How to Make a Mudsparkler

Ethan Fogus

University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
HOW TO MAKE A MUDSPARKLER

by

Ethan Fogus

Bachelor of Arts
Georgia State University, 2013

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2017

Accepted by:

Ed Madden, Director of Thesis

Fred Dings, Reader

Tara Powell, Reader

Kathleen Robbins, Reader

Cheryl L Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner—Ashley—and my family Sandy, Steve, and Emily.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to acknowledge Dr. Ed Madden for serving as my director. It was fantastic to work with Dr. Madden, and his feedback was always a gift. Additionally I’d like to extend gratitude to Scott Chalupa who provided me with whizbang advice.

I’d also like to thank my thesis committee—Dr. Fred Dings, Dr. Tara Powell, and Kathleen Robbins—who provided guidance throughout the completion of the thesis.

Also, thank you to Ashley Kauschinger, Ray McManus, Harper Strom, who donated their time and careful eyes to read early iterations of How to Make a Mudsparkler.

Thanks to the University of South Carolina’s Creative Writing Department for inviting me to be a member of their community. Additionally, a final kudos to my classmates who helped me grow and develop as a poet alongside them at USC.
ABSTRACT

How to Make a Mudsparkler is a collection of lyrical narratives that address issues of masculinity and identity. These poems are threaded through with repeated themes—religion, place, and the nature of work—as they interrogate familial lineage with inventories of memory. The first section ruminates on family history as it is linked to formative memories. Section two continues these themes, but adds an exploration of adolescence and isolation. Finally, section three is the most immediate section as the speaker explores the fundamental questions of love, loss, and the nature of friendship.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication ............................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................ iv

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ v

Part I ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Petition for Land Use and Zoning Board ............................................................................... 2

I Was a Boy in a Bouquet of Sisters ....................................................................................... 4

My Father Says My Name ....................................................................................................... 6

Rubato ....................................................................................................................................... 7

Nightdrive ................................................................................................................................. 8

The Insurance Appraiser’s Son ............................................................................................... 9

Third Shift with Vodka in a Pepsi Can ................................................................................... 10

The Cross .................................................................................................................................. 11

For a Witness .............................................................................................................................. 13

In Westmoreland ................................................................................................................... 15

Part II ......................................................................................................................................... 18

How to Make a Mudsparkler ................................................................................................. 19

A Catalog of Sounds on a CasioTone 660 ........................................................................... 20

Westmoreland High School ................................................................................................... 22

And When It Rains Your Truck Smells Like Dog Piss and Brake Dust ......................... 23

That Night Your Hand Struck Keybed .................................................................................. 25
Part I
Petition for Land Use and Zoning Board
Variance for lot #136830
Property: City of Westmoreland
(EXECUTE IN DUPLICATE)

Where pollen sparkles
as it falls across the barnyard.
Yes, when the heat’s as heavy

as a rumor, whispered.
Where every time I step out,
I hear freight trains

christen the eaves of the skyline
with their old ache.

This is Westmoreland,
this is the land we call home:
land that hasn’t been farmed
since Eisenhower was in office.

Back when mayors would
dig their own wells.

    We were
a place worth slipping a bribe

before we were gutted
and the city council dissolved
our government.

This is Westmoreland
frosted glass business district
of whitewashed panes that reflect
the hourly hawking of trains

past rows of ditched showrooms
of dealerships in a town too empty
to burn down.

But I’m not
here to bicker about the well
  that’s built above its aquifer.
Or the barn pasture
that hasn’t held a herd since
Sullivan hosted The Beatles.

This is Westmoreland.

Yes, the only thing left
here is the mercury caught
within the belly of a perch

  on a sunlit deck,
pinned on newsprint,
held by its head before hilt
glimmers behind the gills.
I was a boy in a bouquet of sisters

who couldn’t sit through dinner,
and itched with fits of fidgets.

Once, as aunts contradanced

over the carpet with choruses
of would-you-look-at-that,

their here’s-how-I-would-fix-it or

well-don’t-you-know-I-gave-them
a-piece-of-my-mind, I toddled

into my grandmother’s office.

