again to the water, to petal pink shells you cut your feet on, the sandbars, an oil rig on the horizon line, deep breaths and checking your bank account when the urge to buy a boat and sail off in it overwhelms, to row out to the edge of the world and past it – desert island, skipper plane, time perpetual.
To the Man Who Gave Me His Seat on the Bus

Our children will be named Walton Arthur
And Elizabeth, if your surname sounds
sweet hyphenated with mine. The kids will
have my pug nose. Pity them. With your eyes
they look at photo albums after we’ve
gone: the beach, my arms red and peeling as
I splash water over your head. You took books
into the ocean, soaked one every time.
Our first baby, in their first picture, has
oversized sunglasses perched on their pink
button nose. I’m sweaty and barefaced. You
wear the basketball shorts you know I hate.
We drive to a dark field at night, all of us splayed
out in a circle on the crunched grassy ground.
My sneakers touch your boots, touch their light-up
Velcro tennis shoes. You take their little
hands, trace the constellations. I tell them
which star is actually Mars, and when
they’re old and their memories fade like bath
water seeping down a clogged drain, they can
look night skyward, and without knowing why,
feel the world was made deeper by us two.
Bumper Sticker Funeral

If my family and friends advertise my untimely death with a car decal, let them have the decency to disclose what on earth happened, so bored teenagers riding shotgun seatbeltless will know not only that I was a caring daughter and friend but the long and short of it all. Folks rarely list in obituaries how the deceased bit it: open your glove box and put on your deerstalker, piece together the story from comments of condolences, crowdfunded funeral costs and medical bills, a local news article. Montana and Mississippi are joined in deadly car crash union, cancers, for here you can still see walking around men with dip indents in their back jean pockets. Light a virtual candle on the funeral home page for a kid you have never met, will never meet, drive past the mobile tombstones and know that everyone buried has someone who cared to put them there.
Angels

Never tell people you collect angels, they’re all you’ll get for Christmas for years until angels with porcelain hands stretching upwards to God, sunbeams manipulating tree-topped marionettes, push the seams of mold festering asbestos, push the roof off your house – Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord in every frayed tulle skirt and jostled attic box that shatters halos to pieces.
Urban Legends

“In woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”
-Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation”
The Carnton Porch Guest

Suppose you marched North in grey during the Civil War straight up to Nashville when your superiors, who’d dragged their writing war desks into the parlor of the family whose plantation you slept on last night, slammed doors and shuttered windows because them Yankee sonsabitches turned off all their oil lamps, snuck by single-file in the night. Once the fighting started proper, a stray bullet caught you in the thigh; your brothers-in-arms dragged you back to the bedroom upstairs where the surgeon standing in a halo of blood gripped his knife and hacksawed your leg off. God’s grace can only get you so far. You breathed still, but your wound turned gangrenous and festered black. You didn’t know what gangrenous meant until you enlisted, and you couldn’t spell it if your mother’s life depended on it. They sat you out on a rocking chair on the wrap-around porch for the good, clean air. Sawbones said miasmas would be the death of you, not your necrotic stump, bandaged with the same crimson-specked cloth they pulled off the arm of a dead man. While you sat still in the rocking chair, you saw them carry you away. You had to squint, but you could see a handful of graves grow to dozens, to hundreds, like maggots on a dead horse. You saw a woman in black, and you could tell as she got closer that she was the wife of the man who owned the house. The air was good and warm so you rocked a little longer. You saw electric lights strung up, tar paved all over your good, dirt-beat roads. You saw horseless wagons and the house fall into disrepair, you saw people come and fix up the house, you saw little children led by a woman in a skirt too short to be decent, and you kept rocking, though no breeze moved you. Rays of sun glinted off a reinstalled window and you saw a child inside looking out through you, and came to realize your own face didn’t reflect back.
Winter Ghazal

A girl left to play with neighbors, puffy coat zipped – outside it’s cold enough to freeze to death, but the snow’s piled high, white, and cold.

*I know what you’re getting for Christmas!* The little girl shrieks, smile checked with one front tooth. Her mother sighs, thinking how she’ll scold.

Picking herself up from the ice-rink, botched toe-loop, her hands squeeze tight, her thumbs indrawn. She swears: *this is the last time I’ll ever be cold.*

Tears streak down a reddened face, breaths exhaled in clouded puffs, she tries to grab his hands with hers. He shakes his head, face drawn, cold.

