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Lucky Boy

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Lucky Boy

By

Mark Lilley

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of the Requirements for the Degree
of
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to the Department of English
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Lucky Boy: An Introduction

Wesley McNair said that poets, more than others, are troubled by the transience of life, and they write poems to preserve the experience—to say, “I was here, and my being here meant something.” *Lucky Boy* is a collection informed by experience—childhood trauma, limitations of place and circumstance, the messy transition from boyhood to manhood. The poems are my attempt to preserve and elevate these experiences, to acknowledge their complicatedness, and to celebrate the role they played in making a poet.

Scenes

I’ve always been interested in scenes. Before developing a passion for poetry, I developed a passion for film, especially character-driven movies in which drama is achieved through subtlety and nuance. We don’t remember movies. We remember *scenes*. Think about your favorite film and you’re likely to recall three or four scenes that stand out, scenes that move you in some way and reveal character, story, and theme. One of the first films I remember seeing at a movie theater is *Mississippi Burning*, a film about an investigation into the disappearance of three Civil Rights workers. The film contains physical violence and a number of action scenes, but I mostly remember a quiet scene in which two characters (played by Gene Hackman and Frances McDormand) are sitting at a kitchen table. He’s wearing a rumpled gray suit. She’s wearing a light brown housecoat. They’re drinking tea and talking about each other’s marriages. Her story is not unlike that of many small-town girls. She married the first guy who made her laugh and now they live happily ever after. His story is not unlike that of other men whose jobs keep them on the road. Another guy came along with a quarter for the jukebox and tickets for a matinee. There is a pause. Hackman says, “She left me.” Another pause. McDormand offers a sympathetic half-smile. He laughs and sips his tea. The scene is enhanced by details—clothes and gestures, family photographs framed on the wall, clock ticking, ice cubes rattling in a glass. But there’s also a power achieved by what’s unseen, unspoken, undisclosed—How does Frances feel about her husband at that moment? Did Gene try to convince his wife to stay? Will Gene and Frances

admit their attraction to one another? We never receive explicit answers to these questions. If we receive more answers the power of the scene will be diminished because a level of artful ambiguity will be lost. The complicatedness will be stated and its power likely reduced. Instead, the scene simmers with unstated emotion, implications that suggest larger themes of betrayal, longing. I often think of my poems as one or two of the most compelling scenes in a movie, scenes that reveal just enough to engage audiences without giving them too much. Similar to how we remember films, we often remember the individual scenes of our lives. These self-contained moments are little windows, little glimpses into our larger humanity. Often, my goal is to achieve in the poem what filmmakers hope to achieve in a scene – human tension, a certain level of ambiguity, shades of character, compelling dialogue. My poems almost always involve multiple characters. I prefer the tension and tenderness of human interaction, the ambiguity of our behavior, the ramifications of our behavior on those we love, what we disclose to one another, what we withhold, and the themes that emerge. Given my sensibilities it helps to heed Stephen Dunn’s advice:

Too many poets are insufficiently interested in story. Their poems could be improved if they gave in more to the strictures of fiction: the establishment of a clear dramatic situation, and a greater awareness that first-person narrators are also characters and must be treated as such by their authors. (147)

Expanding the Lens

Alessandra challenged me during the MFA program to make these scenes, these little vignettes, less stingy and more expansive. She encouraged me to incorporate more of the physical landscape, to allow that landscape to serve a role in deepening character and theme. I think of “The First Time” and “Forgiveness.” Both narrators are in vehicles driving towards something, and the narrator’s description of the landscape plays an important role in unmasking the central concerns. Many poems—especially later in the manuscript— expand the lens. The scenes are less isolated. Settings shift, characters receive more air time, and the poems involve more of the physical world.

It also helps that at no point during my time in the MFA program did I feel pressure to abandon my stylistic preferences, my poetic sensibilities, and write a different way. Rather, Alessandra and others pushed me to write expansively within the style that felt most natural. I remember the first poem I workshopped at Butler. “Freshman Year” appears in my final thesis, and the comments from Alessandra recognize the piece as a “compelling scene.” She understood the “scenic” aspect of my work, though “Freshman Year” (in contrast with other poems) needed trimming to achieve its maximum effect. When writing in a narrative style, I need to establish the narrator as a central character. I need to ensure the setting, to ensure that the sense of place (which is featured prominently in my poems and which is central to character and theme) is leveraged as much as possible.

Poems as Conversation

Abstract language alienates me. The farther poems get from conversational speech the less likely I am to stick around. I realize this may be a matter of taste, sensibility. Philip Levine said in an interview that he once listened in a workshop as participants praised a poem for its wild images, rich sounds, and clever wordplay. He kept thinking, “Okay, but I wish they were in a fucking poem.” His point is that the whole of the poem matters more than the individual parts. Clarity is critical for my poems so that the reader understands the dramatic situation, the general circumstances. This means I’m willing to risk my poems being called “simple” or “straightforward.” Stephen Dunn uses the term “earned simplicity” to express his poetic ambitions. Similarly, I want my readers to be moved, to have an emotional reaction, to experience an ache that’s achieved largely through “earned simplicity.” I want the poems to be inviting. Though many of my poems involve an apparently personal experience, I hope their straightforward, conversational nature creates a universal quality that causes the reader to become invested in the circumstances. One goal for any poet should be to avoid writing poems that only he/she understands. Poems should not be a riddle nor should they exist merely as language exercises. Poems should invite rather than antagonize. A big part of my revision process involves creating clarity for the reader. What is happening here? What’s going on? What

are the narrator's circumstances? What are the other characters' circumstances? Is the narrative logical? In other words, once a poem's circumstances are clear, then readers can begin to contemplate larger implications and meanings. I want readers to have enough information to stay with the poem and be equipped to contemplate the tension between what's withheld and what's disclosed. I want them to feel compelled to fill in some blanks, but not so many that they feel alienated. Billy Collins says poets need to figure out what cards to turn over and what cards to keep down. Too many cards turned up and the poem risks becoming flat-statement and simple-minded. Too many cards turned down and the poem risks becoming too abstract and self-conscious, clear only to the poet. I've considered this tricky balancing act throughout the MFA program, attempting to reveal enough to invite readers into my poems but also leaving enough out so the reader can fill in some of the blanks. I respond to poems that capture the tension between withholding and disclosure, poems that achieve the tension through conversational language. Marie Howe, Stephen Dunn, and Jeffrey Harrison are just some of the poets who teeter on the edge without revealing too much. Ted Kooser said that the closer your writing gets to the pacing of conversational speech, the less it's likely to call attention to itself. The challenge is ensuring that the pacing and rhythms align with the voice and tone of the poem in order that the conversational speech feels natural. I think of "The Clown," "Empty Nest," and "New Sister" as examples in which the pacing allows the details to emerge naturally. The poems, in part, feel like a casual conversation between narrator and reader. This conversational style also allows the narrator to establish credibility over the subject matter. I hope that with this type of narrator the reader wants to hang around until the end.