It smelled like a litter box
lined with wet cardboard.

I saw a walnut credenza topped

by dusty bubble glass bowls
full of potpourri leaves

next to monochrome photos

of family members sporting
fanny packs and plastic visors

outside The Magic Kingdom;

snapshots of them in single file
on staircases all cummerbunds

and fat lapels. Caddy cornered

in the back, between a Lazy-Boy
and blank walls: the shell of her

butterscotch blonde upright spinet.
I slammed a clutch
of suspended notes

it felt good to sit, to force

the keys into high angles of sound.
I was quiet with something

larger to listen to. And it was big,

big like the ripcord pull of a siren
as a sedan is sideswiped

by a snub-nosed fire engine,

big like I was hamsauced
on saltwater taffy and soda pop,

as big as if I was a wild engineer,

a chain whistle in my gloved hand,
bounding through Bull’s Gap

with a haul of Carolina coal,
full throttle, ahead of schedule.

My father silenced the soundboard

You shouldn’t touch this. You should
go back to the reunion.

You don’t understand what it’s worth.
My father says my name

like a hopper barge against a tugboat
on the Oneida sound

loaded with salt as thundersnow
corrupts the sky.

Like he’d rather be chained between
canal lock doors.

Puts a *fuck you*
before my name,

And it’s the sound of a patrol car door
shutting in our drive,

we could hear the mud jalopys start
the second heat

at the Brewerton speedway, a calliope
of carburetors.

Almost summer,
“*I’m sorry, sir.*”

It sounds like that every-night dream
where my right ear

is pressed against his. He can’t stand
but there’s a thrum

in his chest and the house is a field
where I kneel—sob—

offering
“*Daddy.*”
Rubato

I

My father sings until he sighs. 
It’s not always lonely—that’s not the word: 
it’s resignation, it’s a halt, 
how bedpans are changed in hospice.

II

Some nights I’d hear him sing 
in the kitchen. Ask if he needs help—

No, no. he’s got it. Cold casserole 
and the airbrake shunt of a beer can. 
Most nights I’d join him anyway, 
grab a mixing spoon, or boil water.

If I used to pray, it was because I loved 
how naked the words in a prayer felt 
of blunt horns of Canaan 
and walls blustering towards Jericho.

III

The recovery room: my father woke up 
after they installed his colostomy bag. 
He reached for my hand. Looked at me 
like a slur slipped at a dinner party, 
a crack in the good china that a napkin 
can’t cover and the conversation stops.
Nightdrive

Maybe late

on a Wednesday after school
my father would take us on night drives

through Westmoreland in his purple car,
its go kart gasoline smell, silenced me

as block engine tremorred on dirt roads
that frisked along the state line, where

moonlit whiskey still houses crouched
just beyond the road, billboards stooped

along hot powerline drop wires belted

with kudzu loops.

I’d lean against

the door and stare out the car window
terror-stricken in any hairpin turn but

soon felt my tight gristbit milk teeth
were set free by laughing through

each shotgun seat squeeze, as shot
copper wire crackled records through

blown sidedoor speakers, the cassette
shifted to Side B, and we skimmed

the black ribbon as the tapehead warble
slipped into darkness
Whenever he heard the sound
of a train, my Dad would grab my arm,
say that’s your bread and butter
running through the country, boy.
And on nights after the house was gutted
by the ringing of the telephone,
my father would tell me to dress, march me
to the shotgun seat of his company Buick.
We’d drive past the refineries in Corning,
through the backswamps of Oswego,
on the outskirts of some Buffalo shit-town.
Until we saw the glow of a fire engine,
a stopped locomotive, and the caricature
of a car folded under a cowcatcher.
Not much else—an engineer wrapped
in a blanket, police officers passing
a red thermos, a circle of silent brakemen,
as Dad took photos for the damage report.
We’d head home. In the morning,
I’d follow my brother to the bus stop.
We didn’t talk. No, we’d watch as gondolas
were filled with scrap—pistons, couplers,
a half-chassis—on tracks that stretched towards
smokestacks rising above Signal Street.
Third shift with vodka in a Pepsi can