Hands too close to an all-stone fireplace, chili warming on a stove, Hat drawn off, hand to forehead. *Oh, my baby, you’re ice cold!*
Dear Tree-Hugger

We only once visited your cabin, the one you and my grandfather bought nestled wood-side on the edge of a pond. My grandfather told me, lies whistling through teeth, that you sold it. My mother took me aside, told me not to tell my cousin, but you’d been out there alone, flat-backed, looking up at a cloudless sky, mosquitoes nipping at your face. Mud-crusted camo boots splayed out spread-eagle, arms out too, grasping at a pine trunk in your last seconds of life.

We sat on the dock you built, the one time we visited, and let our little legs hang so that we brushed the pond with the tips of our toes, water shallow and rippling out. It could have become a tsunami in Japan, ripples growing to waves, to behemoths, had the pond stretched out farther, meeting streams to tributaries to rivers, groundwater sucked up by gray clouds sagging under their own weight and taken halfway across the world, or staying above us and raining down on the dock where we saw mosquito eggs under the surface. My cousin swore they were tadpoles, but they were the larvae you saw in tire swings or clay pots in your backyard.

Your land is sold and the cabin is gone. It’s nothing more than a rotted wooden frame. The dock’s still brilliant, the wood rain-stained, weary, more splinter than board. You run your fingernails across it, and it’s like driving seventy on the backroads, potholes sending you airborne. You place a hand to your chest and it vibrates, your teeth chatter. Did the fallen pine crush you across the middle, or flatten you long-ways, like a possum bounced once, twice, eighteen times under the thundering wheels of a big-rig semi?
Spam

A balding football coach taught
eighth grade career prep,
his grass-stained sneakered
feet propped up on his plastic desk,
sweating and laughing as he fed
a career DVD to the projector –
behind him, a bookshelf lined and
packed, cram-full, with years-old
tinned and blue-canned Spam.

Tied with a glittered blue ribbon,
machine packaged and passed off to
suggestible, susceptible middle school
students: sewers, cranberries, dirty jobs
of banker, lawyer, truck driver,
bright futures manning spotlights
in community theatres, all musty,
salty, state-mandated, neat, meaty,
vacuum-sealed, people-shaped cubes.
Rat, Undated

*After the painting by Leonard Baskin*

I am a big fat rat.
Inked in black debris,
Well now, how about that?

In this frame I’ve sat
since Baskin drew me;
I am a big fat rat.

I’m ratkind’s diplomat -
Abstract O’Keefe’s I see.
Well now, how about that?

Garbage aristocrat:
“This is art,” you agree.
I am a big fat rat.

I’m quite good to look at.
Rat-framed reality.
Well now, how about that?

Was this all tit for tat?
Black Death’s a warning plea.
I am a big fat rat.
Well now, how about that?
In Case of Emergency

Do not lock yourself in the metal deathtrap, the decades old elevator:

“May stop short of floor.”
Flaming, crumbling floors fed by cellulose and eight

printed pages of chaos theory, neat, butterfly stapled to charring bulletin boards.

The “s” has burned off the door to the stair.
The lab has dual exits.

The great unknown cries and its tears are fire –
Outlined in black ink,

Use the other door **PLEASE**!

Outlined in black ink, its tears are fire and the great unknown cries

the lab has dual exits, the door to the stair.
The “s” has burned off, charring bulletin boards.
Neat, butterfly stapled to printed pages of chaos theory.

Fed by cellulose and eight flaming, crumbling floors, “May stop short of floor,”

the decades-old elevator, the metal deathtrap, do not lock yourself in.
Fish in a Barrel

She lives now in the pet supply shop. Cat food, she has found, tastes better than dog food. Both are gone now and she eats the dust people used to sprinkle over their rainbow painted fish. Most novice-bought fish die in weeks. She had not died yet. The shelter cats she keeps in tiny cages at night for their own good. The cats leave when food runs out, sprinting and hissing and darting through the shattered still automatic doors. Into night without end she watches them run until they are gone, into a lasting darkness she cannot brave yet. Over time, fish flakes do not bother her. She hefts wood planks from the back office, uses them to board up open spaces. Dirty dusted windows, busted glass doors, linking the tops of aisles. A catwalk, a contingency plan. In the back office rots the sallow corpse of a man with a key ring. The outside is too dangerous to risk ridding him. She lets the red-eye cornsnake and the ticker-tape ball python out of their glass cages that tinged green lacking weeks of cleaning. Fearing, at first, they would leave her, she checks on them daily. In the front of the back office door they slither under the dead man’s arms, through holes they have burrowed through his torso, through the empty unseeing socket of his left eye.
Bat Out of Hell
*After the painting by Glennray Tutor*

