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Bough and Hollow

Jeffrey Dylan Nutter

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BOUGH AND HOLLOW

by

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Dedication

For My Father

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This thesis uses poetry to explore the complex relationships surrounding the speaker and the father. Furthermore, the poems contained here work to address the major themes of language, family, and home in an attempt at unraveling the self and discovering identity. Another important touchstone for this thesis is the thread of abuse throughout the father's life. Together the various threads and themes of this thesis are working toward a collective understanding of how the past and present manifest in the body and voice of the speaker.

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Chapter 1: Creative Works

To Reconstruct

You are the blown dandelion
whose seeds have been scattered
on air like umbrellas in a twister,

thrown to the winds you don't
carry the weight of unknowing
in the now. Maybe you're still

sunning yourselves in a field
whose name I could've known
beside the stump of a tree

which could've given shelter.
I want shelter
from the fat fall of rain and the rays

beating down on my nakedness,
from the self-inflicted
who am I now and *who*

have we been. Listen there is a certain
cicada's song I want to call familiar,
a summer's heat

to which we're just accustomed.
Hear the timbre of my voice
and bid it welcome.

Hold my hands and tell me
they've belonged here beside
you and all my other dead

fathers. Place my fingers in your soils,
let me feel this temperature
and learn what it means to have been.

Letting the Suture Go

Father has a scar on his temple / white and jagged / trace of damage /
the mark of a frying pan / flung from his mother's hand / eight years old /
young enough to learn damage / old enough to remember / Father had a quiver
in his voice / grandmother's calls / damage in distance / between his syllables /
fifteen years since her last visit / no more phone calls / no reversal /
self-damage in Father's right hip / osteonecrosis / white given way
to steel / replacement / bone damage / six brown beers before bed /
twenty-four / hours / damaged / three-hundred and sixty-five / days for damage /
two thousand, one hundred and ninety / red labels lining / white countertop /
damage / son strays too close / rose bush / blood bloom and thorn /
hooked damage / two-inch scar on right forearm / recorded damage /
little white line of collagen / inferior skin / son learns / body complicit
in its damage / in its retention / damage

Lancaster Neighborhood Duck Pond, Between the Present and Future

Now walk the creek bend again
around that old duck pond.

A semi-stiff bag of Wonder
Bread in tow swinging gentle

between your index and thumb
like you're a boy anew.

You amble, swaying in your gait
like ripples from another soft

October sky. Then take the few
stairs up and let the knotted

planks rise to meet you,
guide your familiar steps

to the bridge-center.
Here you prepare your offering,

a torn morsel
white and air pocketed.

You toss softly this piece,
it tumbles in the air like a baseball

carrying in the current and you
are captured in this simple beauty.

The chuck cascading in the light
reflected up from the mossy water.

You think of your brother,
of playing catch under similar

autumn light with a football
long gone now to the overside

of a neighbor's titanic fence.
You toss another slice

and you're riding your big wheel
behind your mother around the hook

of this pond. All manner of mallard
on view and a swaying tire swing

given now to vicious lichen,
sheathing moss. You reach

grab the heel of the loaf,
and see two younger pairs

of hands, two brothers set
steady on less faded boards

beneath another October
only close enough to remember.

How to Find a Willow in Your Neighbor's Front Yard

First you'll need a compass
or some other sense of cardinal
direction like the ladle

holding starlight in the dark
of the night's sky. Next, catch
a still shot in your mind's eye,

a familiar thing like the wrinkled
blue siding of a house aside
the yellow leaves of an oak.

Then chase that cerebral comet,
that fleeting thing through
your senses. Let it journey

in your nose, spark cinnamon
and every other autumn spice.
Feel that crisp again,

that good shiver in your pores
when the wind bends
just right around your body.

Wraps you in whip and rustle
of leaves kicking up from
the foliage at the floor

around your feet.
Move now with an abundance
of bliss because you are here.

But there's no leafy spectrum,
no orange-yellow leaves or the black
of your daddy's pickup shining

extant and beautiful against
the autumn sun. Here you'll find
only green and the cinnamon,

yes the cinnamon tastes like absence
and the stars still shine but their light
radiates dimmer in your distance.