There’s glitter in the carpet fibers left over from Christmas and the get together, and I remember being this star struck when I was a kid—alone and awake—as my dad slept through the afternoon. He was in Dispatch. Most of the position involved listening to the vaulted static for lost drivers and watching the clock until he could sleep again. Now, I think I probably would have needed to drink to get through it, too. But I didn’t know then how he made it through the fireball of dogshit boredom. We found out after the merger his supervisor came to see how the nightshift staff was handling the transition, found father drunk, terminated.
The Cross
   —Matthew 22:21

Beams as wide as a fleet of Toyota Camrys, taller than the pylon signs outside of Gateway Plaza. White metal, laser-tapered to look like stone. The cross occupied the lot by the Taco Bell where there was a Wal-Mart. The Chamber of Commerce, with His Confederate Sons, staged a cakewalk to raise the tax-free $173K.

◆◆◆

And when they cut the ribbon City Manager, Tom Stonemason worked the snow cone cart, spoke on a trailer podium: This is a merciful day. United we’ll annihilate all godless enemies of Christ. As brass band fanfared “Dixie” some in the crowd looked up at all 192 straight-up feet of the cross in the sky, some looked away.
Yes, and that Sunday
I saw the minister stand
before the congregation,

all bullfrog power,
Bible clutched above his head,
standing on the silver tips

of his Gucci loafers
and say The Lord’s Beacon
is our redemption

We won’t be targets
of Satan’s envy. No-siree-bob.
Give deeply, friends.

You know—
if he could’ve explained
how the embossed cross

on the bottom of each
collection plate was the same shape
as the one Byron De La Beckwith

tithed to outside Greenwood,
the temple where his ten percent
immersed his sins—

then I would have filled
all their baptismal fonts
with the fatback from my billfold.
For a Witness

2011
My father showed me how to not believe. You’ve got to hand it to him: His parents, wife, friends, kids all passed on his religion.

But he’s got the sales pitch down: the crucifix is inaccurate it glorifies Christ’s death not that he lived again or Heaven isn’t real when we die we wait like Christ for resurrection

he showed me how to walk up on any door like you were invited. Like you were a guest.

2000
That Presbyterian Downy smell in minivans, of college football devotionals, white rice, chicken, Ziploc bags, four-wheelers, hand-me-down paintball, New Balance tennis shoes, middle-part bowlcuts, older brothers. I grab the iron eagle knocker.

2002
A man smiles, says, “You’re a nice kid. Your family live here?”
Yes.
“Where’s your home church?”

Honestly, I haven’t worshipped anywhere in a long time. But instead I tell him we’re Witnesses.

He takes out a business card “We’re members of First Methodist. Come see us for real grace”
1996

Shovel slush and the rushshut clamp of dad’s Nissan

parked have you noticed all of the bad omens
Oklahoma City The Olympic Bombing dead leaders
our creator is getting ready to take back the world
are you ready for His kingdom

my dad has a new haircut and smells like Old Spice.
I ask why we’re doing this and he goes quiet.
In Westmoreland
—Fall 1976

You know the story:
Mom at Brick House,

Dad called her office.

Said he took a handful of Seconal
after his mistress left.

Or the other time:

He called the dealership,
said *Money’s no object*

give me the best you got

*with a pinstriped hood.*
Don’t forget the night

He clipped off his collars

with a pair of scissors
we thought we’d hidden.

You know I know now

that our Dad’s disease
kept me from loving this family.

What did it mean to be born

in Westmoreland?
To live among pawn shops

and flat roofed churches?

To visit the psych ward
or circle the tall hospital
on our bicycles as mom
brought dad fresh bagels.
That rat bastard.

Remember that day he took us
out from school?

We went swimming
it was just spring,
froglings cavorted
on the thin shoreline.

You asked our Dad
if he would let us take
some home in a glass jar

he said no
he didn’t feel right
breaking up a family.

Or that other time
he drove to the stateline

and bought a clutch
of Shimmy Fountains
and Roman Candles.

