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Bluefield

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BLUEFIELD

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Agnes Scott College, 2005

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts & Sciences

University of South Carolina

2014

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DEDICATION

To the past, present, and future people of Bluefield. And in memory of my parents, L.J. & Barbara Bartell.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses poetry to explore the history of my childhood neighborhood Bluefield, which lies outside of the city of Johnsonville. Several factors have gone into the writing of this manuscript: interviewing elders of the neighborhood; researching land deeds; conducting water and soil samples to explore the possibility of environmental causes of high cancer rates; and exploring my individual grief and the collective grief of an aging and dying community. Bluefield is a community that is Southern, predominately Black, and low income; the voices of its residences, along with my poetic voice, pervade the manuscript, which includes elegies for the dead and monologues from surviving members of the community.

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I. BLUE

1. Fleshy Bones

Bones, rise out
of your watery grave.
Sand-crushed shells,
shark tooth subterfuge:
Water salted with tears
of those abducted, packed, forced
across the Atlantic. Bone fragments,
slap-wet and fresh, mingled
with strewn shells, wash
ashore like glossy-black
prehistoric teeth. Bone fragments
of the defiant sick,
weak-when-strong
settle at the bottom of the sea.
Flesh of the healthy shipped
to Barbados for seasoning,
the shackle-weary forced
to Charleston with okra seeds
in their hair. Bones, rise up out
of your watery grave.
Flesh, dust, rise:
Come onto this page.
You are welcomed, welcomed

2. Crossing Johnson's Ferry

"Johnson's Ferry was the point from which the stagecoach driver stopped to change horses. As the stagecoach passed east over Lynches River on the ferry a Johnson slave in charge of the ferry mules announced the number of passengers with a blast from a fox horn—one blast for each passenger, thus informing Mrs. Sarah Johnson of the number of places she should set for dinner."

—As Time Goes By: Johnsonville and Surrounding Areas, Rebecca Hughes Dunahoe

I count the bonnets
and hats who will go beyond
this shore. There are more rivers
to cross, more marshes to dredge,
more fields forced
to yield to the iron plow.
Words are jumbles in my mind,
as the law requires.
I beat back,
beat back scraps
I cast overboard
long ago. I focus on ferry
mules and crossing the river
in this moment.
I cannot think
for these folk, who think
they know me.
I cannot see them face-to-face,
only face-to-boot.
I cannot think
of the Pee Dee Indian
burial mounds
tucked away
in the woodlands nearby.
I cannot think
of Lynches—
a noun, not the verb—
watery epitaph for Thomas Lynch,
signer of the nation's Freedom Papers.
I cannot go beyond
the river, only across.
I blow the fox horn
for each person, save
for me. I have no place
at the table. I eat out back,
feeding the mules, considering
the pleasures of chicken feet:

I can eat and pick my teeth
at the same time. Mules can
dig into earth and walk on water.
There was even a time
when their descendants
trod on palm branches.
Lynches Creek creaks on,
tide washes away
a little of its shore
with each little lick of water.
I hear trickling in my ears
when I sleep.
My ears fill with
water and the river runs over:
it is impossible to pass. The fox
horn lies silent at my feet.
I sleep.

The records show
that this is the place
where Gen. Francis Marion
and that rag-tag, melting
cauldron of men beat
back the Redcoats.
No such saga
for the nameless slaves
who minded the ferry.
But we are with you,
we hear the call of the fox horn,
and set a place for you
to dine and talk,
to shuffle the words
and order them,
as the soul requires.
The call of the horn
reverberates, even now
from this concrete
and steel bridge.
We have prepared the sacred
big piece of chicken for you.
We plant you permanently within us.

3. On Lynches River

The boat slices through water: fractured clouds, blue-skied reflection on a black, glassy surface. Ripples to the shore. Fingers grasp for crickets, the prick of their jagged legs, brush of antennae, quick. Hands dig into a can of dirt. The worm twists and contorts, is threaded onto a hook, dangles like an ornament. The best bream *be near* the shore, near the shade. They nip at my ornament. Winnow it to nothing. But they are slow to bite. We see them gasping for air just on the surface. Hear them splash back down into the deep and muddy waters. My father wears patience on his brow as he shows me how to fish—the way his father taught him. Give a woman a fish and she will eat for a day. Teach a woman how to fish and she will eat from this day forward.

4. Flowers for the Living

Ma melted
 metaphors
in her cast-iron skillet:
 Give me my flowers
while I'm living.
 I can't enjoy no
flowers when I'm dead.
 it was spring,
the sun was shining.
 I was a little
girl who wept
 when the dog died.
I went to the vacant
 lot next door
to pick daffodils.
 I bunched them:
Five yellow
 heads poking
from brown hands
 The black beauty
mark above
 her lip smiled at me.
She placed the daffodils
 in a vase of water,
until their heads fell,
 looking down
at the blue tablecloth.

5. Fried Chicken-Neck Dinner

Skinny, yet
 elegant,
 scant
on meat,
 golden crispy
 brown.
He fixes
 broken things.
 Grease and grit
of the day
 washed away
 from his stout
fingers.
 Done
 piddling
in the barn.
 Thighs and breast
 reserved for
my father.
 He picks
 the neck.
Grips it
 with two hands,
 snaps
the delicate
 vertebrae,
 broken
in his mouth
 meat sucked off:
 polished neck
bones
 rest next
 to white rice.

6. Palmetto, or Small Palm
with phrases from Ross Gay

Ma planted
the palmetto tree,
grew it from a baby
each year she cut
its arms, branches
lay at its foot.
The palmetto tree
sighs as it reaches
for a crescent moon,
voguing for its state
flag pose as it puts on
the clothes of the night.

Ma planted
the palmetto tree.
Trowel her only tool,
digging deep
into the black dirt,
other bodies
blossomed by her hand:
banana tree, white ginger lily—
that fragrant lily whose leaves
slaves used to craft mattresses.
She grew a jungle
in the backyard.

