

HEATHENS AND HOW THEY'RE MADE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains 23 poems with an introduction in which I explain how I craft my poetry. In the introduction, I use examples from both critical and creative sources to identify tools I utilize during the craft process of a poem. The subject matter of the poems within this thesis ranges from speakers pondering childhood moments to mature voices examining domestic relationships. Some of the poems may be considered confessional poetry as the works are immensely personal and the speaker is I, the writer. Other poems apply literary styles that are commonly associated with Dirty Realism and Southern Gothic.

DEDICATION

These poems are dedicated to the boys I grew up with.

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INTRODUCTION

I have always been enamored with heathens, individuals who disregard conventional forms of religion, culture, and social enlightenment. These types of characters and speakers are littered throughout the literary and visual arts. For example, there is the irreligious serial killer, The Misfit, in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"; the brutal uncivilized savage, Leatherface, in Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*; or the street fighting Henry Chinaski who appears in several poems by Charles Bukowski. My goal for this collection of poetry is to capture similar voices which challenge the decorum of society.

Heathens and How They're Made has been in development for over two years. The poem that begins the collection is "Tennessee Ice," which is about a boy who sneaks out of his home to walk on a layer of ice that has frozen over a pond. As the young speaker of "Tennessee Ice" walks on the frozen pond, the ice breaks and he falls into the cold water. When I wrote this poem, I wanted to address the issue of why the young boy decides to defy his parents and escape his home. Is it because he is innately mischievous and wants to sneak out of his house to find "solitude in the middle of / a frozen lake" (lines 26-27)? Or does parental neglect drive the speaker to leave his home? Whether motivated by his own curiosity or by an environmental push, the young speaker in "Tennessee Ice" makes a decision with momentous consequences. Not only are there the physical consequences of falling into a cold pond, "metal-cold water / that sawed at leg. Ice ... stabbed skin" (lines 41-43), there are also psychological consequences. By the end of the poem, the younger speaker realizes he is a Tennessean and the South defines him

as a person: “My frozen Fortress failed. / And I told myself, / I’m not in Alaska” (lines 44-46).

Heathens and How They’re Made consists of poems that present other situations much like the one in “Tennessee Ice.” The collection contains voices that go against the grain of what is often considered enlightened, civilized, or religious in American society, whether it is a child challenging the rules of his/her parents, a teenager finding inspiration through the death of animals, or a father/husband meditating on his dissatisfaction with domestication. Alternatively, these same poems illustrate enlightenment and understanding through rebellion and dissent.

Rebellious enlightenment is not uncommon in poetry. Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” is the most praised poem of this kind. In “The Road Not Taken,” the poem metaphorically illustrates “two roads diverg[ing] in yellow wood” (line 1) as separate and different paths to enlightenment. The final lines of the poem read: “I took the [road] less traveled by / And that has made all the difference” (lines 19-20). The speaker of this poem demonstrates that his/her enlightenment does not come from the common path, but the uncommon path, “the one less traveled by.”

Like Frost, I want to illustrate the “uncommon path” to enlightenment. However, I want the poetry in *Heathens and How They’re Made* to go a step further than “The Road Not Taken.” In Frost’s famous poem, the reader does not know who the speaker is or where exactly the poem takes place. Frost makes his readers draw their own conclusions. I do not want to leave any ambiguity within my poems. Using “Tennessee Ice” as an example, I give characterization to the speakers of my poems either by age, look, or temperament:

With my father at work
.....
I was baby-sat by
PG videos slipped into
the VCR;
the type of

movies where
the young boy living in Anchorage
.....
could always escape the complexities
of nine year old life (lines 11-22).

It is also important for me as a poet to ensure that readers see, feel, touch, and taste the same environment as my speakers: “Across the street / ... was a pond full of grass-green algae every August” (lines 1-5), “I paced across the street / ... My teeth / snapped against each other” (lines 27-30), and “Chest deep in metal-cold water that / saw at leg. Ice ... stabbed skin” (lines 40-43). Finally, I strive for a clear resolution at the end of each poem that signifies a serious realization within the speaker: “My frozen Fortress failed. / And I told myself, / I’m not in Alaska” (lines 44-46).

To achieve my goal of creating heathen voices in this collection, I examined three different literary movements that have had a profound effect on my poetic voice. These literary genres are confessional poetry, Dirty Realism, and the Southern Gothic. These genres and subgenres have their fair share of heathen characters and voices. Robert Lowell’s McCarthy-era communist speaker in “Memories of West Street Lepke” is a heathen voice of confessional poetry. Charles Bukowski’s alter-ego, Henry Chinaski, is a cruel and violent staple in Dirty Realist poetry, and Cormac McCarthy’s Southern Gothic novel *Child of God* features Lester Ballard, a man absorbed by perversion and dissent. Because of the rebellious voices and characters that consistently appear in confessional poetry, Dirty Realism, and Southern Gothic, I applied elements from these literary genres to my work on both subject-matter and craft levels.

Confessional poetry is my earliest poetic influence. This genre of poetry often explores personal topics involving family and relationships in a candid manner. According to *The Poet’s Companion*, “It’s through our relationships with our parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents that

we first learn about the extremes of intimacy and distance, anger and joy, cruelty and kindness, isolation and community” (Addonizio and Laux 30). In my poems, defiance against the family is one of the strongest characteristics of a heathen. Many of the confessional poets I admire have written poems about rebelling against the family such as Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” Sharon Olds’ “The Victims” and “Ideal Father,” and Li-Young Lee’s “Water.” While crafting my own poems concerning dissent against parental authority, I focused on Robert Lowell’s work. In “Commander Lowell,” Lowell presents a speaker who has anger and dissatisfaction for his father: “Having a naval officer / for my Father was nothing to shout / about ... He wasn’t at all ‘serious’” (lines 18-21). Lowell allows his speaker to ruminate on his father’s financial failures: “[he] was soon fired, / [in] three years / he squandered sixty thousand dollars” (lines 45-61). Instead of having the voice reflecting joyously upon the decisions of his father, Lowell has the speaker interpret the father’s decisions negatively.