Finding Music in the Narrative

One of the most important roles a poetry professor plays is the role of matchmaker. During my second workshop with Alessandra, she handed me a copy of Brigit Pegeen Kelly's *Song*. The titular poem immediately inspired my writing over the next year. The first poem I wrote after reading "Song" was "Plea, Thirty Years Late." I had written the following lines in my journal: "Lift the chipped cup to your lips, coffee black with a hint of sugar." After reading *Song* I felt empowered to use repetition, to continue riding the wave a little longer than I had in previous poems, to vary syntax so that a musicality might emerge. I inserted "Go ahead" at the beginning

of my journal line and I was off and running. “Go ahead” led to several other acts of repetition. I had discovered, through Kelly, a way to find music in my narratives. A few weeks after introducing me to Kelly, Alessandra asked if I had read Larry Levis. I told her I had read a few poems. A week later she brought me a copy of *The Selected Levis*. She used sticky notes to identify the poems I might find useful. I read those poems, purchased another of his books (*Winter Stars*), and began to understand how to integrate meditation into my narratives. I had rarely allowed myself to veer from the scene, but Levis opened up possibilities to meditate on implications, inner dialogues, and seemingly disconnected thoughts. Though this approach opens up one to the danger of rambling and/or clutter, it can imbue poems with psychological richness and a musicality that may not be attainable by strictly following the narrative. Not long after reading *Winter Stars*, I wrote the first draft of “The First Time.” Though it doesn’t feature as much meditateness as Levis’ poems, I allow the narrator to veer off a bit as he rides in the back of a pickup towards an anticipated destination. As the narrator and his friends cross a bridge, he remembers two friends—twins—who jumped to their deaths. Later in the poem I include the lines, “and for the first time/I think of sadness and beauty as one.” Prior to joining the MFA program I likely would have remained committed solely to the chronology of the scene rather than integrate the narrator’s inner responses. This happens, then this happens, then this happens, then the poem ends. However, I found an alternative to my linear impulses. With “The First Time” those brief excursions into the narrator’s mind strengthen him as a character and deepen the poem thematically and emotionally.

I used this same approach with “The River.” Encouraged by Alessandra to write a poem with a non-human narrator, I added a section to my long poem that featured a river as narrator. Upon revision I felt the section was its own living, breathing thing. The section deserved its own poem. Choosing a river as narrator opened up a number of meditative possibilities. The result is a poem in which the narrative is enhanced by musicality as the river ebbs and flows from revealing the father’s actions to meditating on human frailty to imagining (or wishing for) a moment of tenderness between father and son.

Additional Musings on *Lucky Boy*

Memory is memory, and imagination is in part
the reassembly of the things we remember (Ted Kooser)

During my undergraduate days at Morehead State University, the poet George Eklund wrote on a blackboard the following: Memory/Experience + Imagination/Inventiveness + Reading = Your Poems. His point was that every poem in the history of language has been and will be informed by memory, imagination, and what/whom you've read (especially the poems/poets you love). George's formula isn't meant to be prescriptive. It's organic and intuitive and happens naturally in the act of composing and revising. All of the poems in *Lucky Boy* involve memory, experiences that I draw upon to create the scene and story of the poem. But with memory come dramatization, embellishment, and the reassembly of those memories to make the poem. Fidelity always to the poem. And, of course, none of the poem happens without a passion for reading other poets, other poems, and revisiting the voices and styles I most prefer. *Lucky Boy* begins with "Traveling with My Mother," a dramatization of my mother's trip to the beach when I was in the womb, difficult circumstances which cause her to consider the worst and ultimately her decision to turn around from the destructive water and give birth. Immediately, the manuscript's title feels literal as the boy survives to live another day. But it doesn't take long for the title to feel ironic as the lucky boy experiences his share of trauma and grief. The early poems, often in the voice of a child or an adult narrator speaking through the lens of a child, tend to be isolated scenes in which the boy observes his mother and/or father. With "Bulldozer," the narrator and his brother are growing up in the middle of a chaotic, tenuous, and unsettling environment from which they escape by hiding in a field across the street. But even this safe haven is imperiled by a bulldozer that will level the field and, without the boys' intervention, kill a living thing that they've kept alive by giving it bread crumbs and water. The early poems are mostly isolated scenes dealing with abandonment, parental death, socioeconomic struggles, and maternal perseverance. The language is direct, restrained. My goal is to create tension, to leave the reader with an ache.

The last few poems in the first section (“Plea,” “The River”) are more expansive and feel like a transition into a slightly different approach with language, or at the very least a hint of what’s to come later in the manuscript. The voice remains the same but the poems become longer with more meditation and music. The later poems become more conversational, the pacing more relaxed and casual, and this stylistic transition coincides with the narrator transitioning from boyhood to manhood. The first sign of expansiveness begins with “Plea.”

The second section continues with many of the themes established in the opening section, though the subject matter shifts to stepfathers, to the messy transition from pubescence to college to adulthood, and to the narrator becoming a father and husband. Themes of betrayal and abandonment continue, albeit in different settings, and the outside world (beyond the narrator’s family dynamics) enters into the poems. Our common humanity continues to be a central concern as a more diverse set of characters appears—prostitutes, children of prostitutes, teachers, college-aged friends, social workers. The narrator’s world-view expands, and within this view we see additional ramifications of male behavior. The impacts begin to extend beyond the narrator, his mother and brother. This section ends with “Older Boys,” a poem that feels like an appropriate close and transition as it introduces the narrator’s son and reveals how violence and aggression can be passed down from older boys to younger boys.

The last section introduces the narrator’s wife and adult family. The seeds of betrayal and abandonment planted early in the narrator’s childhood have been sown. The narrator has inherited some of his father’s destructive tendencies while also rejecting his father’s choice to abandon his children physically, emotionally, and financially. This section features poems with varied dramatic and stylistic structures, emphasizing pacing and casualness of language. The poems take on a more conversational tone, and the themes/concerns emerge a bit later. The thematic thread of “forgiveness” is apparent throughout the manuscript but more emphatically explored in this section. The narrator once again is confronted with suicide, this time involving a friend. “Forgiveness” is one of many poems that deal with the impact of male behavior on women/girls/daughters. There is, of course, a linkage to the manuscript’s first poem (in which the mother contemplates but rejects suicide) and the last two poems in section one (“My Mother Answers the Phone” and “The River”). The narrator also experiences the suicides of two

childhood friends (referenced in “The First Time”). Here, the manuscript’s title again feels both literal and ironic.

It is important, especially in the poems exploring betrayal, for the narrator to avoid becoming heroic. I want to risk, at times, offering readers an unsympathetic and flawed narrator. I hope that the poems collectively create a balance that feels truthful and authentic.