Screaming rebel rocket with report, the bat-cat hybrid pulled itself from the fifth level of hell with only opal fangs and all the wrath it could muster. Bat-cat took souvenir parts of home along, the fire sparked in its ira eyes ravaging sclera like kudzu on the house of a man who died childless, like the gooseflesh spreading up prickling arms and hands hiding shut eyes when the final girl creeps towards the door that hides the masked assassin. The bat-cat lost its head in the wrenching climb landwards, the devils below wheezing with tickled ribs as they set fire to its bat-cat tail and watched it spiral upwards to the earth, a doomed sixties’ space mission, bat-cat howling and whorling to heavens before human error and miscalculation send it hurtling down. For a moment, the bat-cat streamed above it all, cartwheeling in the night sky, dropkicking stars and transforming the entire spectrum of both light and color, everything and nothing all at once before fire crept up the wick to the bat-cat’s spinal cord, a hand thrust outwards to the Pleiades in life-lorn desperation before the stars winked out, embers doused, and all dimmed to darkness.
Jailbird

His name, if he ever had one, is lost like the chunks of panned gold nuggets the forty-niners said they’d find in the hills just a hike from town, then blow on bordellos and craps tables. Jack Hardin said he’d killed a foreign ambassador and was hiding from the law in plain sight. Louisa said he was the one who’d burned down the Lindgren’s house, while Old Chuck and Alice swore up and down he’d been the one who’d shot Miss Kate’s brother on the doorstep of the bank. Miss Kate told Henry at the general store if he’d been her brother’s killer, he wouldn’t be in any jail, but swinging from the rock-side edge of the bluffs east of town. Pastor Robinson sat with the man sometimes, on the other side of the bars, lamenting the evils of the bottle and the cards and the dice and the original sin of being born. The man in the jail, as the sheriff called him, winked and smiled and fell asleep on the bench while Robinson droned Leviticus. The Widow Collier sat with him too, sometimes, old as she was, brought her knitting and talked about grandchildren out past Fort Laramie and others back Chicago-side. Jeremiah said he’d been kicked in head by a horse when he stole it, made deaf-mute. “Cain’t hang a deaf-mute,” he said, spitting tobacco into the thoroughfare. “It’s in the Constitution. I read it. Don’t believe me and I’ll tell you to bring me a copy of it, show you just where
the Founding Fathers said you cain’t hang a man who’s been horse-kicked in the head.”
Apex

We were too old for mermaids
and not old enough for water aerobics
when we night-swam in the pool
sans a grandparent’s blessing.
Darkness stained green-tinged
water blue, nearly black but
for the silver waves glinting off
moon and porchlight. Shadows
grew in the deep end, a place
the light never touched. Shark-sized.
Though we knew no Great White
stalked Nana’s forest-facing
Mississippi pool, sometimes alligators
slithered into snowbirds’ backyards,
ate their little yipping dogs.
The old folks too, from time to time.
Once there was a woman, an octogenarian,
who should have been in the Alzheimer’s
ward of her nursing home. Her family
couldn’t afford it, or decided they couldn’t.
One summer night, with a brain of fog,
she wandered out the building and into
the bayou, barefoot, into the snapping jaws
of a crocodile – or alligator – or other apex
predator with rows of razorwire teeth.
The next morning, a search party found
only a pair of legs sticking out of the pond
like matchsticks, varicose veins
tinged blue, severed red.
Treasure Triptych

John Murell’s been dead for a century and a half, his outlaw gang better fit for hitting wagon trains bound west, rather than hiding in bushes on the Old Natchez Trace, a knife stabbed in a homemade map, dragged downwards through Nashville, cleaving into thirds Mississippi, silhouetting the deep, deep South. Murrell was an awful man with an awful mustache. He made his fortune as a highwayman, horse thief, slave-stealer. When sentenced to ten years, he stashed his gold in a safehouse, tucked off-road, hidden by a tree with three-winged leaves. No one has ever found where or what he stashed away.

When Forrest Fenn was diagnosed – cancer he surely wouldn’t survive – he took his jewels, coins, a handful of antiquities, and, for the thrill of the chase, buried it in the Rockies, where he sat down and wrote a poem, a riddle, a treasure map with six stanzas, twenty-four lines, nine clues. Hundreds of thousands of people have combed where warm waters halt, three men stalled – dead stop, washing ashore on the Rio Grande or the Arkansas River. Yellowstone saw one Indiana Jones plummet from a slope, five hundred feet to the canyon down. Treasure metastasized to legend.