Clarksburg Sonnet

Holler, fits strange on my tongue
and I draw the *hall-er* too short not enough
mountain in my throat, too much sea
between my teeth. I've been water raised,
never known coast as luxury but I've learned
the foreign taste of geography in rhubarb,
the bitterness of its bite and my cousins'
ability to echo *hool-ler*, just right. I take
my rhubarb in grandma's jam,
cut with strawberry and sweetness, a diluted
version of the vegetable my cousins can mash
raw between their teeth. But, my mouth
doesn't know the tart palate of stalk
this inclusive taste of West Virginia spring.

Post-Industrial Town

The old mines still hold the canary's song
and never give back their dead,

a yellow feather for every abandoned shaft
and in each a birdcage forever present.

In these towns the black lung is genetic
a condition inherited from the DNA of fathers

who as their fathers drink hooch
straight from the mason jars. Men who speak

for *never gettin' above your rasin'*
and take pride in living the same soot

stained life as their fathers and grandfathers did.
This is the paradise of blue-collar men

and here daddy's mining helmet with the cracked
yellow light was as good as gettin' was good.

There ain't no room here for livin' outside
expectation, don't even think about making

a way anywhere else because here son
we make our way in this dark.

Poem for the Man I Cannot Know

for my grandfather

I've been searching for mine and my father's features
in photos of men who like you are gone.

I look for our shared short chin and the roundness
of our faces, but there is so much yellowing

to the pages of these obituaries and sometimes I can
find a salt and pepper-haired man with your name,

Howard and I think he could've been you, should've been you,
always isn't. Father says you left when he was young,

that you died before he was old and I keep wondering
for your leaving. This ground I suppose wasn't deep enough

for your roots, our dirt not soft enough for your hands.
I want to ask if you retained any calluses,

anything carried from your short till of our land.
Sometimes I imagine your leaving, if you kissed

my father goodbye. If you held his face like a parent
clutches a newborn wrapped in those white nursery blankets,

if between two curt lips you whispered our beginnings.

Junction

Hanging on the telephone pole of this lonely corner
in this city is the public and unsettled

please to *Send Help*. The little white
lunch pail sized sign with red block lettering hangs

as a billboard of need, the need of this corner
and the fractured mocha brown

stucco on the buildings gracing this lane,
of a place which knows its untold lack.

I'm thinking now of all the times I've needed,
been needed to give, and have been needing

to give but couldn't. This sign is suspended
in my mind like the stile of a window caught

indelible before my hazelnut eyes. I turn
to memories of my father and his hands

on the handlebars of the bicycle I'm learning
to ride again without training wheels. I shutter

and open my eyes to my hands gripping the cuff
of a wool sock once more, the itch on my skin

as I guide his foot delicately into the leg and finally
the expectant toe. A blink and I'm watching

my father drink his beer, the day unspecific
but this circumstance comes cyclical.

This time I could slap the bottle from his hand,
this time the carpet can be what's permeated and brown,

but I haven't and don't knock the bottle.
For my father the answer has been his bottle,

the answer he chose for his signs want.
I think though there could be another answer

for his sign, *sobriety* a chance to reach
above the awaiting ground and remove

the sign he hung there with the telephone.
I would like to bring him the ladder,

give him the chance at the step
he's never mounted before. We can bring

down his need from its vigil, in one stroke
we can wipe away self-reliance.

We can work at our answers now,
for the past and your immersed hands.

Another First Step

Five familiar fingers made cylindrical,
I watch my father grip aluminum
slick with condensation and sweat.
After, when I deposit the refuse
to the yellow gullet of the trash
can. One hand for the handle
one shovelful for this grave.

Hunger

After Graham Foust

Almost as insatiable as addiction,
that great accumulation of our excess.

Almost as tangible as the crown
cap and all its twenty-one pointed

teeth. I sight the eyes within my eyes,
those maroon and wolverine.

Those voracious and all engorging.
Are these my eyes or someone else's?