In my poem “Maternal Spirals,” I also use a voice unsatisfied with the decisions and actions of the family. “Maternal Spirals” focuses on the relationship between a son and his mother. In the poem, I try to illustrate the difference between a mother-cat, who is nursing her kittens, and the speaker’s mother:

Kittens spiraled their mother
aiming for a piece of her warmth and milk.
My mother held me by the armpits
.....
“Don’t come back in here. Let
these cats be until they can see.” (lines 1-9)

The young speaker in the poem wants to “witness” the cat-mother’s affection since it has “eight kittens coiled around her. A / giant purr dreaming them all, / dreaming me” (lines 26-28). But when the mother in “Maternal Spirals” orders her son to leave the cats alone, the speaker defies her: “Phone talked to mother in kitchen, / my light-tipped steps did not interrupt. / Screen door

opened” (lines 16-18) and “I was already / in the shed, on top of / the washing machine” (lines 22-24). The speaker of “Maternal Spirals” becomes a heathen because he rebels against parental guidance, specifically his mother’s authority.

The second literary movement that influenced *Heathens and How They’re Made* is Dirty Realism, which includes poets such as Raymond Carver, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Charles Bukowski. One of the jarring elements of Dirty Realism is its complete disregard for traditional poetic forms and rules. The Dirty Realists write poetry solely in free verse. Charles Bukowski not only uses the free verse form for his work, but he also writes poems about the importance of free verse. In Bukowski’s very short and simple poem titled “Art”, the speaker claims:

as the
spirit
waned
the
form
appears (lines 1-6).

Bukowski never allows his poetry to be entirely controlled by rhyme or rhythm. His poem “The Birds” is a perfect example of how he utilizes free verse. The first stanza has no hint of rhythm: “the acute and terrible air hangs with murder / as summer birds mingle in the branches / and warble” (lines 1-3). However, in the second stanza of the poem, Bukowski briefly uses end-line and internal rhyme. He juxtaposes the lack of rhythm in the first stanza against the second stanza which contains multiple instances of end-line and internal rhyme, as well as a beat pattern: “...my 2nd wife left me / because I set our birds free” (lines 16-17). Each line contains six syllables and four beats, illustrating rhythm within the passage. There is also end-line rhyme as well. The last word of the first line in the second stanza (“me”) rhymes with the last word of the second line in the second stanza (“free”). Later in the poem, Bukowski abandons the four beat rhythm and end-line rhyme patterns. He gives the reader no discernible poetic scheme until a few

lines later when he uses internal rhyme within single lines:

And the other,
Mean green,
of empty thimble head,
popping up like a rocket
high into the hollow sky (lines 23-26).

Both “Mean green” and “high into the hollow sky” demonstrate internal rhyme within their respected lines. Bukowski’s juxtaposition of stanzas with no rhythm against stanzas with rhythm and rhyme emphasizes his use of free verse.

Like Bukowski and the rest of the Dirty Realists, I also use free verse form in my poetry. In this form, I can impose rhythm and rhyme however and whenever I want. There are instances of both end-line and internal rhyme in my work, but because of free verse, I only use the rhyme schemes when I see fit, which allows my poems to have no strict rhythmic pattern or form. “Oh, Father” and “Evan’s Creek” both utilize rhyme for only a few lines. In “Oh, Father,” the rhyme is used subtly in the final stanza: “I’m in a four-door Toyota Camry. / Just perfect for the economical family” (lines 30-31). I specifically use the forced rhyme between “Camry” and “family” to call attention to the domestic symbolism of the car. In Evan’s Creek, I use end-line oblique rhyme to connect two stanzas: “I used to swim in. / May, days’ end” (lines 2-3). Ultimately, I believe free verse poetry reflects the idea of the heathen, which is to defy rules. According to the *Handbook of Poetic Forms*, “The point of free verse is not that it has thrown the traditional rules of poetry out the window; rather, it requires that every poet who writes in this form must create his or her own rules” (82). Since *Heathens and How They’re Made* contains speakers who are not governed by parental, religious, or social commandments, it is important that my poetry does not abide by formal rhyme schemes and poetic forms.

The final influence on my poetry is the Southern Gothic subgenre. Typically, this subgenre is only demonstrated in fiction. However, I believe it is an important style to emulate while crafting poetry. Southern Gothic is identifiable from other genres in literature by its use of the Southern dialect and its implementation of the macabre and grotesque to reinforce ideas and themes. One Southern Gothic author who applies natural and authentic local dialect in fiction is Harry Crews, whose novel *A Feast of Snakes* is about an annual snake hunt in Mystic, Georgia. Although the plot may seem absurd, Crews uses Southern dialect to lend it authenticity, which gives the novel a verisimilitude that makes it both believable and accurate. An example of Crews utilizing the Southern dialect is found in the dialogue between the characters Lottie Mae and Beeder Mackey:

“I couldn’t kill nothing.”
The smile left Beeder’s face. “Then find a place to hide.”
“Ain’t no place to hide.”
“No place?” said Beeder. “No place at all?”
Lottie Mae said: “It be the onlyest thing I know. It ain’t no place to hide.” (71)

Crews’s dialogue is concise, yet his characters do not abide by grammatical rules. Crews uses double negatives (“I couldn’t kill nothing”) and Southern colloquialisms (“ain’t” and “onlyest”). He also uses a rhythm within the dialogue, with the characters’ dialogue never going beyond three rhythmic beats:

“I couldn’t / kill / nothing.”
... “Then find / a place / to hide”
“Ain’t / no place / to hide.”
“No place? / No place / at all?”