Her body blossoms, producing no fruit
furrowing down into the earth like roots.

7. The Real Housekeeper of Bluefield

Before the sun rises, she rises to exit
these fields of blue for waves of blue.
Leaves her children with her sister,

drives one hour for four dollars more
an hour. Her job landscape shifts.
First tobacco, then textile, now tourism.

Myrtle Beach, economic juggernaut,
imports its workers from surrounding
counties. They ship themselves on buses

and in carpools: East, young woman,
to the edge of Carolina. To do the work
her mother did and the mother before her,

but this time for strangers who come
from as far as Canada to walk the planked
Boardwalk of Ocean Boulevard

and taste at the troughs of Benjamin Calabash.
She sees the ocean five days a week,
mostly as she squeegees the balcony

window clear.
She may get a glimpse of a dolphin
jumping out of the water. Some mornings

the water is a deep blue, and sometimes
it is gray. The sky always matches the sea's
mood. She stands on the edge of Carolina

and cannot see her future,
only the waves beating back
in a ceaseless motion, only the past

repeating itself in a pattern like
the fluffy white towels stacked in a pile.
She hums "Thank You, Lord" in the morning

and embroiders conversations
with cuss words by noon.
Her floor partner grins: it's one of those days.

A guest has Jägermeister on the kitchen
counter. There is vomit splattered on the toilet.
Leave it for the maid. It's her job:

vacuum sand from cheap carpet
change sheets mop floors scrub tubs
scour caked bacon grease from pans

Next time bring your hogs...
I ain no damn maid. I'm a housekeeper.

She stands on the edge of Carolina,
looks at the blueness
and still cannot see her future.

8. This Starry Night: Welcome Home

The ghost did not float. Into the room. Jason jolts awake. Stares into the blackness, feels his blood pulsing, his mind fussing. Leaving particles of flashbacks in the atmosphere. It's so dark back here. He rose. Rose into the night. The stars welcomed back this native son. His eyes adjust to this natural light after being accustomed to Vegas bright. Road: a panoramic view of what will never be again, this familiar stranger saw: broken noses and baseball bats, the one room house where cracked-out Cuda-P once dwelled, basketball courts made of black dust. These images danced around him that night; he could not dance back. Forgive him. Jack Daniels helped craft this plot. When the old people died, the love left. What is lost lives in a moist place. Underground. Blossoms as a seed-choking root. *A squeal in the night. Let's cut the hog's balls off. Hog nailed to pine tree, split open. Sap and blood soaked roots.* This starry night is sponsored by Crown Royal. We keep digging a plot: Love left when the old people died. We want them back. Forgive us.

9. Genesis, 1963
for Everlina Jacobs

Let me ride your side,
is what that boy said.
Straddled both legs 'round
me and rode on this here
hip, leaning on this here hip.
I had to pry him off.

And this was when
I had left his-own
at the house. That's after
I reached up on that weeping
willow tree for a switch.
They'd be just a kickin'

and a hollerin' and a goin' on!
Those others loved me
like I was their own Ma.
But now, now, oh-er-um,
I got hips of steel.
And you know I fell some

time back. And I be in so
much pain. Sometimes I
just sit here and the water
comes pouring down.
But I know a man!
I got broke bone under

steel—bruises on skin,
I been cut so many times.
Some folks say I was falling
off and look like a hag.
Lord knows I tried
to carry my own,

but they got stuck
in the bottom of my stomach
So they whip my ovaries
back. But I know a man!
Oh-wa-er—I been the first house
back here. Remember when

President Kennedy got killed?
That day I was getting a bone
set in this arm here.
And we been here every
since then. Ain't never left,
and not intend on leaving

til they carry me away
from this place: Imma be here.
The only thing back here
was a 'bacca barn and woods.
We clean this place up
and had this house built.

Who is Pete? I was married
to him for fifty years
and I still don't know who
he was. He had cancer years ago,
he was taking chemo,
then he wouldn't go back.

He would never go back,
So this time it took him away.
I ain't planning on leaving
until God comes to get me.
I went up to Philly a couple
a weeks and came back.

I just don't like them big
towns, I like the woods.
*The things you thought
you knew, you do,
just not yet. It's what goes
in, it ain't what comes out.*

10. Ars Poetica

Let others that know more speak as they know. —Wordsworth

A ditch is filled with minuscule bits of hope, algae.

To jump a ditch was to leap into a voice,
who called her into its footsteps: the dead
leading the blind. She writes of what
she does not know and cannot touch.

They ordained her there among

the algae and green moss,
Speaking a language that has not been written,
speaking it as she does now, speaking not the truth,
but only what she knows to be true.

Surging words shaped into small rooms.

Smearing blank spaces with amnesiac history.

Inheritor of mouths cornered in silence, abandoned.

We left somewhere a life we never found.

She placed the algae under a microscope,

to see if empiricism could explain what she had sensed
to examine if that voice was in the mouth
of the algae or the throat of a bird
to discover if she could colonize that glitch within

to forget the things unknown

to remind herself that the future
belongs to those trenched in the past
to transliterate stories floating in the 'field
to bend biography to the errors of imagination:

to find treasure buried too deep for shovels.

11. Elegy for My Parents, Courtesy of the SC Department of Revenue

Re: Data Breach

The post office has yet
to establish forwarding
services to cemeteries.

As my parents slumber,
next to quiet cotton fields
in a soft spot of woods,

a letter came to this house:

Our Atari-era software
has not protected you,
your identity
has been compromised
worry about
your numbers—
bank and social federal and local.
Your identity
is at stake
Contact the trinity
of bureaus

*Listen: For us who knew them, their names
are a bulletproof mnemonic.*

12. in place of a poem: an interview
after David Antin

voice 1: *John Nesmith*

voice 2: The Griot

voice 3: **Griot notes**

**So goes the story of the late Clyde Nesmith
as told by his son John to the village griot.
Soft spoken truths crawl from his mouth
and perch on the ears of she who listens.**

When did you and your family first come to Bluefield?