Father's Lessons

Father still pressed under
his mother's left palm,

his stepfather's right fist.
The buckle the whole terrible

belt, a cluster of raisin
skinned children his siblings

and him blotches of yellow
patches with green. Their bruises

a pattern of mislove
and abuse. Father speaks his language

slammed doors heavy steps
doesn't know how else to release

his sounds. Doesn't offer his son
easy the load of his past

but loves better no next history
of bruises of boxed ears.

He loves tousles hair and breaks
open only cookie boxes can give.

Still son knows his father's holler
and howl so he tiptoes and treads

lightly moves across the house
like a field mouse clambering

from room to room across hidden
tufts of grass. Son looks to gather

pieces of truth which sometimes fall
from cracks in father's speech.

After one too many stories for shades
of violence the crash of clinched

or open hands. The fall on cheek
and eye socket or the flesh

of a raised and protective arm.
Son takes these puzzle pieces

seeks to understand father's hollowing
explain father's brown eyes in son's mirror

know what picture here is built.

Pearl Keeping

Dad we don't love like the Earth
holds the moon. We don't share
the same orbit, the same push

and pull of the tides.
The give and take of the waves
washing the shoreline radiant and clean.

In my hand I raise a conch shell,
both amethyst and white.
When I bring this shell like a trumpet

to my ear, I can catch the receding tide
holding along this spiral like your voice
in my head, a minnow roving

the cochlea and canals of my ears.
I hold your promises for revealing
your traumas and abuse in my head

like a pearl tucked in a sea grit place.
I trap what you tell me like a planet
accumulating moons, or clams

sucking in sand. As they are I am
reconstituting a whole body here
where it can be preserved steady and safe.

What the Ache is For

For the Black-Eyed Susan
and the Oriole, blue crabs

and the gentle pull of a tide.
For the snow-tipped mountains,

and the variegated canopy
of leaves sighted from the vantage

of a highway dipping down
from a cut in those mountains.

For a porch swing and a sunset,
and the rails of gold extending

through the holes of an autumn
abscissioned canopy, and this light

on the foliage below. For the crisp
of the air when the sun finally dives

beneath view, and the chance
to walk in the remembrance

of what had just been.
For the promise of verdure,

and the sight of pedals gone
come again in the emerald

of new. For the red siding
of every barn that graces the country.

For the chance at another
stroll in the undergrowth,

and the sight of the almost bloomed
on the shoot of some sapling.

For the roundedness of yellow
hay bales and their discernible

form from even in the distance.
For the soothing stroke of home.

For the possibility of the yet seen,
and beauty of undetermined things.

Father Builds a Doorway

You carve away the excess
wood and graphite from around the edge
of your carpenter pencil. The shavings fall

as oak seeds do tumbling
into the crabgrass and dandelions,
forgotten in the shuffle of sawhorses

and your important things. The table saw,
the carpenter square with an angle
so sharp I can cut myself

on the degrees. Here are your tools
whirling and pointed steel,
nail guns and the elongated yellow

of a tape measure. *Measure once cut twice.*
You repeat these syllables, but I don't want
this kind of efficiency, this lack

of movement. I want instead the tumble
of helicopter leaves and their enticing
variable spin. I don't marvel the same

for trim and well boxed corners.
I don't home for the hiss
of your nail gun plunging

and pressing into the grains.
I'm moved for a different sort of sound,
the rustle of branches this whistle

of the possible in growth. You're drawn
to the certain and static, the knowable
like the lengths of 2x4s. *Forty-eight inches.*

You're after the comfort of the familiar
because it's controllable doesn't require
the risk of stepping beyond the trim.

But I want your hands beyond
these comfortable boxes you build,
I'll guide your fingers to the bulb

of the closest and handiest branch.
We'll find your use for the stem
this new and unexpected inch.

Stress

Spot the fissure,
find the cracks.

How can we espy
what isn't noticed?

Glimpse an acorn's drop,
its tumble and its instance.

How does pressure
land heavy without

clear weight?
A conifer falls,

some roof comes split.
Has the trunk given

or just released
what's already here?

Sight Unseen

And I know your dead eye
sockets had once turned
with finality out
that porch door.

Buick, Chrysler, Plymouth
all words for leaving here,
whatever your car
its name wasn't
lullaby.