When Mom came home

he opened the back door,
adorned her with glitter.

Sister, can we cut some path out of here?

How do we see clear
beyond these wheat lands,

how do we murmer

in a telephone receiver?
Can we cut some path back out of here?

Can we ever really leave

the warm glass windows
and the salt roads of Cicero?
PART II
How to Make a Mudsparkler

Brandon Talbot’s dad showed him how
to brace the slick flanks,
with middle, ring, pinky make sure
to grip the head tight
while forcing its legs open
with thumb and pointer. Match fuse
push quick with your thumbnail
heave skyward watch it spin
in a vivacious trap above the water.
A mudsparkler’s done
when it’s a flashpoint fragment,
it’s complete when it’s shrapnel
over the riverbank.
Yes, that spring they held
an assembly to address the Colorado
bloodshot or was it late summer
during lockdown after the North Tower fell
even today no one talks
about the bomb threats after.
How when American flags came back
to top mast they traced videotape
of Brandon’s brother placing
the call at a bank of phone booths
outside an Exxon, his mouth stuffed
with his father’s barbed graffiti—
Christian Brotherhood
and The International Jew—
it would all have to burn.
And as I stood in his backyard
holding the toad it pissed on my hand.
Brandon laughed. I quivered
with a snicker. The thing I held
was as bulky as a live grenade. But still:
what to do with this thing
that thrashed like low light
off sequins on a halter top?
Let it back to its muck—
to its pattern of water and waiting?
Or shove a firecracker up its asshole?
A Catalog of Sounds on a Casiotone 660

piano, pipe organ,
bass, echo horns

set between printed
wood grain panels

a whole orchestra
for the tone deaf

it’s 1997 your sister
doesn’t need to tie

your shoes strings on
the electric mandolin

preset plucks supple
as a marigold grove,

pixelated—let one
chord ghost the next

how triads bleed out
in Symphony Phase

like the soapbox riot
slogans of a drunken

militia as thin blips
of Poly Sustained

strings rasp out in
your bedroom—

what self immolation
of Stereo FX Boost

reminds you learning
is at best a stillbirth
tell me: will sound ever be wide enough to get
lost in or does it warble on a plastic tonewheel
still urging sound could analog another world
dragging you headlong into each swollen day
Corey passes me a flask at 8am. Today we’ll read *A Walk To Remember* in English. Then lunch followed by Econ, discussion of *National Treasure*. I hate movies, I cut class, no one says anything. Corey works at Gateway Mall, on the line at Sbarro. He’s not really my friend, we used to ride the bus together. He has a lot of parties, doesn’t invite me. In Math class, teacher hands out Skittles, and we graph the color of each handful. I write bad poems in the margins of my French notes.

After 7th period, walk to the parking lot, Corey’s got a flask in the glovebox he passes it to me. The lip’s hot from the air in his car. He talks more, I drive home, Tomorrow— it’s *Saving Private Ryan*. You can be whoever you want to be. Whatever. That’s fine too.
And when it rains your truck smells like dog piss and brake dust

Who knew it could be so hot that you’d drink Coke, its deep swallows

blast the back of your throat like a menthol. Every junkman knows

your muffler’s backfire on their gravel lots, whenever you’d pick up

ignition switches, clutch plates, whitewall tires or any strange work errand.

And lord knows you’ve seen it all:

meth heads in the back, snagging scrap—radiators, an industrial sink,
a VW fender. Foreman Mark says leave any\thing out long enough
to get rained on one damn time and they think it’s a Goodwill donation.

And you’d nod. Mark always liked to talk. Yes, you saw the tail of the theft

before he could get the shells in his sawed off.

That same weekend Mark paid you overtime to rebuild the backgate.