My daddy was Clyde Nesmith. He had lung cancer. He was a smoker. Black, white, everybody knew Clyde Nesmith. Color didn't matter, gender didn't matter. We was the first house in the back in 1967. I was seventeen.

Bluefield is shaped like a capital "U,"

with a dead end at the tip of one side,

one curved bottom shaped like a ninety degree angle.

It was a hard time getting, getting the road to come all the way back here.

Just like the water pipes yet to flow from the city.

What made your dad move back here?

The land was cheap, an acre of land was \$300. That was a lot of money in 1967. You couldn't find an acre of land no cheaper nowhere else. Nowadays an acre of land cost you right. Something like \$5,000-\$10,000.

How would you say, um, Bluefield has changed over the years?

Mostly elderly people back at that particular time. No drug trafficking like there is now. Very peaceful, quiet neighborhood, not saying it's Dodge City now.

Why do you think so many folk back here have died of cancer?

Hereditary. And now whether that is connected with the drainage system back here or the water system back her, I can't make that claim cause I, uh, I don't know. But now it's hereditary, plus some of the foods we eat, uh, smoking, things of that sort... They treat it like a contagious disease. Don't tell people what they got.

**This silence will not protect you from self-immolation,
it will singe the insides until the shell of the body speaks the secret.**

Tell me more about your dad.

He was a Christian-hearted man, farmer by trade, worked at the sand pit, as a carpenter, plumber, and a mechanic as he got older, working on cars. Where' I'd charge \$10, he'd charge \$1. People appreciate life more then. And people were more loving. A lot of people say them weren't the good ole' days, but I beg to differ. From the second I could remember, four years old on up until I finished high school, I ain't worry about nothing.

Uh-huh!

Cause, shucks, my daddy kept food on the table, we kept plenty of food on the table, we kept plenty of wood in the house, what was there to worry about? We had central air and had central heat too. We've always had that. Cause see now it was reversed: We had central air in the wintertime and central heat in the summertime!

[Laughter]

13. Scaling

A tar-complected river shimmers; its color mirrors that of the fisherman, who slivers through the water. Searches for Bream. Spots. Bass. Croaker. Shad. Treasures his bounty—land-bound. The last bit of water evaporates from their lungs, blacks their eyes. Tiny round translucent rainbows fleck up into the sky. Scales the first fish, cuts it open: cleans the insides out, leaves its head on. Saves the shad's eggs, to make fried caviar with grits. *Ms. Everlina's Country Caviar: Boil fish roe. Pour water off. Cool. Peel 'em. Put 'em in oil. Stir it round. Put a lid on it. Beat 3 or 4 hen eggs with salt and pepper in a bowl. Pour in with roe. Fry the hen eggs with the fish eggs.* Disclaimer: Only seasoned women can make this caviar. The sturgeon has nothing on this delicacy. Scales the cankerous colon, cuts her open: cleans the insides out, leaves her head on. He saves the tumors for biopsy stew, with a side of metastasis. A speck for the liver, lungs—the flecks spread.

Waiting for the fish,
in and out of water. In
hot oil and closed rooms.

14. Funeral Photos
In Memory of Roy “JaBo” Nesmith

Tobacco leaf rests
in the tar-colored road. It
flaps as cars pass by.

Watermelon is
busted, baring its deep pink
flesh. Sweet juice: abysmal.

We passed cotton fields
with its young flowers awaiting
the fruit of the fall.

His salt and pepper
cornrows go back on his head-
beard braided into a plait.

Rumble, jumble, go
black van go! Fill to the brim
those new lungs, new lungs.

He became the dust,
cremated into ashes
like a cigarette.

15. Old Biddies' Home Remedies

The old biddies down the street eat
vegetables at least twice a day.
A spoonful of apple cider vinegar
gets the shit out of the blood,
Spanish moss in a shoe regulates
blood pressure, but messing with medicine,
means messing with death
who saunters down the street
with a walking stick. He lives in a shack
at the edge of the cornfield.

The old biddies down the street eat vegetables
at least twice a day.
They yearn for the days of yard chickens,
who pecked for worms and worshipped
at the rooster's bosom. Wring a hen's neck
and pluck her feathers, pluck away
all that gets caught in the palate.
Now things get caught in the blood:
*They have congressional hearings on ball players
using steroids, what about the steroids in the chicken?*
A spoonful of apple cider vinegar
doesn't do shit for the blood. Spanish moss
only improves the soles, so we can walk to death
and visit with him. Riddle with him about food
additives and carcinogen charcoal used in family cookouts.
He smiles with straight white teeth,
bleached with Bluefield bones. He loosens
his grip around the biddies' wrinkly neck, their feathers
too hard to pluck, their meat too tough in his mouth.

The old biddies down
the street eat vegetables at least twice a day;
the young ones munch on their nuggets
made of chicken's blood vessels, muscle tissue,
skin, cartilage, pieces of bone.
All things fried and offered
with a sauce are palatable.
Still they drown it all in a sea of soda.
Savor it all with a smoke.
They have no known address for death,
but occasionally see his work close up.

See the still-life painting of the embalmer,
but still don't feel how his hand is already there at the neck,
waiting to tighten his grip, to pluck at their tender meat.

16. time keeps bathing a father

 he was born of a wishbone
 he fears briny backwoods
 worms want dust
 he remains too moist
grows scars on his
 layered silver face
you could say he is loose
that his tools took up the paradox
of many shores: a broken clock
 he's just playing possum
 he rides bones hooked
 on fish—
 he just wants to fish
but the worms won't dust
time remains too moist

17. Threading

eyes flung wide
in judgment—
how I wanted to
close those eyes!—
refused to be shut,
gazed out
at the world long
after it had turned away;
undone hem:
faith made a hole,
I thread my soul,
sew it onto vestiges
of her breath
that linger
still above,
mouth agape
at that possibility.

