

2014

## Musical Geography

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MUSICAL GEOGRAPHY

by

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Bachelor of Arts

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2000

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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University of South Carolina

2014

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## DEDICATION

In memory of

“Pop” R. Corbett

In keeping us all together

(1948-2013)

and

mothers

Corine and Margaret

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This poetry collection came from so many voices and without them I could not complete this long journey. I wanted to include everyone but that sometimes is not always possible. There will always be another project to honor that special voice, that special story that does not seem to go away; it demands our attention. I want to begin by thanking my parents. My mother provided me a great foundation with Saturday readings in the Durham Public Library after our chores and church. I learned the music of poetry first through choir practice, church hymns, and biblical stories. My aunt, who stayed with us for a number of years when I was very young, shared with me great stories and still does today. She reminds me of the importance of keeping traditions, something of yourself, when you've been lovingly pressed to create new ones. To my family currently living in Charlotte and various parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, and some who are abroad overseas supporting this country through the honorable armed services, I thank you for every word, every hug, every letter, and call of encouragement. I would like to thank the Carolina Archives Center Western Region, the D.H. Ramsey Library Archives Center at the University of North Carolina at

Asheville, and the Atkins Library at UNC-Charlotte. A sincere thanks goes to my grandfather, Jesse Gardner Jr. To my committee, Nikky Finney, Catherine Keyser, Edward Madden, and Ray McManus, your support is immeasurable. To my home and support Kel, Ez, and Cori thank you for helping me see the bigger picture in everything. I humbly thank all of you.

## **ABSTRACT**

This series is a collection of poems covering a writer's journey through family and personal narratives and travels. The collection includes various poetry styles such as persona, ballad, prose, and other received contemporary forms. The work has been inspired from photographs, archival research, and personal interviews. The poems' subjects date from the late 1940's to present day and take place throughout the North Carolina region and elsewhere. The musicality is present within the poet's use of voice and familiar sounds. Subjects include: race and gender studies, the southern textile industry, Western North Carolina history, tobacco, textile production, industrial plant life, domestic, migration, nature, and the everyday voices of workers.

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## PART I

### GEOGRAPHY

1977

My father said, *you almost didn't happen*. A minister held me up to the sky; he provided a blessing. I never saw my daddy in church after that, except for a funeral or two. That's when families show up—when there is food or when somebody dies. July was the cruelest month. Sweat fell from my glabella paired with my tiny clavicle and chest was hard for him to watch. *I never tell this story. But you are like your mother*. Burning cries from a baby christened the house. Their parents journeyed down to see how they were set up. This city was not any larger than the one they had left because this place was flat. The land did not jut out or move any higher into the skies.

This land was flat.

Mama and daddy were the first on this block, 3807. It was not the first time my daddy had seen flat land or water. After living within the towering bosom counties, from Old Fort to Buncombe, he toured as a navy reservist. His golden-hazel-eyes had seen vast scenes for a young man, but no college. But he was fortunate, he missed Nam by a few years; he knew others who had been

drafted to fight in a war he didn't believe in. He was a child of newly integrated schools. He felt some kind of way about a war—fighting for a country that gave him sloppy seconds.

But he did believe in three things—hard work, family, and love. One woman gave him all of these things. He looked at her as she pressed cold wet squares on me to cool me from July's jam. My first nurse, he would've said *she was built like a Blue Ridge gap*, full of fecund wonders. Her eyes shone of mica, lips full, dark as blackberry bushels. Her arboreal hair was a forest tamed partially within a scarf. *I loved the unpredictability of the afro* as it flowed in the rare summer air. The silhouette of her hair was a strong statement back then. So much of her *I did not want to change. We were now chasing other people's dreams, not ours. So much of her I did not want to change.*

My daddy prayed for my mama in that Kenilworth church, thought her up at a city bus-stop near the Arcade, claimed her like a child would during Christmas in a wish book. When he returned from leave in '74 they married. At one period during that courthouse ceremony, everybody stood with their eyes closed. Then my daddy looked at his shoes. His suit, his hands they were rough. His wife graduated from mountain-city-girl to piedmont-county-woman. She was marrying a man who had dust on his shoes. After one college semester, she was new to him—already. He had to meet the new girl he had

dropped off to college. And she had decided after two semesters, she was marrying a man with dust on his shoes. He had to embrace her new found womanness, her new found privilege, her new found acquaintances and attitude –James Brown’s “Say It Loud.” While listening to Aretha’s version of “Young, Gifted, and Black,” *there are times when I am haunted by my youth*, she thought they were young. Maybe it was not enough. Say it loud.

She was right about her abilities and mindfulness, but wrong about her feelings for this man, because she always came up with a candle burned at either end or wax on her fingertips. My mama began pondering about this man, my daddy, and listening to other girls was naïve. *Chasing other’s dreams for one’s self was never smart*, her mother said, and *a good anything is hard to find — friendses, menses. You gotta work to hold onto any relationship or it will betray you.* They were never apart for very long. Like the good book said, they cleaved – left for B.C. powder city. I guess you can say after thirty five years the remedy worked.

After renting a studio apartment on 15-501, they saw an ad, *Divorce and Couple’s Quick Sale*. They visited the house. Mama loved the azalea bush that adorned the front stoop, the plum tree on the left side of the iron chain link fence. And the inside of the house, of course it needed paint and central air, but it was better than what they had. Then, daddy started dreaming. He wanted

his children in a mixed neighborhood in a mixed school. They would ride the bus and sit wherever they *wanted* of course. They would remain in that house with their children for almost seventeen years and when daddy told Papa in Swannanoa about the possibility of them purchasing something they built he did not understand their moving again. *You got this land and house, why you need a new one?* My daddy just shrugged his shoulders.