Who knew the shovel handle would raise blisters on your thumb. You were so happy to leave

with that time-and-a-half windfall. Who knew that you could want to get gone

from work bad enough that the cop car bleeding blue behind you would make you consider
flooring it. Who knew this town could drive you into a swoon about driving on

throttle down with your whole body on the pivot of gas pedal,

the way a bruised body will let you open its mouth roll it over, set it teeth-down

on the sidewalk and won’t even wince as the boot comes down.
That night your hand struck keybed

a warm blood Telecaster detuned, guitarist
woozed full-throat into mic, bass over rid
the PA, dust fell from rafters like dwarf stars.
And some nights that basement felt wider
than the concrete braces of Cable City Stadium.
But that night you felt a panic open in yourself,
felt like a being in the crowd at Times Square
during a mass shooting. Realized you couldn’t
smother any neighborhood, that no sound had
enough lewd hullaballoo to ever cut you loose
from what fire caterwauled sparks in your heart.
Then someone’s delay knobs twisted feedback
into raw noise, snare edged a beat, a voice called:
smoke break. Bassist beer-runs, you ran scales,
they walked upstairs, could hear flat laughter
outside, you counted notes under your breath
whinnying the whispered notes of the scale
using muscle memory for place between tones
made it up past middle C on the treble register
hiccupped pitch a scrawl of a crude interval
your finger slipped, here blue notes don’t bend.
Find your place in the bass register. Climb again.
Central Westmoreland Ostinato

Dad shouldered cigarette smoke
after 10 hours of a muggy headset
with \textit{thanks for calling United Airlines—}

\textit{feel United, be United, worlds United}
\textit{Stay United—United—cold coffee breaks,}
or worse: productivity meetings:
He just asked to be left alone, okay.

You left the screen door open

in his living room to a wild night
of smells—heavy with hops and honeysuckle.
There’s full grown tugboats out there,

beyond the bridge, behind towbarges.

The lower haunches of Westmoreland
tasted like your backswear
during an insomniac fit.

You’ve noticed how now every house reeks

like when you’d hold his Teamster blue ballcap
to your nose and fantasize about being a man.
And those mornings he badmouthed

the dampcloth of his morning wash.

The lighter clicking, after he lathered,
shaved. Static flip the news, news, news.
In your bed you heard the nicks he made

with his razor. Heard the coffee pot

pour before he followed his Marlboro
out the door. That smoke that he chased
past billboards, and salted guardrails
of government-assisted tenements

bulwarked on the turnpike asphalt
he’d take to Woodrow Highway,
passing the de-icing crews

rental car lots, the six-story office park

back to the vicegrip of Thanks for calling
United Airlines—feel United,
be United, worlds United Stay United.
Playlist

I’ve figured out how to roll my voice within the paunch of my anxieties.

And I know how to finally hit notes how you did when we rode together

in your Mazda truck. How you ground the stick shift into first gear at the stop

light where I’d wait after guitar lessons. Your sunglasses on, head thrown back,

spitting each syllable on the dashboard. But how can we talk like we used to

if we slouch with the same set of shoulders? On some weekend last summer, you’d left

the house. I came and slept on your side of the bed. When I woke I was calmed

knowing how it felt to wake up inside your name. I stared at the ceiling

like I stared at your jawline. I imagined those Sunday mornings you cleaned

the living room to London Calling Slip It In, Murmur. Dad, I’m reborn

in your image. Every time I’m asked for a thought and my voice is bursting

around my larynx like it owns the place—when friends can’t look me in the eyes,

as I say “thank you” like its an apology. Remember Grandpa’s eulogy? Afterward
You pulled me aside and said *a funeral is no place for honesty*, then adjusted your collar and my clip-on bowtie, sighing, *but our names shackled us to this family.*
The Cross
—Matthew 6:24

Gateway Plaza—green tangrams checkered flags brown-pink tiled corners ceiling gilde
food court full of balloons loudspeaker muzak loop of “Take My Breath Away” heavy
soprano saxophone sounds like a catalog spread for Merit cigarettes.

Corridors papered with red and white 25% clearance racks a skylight made of frosted
glass. The Gateway Plaza Mall. That’s when you see it: a boy with shaggy blonde
hair. He’s wearing a teal shirt—it’s the helvetica version, clean, inoffensive as name
brand margarine. Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

Different than the one you saw painted on the flared concrete of an irrigation culvert
behind a new golf course neighborhood BELIVE IN JESUS ! TRUST IN THE LORD ! A
security guard made rounds in a golf cart with a full clip in his duty belt. He saw you but
drove on.