18. Mudskipper

The deep waters came. And I remembered I couldn't swim and didn't know how to float so sank real low, like a stone who accepts death. Why hadn't I ever learned to swim? Why did my mother not teach me?

Ma with her fifty-eight years: her mother's ninety-five-year-old hands tried to rub the pain away that last day. Those hands had no power against this force... *I knewed I wasn't going to see her again*, granny would later say. Ma left the world without knowledge of navigating these waters. Her toes never wet in its throes, no lick of wet touching the tight curls on the top of her head as she sits on the banks in a one piece watching me sink: *I've given you all you'll ever need in this world.*

I am a stone at the bottom of a woman-built lake, a stone who grew gills and learned to live in the deep dark bottom we build for ourselves, until I grew fins and swam back up to the water's surface, gulping for air, destined to be one who walks on land as well. *That's it, that's my girl.*

19. Iced Magnolia

Iced magnolia limbs linger,
dangle on one scrap of elongated trunk,
snap like gunshots,

crash to the ground.
Icicles trickle
down roofs and cars

The magnolia moans.

Wasn't built to carry such a load,
in such a place, where birds come to
winter, such a place glitters with ice.

Her many arms once reached up to the sky,
glossy and pointy, they now fall to the ground
flesh left exposed.

That dainty damsel of the South:
crowning glory, whose fragrant
flower unfurls every Spring.

...

I carry away her limbs once the ice melts,
her exposed flesh smells the same
as her flower.

20. This Starry Night: Corner Pharmacy

He looks up at the stars and imagines they are moving. They are witnessing him. Stars look like crack rocks tonight. He wishes he could scoop them up into a Ziploc bag and place an invisible price tag on each. He looks up. How that vast darkness could hold so much light and still maintain its identity. They watch and keep silence as the logs in the burn barrel crack in the night. He can see his breath, but he can't see himself working anywhere else. The jury of stars has yet to make its decision, remain ambivalent. The hogs scrounge in the dried mud of the sty.

In the broad day of the sun, sheltered in warehouses, farmers once auctioned cured tobacco. They sell directly to Big Tobacco now. Some other cured leaf is being auctioned, under the then veil of the stars. Hand-to-hand, green-on-green, rock-on-rock, the addiction of nicotine transferred, or added onto narcotics.

A new shuffle is dealing, a shuttle of cars line the neighborhood. There was a time when the only white man who dared to come here was the insurance man. And the white women were Jehovah Witnesses. But now a mangy white girl walks up and down the street, waiting for the store to open. And he makes her wait.

II.

21. Lab Report from the Margins

i. The Introduction

30 people, 50 years 3 survivors 28 dead fewer than 50 structures built here

the facts: various cancers colon breast lung stomach

Hypothesis: *I feel like something back here causin' it*

ii. The Methods and Materials

Water: sample bottles with solution, faucet flow two to three minutes, rinse fill container

sample location: kitchen faucet, shovel & bucket

Soil: samples from twelve or more spots, mix well sample location: Bartell property

iii. The Results

Results A: Soil: Excessive amounts of calcium and phosphorous, not a danger

Results B: Water: Bacteria absent but iron heavy, exceeds recommended limits

Conclusion: *The earth pleads the fifth*

iv. The Discussion

Iron gives the water a metallic taste that produces rust, grayish stains on fixtures and in laundry.

May also cause an unpleasant taste and odor, similar to rotten eggs. Iron is not a known health problem, but more of a nuisance, like the speed bumps in the suburb across town

Digressing Narrative A: Johnsonville City Council meeting, two years after community block development grant announcement that wells would be replaced with water pipes from the city. Project awaiting state approval. It's taking so long because wetlands were adjacent to the community. Certain city officials continue to tell us we should have water by now...

*Wheels of bureaucracy turn slow,
are usually not well greased either,
especially if you are black and poor.*

Meanwhile people from a suburb across town come with their concerns: *When I came through and saw those big black humps, I thought what is this?* The city installed them so that drivers would slow down for the many children in their neighborhood. However, it seems that the humps have encouraged them to play in the road.

*We are on the margins of the city,
technically non-residents asking
for what has been granted to we*

we outliers, waiting for what's lacking

Ironing the irony of it all: We'd be happy with a "Children at Play" sign and they don't like their "big black humps." What we got here is First World problems and Third World problems happening simultaneously in the twenty-first century. In this, one of the original Thirteen Colonies. In this the 100th year of Johnson Township.

Rena during public forum: I can't cook my Christmas cakes with muddy water. They make it seem as if the people don't care.

Digressing Narrative B: It would appear that the water or soil is not the cause. Bluefield is 50 years old now, and as it ages, lives atrophy, many founding members are dead and others are continuing to die....

III. FIELD

22. Candy Lounge
In Memory of James Hanna

i.

Here comes the crack and weed,
and dem who deal it and feel it.

Here comes feel-good girls and good-
time men, looking for music,
leaning on bottles of gin.

Here comes a few neighborhood men
who come to wax away the wiles of work.

Here comes the folk with rumbling belly
who leave the food shack with fried
chicken-greasy mouths, and belly full of pileau.

Coming here to Bluefield—the building,
not the place. Bars for windows, bars for doors.
Its face red with graffiti, bleeds on the white
cinder blocks saying:

Bluefield Lounge: Stay Real,
with a rose and a heart.

Cars jam the shoulder of a pebble-stoned road.
Bass guitar of blues reverberated
in the walls of every home,
another reason for the old ones
to stay on their knees. Kneeling all night,
'til sweet mercy comes with the rising sun.

ii.

Here comes children, suffer children to come.

Here comes boys with belly yearning for sweet,
girls with mouths fixed on savory.

They flock to the partitioned northeast corner,
that store during the day.