Fresh off a plane, Takako Konishi found her way to Fargo, North Dakota. People say she watched Steve Buscemi, jaw shot, with a briefcase and a million bucks, fall to his knees, bury the cash under barbed wire, ice stretching as far as the screen would allow. Based on a true story, she made her own map to find it and froze to death looking for a red snow scraper. She wasn’t searching for the money, though, but a quiet place to lie down in the snow, to drink two champagne bottles alone, to stare up at the stars and wonder if they were different from the ones in Japan.
Plague

Such is the way of tumultuous times. The sinking Titanic bandstand resumed, expository newspapers unfolded, left on seats at gates in airports abandoned. Racing light-speed, unprepared, at the light dimmed tomorrow with convictions of ragdolls, six and a half million miles of hacking, spittle, fascia muscle lining spaces for lungs and the pockets of penny-pinchers. O ye of little faith, who sit in witnessed pews of plagues and battlefields, morgues, scattered as smuggled, hand-rolled cigarettes in a lifelong smoker’s final pack. One more, in the hospice home he wheezes. One more, and One more, and One more, and One more, blood cough speckled sheets and pillows, dead in the water, cigarette held past balanced lips bit in half, tobacco grounds stained back teeth and tongue. O how ye forget Constantinople, decimated by the black swelled plague they named for a saint.
Something Worth Protecting

“Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence.”

-Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*
Superfamily Cicadoidea

Seventeen years of sleep and that wasn’t enough to keep you tranquil, quiet. No! We know it’s summer when you burst forth and scream and caterwaul, a heavy-metal hallelujah chorus announcing to the world: Wake up! The cicadas are here.

You pull yourself up from the earth with pint-sized pincers the sun hasn’t seen for years. You’re an oatmeal-casted debutante who climbs the nearest tree and stripteases, abandoning your paper-thin silhouette – a rite of passage as you fly with sticky, baby-fresh wings while your shadow clings to the tree for dear life.

Free at last, dead weight shed, you’re whole-heartedly yourself. No one here likes you (we hate you) but you rage and din despite us, to spite us, the disc jockeys of back porches, giving the mayfly a run for its money for the short time you get above ground, but oh, how you spend it.

When you’re found in the morning your carapace is marked iridescent, flown, now flattened, into the grill of a car. Your lifelong quest for romance ends when a little boy in swim trunks picks you up, brings you to his mouth. His mother gasps as he crunches down – a rough-hewn kind of mitosis.
There will be no baby cicadas. Your cicada sons and daughters will not be there at your side, on your death bed. The light in the tunnel is at the back of a cat’s throat, under a laundry basket, a size nine shoe, or a boxwood shrub where, in your death throes a person sees you, you whizz up at them, saying (if you could) “I was here!”
Tsunami

I made pipe cleaner bracelets, at six years old, when I heard about the Boxing Day Tsunami, with no idea what Boxing Day was, or where Indonesia was (I’d be hard-pressed even now) I thought I’d sell the bands, two strands strung as tightly together as little hands could manage. In class the next day, we journaled. First graders had a notebook and a dictionary we filled out ourselves.

I might’ve heard a word, on the news or from my parents, and the word “tsunami” bounced around my head, a ricocheting castaway in a leaking dinghy, whipped by the sea. My mother told me it was a big wave, and my heart broke for the drowned as I myself had wiped out once or twice while boogie boarding, yellow flag warning caution to children with turtle-patterned arm floats that swam too far out, close to riptides, so my little mind at least knew what it was like to be hit by water, sunscreen running, saltwater eyes burning.

I struggled getting my words on the page. I brought my paper dictionary, bound by three staples, to my teacher, opened to the “S” page. She smiled as she took it, leafing the paper forward to the “T” page. Her script looped, black, inking out “tsunami.” I, drilled and hooked on phonics, tried to put the two halves together. “No,” she said, as she pointed to the capital letter. “Sometimes T’s are silent.”
Arc

A driftwood telephone pole hefts in the middle of a flooded bog pond, glass blown transfusers, an animal blurred down the path – either fawn or coyotes big enough to grapple and devour barnyard cats and kindergartners. A standing beacon in the water that turns greener with every hit sunbeam and is hidden when rain floods the deep ravine that killed thirty in a derailed train wreck joggers pass. The water is no cleaner than in a foreclosed zoo, all the animals gathered past gates condemned and are set loose together by a good Samaritan – lion, oryx, hippo, antelope, clustered giraffe families – the smorgasbord is too busy eating one another to turn on her. Every ounce of lacking upper body strength she uses to climb the telephone pole, to sit at the top and petrify – spring rain pelts her, alligators circle around, but their knife-edge claws, rancid with rotting, shredded meat, find no purchase, scratching, and they cannot climb.
Upsweep