Going back to the Cove in Swannanoa now is never the same for him, especially after Margaret, his mother, took ill and died. The place was unraveling. He loves to see his sister and her children. However, he is angry when she is chagrined with deadbeats who leave women with everything to manage. *I remember your mother telling me about your coming into the world, I think every man is proud, perhaps scared, but deep down he desires to do the most he's ever done in his life to give them the best, but we all have choices and we all have to live with them.* He reminded his nephew, Hunter – in his adolescence and now his dewy teen years about the choices one has to make and in choosing the wrong ones it can cost everything. He says this to me being a daughter, being the older one of the two. He wants me to always remember where I came from. He wants me to understand my family. He wants me not to be ashamed to tell my children that our people came from the land they built. Preserving that land that they cultivated was their only dilemma.

## 1.1 KENILWORTH

88 Wyoming Road is where my mama's childhood house still stands.

When I was around nine years old, they built the park across its driveway. To do so, the city had to cut all of those full-bodied green trees where my mama, aunt, and uncle used to play. I still see Ms. Geneva coming up the road with her Ingles shopping cart. Today, encroaching on its past, mansions and new construction towers out of the ground. Asheville history tells me that Kenilworth used to be an all-white borough where a grand resort hotel, where a military hospital, where a convalescent home, where a mental institution was here at one period of time in this same space. It is now a luxury apartment building. Further around the bend, some bungalows, tudors, shotgun ranches – this is where Corine & Sam, mama's parents, used to live. This vermilion russet one. Today the door is locked. The iron screen door is without a knob and the exterior door is in need of new coat of paint.

Ms. Geneva—with her Ingles shopping cart – would park the cart up that steep mountain road and go visit Corine. She could remember South Carolina and smelled rice & gravy with pieces of fried pork seasoned with flour and oil. Corine never locked her doors. She believed in always being open. No one knew where Ms. Geneva lived. They said it used to be the bottom. Corine came from Spartanburg County, South Carolina, but her parents and

sisters moved to Asheville when she was a small girl putting words together. She put words together on cross word puzzles and numbers for Bolita. She writes everything down in that red date book by her Bible next to the bed. Then she met Sam at Stephen's Lee. They married, moved from the mountain city to live among the pines, dogwoods, maples, oaks, and people wanderings like Ms. Geneva. Corine never allowed Ms. Geneva to leave empty handed. Corine provided a heavy-handed welcome and she appreciated Ms. Geneva's deep wisdom about the world.

Every other day is laundry day. Corine today is outside behind the house changing clothes on the line. The girls are playing. In a pose, a girl with a dotted bandeau is taking a picture; my mother looks like a younger Florence Ballard. She stands Helen-like next to a Mustang in a dress she made on her high school Singer; her little sister is brown as cinnamon. She holds a blonde-haired blue-eyed doll. This is one memory from a picture mama likes to hold onto. Now mama feels hollow coming back to the old house now. The sight of its ill repair leaves her discontented. The dullness opens up her regret. Her brother lives there in the home; she is reminded of her own son. There is so much work that needs to be done. Still the women hold everything down. While the floors are buckling, as strangers come and go, she and her sister ensure that the taxes are paid.



At forty-four my mother lost her mother Corine to an unforgivable cancer that locked her womb. An unforgivable cancer locked her womb. My mama and her sister took care of her on weekends and drove back and forth for four hours only to return to work, return to children, return to husbands, return to flat land. They brought Corine & Sam back home and she stayed until she passed away in my bedroom. An unforgivable cancer locked her womb. She has not been back to 88 Wyoming Road in a while. Unable to handle what she might find, she has not been back to 88 Wyoming Road in a while. Her brother lives there now; the house is faded; the grass needs cutting; the gutters need cleaning. The last time she went back, she goes to find that red date book; she cannot find it. She cannot bear to look at her mother's handiwork altered.

## 1.2 Bull City

Bright leaves within brick boxes  
*It's a scent you never forget*  
her gold rows go down Roxboro  
fragrant, loved, & vacant  
without a kiss on her lovely  
native arms

Living in the eighties  
she was stripped naked as a ghost  
town ravaged by many suitors who  
used her

She's gone & her wraith is far worse  
*I've seen her effects on some of them*  
*& although I didn't touch her*  
*I still smell her in my hands.*

### 1.3 Old Buckeye Cove

There are stories  
of this land, this road  
Pop always closes the strangeness

There are stories within feldspar– its dust  
the honeyed rock in billows blind irises  
The trucks crush quartz  
The morning sound of toads  
green miniatures signifying

A tractor will come. Dallas in her gallop  
pretends she is home.  
Mr. Bergin in his errands will stop  
pretend to see an imaginary Pegasus  
after a clay-girl's Harry Hamlin crush  
There are stories if you are lucky  
Uncle David will dare-devil, giving rides  
on his Harley outfitted with mustache,  
shades, heavy-metal on his breath

See me hugging him with my turtle  
head tucked close next to his jacket's crest  
We rode through this forsaken jungle  
this marooned trip  
where many men's hands exchanged  
where they believed were dreams  
coveted, cultivated, or capped  
One left to find his own  
vacated & fire scorched plants

*Don't tell my brother I did this*  
*He'd have a fit*  
– I brushed off my pants  
I wondered what made uncle jump off bikes  
Still, jumping now  
from one meth house to the next

Beseeches my once disabled father  
for month-old hydrocodone

There are stories  
There is a fire in the brush  
how does one move  
auction off  
their piece of the rock

I look out to the dusk spotted  
cow grazing  
The ponies following the land lush  
There are stories  
next a string of dilapidated trucks  
There are stories  
popular as the roadside poppies  
collecting this unpaved land's  
musical body  
Who sings gospel, who sings blues  
The home-place door is ajar  
Pop is in his chair looking at the news

## 1.4 Going back to my father's house

2012

I.