You left sight unseen,
and the smack
of that door into
its frame
was like the pop
of an engine
in its whisper
goodbye.

In evenings riding under
the squint of a crescent moon,
I consider the roads
and if for you they bent
unexpected,
if the rain beclouded
your windshield,
if even nature
would've railed against
your exit.

The bump of a sycamore given to bring
a tire to surrender, a spot of water
to have spun your senses clean.

Might the woods
have taken from you the ease
of your scuttle from the trailer park,
might they have claimed
the metal body
which shipped you
away from our back doors.

May there have been no moon,
nor light to guide your exit
and no need to witness
your gone.

Might my father have had
the goodbye a child
is owed, might we
at least have your iris
and a second
to judge
its rheumy
or hollow
weigh

Father's Lesson

You've taught me to carry
our language in the coded
milieu of home.

Here we speak in play,
our words given way to actions
like how you buy honey sriracha wings

when you're happy and cook
refrigerated drumettes for your sad.
If you're angry no remote is spared

the furious punch of your fingers
clicking, punching, banging
buttons, cushions, and chairs.

I feel the cypher ever in our voices,
and I'm tired of turning the words
over in my head like a spatula

flipping crisp skin to its softer side.
I know when you call and ask
did you see that throw that shot

that run that hit, what you mean
is *are we okay* and *have you ever*
missed me. I always respond yes,

I saw that catch that basket
that save that miss
but what I mean is *where have you gone*

and *how do I follow*.

We share this tongue caught language,
this vocabulary with a snag bone

stuck in our throats. I'm looking
to free our syllables, to take your tapping
fingers and transform them to audible

and directed sound. I know you
knock your fingers against that oak
table next you when we speak.

I've seen the well rubbed surface,
the spot you deposit your secrets
in and leave for fear beyond our speech.

I know that when you say I love you
what you mean is *this should be enough*
or *knowledge is a fragile thing*.

Well what I say is this love
can be a lockless and durable thing,
so give me all the words you keep

away. I'm ready now to love
like the glove and the baseball,
two separate parts to one essential whole.

Jeffrey's Song

Here is my voice and this is me singing
to the stage of your ear. I've been leaving

my throat at the foot of your door
and I've near run out of tender

to grease the words I'm wringing
out of this mic. I beat the blue

wood of your door as a bongo
like some pied piper playing to catch

your unwilling and begrudging ears.
Here is your truth, you've been neglecting

the harmony of our lives for too long
denied me your highest crescendo,

the height of revelation. Here is your mic
sing me the odes of your life now,

you have all the audience you've needed
in my attentive ears.

Lost Autumns

The trees are balding again and I'm sitting underneath the falling leaves and collecting them in my wicker basket, the same brown leaves we collected as children in the groves of our youth, the sacred spots in between the dark green pine trees and vibrant orange-red oaks on the outskirts of our comfortable suburbia. I remember the pedal of our bikes on the forest paths weaving in and out of the neighborhood like the woven twigs of this basket. These memories are holding me together now in a city where trees only know each other from a distance. They are all forests of one now, little mulch circles marking the streets and I pine for the return of fall in my city of winter. The trees are forgetting their expanse, the way they branched together in a canopy shading us in the underneath where we counted every leaf and promised to remember their number. I walk on concrete now instead of forest floors. I'm searching now for the place where I can begin again our counting.

Luster

You've been carrying me
in the blue-orange beads abraded
by the denim pockets of so many
carpenter jeans, the strung

spheres on black string coupled
to your key chain. It's memory,
a younger set of hands delivering
to you a strand of new blue

and orange orbs with small smile.
It's history, a scratch or slash
for everyday past since its gifting,
and if you held them in the gaps

between your fingertips and thumb,
you might find the old me lingering
in the grooves. You might catch
a glimpse of what's been passed

a boyhood and a boy's bedroom,
the traces you hold to. It's fantasy,
you've been carrying the old me
the wrong me and hoping to restore

those beads anew. It's reluctance,
your hand reaching back for thinner
wrists you're not living for the touch
of the now. With this infrequent

but tender lock of shoulders, we can
love anew. Dad, leave those beads
how they lay. These scratches won't rub
out, you don't need me brightened again.