You follow the kid. He finishes an Orange Julius, leaves the paper cup in the base of a
potted plant, looks but doesn’t see you there
Apostasy

The voice of your brother’s blood
cries out to Me from the ground.

Friend, I won’t be made in an image
of God’s, or claim the homage
that rolls the stone from the Son’s
grave and rejoices that He’s Risen.

when they were in the field,
Cain rose up against
Abel.

Who sleeps by you, brother,
when you’re so quick to anger?
Do they call your name?

Then the LORD said to Cain,

Friend, I’m sick with my apologies
for holding my tongue. I can see
your peace from that crucifix you kept on your necklace
in the barracks of Camp Phoenix.
I won’t deny the god-given right
that you have Cain rose up against

and Where is Abel your brother?
should I want to be the keeper,
or wait to be kept?

“What have you done?” He said
“I do not know”
Threshing Season

Abel, come and see how to shape the land
with a lifted sickle.

During our youth there was nothing you did
that God missed out on;

The truth is im sick talking to you. im
sick
with the way you can be so
giving and I struggle split bread
im full of knowing you have and ive taken

from the bloodletting of your newborn lamb
to father’s praises

in the pasture where you set the offering
on fire in God’s name.

By the stonewall where I grow wheat and beans
to feed our family.

as the father gave the eucharist to everyone in the pews
except
me felt like when sister asked mom if god loved us less since he made us poor

Come, Abel, I’ve been speaking like a sky
shattered by bullwhips,

ts the shape that drags on my shadow
or the
difference other than
missing
out that im missing out on just enough no one minds the sound
of your rehearsal

and I’m afraid of the light that is pleased
by the sound of your name.

the light that tells me to set my handplow—
like the smoke above

a sacrifice—against Abel’s temple.
Part III
Litany for Kyle Winkenhofer

Kyle once passed the tip
of a cigarette by my arm
said if I burned you no one
would ever believe you.

He named his kitten General
Smedley Butler. He played
slide guitar—didn’t own one.

You never knew how to say
his last name. He was a temp.

His mom was named Sharon.
He’d say hi at the laundromat,
liked us as much as he liked
anyone. Didn’t stay long enough
to run out a welcome or a lease.

Had a big sister that lived in town
and a half brother in Montana.

When we went to his funeral
we brought Sharon a carton
of Winston Super Sloims.
Kyle didn’t like football but knew every SEC division team playing that weekend. He walked into his bathroom carrying a shower curtain and a shotgun. Sharon told the on-call minister she didn’t want no goddamn half done cookie-cutter memorial, she read one of his emails to the young congregation. It was the second funeral we went to that month.
American Rattle
—After Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing”

you can hear it now: it’s in the street preacher
who bellows hellfire at hotshot pornographers
and lowrent masturbators as their oldest daughter
doctor shops for neural inhibitors,
yes, sound of

can I help you find what you’re looking for today
of please slide chip into reader, of loyalty programs,
sound of missing your ID at the security checkpoint,
of cranes throwing up a tinpot live/work complex
with an on-site LA Fitness

hear it
at the end of the neighborhood
where cul-de-sacs fill with curb parked sedans,
the husband is on Prozac, the mother pops Wellbutrin,
they have throw pillows that say Love, say Family,

but never Empathy

hear it where kids have
connections in the city and can score anything
it’s the sound of
another second notice envelope
stacked on the kitchen table where garages
are filled with Christmas lights, wedding albums,
treadmills, canned food, stockpiled ammo,
it’s in the words the doctor doesn’t write down,
you’ll hear it ten years from now after Eric
folds his Civic hatchback around a dogwood
on Pope’s Ferry if not then, you’ll know it
the night Jeremy hydroplanes

into what drunk driver skids the other lane

the crowdfunded *please pray for, in the ICU, critical condition fluid in his lungs*,