Some things have changed. The same weeds pop up in those places  
The fungus that has attached itself to the fir still grows as the root  
meets the ground. Still Pop gets up from his bed much later  
His gait slower. His glass of 'shine still full.

The JFK photograph still watches over his easy chair & the Obama  
'First Family' picture is over his mantle amongst the cousins & other kin  
His daughter awake from her evening shift sits down on the couch next to him.

My aunt talks about the damning plant life—  
the companies that destroy  
the trees to build, the streams to drink fresh water  
leaving the mountain bare. She's worked  
for Tandy Corporation for fifteen years & decided  
on a degree. Hunter watches his mama carefully  
She is up studying. He's got algebra homework  
and an assignment on Paul Robeson

To write is to rewrite the wrong in a picture, to create  
all of the possibilities. A land of milk and honey  
Hunter is young & hungry for it all

II.

*Pop is always inside the house* unless  
one of his sons takes him on a drive  
The shiny slot machines lure  
laid-off veterans & their monthly checks  
to bet back what they lost  
the last week & yet no black  
they keep going to Cherokee  
There is a stucco house on top of Cove Hill  
it is adorned with ferns, vacillating vines

that create an enigmatic lure in the night  
The sounds of hounds & hens quiet down  
There is always someone, something  
something burning, someone stealing  
something, someone forgetting  
something someone

III.

Hunter's mama is wise  
a woman making plans  
who preaches  
about living off of the Cove  
going back to school  
& making a path  
for Hunter & Feather  
in their next dream  
loads of people come here  
but they don't plan  
on being tourist  
they hope to flourish,  
plunder.

## 1.5 Pro-ball Dreams I.

Pop knows all, but doesn't say.  
I send signals climbing 828 ways  
and I always receive the same response,  
'Yellow. Who's this?'  
I say a name with a jasmine tone,  
'Oh, how-a-you?'  
Still, he says no name and why should he,  
'Bevy and 'em ain't back yet.'  
I am fifth out of fifteen grands.  
'I'm outside here burning this here pile'  
'What are you burning?'  
Conflagrant corn water on his breath,  
I can smell the happiness.  
He doesn't say.  
And I think about him being ninety,  
the fact he still drives a Ford and goes to see  
green "pretty girls" enamors me.  
'They'll be back I reckon'  
He means Hunter, my All-American cousin,  
who rushes miles in the fall  
'She carried 'em to practice tonight.  
Then Bevy go to work at the plant.'  
He's more than good. The teams from Burke  
to Madison County know his gait,  
his position, his math. He passes  
with aplomb on and off his map.

## 1.6 this place we knew

so much is *has been* scattered ash colors this  
procurement: this face is too familiar  
it cannot fill it does not sum but this once-land folds  
into my dreams collects as scattered ash off cliffs—  
it taste wistful of my parents  
newly marrieds in Buncombe County  
The reservist his black nightingale wife  
*unevenly yoked* life [unbeknown to them]  
there was no question without labor migration  
scattered them as ash like all the others  
you get used to breathing the stink from the Canton plant  
no matter where you go a memory will always linger



## 1.7 Esau: 1966

I.

On a road trip with your uncle  
you can acquire much,  
Trust is vital, but names tell  
a greater story.  
His name means: by the work  
of his textured hands.

The daily ritual was simple:  
*prepare* the Chevy pickup  
*eat* Moon Pies & RC colas  
if they will sell them to you  
(it's the only thing  
that would keep during the drive).  
*Be alert* on the winding roads  
Blue Ridge vistas can be a siren  
for disaster,  
*look straight at the road ahead*  
scope every meeting and every stop  
*Jesus, be a fence*

II.

He told my father,  
*work for yourself, son.* You can  
become almost a slave to something  
work shouldn't be one of them  
*they will trap you paying you good,*  
*and then, when you lose a finger,*  
*your hand or your body*  
*in a loom you'll see*  
*a man's value ain't much*  
*I've cleaned up the inners of a man*  
*the broken body. I remember.*

*Esau* began traveling  
mending hewn, shining them  
as if they were gold  
He wasn't a perfect man  
His brother Jacob had another story.

III.