The manuscript closes with “The Promise,” a reimagining and revision of “Stillborn,” a poem that works individually but whose content doesn’t fit the manuscript’s narrative. “The Promise” features the river as a source of reconciliation and connection between father and son, a place where they can establish a bond, an attachment, and enjoy time together. Water is prevalent throughout the manuscript, including in the first and last poems which serve as bookends. In “Traveling with My Mother,” the ocean is a place of potential destruction. “The Promise” closes the book with a sense of hopefulness, although the fact that the poem is a dream suggests the narrator’s father never delivers on his promises. Perhaps this dream is an indication that the narrator intends to keep the promises he has made to his own children.

I feel like poetry for me is in service to something greater than myself. Everything is greater than myself. But [in service] to the great mystery of being alive. So many people I have loved are dead now. And I will be dead one day. How strange is that? To know that we’re alive and that we’re going to die. Poetry can hold that. It holds that knowledge and it holds that dialectical energy field—we’re alive, we’re going to die, this is now, and in a minute it will be past but it will still be now. All of that that occurs when we read a poem. (Marie Howe)

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Lucky Boy

poems

Mark Lilley

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Connecticut Review: After the Sermon

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Red Rock Review: Family

Poet Lore: The Choice; Intoxication; The Quiet

Southern Indiana Review: When My Father Came Around

Sow's Ear Poetry Review: Mother and Father

Timber Creek Review: The Great Noise; Traveling With My Mother

“Flint Hills’ is a found poem from Southwest Magazine, *The Flint Hills of Kansas* by Amy Beth Wright (October 2017).

One

Traveling With My Mother

I can't imagine my mother—
the same woman who plucked pop bottles
from roadside ditches—paying twelve dollars
for a one-way bus ticket to Virginia Beach.
But I sometimes forget she was twenty-three,
abandoned by my father for the first time,
everything she said she'd never do
bouncing in her head like spilled marbles.
She told her sisters she'd be home in a few days,
that she needed to feel sand between her toes,
listen to waves slap against the shore.
I think she needed more. I think she needed
to stand on the earth's edge and measure
that urge to swim out, perhaps fifty yards,
floating until her mind went numb,
every mistake bubbling up in her lungs,
the day's sunlight turning black.
Even now when we talk about those days
her sisters remind me that she turned around,
she hitchhiked back home,
she named me for the trucker
who bought her biscuits and gravy
without asking anything in return.

The Choice

Because it must have seemed hopeless
without a man or education to lean on,
I never blamed my mother for almost
giving my little brother away.

Just as I never blamed her for struggling
with the thought of her older sister alone
in a neighborhood noisy with children,
eggs incarcerated deep inside her body.

They agreed my mother would take one week
to be sure, enough to consider what lingered
after bathing him in the sink,
blotting his brows with a blue cloth,

enough to learn the cadence of his breathing
before lowering him into the throwaway crib,
turning off the night lamp, walking away.

I'll never know when the choice was made,
how much she lived and relived
until the line was blurred between
what's selfish, what's brave.

But I remember that morning my mother
made the call, her back turned to me,
my brother wrapped carefully in his crib,

and how after hanging up the phone
she walked into the kitchen, lit the stove,
asked if I wanted something to eat.

Bulldozer

Remember the field across our street
before the bulldozer plowed through?

We'd run and hide and sometimes see
a living thing unknown to us—

not quite knee-high, silver and black,
lame leg, patch of fur missing.

We were careful not to startle it.
Back then everything was startling enough,

men coming and going and often
drunk, men who said absolutely no

dogs or cats or hamsters, nothing
for us to nurse or bathe or feed.

We'd leave behind bread crumbs,
plastic ashtrays filled with water.

We cried once watching it limp away,
two skinny brothers who cried easily.

If we were hateful if we were cruel
we might have strangled the living thing

and paraded it around our trailer park.
But we were not hateful or cruel back then

when the bulldozer came that summer day.
We ran out of the tall grass barefoot, shirtless,

waving our arms and screaming
until the man in a hardhat high atop

the claw machine stopped and listened.
Please, give us five minutes, please.

After the Sermon

The pastor piled his family into their van.
I remember the chrome headlights,
his wife adjusting the youngest girl's bow,
laughter and singing spilling out
as if the engine turning
were reason enough to praise God.
As the congregation dwindled,
my mother began cleaning the pews,
her brown shirt blending into the wood.
My job was to follow behind, straighten up
if something seemed out of place.
In the quiet of United Methodist,
she mopped the floor with bleach and water,
dusted candelabras, polished offering plates
until our reflection appeared in the gold center.
Before turning out the lights, she stood
behind the pulpit as if she wanted to speak,
as if an audience anticipated her words.
Then we gathered our supplies, loaded the Volare.
She locked the church doors and finished
one cigarette, puffs of smoke
dissolving above us like a prayer.

When My Father Came Around

The old van sputtered and crackled
through Cynthiana, Kentucky,
carrying my father to another job
whenever someone passed his name.
Some nights he came around to wash his brushes,
massaging fine bristles under hot water.
He would sit alone, newspaper nearby,
my mother still at the tobacco warehouse,
nobody asking for money or his name.
Some nights he turned on the game,
drank a six-pack and waited.
He never asked if knew how to throw
a curveball or hit line-drives the other way.
Some nights he made a call, changed his shirt.
Before leaving he would tap his silver lighter twice,
smoke one cigarette. I watched it burn
through his fingertips into some dark cell,
hating myself for a love I had little reason to feel.

Mother and Father

When she comes home from the warehouse
to his indifference, to his thoughts that may
or may not include her, she spits on him.
He doesn't answer back, even when she
gets in his face, close enough to smell
his breath, to see that he hasn't shaven in days,
to see that he hasn't smiled or frowned
since he was a child. She calls him *two-timer*
and *sonofabitch* and tells him where he's going
when he dies. And still she fries two pork chops.
And before he disappears for a week,
before he walks out without telling anyone
where he's going, he stretches out on the couch.
She takes his head in her lap and runs
her fingers through black hair,
under his T-shirt stained with paint,
the room suddenly soft, and in the softness
he strokes her arm, he finds her hand
and holds it until he falls asleep,
and she lets him sleep

The Quiet

I sit up in bed again long past midnight,
my little brother asleep beside me.
I am ten years old. I hear through the vents
my mother talking to my father.
They are in bed together. She predicts
the cancer will take him before summer.
She asks gently—trying not to pressure him—
if he will marry her, if he will go tomorrow
to the county courthouse and sign the papers.
She wants him to think of his boys, to imagine
what it would mean for us to own his name.
During the quiet my brother turns
his slender body to mine. I hear my mother
pulling something out, putting something away.

Intoxication

During jury selection the lawyer asked
if I understood the word *intoxication*.
I remembered one summer at a country lake,
my mother and father in drab suits
trying to forget what they had done to each other.
They sat at the end of the dock. He held a Strohs
in one hand, his other arm dangled
over her shoulder like a broken hinge.
When he kissed her neck, she tossed her head back.
He was finding words. He called her *baby*.
No one could make the blue sky go away.
Even as he struggled to his feet,
even as she held him steady
so he wouldn't fall over the edge,
no one could judge what remained—
their pale skin, the wrinkled water,
two shadows trying to become one.