Crews continually demonstrates to the reader that his dialogue is Southern by the colloquialisms, lack of grammar, brevity, and rhythm.

Like Crews, I attempt verisimilitude in my poetry by using authentic Southern dialect. For example, “Still Ill” is a poem about a speaker covered in scars who takes too many

oxycodone pills during his junior year of high school. To give my reader a sense of authenticity in the midst of the poem's depravity and deformity, I use dialect, colloquialisms, and slang that can be easily identified as Southern: "Got anything like this on yer body?" (line 9), "Scars don't need no second guessin'" (line 17), and "Luther done got shitted on" (line 32). In "Still Ill," slang is used as "yer" is a shortened misspelling of "your." Double negatives and double verbs are used ("don't need no" and "done got") to denote a lack of respect for grammatical rules. As with Crews's fiction, there is also rhythm within the dialogue of "Still Ill": "'Luther is fucked up.' / 'Luther is shitted on.' / 'Luther, get on home'" (line 31-33). I allow each line of dialogue to follow a three beat rhythm pattern to stress the Southern dialect.

Another important element to Southern Gothic fiction is its use of the macabre and grotesque. James Goodwin writes that the grotesque can "constitute an attitude of ... larger culture" (176). Two Southern Gothic works that have specifically influenced my poetry are Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*. In O'Connor's short story, the antagonist is The Misfit, a serial killing escaped prisoner. O'Connor uses the Misfit's violent and murderous actions as a tool to explore Christian superficiality: "'She would of been a good woman,'" The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.'" (143). Like O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy also uses the macabre in his novel *Child of God*. The character Lester Ballard is a sexual deviant; he is both a rapist and necrophiliac. McCarthy describes this character as being kept by a "malign[ed] star" (41) and applies the grotesque elements as indications to Ballard's social ineptitudes.

I have taken similar macabre and grotesque elements in a Southern setting and applied them to my poetry. The macabre components which appear in my poetry illuminate larger themes. My poem "Inspiration" involves a speaker who enjoys finding "dead animals and

tak[ing] pictures of them / with disposable cameras” (lines 3-5). In this poem, I describe the dead animals: “Better splitted / Better photo” (lines 7-8), “deerhead, / torn off by hunter” (lines 14-15), and “bloody o-possum, mound of fur, wrapped / around a streetlight” (lines 46-47). These depictions of carcasses intensify a much larger idea in the poem:

... the word
Inspire hovering over the picture,
over the ocean, in the clouds,
with nice-pointed broad strong
letters hoping to remind us
all of something. (lines 79-84)

As the title suggests, the idea of the poem is inspiration. And the photographs of the dead animals become something more than just images of the grotesque and the macabre; instead the images illustrate a theme of hope through creativity.

Heathens and How They're Made is filled with voices that find enlightenment by uncommon means. Some speakers find inspiration in a glass of whiskey (“Evan’s Creek”) or in taking pictures of dead animals (“Inspiration”). My speakers celebrate life by riding in red limos with Satan (“Oh, Father”) and renouncing parental and religious authority (“Maternal Spirals” and “Fundamentals”). The purpose of *Heathens and How They're Made* is to demonstrate an understanding of one’s reality through rebellion, conflict, and depravity because at times these are the only things one may have.

TENNESSEE ICE

Across the street
from Dad's
two bedroom apartment
was a pond full of grass-green
algae every august.

But this was late December,
and on some desperate nights,
the pond would freeze
from side to side, turning
completely silver,
rejecting its emerald past.

With my father at work,
spraypainting his boots
orange, and my stepmother at home,
I was baby-sat by
PG videos slipped into
the VCR;
the type of
movies where
the young boy living in Anchorage
or Green Bay or Ontario
could always escape the complexities
of nine year old life
to his own
Fortress of
Solitude in the middle of
a frozen lake.

I paced across the street
in little jogging pants and
thin red shirt. My teeth
snapped against each other.
At the edge of the pond, I gazed at
the Tennessee ice. It begged me
to take the first step.
Step taken. Another. Another.

Gray air bubbles, unseen from the edge,
began to form around my feet, no longer silver.
The same cracking I've heard from ice trays
jarred my body.

Chest deep in metal-cold water that
sawed at leg. Ice,
now jagged diamonds,
stabbed skin.
My frozen Fortress failed.
And I told myself,
I'm not in Alaska.

SMALL-TOWN EMERGENCY: A BACKHOE OPERATION

I imagine the day, black and white,
like the family's flyers seen around town.
Walking to E.W. James grocery,
"Debbie has been missing since
December 12th" and her photograph.
Goofy glasses, slow smile, and
gone.

She had to enter the world again.
The waterhole. He said
he put her there after their
sex.

Small-town emergency.
Step dad came home.
"You can't believe what
they had me do today."
Workshirt sweat stiffened.
Blue jean white knees.
He had worn gloves all day,
no grit.

The best backhoe operator
in the county, the chosen one.
Dipped his digger into the waterhole
to make the vanished
visible once again. The
mechanical fist dripping
with pondwater
after each pull. He
anticipated bones for this to be
all over.

Her family on the outskirts
of the plot. A man behind
steel. Me at a school desk.
My stepfather in a cage surrounded
by black and white officer

nurses. All chancing to
see a Newborn dead.

MATERNAL SPIRALS

Kittens spiraled their mother
aiming for a piece of her warmth
and milk.

My mother held me
by the armpits
so I could see the calico-ring of fur
sheltering behind the Maytag washer.
“Don’t come back in here. Let
these cats be until they can see.”