Where pressure fractures skulls, the abyssal plain of the ocean – what lurks there that can snap its jaws once and bisect a great white? What marvelous anomalies go unknown? The force of the meteor might have launched dinosaurs to orbit, crushing others to fine lunar dust – we know more of space than the saltwater that would take four thousand years to deplete if rain ceased, siphoning down trenches, creeping up deltas, sunfish drifting and sun-spotting until they belly up, nature’s forgotten, beloved saltine. Brine-crusted dead fish wash ashore in an eye-stinging red tide, every open eye bored out of their fishbone skulls. Lightning strikes the ocean and a seal dies. Lightning strikes a river and a salmon dies. Lightning strikes an offshore rig and a duckling, oily down feathers slick and heavy, drowns to death under the weight of itself. Pushed down by hydrostatic pressure, the unknown noises from the ocean’s floor – an eldritch mother’s cry for a lost child, iceberg fragments scraping lithospheres as they move. On the surface, a blue whale breaches a wave with her back, balancing the still body of her calf, a pallbearer, as she cries and dirges and is heard at a research station thousands of miles away.
Drawdown

The term for what occurs when land becomes hydrous is liquefaction – as a child I dreamt I rode passenger through a series of hills stretching higher than cranes. Smooth rounded mountains. The mammoths collapsed in on themselves as I drove by, a house of cards caving, turning in an instant to turbid waves, building and crashing with no debris, rootless, rockless, only dream-green water that was somehow solid earth at the same time.
Gull

You face towards the wind.
If you turn around, it'll blow you
and blow you like the striped blue beach ball
careening down the sand, moving too fast
for its owner to reach. He waves a hand at it
as it tumbles and flies until it's just a speck
and then nothing. You couldn’t see it,
but you saw the man running towards you.
You unfurled your wings, batted them at him,
opened your beak and screeched, sidestepping
little cross-hatches onto the hot, white sand.

Why did you run away from him, panicked,
while you bob and weave now at my feet?
You’re pecking for chip crumbs as I kick sand up at you,
arcing, landing on your outstretched wings.
And you, undeterred, unfettered, screeching again,
calling up a dark swarm of your hatch-mates,
peck and peck at the crumbs. You could have them all,
but you called down their dark fury, the legion
that would have descended upon the bag of chips
if I hadn’t been six times your size, shouting
and shooing you away from your own home.

The flag flies double-red, but that doesn’t deter you
from landing at the water’s edge, shifting the sand
with your beak, searching for the shells with insides you can eat.
The waves crash and you take off just in time
that you’re not dragged by the undertow, like a drowning sailor,
beneath the roiling and foaming waves. Do you hate the pelican,
I wonder, as it swoops down and snaps a fish up
from the crest of a wave? It’s effortless, and here
you are, again, on the beach-front, begging me for scraps –
anything to spare – but from where I sit, looking down at you,
your squawking desperation looks a lot like greed.
Liquefaction

A tin mine collapsed to a cove in Malaysia, near Pantai Remis, drilled down hundreds of feet until seawater seeped in through microscopic pockets of earth, filled the small places between the cracks in rocks, worn porous and permeable by decades of wear-and-tear. The edge of the mine was a dam failing, emaciated, holding back water with arms strained. The ocean, obsidian rings on all ten fingers, raged and clocked the bulletproof glass, knowing its bounden duty was to encroach upon the land.

The mine’s owner left his crater abandoned, once the workers mined his money’s worth of tin, lined his pockets with metal. As his intrusion into the earth crept to death, he knew the ocean would take back its battered child, or seize an opportunity, a geologic coup de grâce. Water did not crash over the top of the mine, but took its time, wedged pebbles loose slowly over years, sent them free-falling down to the syncline.

The ocean knew that in a game of Jenga you knock the tower over if you, with haste, slide the bottom block out, leaving the rest without foundation. The owner told the miners to dig, to take that Jenga tower and slice it in half, to take that half and halve it again. Did the ocean finally knock it over with one sea-breeze, a silent breath, or was it man’s mass wasting that caused the earth to buckle and give, Atlas collapsing from the weight of the world?
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