Plea, Thirty Years Late

Lift the chipped cup to your lips—
coffee black with a pinch of sugar.
Misbehave with your favorite cigarettes.
You should be sleeping next to a man
whose stubble rouses you into waking.
But my father is holed up
in a trailer park outside Maysville.
Josie is her name. Red-head, hippie hair.
Go ahead. Burn the photograph you found
folded in his wallet, her slender frame kneeling
next to the Doberman he rescued,
a birthday gift for her youngest son.
Assume she's unbuttoning the shirt
you washed, the shirt you pressed and hung
on the shower rod. Assume he never cared
about the girl born in Fern Creek,
a young girl following the railroad tracks
after another day stripping tobacco,
hands and sneakers coated in soot.
Assume he was nothing more
than a way out of the valley, a promise
you made to your momma on the porch.
Recall her wet hair, black as coal,
homemade pajamas she sewed from cot linens.
Recall the songs she sang,
songs of wildflowers and campfires
that grew faint as you chased fireflies
deep into Butcher Hollow.
Go ahead. Picture his rig jackknifed
and smoldering on a deserted highway.
Picture him startled by the scarcity of stars,
coyotes yipping in the uncertain distance.
Picture him calling out Josie's name in the dark.
Go ahead. Abandon the memory of him stroking
your arm, his fingers lingering on your wrist,
the bedroom thawed by candlelight.
Unclip the clothespin. Allow the curtains to drag

across the windowsill.
Go ahead. Aunt Connie will buy
our bus tickets to Pensacola.
We will convert the shed behind
her house, share a common yard.
I will make new friends, find a team
that needs an all-star shortstop.
Go change out of your drab nightgown.
Before greasing the skillet.
Before fiddling with the radio knob.
Before he gets sick, before the new man comes.
Mother, the front door is waiting. Go ahead.
I will forgive you.

Home

Once, I walked with my father
from the general store to Boodle's Tavern,
holding his hand as the sun disappeared
behind refinery towers. Farther away
a howling rattled the hills. I believed him
when he said the sounds would die out
before dawn, before mothers lit gas stoves
and went to work in the county warehouses.
He needed a drink and told me to wait
in the gravel lot. Beyond the brush
the Licking River ran slick and silky.
Men came and went and came again.
Most wore baseball caps and looked down.
I imagined them as boys and felt a boy's ache.
Because the river was something to fear, and the brush
something to scrape their arms, and I knew
my father was alive only in the living sense.
Nothing was left that could break his heart.

My Mother Answers the Phone

1.

They found his van by the levy.
There was no sign of my father,
but they did find his chemo calendar
and silver lighter.
They will call back after searching
the reservoir, storm drains,
abandoned houses on Elmarch Street.

My mother and I sit at the kitchen table
where she has placed a bowl
of sweet potatoes and skillet bread.
Before the phone rings again,
she will finish the dishes,
iron my clothes for the morning.

2.

I squat between the washer and dryer,
not exactly hiding, not exactly praying,
fingers crossed that he didn't kill himself.

Everything might be okay. Or everything
might sting like my father's hooch,
like the sip he encouraged me to take
on the front porch in broad daylight.

I'm too young to know
why men drift, where they linger,
what happens when a woman receives word.

The River

This morning you find me murky and swollen
after overnight rains. I rose two feet
and flooded the ball fields on River Road.
Forgive me. Forgive the storm front that started
over the Plains and swept eastward, jolting
small children from their slumber.
While you were driving I drudged along
past refineries and junkyards,
through the stench of cured tobacco.
Forgive my persistence. I prefer not knowing
what lingers in the dark, the mysterious rustling
between trees, footsteps and whispers
without shape, without faces,
never far from my swerving.
What I know is that he parked his van
near the shallow end, where the quarry rubs
against the flood wall.
He turned off the ignition, but not right away.
I've seen this before, middle-aged fathers at my edge.
I don't know why they seek me out,
what tugs them towards my dank glow.
He removed his painter's cap.
A flurry of blackbirds burst from the trees.
I can't be sure if he watched them divide,
but he rolled down his window
and leaned into the new air, into light
that fell jagged across vinyl seats.
I thought he might join me.
I've seen it before. Sometimes they enter
as if taking a stroll in the park,
as if meeting an old friend for coffee,
until their legs buckle and for an instant
I believe they're ready to fight me.
But more often they just submit, sinking
below my brown sheen until they emerge
with the same sadness, the same misery
they were certain would be washed away
by one gesture selfish and brave.

I could go on with these stories,
but you want to know what happened
before a fisherman found him the next day,
his wrist scabbed and bloated.
I can tell you he was a handsome man,
slender jawbone, jaunty hair slicked back,
eyes wide and hazel, and there was a gentleness
about him, the way he rested his head against the seat.
It's not difficult imagining him cupping
the face of a good woman, and with one finger
removing a stray hair from her forehead.
Maybe you choose to remember him like this.
Maybe you recall a night in a trailer
when the air was soft and clean,
and no one was afraid.
I wish I could give you more
because you've traveled so far to be here.
It's a lonely drive home through the valley.
Forgive me. The wind has shifted again,
hinting at what's to come.

Two

Family

This morning I imagine my dead father
picking up his granddaughter from school.
She is unashamed of the rusted van.
The radio is low, windows rolled up.
He struggles to ask about her day,
the other children, how her favorite bow
came undone mid-afternoon.
He notices her hair, black as a chalkboard,
the waves around her cheeks, the long blink
before her eyes meet his. She is ten
and feels the sadness on his breath.
They drive around town till dusk.
He fiddles—as he does when he’s nervous—
with his painter’s cap. He’s longing
for a cup of coffee, a cigarette, something to eat.
She tells him a story about riding her bike
through slippery leaves. He listens
before coughing a stale cough, as if clearing
his throat for the words that will not follow.

The Old Story

1.

Because the graveyard lies
between two hills, and these hills roll
into many others, I brought my son
to see where the dead rest

on his father's side. It was here
that a flag unfurled and I counted
stars and stripes until the colors bled
into a shade of sorrow.

My son was not much taller
than the tombstones, and with nothing to say
and no trumpets announcing my sorrow
I turned us away from the old story,

crossing over to a hillside with no graves,
no church or broken bell,
and it was here that I counted
twenty-three shrubs before my son said *Dad*

and ran down where the creek thinned,
where the wildflowers bloomed blue-green.
By the time I caught up
he was ankle-deep in the shallows,

and it was here in the dead of summer
that my son counted twelve tadpoles,
sweet boy without memory,
sweet boy who'd buried no one.

2.

A story was told. I can't repeat it.
But the man who told me
served in the Army with my father.
It was a story with two dawns, two dusks.

On the first day, work you do to prepare—
loading knapsacks, filling canteens,
cleaning the lens of a rifle's scope,
sitting down to write a letter.

On the second day, quiet.
Except for something launched, and the sound
the ground makes after something's launched.
I can't repeat it, but my father survived.