When I Envision Trees, I Imagine First Their Hollow

In the cavity
of the elder's trunk
you can stroke
the rough of this bark.
Take your pointer
finger to the canyons
and ridges of this geography.

Bend your whole hand
to the hollow and feel
the trenches where the ants
crawl safe in this ample crust.

Here too are the leftovers
of a feast of acorns
piled in the recess
of the tree's vacant center.
Further even inside
is a feather left
in the emerging
morning light.

Artifacts of other
needy bodies seeking
shelter from umbra
and predators of night.
Make me the site
for your shelter,
sprinkle feathers
and acorns now
between my parted ribs.
When the wrapper
of dusk falls,
climb into my hollow.
There will be space
enough here for us all.

The Father Speaks of Snow

It's winter again, the willow's tendrils are empty of their leaves and open to all the chill wintertide will bring. The grass too, covered from the last night's snow. Has it always been winter here? There is so much quiet in these small hours, the times before you or anyone else are awake. But I am here readying myself in the dim light from above the stove, preparing to start my day. Do you remember, when you and your brother made snow angels in the front yard? I would smile then. It's snowing outside again, the flakes are falling into piles and building the perfect canvas for another making. If I look into the snowfall, focus right on the flakes as they drop and pack on the grey cement of the driveway, I can see you. I can hear the same rush of freezing wind that whipped our faces when you were young. When you needed my help to tie the stiff and frozen laces on your snow encrusted boots. Your cheeks and nose all reddened from the lick of winter, do you still need me now? I walk with ice scraper in hand down the shoveled driveway, the snow even now making ready to recover what yesterday's efforts had just revealed. I bring the blade down on the windshield, begin to scrape away this verglas which has settled here. The ice curls in strands and disappears off the side of the glass when it reaches the edge, falls and then gathers somewhere unseen. I open the door. When I start the ignition, heat will come and turn all this to slush.

Clarksburg Sonnet

Where does loss begin? My mother
even now insists on the fallacy of her birth,
recount her sense of displacement to me
on humid summer nights while we sit
steaming in teal Adirondack chairs,
divulging secrets in the dying light of suns.
She has always felt the imposter, the fairy
child left in the shadow of a true daughter,
and I have inherited this feeling of loss
which manifests in my inability to hold
West Virginia any closer to my center. I have
tried to see with my grandpa's eyes, I have
tried to feel with my grandma's hands, but home
remains elusive as the cloud vanished moon.

On a Monarch's Wing

In another Maryland
in a different
time there is a second
me and some
other you, Dad
having a conversation
 we haven't had about
 you
and me. Their words float
 between them in
 the glow of the light
reaching in through crisscrossed
 pattern of the red
 window drapes
brushing against the laminate
floors of our kitchens.
Their sounds bop easy
and flit
horizontal in the blow
 of air like a monarch
 fluttering
 in the day's breeze.
Between them
 they are closer
 than we have come
 before.
Butterflies move organic
 bounce random
on the air,
are unsettled and beautiful
 in their aimlessness.
I'm guilty
of being
 a poor son, of loving you
less than wholly.
My love for you is
 hollow like
 an apple whose
core has been emptied
 under
 the jaws
 of a caterpillar.
I want to love you
like son's

are supposed to
love their fathers,
with admiration
peeking in through
the stars in their eyes.

But how can I
love a man who I don't
know beyond
his excess? When I say
my love is hollow
I don't mean
false,

but only
that it's lacking
the honesty
of love.

We are each keeping parts
of ourselves separate.

When I've imagined
the possibility
of truth
I've envisioned
a version of us
where we don't restrict
our voices, I've dreamt
of a father
who wasn't
reliant on silence,
who could speak his past
and maybe
find something
next to peace,
sobered

in the knowledge that his
sons are his
support.

I see another pair
of us who can
coexist wholly in a space
who will share
the contact of their
eyes and see
their likeness
in how they both
stand balanced on the
tips of their toes.