Bikes, scooters, go-carts parked
on the shoulder, or they walked.
Inside plexiglass counter:
penny candy, mini doughnuts, fried pies,
soda, pickled pigs feet, chips. Behind

the counter: Mr. Smoo'-J. Smooth James
with his salty afro balding in the top.

An entrepreneur-neighbor.
Smoo'-J's shades stayed on even indoors.
Smoo'-J with his smooth skin, his frame tall
and unmoving like a pine tree,
teeth flashing like flesh under bark.

iii.
Here it is: Bluefield Lounge—blush of graffiti
smeared clean, boarded windows.

Here it is: the thing that came,
but does not know how to leave.

Here it is: splintered plywood, wire,
shattered cinder blocks, razed food shack.
Weeds, shards of glass,
No Parking sign replaces sounds of pool
balls clacking together.
Best lounging days behind it, staying
like a scar you get learning to ride a bike.

Somebody robbed Smoo'-J's house,
beat him up good. He was sent to a nursing home.
I visited him there once, chopped down into
the height of a wheelchair.

When I looked into his eyes,
his shadeless eyes, I knew the candy store was lost,
trapped to the confines of his mind.
He didn't know whose child I was.

The trunk of what was left of
Smooth James rotted into the ground,
but Bluefield, the building, not the place,
sits in its own ruin, refuses to believe
in its own obliteration.

23. Green Thumbs Elegy

Two summer roses poke
their heads out in December:
should mean my dead
parents are saying *Merry Christmas*.
They speak often in this way,
a yard-talk of their own.

The amaryllis bed
emerges after a year of sleep.
Living one month,
to return, return to soil-sanctuary.

Her lantana garden
explodes with pink and yellow petals
lending sweet-smelling tinge to summer,
by fall brown and crusted.

He inherited that backyard empire—
pink azaleas, chinaberry tree,
four o'clocks, white ginger lily,
others, names unknown,
but whose lives he could preserve—
expanded it until his green thumb grayed
under the weight of the grave.

Plastic poinsettias dusty on their graves,
not as red as the roses, unable to speak
in the varied tongue of the yard.
They have never been seeds and do
not know that to be born,
you must first die.

24. Leaves Like Prayer

My father planted
collard greens,
leaves sun-arched,
them cabbages
without hearts,
their green
leaves like hands
clasping for prayer.

The collard greens
my father
planted
keep growing
As he sleeps
in his grave.

After frost
bitters them:
Hands cut,
fingers
rolled and chopped,
wilted.

At the table,
sprinklings
of vinegar,
hot peppers.
We take.
Eat.
Taste
his love
as he rests
in his grave.

25. Our Founding Fathers

i.

Some record books say it began
in the 1600s with one Lord.
Lord Craven of England, who was granted
a portion of the Colony of Carolina.

Our first Lord Proprietor, our progenitor
of the Province of Carolina came to the new
world, craving what all men of his time
and place craved: land, that would split

into North & South
Carolina, from the Latin Carolus or Charles, the King
Carles, Karel, Karl, Carol, Cas, Chaz,
Chip, Charlot, Karolis, Carlos, Carlinhos,

Carlito, Kalle, Carolina: meaning free man:
he who goes where he wants
who does what he pleases,
master to no man, and slave to none.

But the burial mounds—
that have been plundered
like the pyramids—tell a tale much older, much ancient.
They called the river Kadapaw or Catawba, now Lynches

This tract of land was called Craven County, Williamsburg
named after William of Orange whose duty
it was to develop the back country,
which largely remains undeveloped.

ii.

This place was called Witherspoon's Ferry
then Johnson's Ferry. A wealthy man owned
most of the land that became Johnsonville.
He owned a cotton gin, barges hauled

cotton down the river He died in 1855.
He willed to his eight children six thousand dollars
each and seven slaves each. The land swapped hands.
The slaves swapped hands. In 1846 a man of great

property died. He left to his heirs a *Negro man Davy,*
a Negro woman Pig and Eveline, Neby, Martha, and Muldro.

Little John and their increases. *Also a gray mare, his gig,*
ten cows and their increases. Along with *Ben, Lena,*

Frank, King, Old Sam and *Young Sam, Zula, & Phil.*
Another man wills to his grandson one Negro girl,
Minder. And to another son a Negro girl Sary.
He wills them *to him and his heirs forever.* Flesh forever.

[Mind her, that Negro girl Minder. Mind her real good.]

iii.

Know all men by these presents
Atlantic Life Insurance Co. bargained
and sold to Warren Barr a tract of land,
formerly known as tract 11 of the Poston Farm.

Presenting Warren Barr: The Founder of Bluefield
who marched in the Jim Crow Army of World War I
Returned as a farmer who worked hard for his family,
a man whose sweat equity paid in cash

the balance of \$1,800 to buy 67.8 acres,
with nine equal installments of \$162
So then he just started selling it to black people
'cause white people was doing so bad ... towards

black people. That Mr. Warren Barr started
selling the land to them, the people,
where they can have a place of their own.
Yes, Lord he did! He named it Bluefield,

the place where the sky and the field blends.
1963. Bluefield joins Frog Alley and Poston University
as the segregated spots of Johnsonville
where nigger flesh went to rest.

iv.

For three hundred dollars sells
the first parcel to Peter Jacobs
This twelfth day of November 1963,
in the one hundred and eighty-eight year

of the sovereignty and Independence
of the United States of America. And
in the ninety-eight year of the freedom
of the slaves in said United States.

Barr rode by a patch of woods
and saw people standing in place
of pine trees, houses erupting from the ground.
How blue and fertile its field must have seemed

to him. After Jacobs came Nesmith,
Skinner, Lewis, Eaddy, Davis, Graham, Chandler,
Bartell, this idea he tucked in his mind became flesh,
and he kept a piece of the field that

is plowed every Spring, even to this day.