3.

If you stood at the top of Cordova Hill
you could have watched my father's story
from beginning to end—
log cabin where he was born,

the schoolhouse where he learned
arithmetic and how to write the name
he refused my mother,
Berry Methodist where he never married,

and next to the church
the graveyard with its embedded stones,
where under a tilted canopy in the rain
we buried him, our tired stranger.

4.

Once, I rode with my father
to the V.A. Hospital. He had stopped
drinking and thought the headaches
were God's punishment

for his waiting so long. He waved at truckers,
talked about his job delivering steam turbines
to the factories in Topeka, Des Moines,
factories, he said, where men made light.

Safe memory, go on—with one hand
my father pulls a cigarette
from his shirt pocket,
and with the same hand lights up,

and the small fire at the tip glows
against the peach horizon, and I am ten
and shy with my father, but I say the words
peach horizon, and he looks west.

5.

My son wants to hear the new story.
Okay, the new story: A boy runs away
and is forgiven. The boy becomes a bigger boy
and wrings a cat's neck, and that boy

is forgiven, and years later
the man drifts from his wife into the arms
of another woman, and the man
and other woman are forgiven,

and the fruit bowl is glued back together,
all seventeen pieces, and this is the story
that might help you salvage something broken,
something dropped or slung

in your direction, and *why*
is not important in the new story,
sweet boy drifting in his cotton pajamas,
sweet boy who's betrayed no one.

Girl in 107

I sit cross-legged on the motel room floor.

I play jacks or read *Charlotte's Web*
or brush my doll's blonde hair.

The curtains are closed, TV turned off.
In my mind I hum last night's dream.

This is where the men bring my mother and me
after picking us up behind the shelter.

Some are truckers who pull off the interstate
and take two turns onto Stoney Pike.

Some are important men in dark suits
who need to get home before dinner.

Some complain because she wouldn't leave me behind.

Tonight is her *steady*,
the state trooper who wears a badge over his heart.

I like him best. He says I remind him
of his girl when she was nine.

He gives my mother medicine to help her sleep.

Sometimes I worry about him,
out there in that other world

where the bad men live.

Lucky Boy

for Mr. S

He never put his mouth on me
the way another man might have
if he had found himself alone with a boy
whose mother worked weekends.

He could have tried to get me hard
with a magazine pulled from his glove compartment
as we drove north to Cincinnati in a sedan
whose windows were not tinted,
whose cloth seats did not reek of cheap cigars.

He could have pinned me against a bathroom stall
or taken me behind a rest stop
where the undergrowth was thick,
and trucks hauling turbines on I-75
might have drowned out a boy's squeal.

He could have seduced me with jerseys
or bobbleheads, confessed a secret that needed
to stay between us. He could have asked
about my father until what I desired—

even more than a late inning rally—
was to rest my head on a man's shoulder,
feel his three-day old stubble.

I was a lucky boy. He was just a decent man,
a 7th-grade science teacher who shared my love
of baseball, who dropped me off that night
with nothing but a scorecard
and a ticket stub folded in my pocket.

That Other Life

At twelve I became hooked
on my mother's favorite soap opera,
rushing home after school to catch
the second half of *Days of Our Lives*.

During those long summer days
when boys my age were playing baseball,
I remained in front of the television,
rooting for romance and second chances.

After Bo's car plunged over a cliff
I could barely watch as Hope received the news
in her wedding dress, unleashing a grief
that convinced me the pain was real.

Bo wasn't dead, of course, and the removal
of his bandages revealed a different actor
with darker hair. I cried when this new Bo
kissed her fingertips and cupped her face,

violins reminding me of my mother
smoking alone in the dark,
who never received a heartfelt phone call
that sent her out into the rainy night, back

into the arms of my father who would disappear
without taking a change of clothes, whose secrets
were merely something they could laugh about
or dismiss as what happened in that other life.

A Name

It's just another Saturday visit
until the social worker tells my mother
time is running out, that the broken windows
must be replaced or my brother and I
will be removed from the home.
She says the state won't allow us to live
this way, the worst of winter still to come,
and surely there must be someone
who will take us in.

My mother joins us on the plaid-splattered couch.
As we wait for a name,
she pulls an old cigarette from the ashtray,
holds her match steady until the stub glows.

Departure

Two hours before departure,
our new stepfather finds an airport bar
while we wait with our mother.

She tells us sometimes he needs to escape
the stress of this life, the pressure
of finding and keeping work, of providing.

We shouldn't worry because she understands him
the way Mildred, his first wife, never could,
and men need to be understood or else

their stinginess might be mistaken for secrets,
which leads to false accusations,
and she refuses to make the same mistake.

We should be grateful that she found a man
who would marry her, who promised
to remain faithful night and day.

She wants us to know we're a team now,
four soldiers marching in the same direction,
only as strong as our weakest link.

Those Other Stories

One night our stepfather taught us
how to play euchre, shuffling

the deck into a spasm of air,
dancing around the card table to change his luck.

He talked about the men who owed him money—
Skeeter, Rankin, men from our town

who had passed away, who did everything
they could to avoid paying him back.

But after a few sips of bourbon, and before
our mother intervened, he told those other stories—

of medals earned fighting in a war,
though they weren't enough for him

to recommend that type of sacrifice.
He recalled his platoon getting word one afternoon

to abandon a field north of the Yalu River.
As they walked over the hillside, he turned

to see boys and girls playing in the sun,
the smaller ones struggling to keep up, slipping.

Flint Hills

*Everything dies, baby, that's a fact.
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back*
Bruce Springsteen "Atlantic City"

Every April, as grazing season begins,
pastures are burned to clear dry brush.
New blue-stem grass will spring to life
almost immediately, so I've been told,
so I've promised my son as we drive
through Kansas, map unfolded in my lap.
We're driving to Flint Hills
because too soon my son will believe
death is death, and that his childhood
cannot be resurrected, and we've come
searching for proof to the contrary.
I pass the markers that tell we're not far—
Corn Creek, Crocker Lake, the reservoir
north of Groveland. They all splinter
from the southern fork of the cottonwood.
There is fenced property to our left
where cows graze in pastures behind
a ranch house. They will gain weight
throughout summer and be sold in October.
But today's journey through pines and cedars
will produce no savagery, no carcasses,
because too soon my son will believe
the merely decent man is insufficient,
and if I'm worth anything
I will find for him the flames
charring a path through these hills,
and behind them the blue-stem grass reborn.

*

I turn his attention to Little Cedar Creek.
A month from now the plains will wither,
water so scant that the rocks will thirst for color.
But today's journey will produce plenty.
I point to the hillside that holds still

like the last moments around a campfire.
Suddenly, around the next bend
high flames shock the soil awake.
Their blended seam halves the pasture.
Black smoke swirls above the fire
like tarnish on silver. The landscape
of peaks and valleys is marked
with shadows, and I concentrate on the way
light can climb and sprawl and vanish.
My son leans forward, his eyes widen
as the horizon purples and another band
of fiery orange emerges. It's impossible
to know north from south, dawn from dusk.
But beyond the haze the promise
of new life. Before I can ask if he wants
to turn back, he tells me to drive faster
towards the thickening flames.