How could I have let them be?
I needed to witness the *nook, nook, nook*
as they were being fed,
the way their heads rolled against
each other like Chinese medicine balls,
the mother licking their paws after lunch.

Phone talked to my mother in kitchen,
my light-tipped steps did not interrupt.
Screen door opened
just enough to slip through
without a pop to the frame.

If there was a pop.
I didn’t hear, I was already
in the shed, on top of
the washing machine with a
finesse akin to the cat-mother who
had eight kittens coiled around her. A
giant purr dreaming them all,
dreaming me.

Until my name fastened to the
air like a belt, my mother.
I heard again
closer this time. She stepped
inside the shed, kicking a box of detergent

to a tornado spin.
Me, crouched between the space
of the machines wanted to push
my shoulders to chin. My name
leaving a ring in the metal.

She did not see me. My crouch
kept as I heard the sound again
from behind,
traveling from the road.
Then to the right of me,
neighbor.
The kittens awakened as
the name distanced itself
from me each time in another
position. Until it became only
a word coming from the deep,
while these babies crawled
into their mother,
mewling for her milk.

AMAZING GRACES

“Let’s raise our hands
in praise.” Preacher
lifted only one
hand. Fingers fat
for the others gone
in jacket pocket.
Nubbs floated there,
blown off for a holy cause.

Our organist
all fired up on stage,
over-modulating hurt
with a child-filled heaven,
amen. My father the
same age as me? That
scared me.

My cousin, who I saw
not much, was pretty
like white Jesus painted
behind the pulpit. Covered
in sky, sapphire
waves touching feet, nature
and Him.

She said she’d cry
if Amazing Grace
was played on the
organ. My cousin hadn’t
heard it in awhile.

She hadn’t
been here in awhile.

They said she
came home from
the dark woods
alive and lucky,

smelling like vanilla
instead of dirt.

She cried off
the pew at the sweet
sounds. He put his good one
on her. She cried even more.

I didn't want her
to be a child again
and was told the time
had come for me as well.

Eyes on my cousin
in a spirit-filled heavy
breathing ball, crying
to painted Jesus
who had come out alive too.
The preacher smiled, gave me
his scarred tree stumps.
A hand that fit my head
like a hat too large.

I went there,
I got his invisible-touch.
She went there
and got saved

FREE FAIR

*The Henderson County
Carnival is recognized as the only
fair in Tennessee that never charged admission.*

The fairgrounds neighbor
the elementary school.
Pink cotton candy trailers
and GRAVITRON (“The
Ride With No Gravitational Limits”),
September brings to mouths.

Memory 1:
Pleaded with Dad to guide me through the
freak show. A small coffee tin building
on wheels.
TERROR, ALARMING, SHOCKING
airbrushed to
electrify my eyes. A carnie
yelling
“Witness the damage
of drugs inside! A
man whose sanity has
been crushed by drug use! Haunting
images inside!”
Dad declared
“Son, it’s not
worth our time,”
deeper
than a well.

Screaming men inside
the syringes of hypodermic
needles. Mouths gaping with
silver drool
and black spirals eyes.
So vivid,
I could hear their
caterwauls bellowing in my ears

before the painted
junkies were siphoned
into the needle.
The images
reflected on my father's
bald head.

Hallway ended
to spectacle.
A real man
encased in
greasy plexi-glass cubicle.
A sweaty white-t shirt,
red mesh hat
reading "Damn, I'm Good," and
Grimy blue tattoos of naked women with
bodies like my 2nd grade teacher,
wizard, and JY Loves KW
blotched his forearms like
birthmarks.

Holding a
garter snake, black
with yellow flame.
Quieting the reptile
"yes, I know. It's okay. ssssst."
No eye-contact to any of us.
But my eyes gaping.
The snake slid
through his fingers like water.
It crept on top of
his tattoos, while
my dad repeated "What
a crock of shit,"
in a voice deeper than
I could comprehend.

Memory 2:
The fairgrounds covered
with gravel.
A chalky air
choked the humid September
afternoon.
School let out early at
twelve. Fair Day.
Thirteen. Old enough

for no parents, for
more fun.

Magnetized
by the Rock-N-Roll
Express. A coaster
around
an egg-shaped track, while
Blur's "Song 2" or Veruca
Salt's "Volcano Girls"
made the speakers.

Seat-belts
guarding the lives of
blooming juveniles.
Juveniles more vibrant
than the ride itself.

"Back again, huh?"
A black guy said
to me and another.

Early twenties and
a thick green polo,
"Ring Brothers
Amusement," it said.

His forehead,
a heavy sweat cake.
Aggregate
dust glazed
wirey hair.
"If you want to stay on
the ride when everyone else
gets off,
you can."
It went on like that
forever.
But everyone needs a break
from rattling and vertigo.

Walking off the
ride's chrome catwalk,
the aluminum Plopt-Plopt
footstep into the air,
the Express's Carnie yelled

“You boys wouldn’t mind
buying me a hotdog wouldya?
Slaw and mustard. Spicy mustard
if they got it.” Flashing
four crinkled dollar bills
from his pocket.

“Thank you, boys. Let me tell you
something since we’re friends,”
taking a bite.
The mustard
into the quick
of his fingernails .

“Don’t let the pussy
get ya.”

His right hand lifted,
his index finger
and thumb into an L shape.
The webbing of
fingers, a sore,
peach-crayon color,
played heaven
and hell against his
dark skin.

“Becuz this is what pussy
will do to ya,”
while the slaw rode
on his bottom lip
like a frightened child
on a roller coaster.

Memory 3:
The fair's last night
and my girlfriend.
Screams and horror,
flipping and retching
in the Zipper.

Prize Winners'
Ding, Ding,
Dings for the Carnival’s
closing composition.