26. Before 1963: Mining the Deed Index

Their names do not live in the ledgers,
No clerk has labored over it with the swoop
of her pen. Ink stains my fingertips
as they tap the time, looking for that time.
For those who were:
squatters, tenants, sharecroppers,
whose names didn't appear in the index
for a whole century or more.
Black bodies find no form in this book,
so the soil took on their melanin
and they were careful in its cultivation.

27. How to Read the Pockets: A Guide

A plume of cigarette smoke hovers over the corn stalks
as he palms the cobs, shrugs at the thought of White Shoulders,

reminisces on how the scent embalmed her skin,
how when they were apart he kept her skin in his pocket.

Her perfume burned a hole in his pocket.
The scent of her was as close as the smell

of dirt and dust after plowing
when the wind carries traces of it and triggers

his days working in Tarheel tobacco fields.
Now fresh earth-wounds open to accept a seedling that will

never sprout, stays buried until the trumpet waters it to life.
For her final depart, he could smell her brown skin still,

even through the purple-laden coffin.
He sniffed out the fragrance even when he passed

a fire-curing tobacco barn in mid-August.
In a wave that rushed his barn door,

he detected the bouquet. His heart
considered the electric slide, but could only be still.

And in his pocket: a receipt for Dr. Pepper.

28. Wishbone

My mother learned me to cook a turkey.

Secret to juicy meat: brining—

She said: The more time you have,
the more flavor you have to work with.
Roasting a turkey in a bag
Is for people who can't cook.
Time is everything.

How much time will we have?
How much flavor will we be able
to savor from: chemo, surgery,
oxygen tanks, hair loss.

It picks the life from her, de-fattening her.

Why can't they pluck it from her body?

Her meat is juicy and flavorful,
interior-basted from the colon
to the liver then lungs.
Leaving dying skin grappling
for more time.

The more time you have...

Use the giblets to make gravy
and cornbread stuffing.
We save the wishbone, pick it clean,
and hang it over the doorframe.

Hoping it will be a good omen.

Her heritage baked into my bones:

Benign tumor at twenty-six.
How old was she when her first polyp
began its brine?
Time is everything.

In a book are the recipes my mother told me,
Her heritage spilled onto journal paper—
I take communion every time I cook
with her words; we replace
the wishbone every year.

29. Postcard from 2006 Funeral/Postcard from 2012 Wedding
Sent from J.J. Mitcheom Community Center
Hemingway, South Carolina

place to cry longing,	place for the people
place to say hello,	place to say hello
then farewell to	then hello again
a racked body	to bodies mingle
in despair	in laughter
tears	tears
damp with memory	damp with jubilee
purple-laden coffin	bridal arc and kneeler
with mourning flowers	with gossamer and lace
he's sliver-bearded	his heels clang
feet dragging me	feet clanging
down this long aisle	down this long aisle
to my seat of	to my seat of
sackcloth and ashes:	embroidered napkins:
the only time my father	this time my brother
walked me down the aisle	with me down the aisle

30. This Starry Night: Front Porch

Brooding time of night, perching on the front porch: The moon outshines stars to reveal a pockmarked sky. Let us glimpse the moon some more to see if its craters have been filled. The amaryllis leaves: limp and tangled, hug the front porch. In spring they bloom. Then shed. Its red petals. And clenches its hand into a fist that it cannot keep; crumples on its own weight. A house built for five sleeps. A house built for five holds one in its hand, in the hollow of its stony hand. A house built for five can tell you stories that a house built for one cannot. To enjoy the moon and the half starlight, mosquitoes must gnaw on exposed flesh. And I grant her a belly full of my blood. I swat her into my skin and the blood-splatter with broken wings lingers on my palm. I look down the road at the past. A rooster stirs in the razed coops.

31. Survivor Call & Response
for Alice Ann Eaddy & Bessie Chandler

Alice Ann Bessie

I told them I don't have no cancer	it was freighting
spot in the lungs in 2011	lump in the breast in '96
chemo and radiation	chemo and radiation
remove it with laser radiation	in case one little cell got away
coming back on the lower lung	lump, lymph nodes removed
I believe in the Lord	Lord, it's in your hands
don't worry about it and	and that took the fear away
the worry will get you down and sick	don't let the fear of it get you down
some people let it burden them	have a positive attitude
down: don't do that	don't let fear get in there
I thank the Lord that I <i>am</i> a survivor	it won't let you survive

32. Shakespeare in the Barn

His hand does not know
the musk of pages,
he could never trust
himself with the words:
Favoright pastime:
piddling around,
piddling about the barn.
The wrench and he
are of one mind,
they toil in the dingy
shadow of cob webs.
His hand knows
the feel of restoration.
So he salvages
Shakespeare, Volume One
from the musk
of that graveyard where
forsaken things go.
*The body is with the king
but the king
is not with the body*
— an appendix to other
such mysteries,
like the blood-dipped
words of Jesus
all over King James.
After the body comes,
where it goes is
of no consequence.
He continues
peddling a brass-footed
virgin-Messiah's words
to empty pews.
Not keen on words,
but a collector still,
piddling in tools and tomes.

33. Intercessory Games

Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb
but wouldn't raise malignant cells

from her body, that second womb
that replicated thrice over.

On knees we reached for him,
for that hem of restoring destruction

that hand was a dodge ball,
Jesus leapt. And left her body

wholly untouched, holy and ready.
Just come already. Come claim her

since miracles don't happen
on this street. Come by here

and don't delay. Be a blessing,
be a dear, and stop the breaths,

yellow eyes, blood-crusts
nose. If mercy is a synonym

for his name, he would come
out and seek a sure death

by morning. Words on our lips
beg for the final timeout.

34. Francis Marion at Witherspoon's Ferry, 2013

They must a been half fool
to put half a man on a statue.
But tell me something, Gen. Marion
Why is your horse so scared?
His eyes damn near popping out
the sockets.
He must not know guerilla
warfare don't mean he got
to fight too.

35. Electrical Storm: Powerless

Brother and me sit in silence and listen as crickets quiver.
Darkness kisses me on the forehead.