He taught his nephew  
*one learns to master a trade, a craft.*  
the world was ordained this way  
*find what takes you somewhere*

## 1.8 A ballad for Corine's girls

after Eavan Boland

In the ground, like scattered numbers  
barely seen from this frosted window  
they were young and fresh from snowy sleep  
their dreams were invisible

They were small seeds in the spring ground  
In the fall they were fertilized  
with the leaves from the ground  
They were comforted until they browned

Plentiful trees were often cut down  
making room for the changing times  
this is a language about the work  
this work made room for light

This tome transforms, it folds under  
beltways of hank veins and carpal  
bosses looped like the Ozarks to Pisgah  
men built resorts, roads, and tunnels

Women accompanied their music  
lifting, bending, mending, making  
things beautiful with their mother's  
magic or demise, one will use it

But in the midst of all this force  
generations must spread their roots  
young men go off to war and work  
girls ponder on a burgeoning choice  
Her voice is created yet still  
she is labeled dangerous  
every mother cannot grip the growth  
of their daughter's new precious will

## 1.9 When Sunday Came

A young man sought to find  
the perfect sound for the family Wurlitzer  
he was dressed in his only good trousers  
almost the height of creek water  
he was built like a Brazil nut tree  
white dress shirt borrowed from his brother

A mother would peer through the eyelet curtains  
her husband shook his head through the screen  
with laughter in his eyes

This boy had walked for miles,  
from Swannanoa to Asheville  
with a record underneath his arm,  
a mother thought,  
*maybe another Marvin Gaye record*  
But today: *Darling, reach out reach out*

The two were sitting in the untouched parlor,  
on a couch still covered in plastic  
As her taffy-colored daughter, donned  
a yellow dress, hair fresh pressed  
White Shoulders behind her lobes  
special for her out-of-town guest  
She thought her daughter lucky

## Part II

### Reading Nnenna

Tomorrow always sings the blues  
Tonight you are the star in many rooms  
Reading seasons, working budgets,  
ironing pleats, bed sheets, neatly  
choreographing boardrooms  
you helped build on your back  
still the demand is crippling

Stacks of notes sit waiting for you  
to study them at another place  
when you felt an even greater love  
the first one that never lost its grip

## 2.1 Epithalamion

Blessed God hear this soul,  
may beloved accept this troth.  
Nature's face is not our dole,  
gentle skies of clouds float  
Lustrous lines connote  
visages gentle as Iris's iridescent dress  
Moments after waterfall coats,  
aegis-like parasols pomp. Yes  
peace be still in a placid park  
bless sodden ground for the arc.

## 2.2 Summer Employment

In the summers I shuffled  
plates, opened napkins, let them fly away  
    like doves who knew their magic  
the picture has always been practical; it has always  
    been more than one door  
to walk through

After watching my parents always  
    keep their steps short & narrow  
so their brood could become wider,  
    varied & our desert of dreams  
could have water  
    I decided to pull out the hotel plates & drop them

## 2.3 Womanhood

after Lucille Clifton (1936-2010)

I'd never thought  
I'd miss you  
The sight of you  
I'd miss the remnants  
blissed berries  
this gift left behind  
she was never kind  
but I loved her  
what she meant, its scent  
spent and when she walked  
out, went away  
I thought she'd come back  
Like ol' girls do, but  
she never did



## 2.4 Answers with a grandmother

after Mark Strand

for Corine

*Where are your parents from?*

The water– then they came to Greenville

*Why did you marry him?*

What reason to stay

*Why did you marry him?*

He had nice tan shoes and shiny bone china teeth

*How many children did you have?*

Three

*How many children did you have?*

Five

*Why did you put up with him?*

It was a beautiful marriage

*Why did you put up with him?*

How does any one?

*Why didn't you tell anyone about the blood?*

There wasn't anything to tell

*Why didn't you tell anyone about the blood?*

I was a girl like you again.

## 2.5 Remembering how to dance: ten segments

I.

A pan of her face: slow quick, quick, slow  
she knows she cannot bend the foundation  
where lines meet. Like the tempo  
They move onto the passing street

II.

They stare while making confessions  
his snowy lips  
his winter face folds  
emits condensation

III.

She'll never know how to pick  
the right hibiscus red  
She'll never know how to pick  
the best face to wear

IV.

Camera to her face  
his thoughts were not her thoughts

V.

He cannot decide, as he looks  
at her face, whether to turn  
or to face the tempo

VI.

The stars hanging off shingles  
Still move the girl  
face flushed in a tango  
paradisal red as the umbrella

VII.

At night, they sate their minds  
sharpening their Portuguese  
*O Orpheus look*  
into her face *Dalbergia nigra*  
Marpessa's eyes hold a fire

VIII.

They face the zooming crane to see  
how long this will last

IX.

He approached her father  
looked him in the eyes  
his face conceded  
this was the language of men.

X.

She weeps in another space,  
while he sleeps in another room  
the son draws school art  
tells of a mother's hunger

## 2.6 Ovules

The mouths of birds have barely opened  
like berries hidden from august companion

Sitting at the bottom, blossoms clogging  
the river-pass cleanse the marbled sediment

*Here is where life should grow, there*  
are seasons when anemones do not bloom

on time—fish fall to their sides.  
What has created the elegy of the orchestra

this morning, what has created  
the dark masses where light should glow

Strings of pearls drape the flower's neck  
there was magic in her eye

she used to cry, opening  
like a full-blooming red dress

## 2.7 You tried to push the Buick down Horton Road in the winter

Dimming cyclists raced  
the down turn of economies  
down the anachronistic suburb:

*The old house, you wouldn't recognize  
the neighborhood. The azalea bush  
at the front door was missing  
The plum tree, pines cut down.*

There are children now, but they  
do not walk where they are wanted.  
They break into houses– this is  
where we walked. Old Blue  
breaking down. *Do you remember?*  
Our one walk from school in winter  
Softer diamonds came down as you pushed.  
Then you decided to abandon it.  
Never coming back to it until I asked

about the nature of my birth. You stopped  
*You can't go to another man's neighborhood  
to start fights. You can't win– win what?*  
Those questions in a formal letter  
unopened– *for what*, the war  
was over.