We watched
little kids in
Alligators and Sharks
saunter around rusty tracks.
“I can’t ride rides,”
she said, “they make
me sick to my stomach.”
I was stupid and bought her a
funnel cake, blanket-sugar.
It rested on thin plate.

The white powder
not afraid to ride,
escaped her mouth
and flew with
the wind.

More games. Rows
of popping balloons with darts,
automatic be-be gun target practice,
and shoot the basketball through
a warped hoop to win.
A loud mouthed carnie screamed
“WIN A PRIZE ANY PRIZE,
YOUR PRIZE! HEY, HEY,
WHAT’S YOUR PRETTY
GIRLFRIEND’ S NAME?”

“brandy.”

“BRANDY.
LIKE
BRRRRANDDDDDDYYY
WIIIIIIINNNNNNNE
DONTYAWANNAWIN
A PRIIIIIIIIIZZZZZE
FOR BRANDY
WIIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNE?”

Every six dollars,
a chance to
win a poster of the Deftones
or a scaled-to-size
stuffed polar bear
with blue bow-tie.

My first try ended with
“Nope. There’s
some red right here,
sir. Wanna try
again? Another
six.”

“Nope. Wanna try
again? Another six.”
Repeated enough times
where the forty dollars
turned into four dollars
in my billfo.
A Big Star grocer
not allowed this luxury.

No extra-large stuffed
green dragon or
goldfish in a
bowl to give,
the last night of the
fair ended with
Sophomore
stupidity to show
for the loss.

*With over 65,000
people known to attend,
it’s usually spoken
of as ‘free fair’ by
locals.*

TO SHERMAN ALEXIE

Two white boys trailer-learned-spirits running from the fireworks
one fell down like a pail of water Waters boring I dont drink it much now
The best whiskey I ever drank was in Seattle and I tasted it with you As if it
was introduced to me with a nineteenth century tongue Savored like
the Man With No Name who drank water from a canteen shaped like
a tambourine whites' spiritless drum One of the few times there was
sun but clouds close by wanting to engender me I could understand why
the 90s were angst-filled like yours Im a boy again And saw the fire rise up
Wanted to taste it like wine too go down too like rain set fire and hurt someone
too make loud noises be bright too Its dark again too Perfect for fireworks
you didnt want to sell me and I didnt want to buy them from you
because white boys want to be like Indians sometimes too

FUNDAMENTALS

"This House is Clean."- Tangina Barrons

PART I

Dad let me grow one part of my life
in a Baptist church
on the side of a highway, where all
cars speeding 75 in a 65 could see
three crosses stuck in the ground,
middle one bigger than others,
painted a supposed light-blue because that
was the color of heaven, said my cousin.
Didn't matter to me- color blind, purples
and blues confused.

It claimed to have taught the Calvary Fundamentals,
it wasn't your hole in the wall church though. No.
Better than that, a hole in the ground church,
literally. Jackson, to this day, is tornado hill
in the flats of West Tennessee.

It was a shelter for white painted Jesus
in the sky framed behind the pulpit and all
of his cowboy boots, khaki-pants-believer family
was invited to take cover from the storm.
Dirt came from ceiling, forced by screams
of preacher, hitting occupants in pews, strengthening
Pastor Brother Terry's sermon:
earth is not *your* house.

I'll tell you the truth. I only liked to sing
when my Uncle Bobby (who had severed fingers
from his bottle factory job, yet still managed to hold
a bible every "Sundy") invited me to sing.
The rest bored me, heavily.
Pastor Brother Terry's loud cries,
and I mean sobs, they hurt my ears. Crackled like
when someone kisses your hearing with screams.

I didn't believe it or understand it. And I didn't believe
or understand my father was anyone else except Ronnie Crowe.
I didn't want to be a child again
or have a brother and a sister in the afterlife
either. Because, tell me,
who wants to be a sibling
with their parents?

PART II

Another part of my life was
father and son time in front of television.
That's when Dad got religion in me,
didn't even know he was doing it.
He'd tell me about his body and the aeroplane,
which fired more wonder than Brother
Terry's depiction of the crucifixion ever did.

I remember when he first talked about it.
A warm night of *Poltergeist* in
its cable debut, coke and popcorn communion.
I worshipped it on cassette tape, but then,
released for public, special for us both
as the television that ate Carol Anne
reflected upon father and son.

He hadn't had an aeroplane in over 27 years,
since he was my age. "It only happened when the
t.v. was on," he'd tell me. Imagine black and white
screen snowing on my father in a dark living room,
coloring his face into a static ghost. His mother
and his father working nights in those same Uncle
Bobby factories. There, it'd happen to him.

He wouldn't dare call it his soul, oh no,
because that only left him "when he was dead."

Dad called it the aeroplane because it took
all senses out of body and forced them to
float in circles above his head, barely
rubbing against ceilings.
He'd sit in a chair staring blankly
when the national anthem ended and
the Indian Head Test Pattern buzzing its blank tone
into his ears while the rest of him went
around and around and around.

“Connected by an invisible umbilical cord,” he said.
That was a time when I thought the umbilical cord
was an extension of the penis. But now I can
liken dad’s aeroplane to a housefly on a string,
only when the fly got tired of going in circles
would my father go back inside himself.

He had no articulation to how it felt,
only that it was. And he never had
an answer to why I never aeroplaned.
He only grabbed me by shoulders
as we listened to the movie that
had its television debut in 1989
claim “This house has many hearts.”

During commercial break,
he’d ask me if he needed to
to refill my cup, and I watched
him go into the kitchen and
sit beside me
at the same time.

WHERE SNAKES GATHER

There are never venomous
snakes in gardens.
Too much open-space with color,
brighter than our bedroom's
wall-paper. Not supposed
to get near.
Told never touch the
cross-shaped flowers
with colors like Sunday dresses.
Delicate beads of chaste
water from the sprinkler
that made the petals smile.
Chicken-snakes, maybe, not poisonous though.