Dinner still: Smothered chicken,
rice, fried squash—prepared outdoors.

A propane-fueled lamp whispers indoors
and tells me about his past exploits in the barn.

Phone powered down to save battery life:
Trapped with the rattlings of my mind.

This is what nature says—
You are not more powerful than me.

Milk spoils, meat rots, veggies perish.

Showering by candlelight is not romantic.
Shadows play on the bathroom wall.

Later I rap with the crickets,
Their rhythmic voices pulsing.

Buzz of electricity returns, drowning out our song:
The phone powered up, the TV on.

36. Gentrification
after Wallace Stevens

Flying checkerboard whirls
in the summer wind.

Anticipates his next move.
That thumping
you hear is his jackhammer

carving dining room space.
Red-head stepchild of the clan,
forced to other lands.

O dear brother,
do you imagine
a woodpecker
big as a buzzard?
Do you not see
that the woodpecker
is the peckerwood
dancing in your head?

Jackhammer thumps,
vexes, blackbirds caw
scar and checker the sky
while chasing the checkerboard.

37. Holding the Land
for Rena Wright

Daddy bought this land
and I'm trying not to let it go
no where to honor him.
Daddy said *please*
don't let the place go.
I was eighteen when

we moved to Bluefield.
Daddy was trying
to buy a place.
Mr. Barr knew Daddy
and he didn't sell
it at a high price either;

he sold it reasonable
I farmed when I lived here
until I had my babies,
then I was minding
kids for white people.
But I couldn't stay here.

[Ms. Rena is an elder here.
She has skin deep and dark as iced tea,
and a tiny cropped silver afro. Ms. Rena
is a short woman. But what she lacks
in height she makes up with her talk.
She knows silence protects no one.]

I wanted to go someplace
to get a good job,
so I could make a pension.
I left for New York and went
to Jersey because New York
was just too rowdy for me.

I could never find a job
in New York. A Jewish lady
in Jersey did interviews
and I went over there to mind
her little girl, stayed over
there for six months, didn't really

like that so I went over there
to my sister in Philly,
she had been there for years.
I was in Philly thirty-two years.
I worked at a restaurant called Dewey's,
started nursing school and went one

year and a half, and got tired
of that so went to City of Philadelphia
City Hall and they had jobs
listed on a board,
so I got a job
at a nursing home, stayed there

for sixteen years. I got tired of that.
Went back to City Hall where
they had a correctional officer job
posted. I was going for more money,
whatever I could get. Stayed
there twenty three and half years,

then came back home to
Mama in 1990
when she cut her leg
with that axe. I told Sarge
I was going back home.
He said, "Officer Wright,

you one of my best officers."
I said, "I can't help that."
I said, "I only got one Mama,"
and so I came back here.

*To this place her father
left her, the only thing*

he left her.
Daddy bought this land
and I'm trying not to let it go
no where to honor him.
Daddy said *please*
don't let the place go.

38. The Long Memory of Muses
*(For Golden Graham & Blanche Lewis
In memory of Genethea Eaddy)*

i.

My name is Golden. Golden Graham. I love my name. People always ask me about my name. Before the houses were built up good, there was nothing but woods back here. We hunted huckleberries, hauled buckets of the dark fruit for tarts and jars. Now that the land has been cleared, I can look at that spot of lawn where my vegetable garden used to be. It was a time when we planted veggies here: corn, butterbeans, tomatoes. But that time is gone, I got a crook in my back, and those seeds are on a shelf. Recorded in their hulls are steps of my life, the things I wanted to see grow, but my body isn't willing. But there is somebody who will find those seeds, who will listen to what they have to say, who will put the seeds in the womb of her mind, and grow it and pick it up, and show it, shove it into the mouths of the world: taste this vegetable you have seen for years but never tasted. Feel the grit of it on your tongue, the bitter juice of this nourishment that comes from the pain of us scraping by just for scraps. Swallow it, do not gag, we have eaten this for decades. My name is Golden, folks call me Goldie.

ii.

I was named after a auntie, my name is Blanche but most folks call me Blanche, the e silent. Before we moved here, we lived in a house where it rained on the inside. We could see the hogs under the house, we poured hot water on them hogs, but that was when we lived on the white folks' land, before we came here. It's nice to own your own land to be out from under de white folks. When we got this house we thought we was rich. We had an outhouse: my Ma would go in there and it would sound like she was crying,

but she was praying. I can imagine
the things you can tell God with urine in
your nostrils. Some Saturday evenings there'd
be a picnic in the church yard, our legs
carried us there, but legs can't carry us that
far no more. We sang on Sunday. Sometimes
our shoes had holes in 'em, shoes the buckra
done worn out and gave to us. Now we all
'bout worn out. We fight so hard for this place.
My name may be on this place, but this place
don't belongst to me. And I got one more
place to go: I'm promised a place over there.

iii.

She took in other folks' laundry up
in Connect-a-cut. Her and her husband,
they left in search of fair wages in a
fair land. And after a time they came back.
Back to this country living, to the life
they were born to and wanted to die to.
Back where the icehouse is underneath earth:
In a hole in the ground, a block of ice
wrapped in a sheet, sprinkled with fine sawdust
and placed in that hole on summer evenings.
They would make tea in a water bucket.
Chip a block offa the ice. Now that was
iced tea! That tea would be so cold...so cold
it would hurt your teeth. And cool all your soul.
As the eldest, she tried to pick up her
words with a butterfly net but nothing
came. Even when she came back from up North:
She got stories to tell but she won't tell
them. She will take them with her when she leaves.
She plays possum, the silence comforts her,
and it strokes the fine contours of her throat.
The grave licks its lips and opens its mouth wide,
she pauses, kicks its tongue, steps inside.
It wasn't warm like those summer evenings,
It was cold like the iced tea, but it didn't
hurt her teeth, no it didn't hurt her teeth.
When she took that step, she saw her sisters,
and the whole expanse of their lives, what it
all added up to in the end. She knew
what it meant, but she still wouldn't say. Their
three houses form a triangle at the
entrance of Bluefield. The lines are broken,

there are only two sides now that Mrs. G
has gone away to that promised place.