You had witnessed the ailments  
on your father's land: mash water,  
hops, serrated leaves  
dressed as hypertension, depression,  
diabetes & meth.

*The car didn't have any shocks* He said. *You almost fell out of a car,  
smaller than this one.*

*But you waited a month early.*

Looking at my brown pleather boots

He said. *You had those huge feet.*

Extending his hands out– one east, one west.

## 2.8 Memorial\*

Citrus ripens in a home. Sweet carpal bodies on the cutting board. A nostalgic image of a girl—not yet woman—torn by wars. She lights a wick to hush the thick disquiet. Cypress surrounds a clamor in the town. It silences the gray.

Her only one—there, small & round—is in sketches & folded socks held with a single clothes pin. My hand grips on to you; unsuspectingly you walk away from me. Now you are on the mattress dying under petals of percale. Each morning will not remember until you speak. A grandmother reminds you of the joy of work despite the bite within cotton rows.

Years from now, when I collect my own socks & you're donning a crown of pewter, I know you imagine me rebellious. Maybe that I have manners—that I can grip precious things, that I learn worth. You'd write this on lunch napkins & outline the collar of my sweater with fable. Tell me to be mindful of erasure. That I know better. That I learn when to leave. The demarcation of circumstance, the extermination of choice behind

When I look over—pitying the world— I often see you singing. Rocking in an empty unpainted room. Obscure bars. Sometimes they disregard your lament. I want them to hear it.

You lean over a clear space. Imagine a gentle tower in the middle of the room—circulating lambs, elephants, bears, kittens. Dimly lit & unforgiving—your stolen stories.

### Part III

**Commute**(vb): the act of travel back and forth to a particular place regularly. 1.)To move incessantly. Her *commute* is three hours leaving from home, going to work and coming back. 2.) To exchange. To travel for a period. Escaping. He *commutes* twenty miles to the nearest magnet school, because it is better school than the one in his neighborhood. (n): the actual journey to get to a particular place for a period of time. The measure of finding. Discovering the meat behind shells. 3.)To change often (mutable) mid 15th century “to change, transform” from Latin *commutare*. The *commute* happened as she began losing time and practicality. 4.) To exchange one kind of payment for another. For every *commute* the risks can be immutable.

### 3.1 When young parents danced

1982

I had to have been four or five. It may have happened late, a dancing Noritake plate. I kept a porcelain shard as a relic. Broken shadows that wanted to scurry into frame became fine dust. Congoleum in psychedelic orange. A cylinder shadow. *It is work*, she said.

But why musicians stopped ten minute songs (I loved the seventies), I don't know — to cover the cacophony of wars, unbalanced wills, and gender-politics? They argued over gods, over guilt, while listening to Switch. *Let me whisper in your ear.*

While the vinyl static bled—I sheltered between their legs like a jail— in solace, I waited. Their fantasy island eroded. Countertops collected. They stood still. And then, my father awkwardly dipped my mother.



### 3.2 Laboratory Mixer/ Assembly Line

A Saturday drive to the beach  
was not uncommon, down I-70.  
On other days Daddy got up

dreaming about cloudless vistas  
Of beryl & sand  
only to retreat back to white space  
within strict confines of factory walls

Mama, she sat, shaded face in front  
as daddy drove his metallic blue  
& rust colored Volvo, the one  
in need of repair  
Brother & I studied every road sign

My mother grimaced about long  
distances & compromise  
In Winston there was destruction  
This is how to clean up the ruins

Daddy worked the vaccine lines  
while mama provided comfort inside  
bleach-colored walls, the moment  
when one has lost function

I know this fear as the body fails  
It is like running to God  
Bare-footed on broken glass  
It reminds me of what story  
we pass on to our young  
We push on in hopes that  
our spirits do not retreat  
telling another version of ourselves.

### 3.3 Nearly Losing Him

For Daddy

If a man collapses while sitting on the toilet  
it is humiliating (God, I do not want to die like this).  
Newspaper at his ankles, Fruit of the Looms hanging  
at his knees. His calloused feet without socks.

If the man shudders with the gaps while sitting in darkness  
If he forgets to write down every nerve  
If a man struggles in his confined bed  
Do you blame him when he makes lemonade?  
It is the only thing— next to a turkey sandwich  
—he can prepare sitting down.

If he sends his son out to buy lemons  
his boy often gave up on the rind's punch  
inhaling the scent between his nose & mouth.  
Circling the pores with his thumb.

If this same man chops the lemons into halves,  
they'd glow like cat eyes against granite black.  
If the man rolls back to his first fecund dream,  
he'd wake up wet, dew's clinging to him  
If this same man learns the meaning,  
it will answer when he fails

If there is light in every closet,  
there, he will see his hanging:  
morose and magic arranged bright to dark  
white uniform with his name stitched  
There was his life

### 3.4 Commute III

Hunter left home with just his high school duffle bag traveling 500 miles east, meeting his mother's oldest brother. There is so much history on the outside –a white horse whinnied on its side, mascot was named after WWII soldiers skipping home to work on those blanket lines. He wanted what his mother never got and promised to build her a castle. She worked most days at the hospital; before that the television plant that is now overseas. His football coach carried him around often & on those days he wondered about where his father was –when he caught a Rawlings in his chapped hands, when he made the team, when he made his first rush on field, when his first letter about college arrived and his mother posted it to his bedroom mirror, when curious lips of a girl on his other crown froze him to forever. This was the only time he missed him. He wanted to talk to that one man about it. People in his hometown were always offering up kindness because they thought, perhaps he will *remember me* when he makes it big. He stands almost seven feet tall, all muscle and bone is now a man. He thinks he knows everything, but *there is more to life son than just yardage*, his uncle tries to tell him. He knows what it means to catch arrows with one's hands while being praised & while others looked the other way.