The Gamble

It was the lock of the century
until Douglas found the courage
to go after Tyson.

By the fourth round
his courage had grown into confidence,
which debilitated Tyson
(as it does all bullies).

When the bully buckled,
falling for good in round ten,
all Hell broke loose in Tokyo.

Six-thousand miles away in Millersburg, Kentucky,
our stepfather was throwing another tantrum,
having lost a month's pay and taking it out
on the card table, the board games,
anything to hold him over
until she returned from her double shift.

Maybe it was cigar stubs in the recliner,
specks of cornbread trapped in his stubble,
the frenzied crowd still buzzing on our Zenith,
or maybe it was my brother cowering in the bathroom,

but I grabbed a kitchen knife
and told him if he stayed there that night
I'd wait until he fell asleep
and cut his throat.

When he shrugged I took one step closer,
holding the knife
like I'd seen in horror movies,
reminding him I was only fourteen,
a child in the eyes of the law.

He cocked his head, lingered
for what seemed like forever,

and then he told me he should have known better
than to marry white trash

as he grabbed his belt and keys
and walked out the door.

The Brown Volare

On the road to my high-school reunion,
I spot a brown Volare and decide to follow
its dented fender through my hometown.
I pass the gravel lot of Ronnie's Drive-in,
the big screen advertising legal advice.
I follow the rusted chrome, doors peeling
as it veers onto Elmarch Avenue
where single mothers smoke on shared porches.
I follow the tail of exhaust to Highway 27
where hay bales roll like swollen knuckles
and barns bring loneliness to the open fields.
I follow its groan uphill towards Cassie's house,
surprised when it pulls into her parents driveway
and a boy emerges who must be sixteen,
his collared shirt tucked into dark jeans.
I follow his thin, untouched body
to the front door, waiting as he waits,
our hearts pounding, our fingers fidgeting
with car keys, and when the screen door opens
I follow his hand until it finds hers,
and I think of those boys loading dye
at Bundy Tubing, boys stripping tobacco
in the county warehouse, and this boy
swallowed up in the front seat,
his engine turning on a prayer.

The First Time

The older boys swear it's true.
They have been there before,
have seen men coming and going and coming again.
We pile in the back of my cousin's pickup,
drive out to Highway 27 past the roller rink
and Joe Tully's tobacco farm, beyond
the juice joints and card shacks,
out where the darkness swells but hides nothing.

We drive over Ogden Bridge where last summer
the Nickerson twins jumped into the Licking River,
holding hands, the story goes,
when divers found their bodies tangled
in fishing wire. Someone says their names—
Tommy and Ray— and the boys are with us again,
ghosts on the faint tips of treetops,
and I think of their mother knowing
one dead boy from the other
because Tommy had a scar under his left eye.

On Antioch Road pavement turns to gravel.
Stars wobble. Rocks spit out from under the tires,
startling night critters nestled in brambles.
Through a clearing in the tree line
we see the cockeyed trailer.
We park in the dirt, walk up concrete blocks
and peer in the lone window.

On the edge of an unmade bed,
she sits in a red nightgown, braless.
I notice the soft droop of her breasts,
the bony outline of her shoulders, charcoal hair
pinned and glossy, and for the first time
I think of sadness and beauty as one

because a baby is sleeping in a plastic bassinet,
a baby wearing pink socks, wavy shadow
of a candle flame on her belly,
and our giddiness subsides
until there is nothing but quiet.

As new headlights hold still,
we turn away from the window,
careful not to wake her.

Freshman Year

After a few weeks together drinking Old Styles,
my new roommate begins to trust me—

first with the story of his father arrested
for shoplifting cigarettes, the shame

of reading about it in his hometown paper,
his mother trusting only in Jesus,

and then the story of what he fears most:
his parents finding out he's gay.

He tells me he's known since he was twelve,
that he needs more time before coming out.

But because he's been visiting those other bars
he's worried word might reach

his town, his neighborhood,
his father walking the dogs.

He asks me to imagine a cobblestone road,
having to let go of my girlfriend's hand

when we pass beneath a streetlight,
and I keep nodding

the way someone does
who wants to understand but can't.

The Game

In college this guy from my fraternity
told me about a game he invented.

After biology lab when he was hot and bothered
from standing next to the volleyball twins,

when he needed a little release
he would go to the mall and find a woman

holding bags or sifting through her purse.
When she passed he would stick out his foot

just enough to make her stumble, and amidst the flurry
of tangled feet and him grabbing hold

to keep the woman upright, he would touch her breasts,
sometimes more than touch, and he said it was crazy

how these women were too flustered to realize
what he'd done, even crazier that most of them

actually thanked him. But he needed a wingman.
Because it was starting to feel weird walking around

the mall alone, and if I was game we could take turns
dividing our guilt into disposable pieces. I don't recall feeling

a stranger's breast in my hand, but I do remember
standing in the parking lot recounting the feeling

of a stranger's breast in my hand. I told my buddy
I had managed to rub her silk blouse against her tight bra,

and I recall our plan to keep the game fresh
by seeking out women who went braless.

Twenty-five years later, as my daughter leaves
for college, I feel the need to finally confess,

to warn her of those boys rounding the corner,
those boys holding nothing in their hands.

Older Boys

The older boys want to watch something burn.
From my lawn chair I overhear them

talking about the fire, how rapidly
a treehouse or trampoline will disintegrate

into ash. But I don't need words to see
that their eyes have shifted

as they launch another round of fireworks
from the backyard platform. Already

this job they craved has become stale,
impossible to satisfy their raw imagining.

Standing with them is my son, almost thirteen,
who says nothing. When the older boys ask

if he wants to load a rocket into the mortar tube,
have his hands vibrate from the aftershock,

I expect him to look back for permission—
or, as he sometimes will, for an excuse

not to be brave around his friends, to groan
and say *My dad is way overprotective.*

Instead, he looks out in the open field
where younger kids are chasing outlines of smoke,

begging for the next barrage of color and hiss,
and my son who says nothing

takes one step towards the crude contraption,
nudged on by the older boys itching

for a new thrill: a stray, a misfire
that might ignite a thing but harm no one.

Three

Reckless

I bring to your attention
the sharp-shinned hawk
and the roadside ditch
where it dives into something dead.
Notice how it rises full-bellied,
jagged feathers bronzed
by the same sunlight
that pierced my boyhood window.
Back then I didn't care
to know the names of birds,
though I must have plotted
their misfortune, because one afternoon
I pumped the pellet gun until my bicep ached.
I steadied my scope
on the anonymous bird perched
atop the telephone line.
That night it must have been another boy
who cried himself to sleep,
who begged his little brother
to remove the dead bird,
and it must have been a kind of tenderness
when my brother told me he had buried it
in a field across our street,
and after leveling out the dirt
had said a short prayer.
I never told him I had peeked
through the curtains and watched him sweep
the bird into the same gutter that swallowed
our baseball signed by Hank Aaron,
Hammerin' Hank, number 44,
baseball's true homerun king.
Reckless is the word my lover uses
when we meet on the sly
at a downtown motel.
Sometimes we claw
at one another. Sometimes
she opens her eyes.