Sometimes silence isn't
 silent, the snap
of aluminum
in an otherwise
 empty
space or the crunch
 of the same and similar
aluminum. Are you calling
 for me or
 someone else
when you toss another
 Tallboy
back? What can a son
 give
to a father uninterested
 in saving
 himself?
Did you know monarchs
 store poison
within their orange
 bodies
to discourage
 predators
 with their flavors?
I wonder to whom
 you hold
 poisons to
 deter,
are you raging
against the outside
 or the inside
 with your taste?
I keep getting
asked about your
quiet,
its condition and
its causes,
 maybe it's better
if it's just described.
There is always
a space, and some sound
 you need
present like
 the fizzle of steaks
 crisping in the oil
of a pan,

demanding attention
or the invasive whine
of a buzzsaw
drowning our ears
in a melody
of split wood and
construction.
you never allow
silence to linger
long enough
to reach anything
resembling admission.

We keep dancing
hovering around
each other like two monarchs
hovering around light.

Why, Dad, does my presence
always seem
to invite second noise?

If you wondered
how this feels
I'll be honest now.

It's like
being behind something more
captivating,
more spectacle
like your first
time spotting a chrysalis
and you're so caught
in the green possibility
that you're
lost in all that could be
and lose what is.

But sometimes,
I spot the butterfly
dance in the sunlight
and wish gentle
on its wing
for a kingdom
of chrysalis all my own.

In South Carolina, I Search for My Father in Shellfish

Sometimes I'll dream of crab shacks
the soft crash of blue-green
waves breaking against the faded
white hulls of crab boats just rocking
while the swash inches its way up shore,
and the breeze is heavy
with its gifts, drops of water dash of salt
enough to bestow a briny lacquer
to my red-tinged skin baking in the afternoon sun
and the petrified surface of oak
tables ready to receive the sea's bounty,
buckets of red limbed arthropods
freshly steamed and peppered with Old Bay,
an invitation to embrace all the home pleasures
I can remember. In these dreams
a father and son sit on the aged deck
open to spray and sunbeams,
the father instructing his son on shucking
demonstrates the crack of shell with orange
mallet and as his son watches with familiar eyes,
the father fishes the pearl from its shell,
a chunk of white meat gleaming in the sun
and his son tastes this sweet morsel of home
absorbs the spices, savors and saves
these flavors for later.
I dream again of us
you and me seated beneath
the same midsummer suns
as the second set of father and sons
building mountains of cracked red claws
and split legs, you are smiling for once
and we could talk as easy as the gulls
could glide through the humid air,
effortlessly like how we talked
for this first time about your father
and whatever else
you've never said. We could
love as fully as the plates and the buckets,
I could tell you of my fear for you're drinking
and just this time there wouldn't need to be a
bottle for you to hold whenever we talked.
Recently I ate crab cakes
in a restaurant full of its pretending,
the pilfered wheel of a Baltimore clipper

hung unnaturally above a once knotted mast
stripped and sanded, stained for the bar.
There boys ate plates full with the fried meat of crabs
needing only their forks, the soft hammers quiet
on the saltless and sterile air and the crab cakes,
yes the crab cakes tasted of sand
beach sand and absence.

Easement

In your heart I know is a hollow space
the hole created by a mother and step-father

who called you *stupid* your whole life,
they who left the welts on your face

gave you marks of yellow and green
no child should ever have to wear.

They who made you dropout of school
made you work instead as a mail boy

just fourteen riding a battered cheery red
bike around the deserted streets

of the trailer parks as the sun was peeking
over the hills, just the rind of light to come.

You delivered copies of the *Exponent Telegram*
for a quarter a pop only to bring your few

jingling dollars home in the afternoon
to see them taken and transformed

into another green pack of Salem cigarettes
or a sixer of Miller and the crinkled

brown bags tossed to the covered floor.
You learned that even your work wasn't your own.

You've had to love your whole life scared
for the fall of their hands, another smack

against the temple of sensitive skin
at the base of your neck. Their hands

have been hanging over you, hovering
in the air like someone found the pause

button on the TV remote but never
remembered to hit off. Nobody taught

you how to love yourself, how to love
without the violence of callous hands.

I know though that you learned how
to give what you had never been given,

evidenced in the surface of mine
and my brother's unblemished skin.