### 3.5 Jesse

In '42 when I was away during wartime, soldiers got blankets from Beacon every Christmas. The soldiers would get a check too. I showed them boys in the barracks; many of them questioned me; they thought I was some big shot, but I was just seventeen years old. I worked for Beacon for 40 years – drove a truck locally to Winder, Georgia, Westminster, S.C, and other places– to pick up supplies or take things to workers daily. Daddy worked there and his daddy.

My brother did it too. When my son left for the service I gave him seventy-five dollars. There is nothing here but hotels & factories, but they are closing. They are boarded up. I never told him come back & work here because I had done this before. I had a good time when I was young. I married Marge. When I came back home I bought the land from my daddy. Marge and I paid 'em fair and square. He would've sold it to somebody else. When Beacon burned down many stood looking at their definitions up in smoke I only look at the place where I rest my rusted feet, the place where I pour my drank, the place where I want to pray. I ain't a perfect man; don't tell anyone I am still driving. Someone asked me about moving on, going into some other house. That's nobody's plan but theirs, not mine. I was staying put. No one was going to take me off the land where I was raised, where I raised my children. I was staying put. Some of us should do more of this, maybe they could be happy.

### 3.6 Soundtrack I : 1960

E.Y. Harburg's "Necessity" sung by contralto Carol Brice  
interior shot– inside of a diesel truck

At home, people were the same  
leaning upon the sick & romantic,  
One has read the history  
this clean-air paradise plenty flock to  
the rich, a wealthy page-turner  
hiding his sick wife,  
The industry of luxury excursions & wefts  
stolen from Native Americans  
the mill, the land they shared,  
No one wanted to know their stories  
about the people who put it all together

Jesse glides with Ruby  
he broke her, busted a tire  
& left her bare  
a time ago when drivers  
& passengers  
stole crying baby comforts  
He laughed as he told me his  
story, *My boss asked*  
*why didn't you save*  
*those scattered blankets*  
*across the Green River Bridge*

He learned early that survival  
on bad roads in weather so treacherous, the bears,  
couldn't hold the driving passengers off  
as if it was a give-away  
the road he knew well  
– its demure corners – betrayed him  
Jack knifed  
nearly cutting his neck off

But today he drove  
leather passenger seat exposed  
stuffing: an iron femur  
It is covered often with a towel  
BUY WINSTON'S SMOKES  
A box of invoices wake  
from their repose demanded their goods  
There is an empty snuff wrapper  
from the last passenger he collected  
off velvet lavender chalk vistas  
He rides down 70, down  
to the Grand Opening: New Beacon  
Make Warm Friends

Before Fedex,  
this former Army MP  
was driving after midnight  
to local stores  
the next morning KMart  
in Ohio, for Penny's  
This was new for him  
It was good work  
work that had taken him away  
from his land, his wife to provide for  
the coming babies. He would greet  
sons and daughters, seven in all.  
Then three more. These would be  
the grands- all boys.  
Then Marge's kidney's failed.  
His baby girl came home  
pregnant again. He'd step in place  
where his baby girl could not  
This is the life of a man

In the chalk level south without papers  
to hang above any mahogany leather  
chair or desk hutch  
There are no letters, only another day  
to build walls. He did  
built his with his bare hands.

He toted those throws  
into those mom & pop store fronts  
they have all closed down  
for popular monikers  
One always opens a door  
but one must be fit to walk  
through it & no one has been  
for awhile. Pop has kept  
some things a secret as token  
We cling to the ones who love us  
this is why he burns an offering &  
rakes dirt over idle dust  
He is the land

### 3.7 Tobacco Road

Durham, North Carolina

1980

There is the door where I walked out a million times; I was never prepared, but there are the signs that tell you. Leaving home was something that was carved in us as children. There was just enough, but if we went further, this is where we had to plan. My pretty wife, who knew in order to make it we could not stay. Families. Both questioned us.

One sought employment one of three places. One worked for the universities, the hospital, or American. One also had IBM & research. In the 80s working for the big companies was something. There were two big universities and a community college. Community college was sweet for a while. It weighed on me trying to work as a barber. Carter was president.

Then *you* came. My wife worked nights as a nurse. I was studying to make moulds. Sculptures of mouths now collected in shoe box. You'd later find those diagrams of gingivae and bone white, distal or mesial. Play with the tools in your precious hands. But I never told you what it was for.

I interviewed at one place and it didn't go so well. But I went back. They asked me if I smoked the first time. I said no. And then I said yes. I worked evenings cleaning the cigarette making machines. There were sharp blades and forced air through pipette like streams. Monkeying around cost



one his hand, his eye, his life. It was dangerous work.

Cartons of smokes were given to us at the end of our day. A Native American head stamped on the boxes. I had boxes of cigarettes stacked in my garage & my neighbors would come & get them. People asked me why I didn't sell any of them. Just wasn't right. I thought about the work & the things they gave us. This was before The Truth. Before they learned of what happened to mothers & their babies. *Ebony* & *Jet* always had beautiful women looking carefree. It's not like that now. When you need work, all of that goes out of the window.