sounds like pins lined up
inside a lock of a safety deposit box

like a sales floor incentive to upsell

the loose alternator belt as the ignition clicks
towards another bad case of the Mondays

    say you hear it, too:

there on the train station platform
in the shush

of pneumatic doors, the shimmer of commuter's
headphones on the train,

    rolling across the soft soundbed of
*oh god please don’t look at me*
Sundowning

criminy say it like you mean it you’d think he’d be less of a knucklehead Shepherd Smith said Agent Orange gave me diabetes there’s someone who is not afraid to tell-it-like-it is okay this country is over there’s too many blacks on CNN tell me what happened to good old American elbow grease the empire is falling not like that cripe don’t shatter the crystal these knives should be hand washed like this no let me show you put your back in it Jesus did you see the paper this morning who made always the same these cookies that’s fine this place is textbook Shithouse USA let-me-tell-you my country isn’t how it used no sir to be men used to be men my first wife looked just like Stevie Nicks they took blood to see if it’s spread I’m sick of how they treat us here it’s fine I guess I love you
The Cross
—Revelation 6:12-14

I saw it over the Trucker’s Chapel
by a roadside motel and an adult store.
   It was lit
the color of magnesia powder.

That afternoon I’d left Sumner, Mississippi
booked through the Delta, saw
a septic tank lashed to the front loader
   of a backhoe,
passed deactivated grain elevators,
   stray dogs,
check cashing,
   factory-direct catfish farms.

Now I was smoking a cigarette by a steeple
tripped with air-horns
   and running lights.
I ashed onto the parking lot, and slept.

   Sometime in the night
   the quick downshift

of a Freightliner woke me.

It had changed from white
to a sonorous red,
   same red
of Sam Bowers’ Bible, blood in blood out red,
firespark red of hell
   no I won’t forget,
red of a quiet jury
that won’t convict,
red of the Aryan Brotherhood’s neck
   tattoo final chance
hard red of give up your life
for Jesus. I cranked the ignition, eased out
of its bright leer,
   drifted deeper into the Delta.
You don’t need to drift the aimless channel

Brother of the strange sea that rises
in our ribs as we sleep—join me in it.

Bob past the breakers swollen,
with those attic-kept accordions,
ribboned tambourines, those drunks
leaning on guardrails,

boardwalks still lousy with pink
sunglasses of old women fishing—

drift past the gift shops,
soft serve ice cream, a kinship

framed as celeste trills haunt
the sermon in a barrel organ.

This galactic hearse tappets
us into the next century.

And I know you pass out
after you count the Journeys drawer,

Your hair has started receding
and you hate me when I say

words like “dream,” but brother,
we don’t have to go to another family

reunion and drag ourselves into
our Sunday best. Don’t worry:

the carnival will pack up soon
as the season’s over,

all the cots will be laid side by side
in the flat beds of open boxcars,
as the bigtop growl of carnies
will clodhop the rails, they’ll spit
sunflower seed shells
into the cotton fields.

Brother—of the split name
that pickets our skin—

I still can’t quiet a secret,
but it’s all been sorted out

and I know now what to say
in place of apology
Keeping Good Time

My friend is writing a record
he emails me rough sketches
of new songs.

I was in New Jersey
for a funeral and he sent me his latest.
I wept.

My cellphone battery was low
and I was in a strange airport.
Didn’t matter.

I replayed the file on my phone
rapt by how sound travelled
in his empty house:

from hands that aren’t big enough
to voice chords through the gentle wash
as his piano bowed

out of tune, I wept for my friend
his small body and how his shoulders
warp his chest out.

The next time I saw him
I leaned on a door as he sang
mouthing every word.
The Image: PCA Youth Ministry
—Norma Jean, “Memphis Will Be Laid to Waste

tumblethud gutrumble a mangled out town
hardcore slugs the blustered speaker cabinets
gutramble you find yourself helpless Christ
is not a fashion fleeting away tumblethreat
it’s how the highhats separate and shimmer
the dead weight tumblethump drop d room
pinwheeling bruised hips and bloody noses

Some sermon. A god
unlike our salesmen fathers:

hunched in offices,
wearing loose coats over
goldflake neckties.