You only found those in places you shouldn't be.
Cottonmouths walking on swampy water
in a lake only fathers know about. Bobbing, ominous
heads so close to the fear as if they were not afraid of your
daddy's low-purring boat.

Or copperheads in washed-out gullies as I thought
this is a place where snakes gather, and at that moment
one hung dead on two intersecting
roots. I jumped because I heard they still struck
even after they had gone and died.

INSPIRATION

I would drive all night, new
license to turn fast on streets
or slice fields, just to find
dead animals and take pictures of them
with disposable cameras.
Except dogs and cats, off limits because
they had names. Better splitted,
Better photo I'd think.
It came from *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*
1974, when Leatherface calmed nerves
by looking at polaroids of chicken bones.
I love that movie. My dad did too,
died before I got to second grade.

Flash in the night on a deerhead,
torn off by hunter, wasn't always
the greatest idea of beautiful photography,
but worked for me. White blighted
snout in the chemical of developed frame,
left antlers in dark-light focus
like broken branches. Near a nice
Lane close to my house,
found a snake once. Black racer
not racing. I snapped it too and
came out dark reptile cursive
on asphalt. My foot was in the shot
close to its tail, a bravery mark I think. I was
so scared of snakes, but still made a duplicate
for my half brother. For a second, he liked
the slick of the touch and slobbered,
but boredom is real. I put the photograph
deep in his toybox, hoping he'd find it
when he got older. Creased, crumbled, interesting.

I named the photos on the back
with sharp blue underdeveloped
s-crawl. I'm left handed, so
the title was likely smeared.

Broken bird that fell all the way
to bottom called "Blood You Spilled
Near to Me Woke Me Before Time"
or the remains of something with hair called
"You Think This Is a Costume? This Is
a Way of Life."

I stopped not long after
Toneisha Timberlake saw one
hanging inside my blue locker. It was
bloody o-possum, mound of fur wrapped
around a streetlight. She yelled,
"You need help, weird whiteboy,"
and it spread in cafeteria talk, sparking
the only hand-written note I ever received,
"I bet you take all kinds of nasty
pictures, fag" signed BENTON PRICE
in straightest shorthand.
I kept that letter in a drawer.

School psychologist had
laminated or lamented
photos of dolphins jumping out of water,
cartoon teens- red cheeked, happy, and cool
watching television with parents.
My mother had to be there too
and my half brother sat in her forearm
reaching for air, murmuring when he got
nothing but empty.

When the psychologist wanted to know
why, I asked her if she ever saw
Leatherface holding polaroids
like a pair of 2 Diamonds in one hand
and distressed head in the other
(wondering what the insides of all
really meant). My mother said,
"His father really liked that movie too,"
bouncing sibling on knee.

"Well, what do the photographs
mean to you?" the lady asked. I
could smell mother's cigarette-
smoke sweater, while my brother's
chin glistened. And I stared
at the dolphin open-air flying

with grey skin, the word
Inspire hovering over the picture,
over the ocean, in the clouds,
with nice-pointed broad strong
letters hoping to remind us
all of something.

STILL ILL

Bleach and peroxide fucked up,
gave me stupid hair color. Off-white
orange came shining into classroom.
Late too because I had been slobbering
in halls and glittering concrete. Too many
pills to impress the girl with the
Playboy bunny tanned in between her
thighs beside a discolored mole.

“You got anything like this on yer body?”

she said below bleachers during lunch.
Scars, sure. Childhood, pocketknives,
cigarettes. Smoothed with age and no
detail. Unsure about them.
You don’t want to show a scar, don’t-
learned that from my father
or book or movie or something.
“Scars don’t need no second guessin.”
I may have made that up.

But there were OXYs, dug deep
in pockets. “How I know those’re real?”
Palm to mouth, three of ‘em went down.
Everything empty. Except a ring, class of
’03. I.L.L (for Isaac Lutherin Lane)
engraved in dull silver. She took it,
let it dangle down her thumb
like a horseshoe. “I gotta go to the bathroom”
She never came back, but I
put myself against a coke machine.
Heard the cooler buzz in my hands,
sure I was getting somewhere.

“Luther is fucked up.”

“Luther is shitted on.”

“Luther, get on home. Skip before trouble.”

Hell, they knew I couldn't leave because
I came and went on the bus like everyone
who didn't have a Camaro, Avalon, Durango.

But got to Calculus II,
although feeling calculused.
Passed out on the desk. Marble so cool
and even, it flattened my cheeks.
There, dreamt of normal
black hair, rings on ring fingers, bathroom sex
until I woke up somewhere else.

No longer class of '03, still ill.

HEATHENS AND HOW THEY'RE MADE

I.

"You guys better stay inside the buggy
or you're going to get the SWAT team."

Interested,

I look to see the daddy, his
palm facing the guilty, he is
being honest.

Catching my gaze,
he says

"this is the SWAT team."

Original. Impressed, I go
back to stocking the exotic
glassware. A transparent green,
full of airbubbles, bending your sight,
probably worth loads of money.
Donated by an heir,
"she had nothing better do except collect
crystal," duly noted by the thin layer of
glass fogging dust.
My fingerprints leave
a trace of boring work on that smooth powder.
I have nothing better to do.

Smat, smat, smat, I look at the daddy,
"Now that's
The SWAT TEAM!" He was
patting their wrists as if their precious ivory
would break. As if they had no behinds.
Not even a peep, their eyes still clear to see.
One of them even hugged their father,
justice,
a plaything,
while getting it.

Daddy pushes them towards
checkout. They peel out of the

cart pulling clothes from hangers
on the way,
their stomach full on chances.

II.