The old gang at American they were interesting folk, you should try talking to some of them, some high school college drop outs, war vets, young men just needing to fill a void & pay their ends when needed. I felt bad giving my wife's mother those cartons because I wondered would she have stopped. I worked there until they moved the plant to Reidsville & I decided it was not for me & my wife anymore; she had job in the hospital. She was not going to move. I found new work in Treyburn cleaning industrial plants. Then I moved as a plant supervisor. I worked there until my hips & limbs failed me. That was hard for me because I learned as long as I couldn't produce no one had anything to say to me. No one had anything left for me. Others weren't so lucky. Some other tobacco workers did move with them & then they sold the

plant again. I've seen some of the old gang. Some were just one paycheck away from being homeless & many of them did lose everything, including their minds. Losing one's job has that type of effect on any person, especially a man.

## Part IV

### What Nature Can Trigger

A son travels to his mother's hometown.  
Kenilworth mountain encloses remains,  
an undesired facelift; he longs for  
the embracing trees, arched in the backyard.  
Only there is one left, full with sweet reds  
He plucks a gem from the tree where she sat  
vibrant as a girl. Ripe and sweet, he smells  
now as he pares down the gold glowing skin  
with a jade clustered blade. He bites soft meat.

A fall like this will always stir a scene:  
A man shares his umbrella with a girl,  
dripping with college on her tongue, striking  
young skin and tough as chestnut core. Supple  
silhouette stands with her back to his chest  
waiting at the door while signifiers  
answer. All familiar as poppies they  
gather and scatter into their places.

But today not a word, nor honeyed-sigh.  
A mother knows loss. His frame cries, dithers  
next to a surplus of fallen autumn  
inside patches of dead grass. He follows  
his mother's beginners path, read symbols  
his mother carved inside a metal shed,  
He traces the rusted tattoo maudlin.

**4.1 The besetment of new & gorgeous things**  
(Freedom Park) for Ezra

coconut gleans on chestnut shells

moreover the rite lifts this scene

Blue-grey jewel

the body carves                      sunlight                      through leaf

lattice

Christ's blossoms

burst a fresh

attar

corolla on his lids

Viburnum

## 4.2 Placencia, Belize

May 2001

The air is the scent of God.  
If you listen, you can hear  
all the secrets of the world silenced

Garifuna baskets stood as shelters outside  
fresh air market stands in a town converged  
with guarded narratives, under stephanotis  
and mango trees.

This marooned land entered a russet dusk  
as I noshed on sliced *aguacate* with freckles  
of *achiote*, I thought of a history obscured  
like mine. The scent required attention.

When pregnant nimbi poured through  
old Stan Creek town, branches coddled  
hollow air. Mami Wata's pools made music  
Silt transported from roots to mossy floral beds  
as rocks dropped inside the beating  
beaded belly of the river.

### **4.3 I am answering your letters now**

Greenville, North Carolina

September 11, 2001

Fear is the din that rattles more places  
All of the movement halts  
trains, planes, change their routes  
teacher's lounges are glued to television  
sets.

Over and over the repeating sky falls  
but at this very moment

People are speaking

People are writing

People are listening

People are people.

## 4.4 Swannanoa Valley Museum

### I.

Words lifted free people  
its land married freely  
no  
native folk women colors land  
clay sediment  
rock water core six foot  
more up Old Fort  
Black Mountain up  
Swannanoa  
hips & eyes  
big as Blue Ridge

Height didn't apprehend  
this man  
climbing  
no problem

### II.

loose

air planted

seeds

pictures in winter field

bloomed built  
falling  
cows  
honeysuckle

attar  
every summer

III.

Coach stops    failed mushroom motels

an identified tourist

on the other side of            heart

baby girl,  
great-granddaughter of Jesse,

watches art

She took Risk's name

like gaps    ravaged  
tome

A sewn map like pieces of a frayed

uniform    every

necessity: *don't pull stray strings*

Plant work gone

snowfall

years

mountains

remained

popular not so

this view  
speaks

otherwise



## 4.5 Investment

1888-1902

Caroline Hawkins, mother of Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown

I was once like you  
growing into a girl with grace.  
Mrs. Jane, she wanted to save it  
But He gave me feet  
to dip into water  
Even if it was undeserved

From North Carolina to  
Cambridge  
we'd take the train from  
Raleigh, the town that inspired me  
when hearing voices in parlors  
like the Glass House.  
The tourists were plotting  
dreams gave me more ambition.

## 4.6 There was no train stop

after Charlotte Hawkins Brown

and so the woman jumped;  
her baggage teetered off  
there was no warning  
in time her faith grew.

Her baggage teetered off  
faith small as a ball of lint  
in time her faith grew  
poured into gift until spent.

Faith small as a ball of lint  
your craft was your people  
poured into gift until spent  
a man couldn't fathom that

your craft was your people  
you worshipped libraries;  
a man couldn't fathom that  
a woman was building this town.

You worshipped libraries  
yellow-island bird songs  
a woman was building this town  
as a Mecca of prominence.