I went for the quiet ring
guitar feedback

traced in my ears,
a noise like wine leftover
in a chalice.

I went to hear
the new god: one

without cigarettes
or torn scratch offs
in their breast pocket.

This god sets pillows
at the base of its throne.

Doesn’t fold us
into its mistakes.
No, it’s as close
as a bearhug
in the parking lot.

Before curfew falls
when I feel as naked
as a star.
The paper lantern

whispered up
like my sister in her sleep.

It spread like a jellyfish,
bright as the yap
of a child’s voice on videotape.

I learned the sound of heat rising
from your hands,
as stars scratched across
docked oil tankers
in the Galveston harbor.

In my family, we mumble
our sleep. The cavalcade

of our mistakes,
from how often we come up short.

And, my dreams, too
are full of hands that slip

beyond my grasp.
Once you stood behind me
with a camcorder

as I played piano.
Later you spliced the audio

and left the soundless image:
a man’s hands
floundering on a keyboard,

helpless.
Some nights I’m certain
you’re going to wise up
and say its been a mistake.
But if our only souvenir

is over the Gulf
then let me fall

like a champagne bottle
christening a ship.
Strike me against the bow

of whatever is tied up
in dry dock.
Cadenza

My friend, how are you living?
I’ve read that you cut your hair

and got that promotion. You moved on.

Do you still talk to Keller and the boys
or was your break a clean break?

Have you learned to live with yourself yet?

I’ve been thinking about you, friend,
since I saw that slate sky in my brother’s eyes

when I watched him calculate his limits,

before he parked his car on the causeway,
wandered out into the deep water.

Before the search party dragged the channel.

Friend, we’re so small. You knew that early.
Sometimes, on our late-night bike rides, it’d slip—

the words your parents used, their shattered voices,

the tumbler your mom dropped on your dad’s head,
or how he once slapped you against the mirror

for using his shaving cream. *Let him go, motherfucker.*

And what remains unvoiced? What little I know
of the groundswell, and the history you keep,

tucked away in the darkness—haloed

by the cherry of a cigarette. But I saw you
happy, too. Or maybe it was excitement,

whenever you’d made a new painting
or found a copy of *The Works on Canvas* at Value Village, still in the plastic. I still have your *Art & Fear*. I’d like to give it back sometime if we’re ever in the same place. I visited Rothko Chapel once, I sent you a picture from the garden, you didn’t reply. But I get it. It was beautiful though. Dark, black. Black as the color when you close your eyes in the middle of a coffee line. I’m not sure who, or why, or how—but I prayed. I prayed that we’d make it back to the place where our dreams won’t shackle us to the sky. I still can’t understand the night you burned every canvas in the backyard. As the smolder slicked the sky you wanted more to go up: the drop cloths, the easels, your paints, books and journals, your clothes. All of it had to disappear into the flaming arc and ash. Have you wondered what life would’ve been if your parents hadn’t tried to stay together? Your mom would have gone back to Jonesboro and your dad would have gotten a doublewide in the Honey Hole. It happened anyway, but if they’d called it earlier, if everyone had agreed to cut their losses maybe it wouldn’t of been as brutal. But it went the way it went. I hope you’ll write me back soon.
Friend, if there are no more memories to make,  
if I’m grist without a millstone, if I’m a metronome  
without a melody, or a riverbasket without a prophet,  
if the secrets we shared were too much for you  
then I hope you’ll approach another canvas.  
Even if the backyard may have been wasted by flame  
after you slipped the tiny Jesus off of your neck.  
I know there’s still a place left on my bedroom wall  
for another piece cast in your image.
Playlist” was originally published in *Exit 271: Your Georgia Writer’s Resource*

“The Cross” (page 39) is inspired by Mississippi photographer Maude Schuyler Clay, as well as photographer Ashley Kauschinger’s *Spiritual Warfare* series

“Keeping Good Time” is based off of the song “Jackpot” by Slow Parade: bearkids.bandcamp.com/track/jackpot

“The paper lantern” was originally published in *The Lindenwood Review*