I worry though for your lack of self-love,
I'm scared every time I answer the phone

that my mother will tell me
you've taken yourself from us.

I've lived my whole adult life worrying
that someday I won't have your hands

to hold mine when I need them,
that the green of your eyes will

be swallowed in the distant but ever
present black of your past nights.

On Commuting

It's gotta be 4 O'Clock
somewhere so you're tipping
your hand back
like it's capsizing
like it's taking on
too much of something
like water but isn't water
and you're sinking
beneath the froth and rim
and maybe it's a hushed
home full with rattle
of air starting
in the vents or the drip
of the faucet that fall
where you start
or perchance it's between
those four lights leading
down Plaza and across
Western onto St. Patrick's
where you start
spilling aluminum or leak
glass into your upturned
throat and leave empty
cup holders behind until
tomorrow or another
day like the future
where maybe rain collects
too heavy on your windshield
just a little too opaque
for that last turn
home and perhaps
you could've waited
to sip and stack
maybe you could've
been something whole

At Your Gravestone I Attempt to Convene History

“The graves grow deeper. The dead are more dead each night.” - Mark Strand

Across the cemetery a file of cars
flow from behind a bend and exit
the graveyard like moving through
a turnstile, a steady alternation of yellows
and reds. They having just made their last
goodbye and me making ready to speak
my first. As I kneel next to your grave,
I must admit, Grandpa, that I'm unfamiliar
with this process. The birds I notice
have given up their songs today, we only got
the company of leaves and the melodies we
are given. The crunch of gravel under
tires, the wails of wind in between rows
of granite. I reach for your headstone
having required help to find you.
Is this the failure in our connection,
have the years carried too long
between us? I'm carrying
your name but what of anything else have I arrived
with? Could your eyes even recognize the cut
of my chin, I've been told for so long my face
lies outside the model of the living. What of the eyes,
would our colors mirror across if we were placed
side by side and examined in a degree of sunlight
not unlike the level we've been given today?
Or the shoulders and spine, do we share
an alignment of our bodies? If I dug
you from this grave today, could I position
your bones across my framework and be
honest when I tell myself it's familiar?

I sweep the dirt from your headstone with
my fingers, brushing an accumulation
maybe only the trees gave witness too.

Around us I can count beyond my fingers
more graves of people carrying our name,
more still who could've known you greater.

I see the empty plots next to you and wonder.
Would you welcome my body next to your body,
could there be room enough here for one more?

Desiderium

My bones are scattered
and can't find consensus,
my left foot pushes
me east when I step.

The left shoulder has me
leaning south when I walk.
I've been moving in mis-
direction, circling around

myself like a top. My off
hand aches for snap
of blue crab, has been acting
brash and tugging me toward

north when we rest, feeling like
being the fish on the line.
The right hand's itching to move,
to pick blackberries again,

off the grassy bank out behind
my grandparent's backyard.
These bones are trying to work
our way back, yanking me side

to side like a sapling in wind.
They're trying to reel me into
a home, into a settled place
like a salmon swimming

up to the only waterfalls
its ever known. I'm still circling
the river one hand on the rudder
another reaching for anchor.

Clarksburg Sonnet

In my heels I hold the lack of the hundred
hills of West Virginia my parents' feet
can call familiar. I'm visiting a city
which homes their histories in the dark-brown rings
of the maples' bodies. These trunks are witness
to the growth and aging of my parents
hold even their initials here in the grain.
When I bring myself to these roots
I feel as I'm playing the tourist
a son arriving unrecognized to a home
I haven't owned. I don't belong to the boughs
of these trees. I can't recall the sights
over the slope of the adjacent hills. I must go,
I'm looking for lands all my own.

Country Fortune

The almanacs are predicting a warm winter,
they warn us to prepare for less frost and more thaw.
They say we should worry for icicles,

their gather on gutters and roofs. The frozen
droplets caught in the current of the night's gales,
those glacial gusts. I wonder if you still remember

the crystallin's peril, the plunge of the ice
when released. Winter is always danger,
have you remembered to salt the street or steps

like I taught you? Have you cleaned your home
of the hoarfrost? The hazard isn't the weather you see
but the weather that comes after, in the dark

winter forms more indistinct. The roads,
glazed thin with the gifts of the slush and refreeze.
Do you still think of me when you shovel

the winter from your door? Do my lessons continue
to hang in your head like so many icicles on the shingles
of our home? I worry for December, for the melt.