Tijuana

If I told you there's at least one clean hooker
in Zona Norte, and if you're nervous or shy
she will sit with you on the edge of the bed
and rub your arm and listen to your dream
of sailing away on a blue sea she's only seen
in cheap paintings, you might be convinced
her tenderness is nothing more than a hustle.
If you followed me through the main strip,
past pill vendors and trinket stands,
after the sun slips behind a hillside
of tenement shacks, you might see me fill
the buckets of those blind boys panhandling,
and wonder how I can't see they're just pretending.
How does a boy learn to deaden his eyes
with such precision? It's easy enough.
Once every quarter I tell my colleagues
I'm calling it a night. I walk out of the hotel.
I take the Balboa shuttle. I cross,
pay five dollars for a cab ride to Adelita.
Once, a driver confessed to me in broken English
that he loves a woman who's not his wife,
and in his mind he often lives that other life.
If I told you his voice cracked
and his eyes closed and his fists balled
and I could see in his mind her yellow dress,
the two of them dancing under a starry night,
you might roll your eyes and insist love is a choice.
I choose Consuela to pull me closer
until there's no space between us.
When she says *you make me feel good, papi*,
I believe her.

The Great Noise

Something happened the first time
our daughter rolled over on her own.
I jumped over air hurdles screaming for you
to hurry downstairs, *our baby rolled over*
on her own, words attaching themselves to meaning,
dashing through the air like a wartime message.
It had been months since we made love
or danced in the kitchen to Van Morrison.
The future seemed familiar and certain.
But you dropped the laundry, ran as you never run—
reckless, anticipatory, the way lonely people hurl
headfirst into their dreams. Rounding the corner
you found our first-born on her stomach,
this time the legs leading the body along,
and when she rolled again we rediscovered
the great noise stranded between us.
We kneeled over her like awed disciples.
For the next hour we watched our child
learning how to get from here to there.

Sick Day

After I entered you for the first time,
you said *there's no going back*,
and I repeated *there's no going back*,

and the lovemaking that followed was not raw
as we had imagined, but ached
with a quiet that lingered

beyond the last thrust
when my forehead rested on yours,
and beyond the spooning as you handed me my belt

and we dressed under fluorescent lights,
and beyond the motel curtains
into rush hour

when every honked horn was muted,
and our song played without
one glance between us,

and beyond the children's bedtime routine
when we assured our spouses
it was just another day at the office,

and into the next morning when I overheard you
tell a colleague you were feeling much better,
that the migraine had passed.

Exercise #7

We leave *The Bluebird* before last call,
a little drunk, a little hungry,
ears ringing from the 90s cover band.

We walk to the diner on Kingsley
where Kay orders an omelet with cheese,
and I order biscuits and gravy,

the same food that once sobered us up
after long nights bar hopping, back
when we were young and in young love,

new graduates in a new city, already snug
in cubicles on our way to the good life.
Now we imagine our waitress is the same girl

twenty years older, her blonde hair cut
into a bob, and that she remembered
our favorite booth tucked in the corner

with a view of lovers sorting things out
in the alley, and though this exercise
was designed to help us go back in time,

rekindle the spark when our love was raw,
we will remember this as the one
that came before #8

when our therapist suggested an *honesty hour*
that revealed fresh indiscretions,
lines I had crossed, and with whom,

and he said our only hope was that Kay
find the strength to forgive me
for becoming who I am.

The Boy

I remember walking down Lambert Street,
the sorority yards glistening from a late March frost

when you said we'd gone as far as we could,
and I thought you were talking about

our cobblestone road that jutted into a quarry.
But when you stopped under a streetlight

and gently took my other hand, your eyes dry
and neutral, I realized what you meant

to me, and how I would've done anything to keep you
from moving beyond the boy you'd outgrown,

the boy I was certain had slipped out
of your dorm room as I pressed into you.

But there he sat sobbing on the curb, begging
for another chance, another month where he promised

to open the passenger door of his '79 Datsun,
compliment your caramel highlights chosen on a whim,

and I'm remembering this now, twenty years later,
as I watch Kay walk to her separate car, because

after the therapist asked if I felt remorse
I expected that same boy to say something.

But he just stood in the corner with both hands
in his pockets, leaving me to answer on my own.

Empty Nest

As we walk the dog at dusk,
Kay tells me our lives will be better

once the children are out of the house.
that something heavy will be lifted.

This isn't to say she doesn't love them
or take pride in their good manners,

or that some afternoon she won't be standing
in the kitchen and hear the familiar crank

of a school bus, and for one twinge
recall their glossy backpacks, the oak table

where they enjoyed milk and cookies.
It's not that if she could do it over again

she would choose a life without them
(she says they *are* a blessing),

it's just that for the last sixteen years
she's lived each day with unspeakable dread,

and most nights with a voice
only she can hear, a baritone warning her

of danger— balloon pieces stuck in the throat,
misassembled trampolines, a scoundrel

waiting beyond the tree line. She admits
this has caused her to deny me the pleasure

of giving her pleasure, and she doesn't blame me
for falling in love that summer when the voice

reminded her to triple-check the inflatables.
Every afternoon the kids waited by the pool

as she pressed her ear against the floaties,
convinced she could hear the slightest oozing.

The fear is not that some harm will come to them,
but that it will come to them on her watch.

We just need to hang in there until the children move on
to a future where in the middle of the night

she can answer the phone
and be almost certain it's not her fault.

New Sister

When I receive the phone call from a woman
in Iowa who claims she's my half-sister,

who says the DNA kit she ordered online
confirmed with 99.94% certainty

we share the same father, I laugh.
Not because I don't believe her story,

and not because after I said *Hello*
the first thing she said was, *I bet your voice*

sounds just like our daddy's did,
but because it strikes me as funny—

maybe for the first time—to imagine
my father pulling his rig into those sad towns,

always on the prowl for some sad woman.
He must have found one wherever he drifted—

truck-stop diners, roadhouses
with beat-up jukeboxes, laundromats

where he could charm a single mother.
I want to tell my new sister

that our father drank too much,
that he wouldn't marry my mother

even after he got sick,
even after his girlfriend kicked him out

and my mother took him back
into her bed.

But when my new sister tells me her story—
abandoned at birth, adoptive parents

and their Catholic punishment,
how she's always chosen the wrong man,

and how it might mean everything
to hear one sweet memory, proof

that she inherited something decent,
some light she might carry into the darkness,

her plea deteriorating into tears,
and then a sobbing that shakes my phone,

I decide to pull back. I tell her
about the afternoon riding shotgun

with our father to the V.A. Hospital,
how on Highway 27 he picked up a hitchhiker,

a fellow whose head was shaved,
whose scar wrapped around from ear

to ear, and our father asked this fellow
how he was getting along.