Community praise songs  
carried word that Sedalia  
was a Mecca of prominence.  
And so, the woman jumped

## 4.7 Carol Brice teaches at Black Mountain College

In the unforgiving South  
My father named me Carol  
He thought I was to be a son  
Charles, the name for a free man  
But I was a hinged woman  
Connected but free during the sound  
of southern railways

A full jar without answers  
On the outside my open mouth  
This modest treasure sound  
Comforted composers &  
Penned me their goddess  
I spoke the language of a cello

With my mother and son,  
I go back to the south  
I have left Juilliard  
left my aunt who is fighting  
her own fight in Sedalia  
while I fight for a place  
onlookers in their hamlets  
& boroughs don't look  
My way was never fair  
Black Mountain.  
Separated spaces, races, classes  
Everybody knows but Jesus  
What I do is sacred  
What I do is offer example  
My mother sang, but she often grieved  
in a church choir

Early on my aunt taught me that  
Gifts present themselves to be used  
for fear of being lost  
Many never put one foot in front  
to see what calls them away from  
Everyone  
*Use me Lord*  
*Use me*

## 4.8 St John A. Baptist Church

We pass the path that each man trod— pushing lifeless weeds,  
that cover my historical apogee. They will be etched this second  
This picture I will frame, even slighted amber leaves  
covering unmarked stones (that are faceless). I read the naked  
Scattering the ample cob webs away from their vapid  
lives. Like a weed, my son watches nimbly fecund  
Smartly he rests at the bottom of the hill  
He takes everything; his eyes fill  
with his own restless image of the sacred.  
*Can we go now? As if we'd been walking for miles*  
& I said to him, Wait. *Can't you hear this?*  
He said, *nothing, but a bird.* The oscillation of a plow  
drudged, *Wait. Be still.* & he toted a troubled wish  
*I see things— a village.* Amidst silenced vowels  
all this noise, I offered each of them my hand, this  
portion, my whatever left, watching foliage adrift  
My planted meaning is bereft  
My young parents lived two cities over  
Met in this Kenilworth church, left  
a McDowell slave ground full of clovers  
broken branches & moss a path for rovers  
fallen pines make room for lovers & tourist  
& college students who dust unnamed stones

## 4.9 Fourth of July

Will always mean: golden neck ties  
the color of man's shirt  
His Father's Day party, he smiles  
here with his son there behind  
His brood on either side  
How to explain rain to a five-year-old  
How babies are made & when  
do they come out  
& why pop isn't coming back  
Like in this picture, our son asks

Each night you wake up  
a different man  
Floating from room to room  
You slept next to our son  
unbeknownst to him  
You were a red balloon  
I walked with your mother  
on wet sand in August  
The stories of birds calm her  
When she was a girl  
they never went to the shore  
Her father didn't believe in danger  
for the argument  
She walked with her grandson  
as he chased the ebb  
Sea froth that washed his wiry ankles  
made thin sprays of sand  
on his chestnut legs  
Wandering near him an egret

## 4.10 Grief

As Naomi does  
you love your husband  
your soul flails  
Vulnerability & emptiness  
have pulled you out like pockets,  
still you are grateful to have shared light  
and to fill yourself everyday  
allowing his refulgence  
to shine through

Dear Maura, oh Maura  
do not send me away  
Your line renews, redesigns  
all of us that you have  
you still have your mind  
You still have your spirit  
You still have pieces  
of him that walk like him  
You still have  
Insert yourself & anything else  
in this space and keep  
reminding yourself all day

Once you birthed a son  
but only one  
You also birthed a daughter  
who has returned home  
after head tumor & divorce  
Your line is not forgotten  
It runs wide and out like  
the Atlantic sweetly  
despite the occasional debris  
its semantics speak fully

calling all the birds back  
across its shores  
crushed shells & stones  
under your feet are uncomfortable  
they build a path to a holy paradise  
blessed quietness  
Our arms offer comfort  
even when there is silence  
do not send your daughters away



## 4.11 Like a forceful sluicing

One should learn to leap  
should leap and learn risks  
in their sleep they should plan a speech

of fire when inspired to lift, refute a myth  
which tells one to be, be humble  
Humility is a trip

It never healed my grandmother  
Well, only half of that is true  
She built her world around others

She had lost her youth  
forgot her once enamored faith  
& could not reclaim what was true

Lake water does not cleanse the body's  
turmoil. Though I am lovely, unholy  
to some, I take my chances bloodied

on the dirt while crowds mightily  
force to view the constant mocks  
My constant anemia governs me

The sightless could pick me in a flock  
The rueful scent's inconvenience  
gives me reason to balk  
at the sight of their dissonance  
even if it is a frayed hem  
they will gawk at my reverence

One must learn credence when  
our faith rests on the power of us  
not finding it is our own sin

## 4.12 Notes

“Reading Nnenna” is inspired from an article on jazz singer Nnenna Freelon’s conversation she had with her husband, prior to her movement for a career as a jazz singer. She used to work in hospital administration raising three children with her husband; but both she and her husband knew she was unfulfilled in not chasing a childhood dream.

“Remembering how to dance: ten segments” is after Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

“Memorial” is after the Winfall, North Carolina eugenics survivors

“There was no train stop” was written for Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown Palmer Memorial Institute historic site Interstate 40/85 North Carolina

Carol Brice was one of the first African American instructors at Black Mountain College. Known for its ground breaking methodologies on artists’ education; At Black Mountain College they produced a prominent poetic movement as

well as a strong visual arts, and music program. They were one of the first academic programs to accept African American students prior to southern integration movements.

“St John A. Baptist Church,” this poem is named after the place where my parents first met. It is now a North Carolina historic site and listed as one of the oldest slave cemeteries.

“Like a forceful sluicing” Mark 5:25, NIV Bible