Watch the drip of the drop from the frosted points,
the splash on the grass below. When the ice falls,
it falls uncaring of what walks below.

Elegy for My Grandfather

Howard, your heart must've worked hard
to push your rabbit's legs after you left.
That's gotta be why you died all midlife sudden.
Your heart giving out for the guilt ringing

in the cavity of your chest. I searched like an explorer
for the answer to your desertion, I spelunked
into dad's memory and looked under every moss
covered rock only to come away with enough

dust to coat the heartline in my hand.
When I say now that you weren't afraid
for fatherhood, I speak as the son of the man
you replaced with another family. I know

you weren't afraid to love, you just carried
a reluctant heart. I think like arrhythmia
your atriums beat double time trying
to keep your penitent blood flowing,

carrying you away from us. We could've
loved you, teased that guilt from your chest.
Instead we are separated by your leaving,
the pumping blood of estranged and distant hearts.

Clockwork

The minute hand rounds its circuit,
brings close the curtain of any hour.

Closer still comes the future
in every inch of a shadow's span.

Somewhere a gear catches,
and is sprung forward in the instant.

Somewhere I'm holding that hand
trying to steal myself this moment,

somewhere a second is given seconds.

Myringotomy

Even at six I was eager for the blessing of sound. These ears have always been ready to receive my father's voice. I listen always for the cello of his voice, the sound unfettered and raw as the cricket's tune, unmistakable in the emptiness of night. If this baseline comes forgive me, I've been searching for this duet all of my life.

My Body as An Orchard

In the heels I cultivate
the seeds for the saplings
of memories which I hope
to sustain and pick later
the fruit from. Look, running
along my ankles are the roots
of the palmetto and I'm learning
to love its alienness like the sight
of jessamine climbing fence lines
and coating entire boulevards in tendril
and yellow. I invite this occupant whose
fruit isn't as easy as the apple or pear,
but who gifts me the skyline of a city running
over the rapid water of the Congaree near
my city I've come to love. How else do I speak
of a landscape I'm as foreign to as the long
frond of the sabal tree, whose green leaves
have cradled my hips and tucked away
my days, but to call it beautiful.
I adore even the incessant sounds
of rumble from your train tracks
and the way the horns pierce
the evening like sirens warning
for what arrives with night.
Along the valleys of my spine and across
the peaking summit of my neck I wear
the bark of an oak whose pink and green leaves
are as familiar to me as my own rough flesh.
In between my fingers and toes there are what remains
of cupules, and the lingering salt crystals from a swash

deposited here in the aftermath of an earlier wave. See,
the offering of oak is the warmth of the September

sun and the sight of a hummingbird drinking
in the nectar of the marigolds and lilies dotting

the garden of my parent's yard. I've given
myself fully to this cornucopia of color,

given even to the labor of the ground
the nuisance of soil beneath the nails.

Once I even suffered a splinter from
the mulch for the tree and marveled

at the mix of skin and wood chip,
how the red of my blood infused

with the red of the splinter to form
an indistinguishable site of fusion.

My cities we are as mutual
as the scar on my index finger

and the wood which entered me.
I bear for you the weight of your

growth on my skin just as you carry
the memories I have been allowed to

leave hanging on your branches like the apple
awaiting the picker and then their first bite.

How does it taste? Well there is an inherent sweetness
when you first roll a tongue over the flavor

of the past and the tang hits reminiscent on the taste
buds. However, in working the pulp over you'll find

other deeper flavors like the sour of your first
tumble from out the branches of the tree you climb

in your front yard. Or the salt of the tears
and their mix with the maroon on your knees

the skin giving way like the bark
releasing from the trunk of the oak.

In my body, I don't grow just
for flavor there are more

tastes here than just apples
and I grow to remain,

to hold everything
that flowers

here whole.