39. Taste the Sound

Maud's rooster crows
at midnight, a hen mines
the margins of the coop.

Virginia belts gospel
on her front porch:
off-key, off-kilter.

Ma's Mississippi Mud Pie,
frosted with marshmallows
cools in the freezer.

Roy's black van rumbles
up and down the road,
the beat-box muffler,

Come
sing for us, 'Ginia—
Roy gives the drums
Maud twists a chicken neck
Ma brings the dessert:

Lift
our little lot of Americana
since today is too silent.
Yesterday is the only honey
in our mouths.

40. Renewing Vows

“My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door, and my heart yearned for him.” –Song of Solomon 5:4

He lies, to rise no more, his breath
with dank and spirited sorrow,
hovers over the barn floor.
He steps outside of himself, left—

what’s left? The flesh that housed his dream
and tools he used to dig the earth.
She pauses: earth is not enough.
Only then she comes. Her face beams.

She had waited five years to say
let us go: over up yonder,
let us restore that blunder
and go hand in hand that day,

that great day in the morning.
Her grief sloughs off like a second
skin. Her hemmed-healed body beckons,
marks the end of his mourning.

She wraps her gown around his shell.
The barn door sighs and is relieved—
now it has naught more to grieve.
In this parable we dwell.

Rejoice! For now we understand,
believe that love is stronger
than death. And love is stronger.
No longer stranger in this land.

41. Last Will & Testament of L.J.

Use my money to pay my bills.
Except that bill from the triple-bypass.
Don't pay them nothing.
My heart gave out in the middle of my barn
when I was getting tools to fix a sink.
No. Don't pay them nothing.

Estate tax, income tax, then more taxes?
When will they be done with me?
The money wasn't mine to start with no way.
No more dollars, worries or taxes.
They done with me.

To my three children all that I own:
Lord, let them keep the Ford running.
And get that eave over the back porch fixed.
Half the policy between the eldest, the youngest.
The middle child will likely be in the jailyard or graveyard.

I want my eldest child born last as my personal representative.

In my careful and slow hand.
Our people ain never had nothing.
I am the son of sharecroppers.
I came into this world alone.

42. [Untitled]

The moon was naked. The moon shone down on us, on the blue field and green waters. And we could see our way. Even then, even now. I do not turn my gaze, grace prevents it even through a thin gauze of clouds it shines, nothing to betook its beauty. I've never seen the moon so naked. The moon, the moon, making us moan when we want to cry. Moving us down the road, down generations, down through times of travel and travail. What we know is that we don't know the way to the crossroads, but we have a lamp at our heads—purging—pushing us along. A long way to go. *And my feets ain no way tired.*

NOTES

“Crossing Johnson’s Ferry,” contains information from Rebecca Hughes Dunahoe’s book *As Time Goes By: Johnsonville and Surrounding Areas*, which uses a variety of documents to historicize Johnsonville. Ends with a quote from Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

Barbara McCray Bartell died of colon cancer in 2006.

“Palmetto, Or Small Palm” contains phrases from Ross Gay’s *Bringing the Shovel Down*.

“This Starry Night: Welcome Home” features a night of reminiscing in Bluefield. During the night a man who grew up in Bluefield, Dexter Wilson, whose mother recently died of breast cancer, said the line, “When the old people died, the love left.” Jason Gilliard grew up in Bluefield but moved to Las Vegas to join relatives and friends who had already migrated there. He still resides in Vegas.

Everlina Jacobs of “Gensis, 1963” and Rena Wright are sisters. Rena lives on the land that her father Anthony Skinner bought from Warren Barr. Mrs. Jacobs husband Pete Jacobs died in 2011 after years of it being in remission.

“Ars Poetica” quotes Derek Walcott’s “Laventille”

L.J. Bartell died in 2011 of a heart attack. “Elegy for My Parents...” contains phrases from a letter sent to victims of a SC Department of Revenue security breach where hackers swiped bank accounts, social security numbers, and other personal information from millions of SC businesses and individuals. My mother received her letter nearly seven years after her death and my father received his after two years of interment.

“in place of a poem: an interview” is adapted from David Antin’s *Talking*.

Roy Nesmith died of lung cancer in 2012.

Bluefield is an unincorporated neighborhood that is a few miles from Johnsonville City Limits. Johnsonville officially became a municipality in 1913. “Lab Report from the Margins” uses some information provided via South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control Bacterial/Metals Analysis reports for the individual residential wells of Rena Wright, Ann Brown, and Oneta Gilliard; Clemson University Extension Agriculture Services soil lab report; and things said at a Johnsonville City Council meeting, October 8, 2013.

In “Our Founding Fathers,” historical information on slave and landowners from Johnsonville is taken from Dunahoe’s book. Special thanks to Warren Barr’s daughter Carrie E. Bell for providing some biographical information. Barr was born in 1892 and died in 1973. He never built a home in Bluefield.

“Survivor Call & Response”: Alice Ann Eaddy was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2011. She was cancer free for one year until the cancer returned in 2013; she is continuing treatment. Bessie Chandler was diagnosed with cancer in 1996. After treatment her cancer went into remission and continues to stay there.

“Shakespeare in the Barn” quotes Hamlet.

“Holding the Land” paraphrases Audre Lorde’s “Your silence will not protect you.” “in place of a poem: an interview,” also repurposes the quote. Rena’s sister in Philly was Marie

“Taste the Sound”: Our next-door neighbor Maud Pressley died in the 1990s. Virginia Skinner, Everlina and Rena’s sister, died in 2012 of pancreatic cancer.

In [untitled] poem the line my feet ain no way tired is adapted from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail”: “...with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: [she said] ‘My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.’”