His Plan

Between benders my brother wants to spend
an evening with his twelve year-old daughter.

He wants to do this right—suit and tie,
new dress, a corsage of yellow carnations.

His plan is dinner downtown with white tablecloths,
a carriage ride through the city. Enough

that she might forgive what he did to her mother
in the front yard, in front of neighbors.

If he can make this night special,
she might choose to remember the string quartet

on Market Street, stars freckled above the night skyline,
as we choose to remember the outfield grass,

our father holding his scorecard steady,
a flurry of blue baseball caps bobbing in the sun.

Search Party

The mood was grim as we crossed Ogden Bridge.
Rain had muddied the main trails.
Nightfall was on our heels. Bloodhounds
had tracked all afternoon without a scent.
A crew broke off to dig Randy out
after his four-wheeler stalled on Maker's Hill.
On the talkie nothing but dead ends.
We knew the girl had gone to play in the woods,
had walked out that morning with coat pockets
full of bread to feed the creek minnows,
that she had promised her mother
she'd be home before lunchtime.
We knew her brown jeans and flannel shirt
would blend into the autumn foliage,
so we shuffled our feet through each leaf bed.
It was the girl's grandfather who kept us going,
who told us the girl once got lost following
a wounded doe, that she waited for the doe to fall
before building a tipi out of branches and bark.
He felt certain we'd find the girl somewhere
beyond Devil's Backbone, sleeping
under the call of a night owl roused by dusk.
This gave us hope, kept us on the lookout
for a makeshift shelter, until word came
that her mother's boyfriend had been caught
in a lie, and then another, and that we should
turn back, head south towards the levy.

Jury Duty

After leaving the karaoke bar at 4 a.m.,
the defendant drove his truck into the path

of a minivan, killing the van's driver—a nurse
on her way to work—and her unborn baby.

It takes less than twenty minutes
for us to agree he's guilty,

having quickly moved beyond the evidence
to discuss the victim's sister in the front row

holding up old photographs like flash cards,
and three girls without a mother, the youngest

too young to understand *forever*, and the husband
who testified that three days before the crash

he learned he was having a boy, a son
to complete the portrait above their brick fireplace,

and the defendant himself who walked away
with only a scratch under his left eye,

who hoped we'd buy the story of tainted blood
and a white-tail frozen in his headlights,

who every day wore the same crooked tie.

Memory

When I was twelve, I watched my stepfather pistol-whip a raccoon that was eating his tomatoes.

That summer I learned many words: *carcass*, *fermentation*, *Alpha Charlie*, *cocksucker*.

It was the same gun he lodged under the front seat on our weekend trips to Chattanooga when we'd visit

his mother. We mostly sat around as nurses changed her bedpan or flushed her feeding tube.

Once, she started talking in her sleep about running barefoot through woods until she came to a river.

I thought it was another dream of the dying. But my stepfather rose in the artificial light and leaned over

her bed. He remembered that Easter morning, his father's hunting dog scratching at the screen door,

how he carried his baby sister through patches of blood of foamflower, and what they found downstream.

The Clown

He appeared each night at dusk
on a busy street corner in my suburb,

pacing back and forth an hour or so
before disappearing beyond a tree line.

He waved only if someone waved first,
usually a small child startled by the burst

of orange curls against the coming dark,
or high school boys in a Range Rover

whose crude gestures caused him
to cover his mouth in mock surprise,

then wipe away an imaginary tear.
Everyone who called the police received

the same message: it's not illegal
to go out in public dressed as a clown.

Unless he was trespassing or making threats,
he was perfectly free to be a clown, a freedom

that surprised my ten year-old daughter.
She worried that the clown might stray

into her daily routine, and one morning
she'd open the garage door to his oversized feet,

or find him at the bus stop twisting balloons,
or in the front pew on Sunday singing hymns.

When the bad dreams started, I unboxed
the books I had read to her when she was three,

stories of dust fairies and goodnight moons,
and we went back in time

before something pure was reimagined,
before trees and step-mothers wished a child harm.

But it didn't take long to realize
those old stories were no match for the clown.

One evening our neighbor stopped over
to tell us we had nothing to worry about,

that he'd *taken care of our clown problem*.
He was tapping a baseball bat on our front porch.

The next night, after soccer practice, we drove
past the street corner. The clown was gone,

nothing but space and concrete
and our stoplight changing from red to green.

For a few nights my daughter slept again,
until those new dreams emerged.

Forgiveness

for Ava

The road to my friend's house runs
along the south rim of the Licking River.
On summer days you might find boys
fishing on the lower banks,
or roughhousing knee-deep and shirtless
in the cold, dark waters.
Standing on the levee at dawn,
after the morning fog has lifted
and dispersed over the valley,
you can see soot from the factory furnaces,
a vaporous sludge hovering
over the men and women as they walk out,
another graveyard shift behind them,
another eight hours straining glue
from the pits of the tipple-tower,
until the glue is molded and shaped
into a teapot or white-winged dove,
the bargain trinkets boxed and shipped
to God knows where, and maybe God knows
if my friend rests now, or if *rest*
is the proper word, or if the proper word
is a type of ache undefined.

Death, when slow and certain, is also considerate.
It allows a dying father to write his son a letter,
two full pages and legible,
and the boy keeps the letter in a shoebox
with his baseball cards and silver dollars.
Maybe all that survives is the language
of forgiveness, and maybe the language of forgiveness
need not be written nor spoken nor sung.
When my friend's daughter heard the noise
from her upstairs bedroom,
she thought it was a glass shattering.
She had never heard a gunshot before,
except on television or in the movies,
and this sounded different from that.
When she heard her mother yell,
Don't come downstairs, your dad hurt himself,

she thought he must have cut his hand,
and then, *How bad can it be?*

God I seldom believe in,
God I've taught my children to disbelieve,
I see your plates spinning. I see your plates on fire
and spinning, one for each child forgotten
or fondled or slapped around,
one for each child shot up or safely buckled
and driven into a lake,
and one for my friend's daughter, spared
by her father as best he could.

The Promise

In the dream my father is chopping wood.

Before splitting each log along the grain,
he inspects for knots and corner chips.

I push the wheelbarrow to a dead patch
near the winter shed. Because he taught me

that the ground will shift after heavy rain,
I stack the halves crossways.

My mother is stirring something on the stove.

Chores complete, my father and I sit together
on the back stoop. Smoke rises from the burn barrel.

He promises to take me fishing at sunrise
when river trout are feeding in the cool shallows.

Name of Candidate:

Mark Lilley

Thesis Defense:

May 3, 2018

Committee Signatures:

Thesis Advisor

Thesis Reader

Thesis Title:

"Lucky Boy"

Thesis Approved in final form:

Date: 5/1/18

MFA Director Signature:

Paul Brack