Little boy had to follow
mother. Arm stretched in the air
like a rope to a tree.

I notice a child's walk
to a parent's gait seems
like skipping, but trying
not to trip. No rhythm.
It's cute.

"Naw, you can' ask tha man where tha toys is at."
Why not? Why can't he?
In the right corner
in front of the bathrooms.
Walls of stuffed
animals, taller than your mother, all of them
clean. I sort to make sure
no stains are on the toys and
no unclean get on the floor.

I hear every
derivative of "no" from the linens.
The child tiptoes because
of his mother's grip, afraid she'll hear
the truths of his footsteps,
he wants something.
Her clasp responds
the only way you'll get it
is if you take it
because you can't get it any other way.
"No."

She walks to the check-out,
hands full of sheets, blankets, quilts
stacked like firewood.

"Is this going to be it" I ask.
"Git over here, Devondre! Quit lookin' at
tha' model!" clinched teeth, lips moving
more than they have to. Little boy
clasped again.
"Thas it."

III.

I almost trip on a Hot-Wheel.
Loss of velocity.
Two children, and I mean babies,
sit in front of the toys. Stranded like
the toy-car, alone. Only me
in front of them.

Earlier, one of them played
on the piano. A crazed blur of
notes stole the store's radio. Of course
she could not read the rainbow sign
"If you can not play, do
not play" taped on the piano like a
Wanted! poster. Her diaper
poked out of the miniature red pants. Her
legs moving like streamers from the piano bench, her
head jounced shoulder to shoulder.
But my index finger, the metronome, moved side
to side. She slid off the seat,
ran to the back, and hid behind some clothes,
so fast.

I notice the other baby crawling
towards the electronics.

"How much?" their mother asks.
"Twenty-Five."
"Twenty-Five dólares?"
"Yes." She got on the
machine. It exercised
her legs in a running fashion, back and forth.

I've seen T.V.'s fall from those wobbling
shelves and crater the floor.
"Hijos Vamonos."

Mother laughed
at the machine. Her legs
minced the air.
The baby put its hand
on the first bracket, making a stand.
First step, perhaps.
It wanted to climb,
and I didn't make a sound.

ADULT-NESTS

Just today I found two
bird nests failed to the ground.
Like works of witchcraft to tell
me, "this will happen to you."
Twigs, the carpentry of
birds, deserted, left for
broken. I don't have
children yet, thank god.
The symbolism
could be greater.

Left at eighteen to
survive on chewing gum bits,
ramen noodles,
and soda cans. Pieced together
in the same art of the birds.
And so easily dashed to
ground if not pieced just right.
If weight, correctly not angled,
the branch will sway in the wind.
And my nest broken to the ground
for everyone to see.

WHY I DON'T GO FISHING AGAIN

That river water smell
floats into my nostrils as
I glide across the bridge
on my bicycle,
the odor of my father's
fishing lures and slimed
chicken livers. When I
had to be so still, so quiet,
so patient to catch a catfish.
"Why is the line not moving?"
"Why do my legs hurt?"
Those facets were not mine then.

I come home, open door.
The dog-hair, a
gray animal of its own, flies
into corners and settles again.
Clomping feet and dog's toe-nails
against the hard wood floor
voices through my apartment,
then hushes by dinner.
I wait for chicken to fry, 10
minutes on each side,
wading on my couch, waiting for
the night to catch.

MY FIRST

My best friend said he knew it was mine,
“It just had that vibe” and the sticker on
bumper, “Are you pro-life or just pro-birth?”

94 Corsica, my first.
I should’ve never gotten rid of you.
With that slight curve on your hood because
I pulled up the long skirt in dedication
to the Pentecostal grounds I was doing it
on. And we put the condom in a cup
and threw seed to ground.

I loved you even when the
water broke every freezing February
morning, a manufacturer’s mistake.
My floorboards: frozen ponds,
starting to rust, a drip hole. And you
smelled like mildew of unwashed denim jeans.

I drove you fast and never got lost.

I gave you up for only 600 dollars
to meet fear in a ‘97 Oldsmobile. Unforgiving
metal crashed into a pregnant woman
and my split forehead. She spoke to me
in spitting fashion and said
I owed her a thousand dollars.

And that was the end of that.

I now have an ‘01 Buick LeSabre.
The air conditioner makes a click-click
like the cocking of a toy gun. Like the
Olds, there’s lots of room. But like you,
the seats are covered in suede and
calms my thighs when the summer is hot.

RELATIONSHIP SPILLED

I was in black sleep, ant swarm.
But the remnants of a Seven-Eleven styrofoam cup
never emptied
still awake.
Syrup sunk below the seltzer like oil
falling to the bottom.
And the bottom fell out, viscous
circle-spreading.

We had shared the cup,
but I drank from it. Midway until
ice melted. The drink no longer a drink.
Flat water to mouth,
no sensation. Only fluid to rot.

She swiped the brown sugar ring to only
a fade. Her doing.
And the paste still there,
still honeyed, still
there.

Our windowsill got ants.

Dalmation-spotted,
dancing on the spill like
heated-hurricanes we see
on the weather channel,
needing more sweet
to frenzy their antennas.
Our framework became there's.

This is what happens
when we
do not clean
after ourselves.

I put my hand on the sill to
see if they would bite. They did.

Bit me with hello-shocks like when we first met
to form a bolt if I'd let them.

I did not let them. Instead,
I got a rag,
and one swipe erase forever.
Backing me to sleep.

SEX IN A MOTEL

I said you looked like
an actress.
I had my glasses off.
And you came from the
darkness to save
the guilty-blind.

Nightgown V'd to belly
button. Blank air between
your skin and cloth.

Red light came
from the ceiling star.
The night's shade
gave our bodies
correct color for
the eyes.

Purposely blurred
and puzzled beside me.
I put my hand on
your silk and directed
you to action.

“I’M THINKING ABOUT CUTTING IT”

It used to wake me up at night.

Shorter then, perfect at tickling
the part of my nose where nostrils meet.
I would stare as it moved like seaweed
in the ocean with my breath,
steady as a current, always there.

I find it in my clothes now,
especially out of the dryer.
Bound together by static
electricity. I can count on seeing
the hair as much as I can count
on the washing machine
to make the rounds in cleaning
my dirty laundry.

Attached with a dog hair finesse,
so gold, only I can see.

Only in my clothes.

It knots my toes, letting them suffocate
in my socks. Pulling strands that are forever
out of my sweater, keep pulling and pulling
and when one ends, another repeats

As if the sweater you purchased for me
was sewn with your blonde.

I pull. The energy leaves
my body like a nosebleed.

Ran my dog yesterday.
And on the leash, a hair
with that same invisible gold,

only floating by a tether, ran beside me.
Felt its electric charge in my sweatpants.

I shook the leash for the fiber
to fly like the fur of a dandelion
into the afternoon, in hopes it'd
attach somewhere else.

BLOODSUCKER (FOR CARLA)

The only time I
ever met a blonde-haired
flying with the ravens,
snake-bitten bosomed,
afraid of cross&stake,
ivory sharp teeth,
tattered robe wearing,
frosted pink shaved-
legged vampire,
I asked her if I
could put my moonlight
into her blood-drinking chalice,

then she began to glitter.

THE COFFEE THAT CHANGED COLOR

I'm in the break-room,
fixing my morning.
I shovel creamer on top
of black coffee with a
butter knife.
All we have is
plastic, black,
killed of color.
The creamer
mushrooms like
dirt from
an old pet's grave.

James
walks in,
sees me stirring the
first cup,
furthering away
my dreams,
and walks back out of
my presence
to his cubicle cloud.

You wouldn't think
he'd want to be alone
because

James' wife
heart-attack
and gone.
His first Thursday back
with no desire to watch
me create something more
than white and night,
day and dark.

The liquid
twisting and turning.

Black and tan
turns into clay.
Something new
to forget the old.
I told him that once.

This is what you do
in the morning to
wake up. But he wasn't
there for the coffee
that changed color.

HOMEDRUNK

To my friends: Ride
those tornadoes, use the lightning
as tridents, and make the rain
your spirit redeemer. Warrior
sounds!

To my friends: I'm
drunk off wine, roaming
around the neighborhood
alone, listening to leaves
scatter like beads from a necklace
that's broken, the wind
feeling like the lightness
of her skin, wishing I was a
Comanche reflecting
on the empty plains.
I love you both.

HERE AND THERE AND COYOTE

“There is a light and it never goes out.” - Morrissey

Before I saw the coyote in the alleyway to my apartment,
my stomach was a tombstone, full of tex-mex.
Horny and dreading the empty space. Wondering when the hell I could leave my
minimum wage job that was supposed to get me from here to there.
Where the hell was there? I had never seen it.

Here didn't hear my misery as I came home every night.
Feet burning from gas station concrete floors. I knew
that when my shoes came off, my feet would smell
like sour cream and onion Lays, but the traps would be gone. And I would try
to sleep and only dream about the next day of here, where the drawer would be off or
my manager would ask me to kill another shift. Another day zipped forever.

And then I saw the coyote. At first, I thought it was the world's largest raccoon.
His legs were Dali-elephants like skinny. His body no bigger than a lab's.
But I remember his gray the most. His mane pieced together like a quilt of different
silver, outshining my headlights, laying light on the doors of apartment, and turning the night
into a candle. He bounced towards the Buick and I eyed his trot as he
passed, moving along the alleyway, leaving my here to continue for his there, and
the light never coming back.

EVAN'S CREEK

Dedicated to Vic Collins and Stephen Rhines

Whiskey color
reminds me of creek
water I used
to swim in.

May, days' end.
End of rope
to bring
feet to soddy
bottom. Wear ourselves
out so bad, we'd
fall asleep on
rocks like rocks.

Once awoke to no one
around. So
night,
scared of the
chainless night dogs.
Pedaled so hard,
crashed
on the way
home.

OH, FATHER

Before I met them, I rode in a red limo
and wasn't alone. That's right.
Tinted windows, so dark,
no in or out. Upholstery lined with pentagrams.
Fin-antenna on the trunk of the ride,
pitchfork-shaped, picking up snow signals
that barely told us where to go next. Beside me,
he smoked a cigar that smelled like hands
of childhood with dirt in fingerprints,
waiting to be washed, but kept filthy just because.
There was also a mask. Two bloody fangs,
long waxy gleaming wig. Same mask I wore Halloween
'96. It scared me then but I didn't have to see it. I wore it.
I ran through neighborhoods with the latex sweaty as
it coolly stuck to my face. That same holiday
I took toilet paper to my homeroom teacher's
fall-dead magnolia. And the wind
hit the thin paper like a harp. Defacement was fine.
Me and him, we were fine as we flew by deserts
in the air-conditioned limo. It felt good.
I got older and it felt like drugs. We went beyond
Death fucking Valley, dead on. Parts
Unknown, can you believe it?
All the while, the limo's interior lights shined on
his slick black dress shoes
a moonlight white, the moment before
gray. And gray is a moment before
black, and black is what happens
to us all.

I'm in a four-door Toyota Camry. "Just perfect
for the economical family," that guy told me. He had
a tie with an angel on it. Damn.
I had a new car. Now I could drive pass the
streets called Huntingdon and Dogwood and Hinson.
There will be more magnolias and flags on Mailboxes
pointed up to let heaven know that this is my

address. And I'll end up so far from Hell, some people call it something else.

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VITA

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