

2013

Rum Heart

Cameron Witbeck
Northern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Witbeck, Cameron, "Rum Heart" (2013). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 524.
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/524>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

RUM HEART

By

Cameron Witbeck

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2013

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: Rum Heart

This thesis by Cameron Witbeck is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Austin Hummell Date

First Reader: Matthew Frank Date

Second Reader: David Wood Date

Department Head: Dr. Raymond J. Ventre Date

Associate Provost of Graduate Education and Research: Date
Dr. Brian Cherry

ABSTRACT

Rum Heart

By

Cameron Witbeck

This thesis represents a consideration of the reader-text interaction within an entire collection of poems. I have approached my collection, not as a presentation of an over-arching narrative or “different takes” on a related subject, but as a linear emotional journey of desolation-to-salvation for the reader. The poems are separated into two sections. The ordering of the poems in both halves is set up to evoke four successive emotional responses from the reader: 1.) Engagement 2.) Disorientation 3.) Desolation 4.) Redemption.

Copyright by
Cameron Witbeck
2013

For Thao, my river birch.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Thao Do, Austin Hummell, Matthew Frank, David Wood, the entire NMU English department, my family, my friends, my ancestors, and the wolves.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications in which some of these poems, or earlier versions of them, appeared:

The North American Review: “The Deer-Runner”

Witness: “The Michigan Dogman Watches His Wife Sleep,” “The Michigan Dogman Mourns His Father,” “Kenn Peterson Shares His Dream with the Michigan Dogman”

Rosebud: “Remus, MI”

PANK: “The Mecosta Burnout,” “Wendigo”

The Way North: “Predator and Prey,” “Island Poem No. 23”

Yemassee: “Eavesdropping at Starbucks...Again”

Sundog Lit: “The Tunnel Rat,” “The Chum Chum Thief”

The Prose Poem Project: “Pluck”

Greatest Lakes Review: “Cripple”

This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Part One:	
Rum Heart.....	16
Antifreeze.....	17
The Pickle Dump	18
The Michigan Dogman Watches His Wife Sleep.....	20
How the Dancing Bear Learned.....	21
Wendigo.....	23
How Many March Snowstorms Does it Take to Break a Michigander’s Heart? ...	24
The Chum Chum Thief.....	25
The Deer-Runner	26
The Michigan Dogman Mourns His Father.....	27
Island Poem No. 23.....	28
Glow in the Dark.....	29
De-Quilling the Michigan Dogman	30
Predator and Prey.....	31
Hillbilly Band-aid	32
The Michigan Dogman Prepares for Winter.....	33
Eavesdropping at Starbucks... Again.....	35
Without You, I’m Just Keanu	36
Wild Grapes	37
Cripple	38
The Michigan Dogman Tastes Human Flesh for the First Time	39
Mix-Tape: After-Bender Sex.....	40
Bobber.....	41
The Mecosta County Fair	42
Part Two:	
Tom Cruise Reviews Survival Knives on YouTube.....	44
Crush Cage.....	45
The Hunter’s Wife	46
The Michigan Dogman Fights at the Remus Tavern.....	47
Amen.....	48
Pale-Boy in the Breezeway.....	49
Starvation Point.....	50
John the Baptist Lives in Baraga	51
The Wizard of Diamond Lake	52
The Michigan Dogman Gets a Lap-dance from a Girl He Loved in High School ..	53
Pluck	54
Remus, MI	55

White Meat	56
Addiction is Easy	57
Light.....	58
The Michigan Dogman in County	60
The Mecosta Burnout.....	61
The Dutch Sell Guns to the Mohawk.....	62
Foreclosure on the Flower Farm.....	63
The Tunnel Rat	64
Chance Gets Back on the Horse	65
Kenn Peterson Shares His Dream with the Michigan Dogman.....	66
Euchre	67
Mishupishu in the Garden of the Drowned.....	68
The Shooting.....	69
Works Cited.....	70

INTRODUCTION

What is (a) “Rum Heart?”

The phrase is my phonetic Anglicization of the first half of North Frisia’s national motto: “Rüm Hart – Klaar Kimming.”

One interpretation of the motto, “Wide heart, Clear Horizon,” is that it serves as a type of invitation from the North Frisians, who see themselves as an open and coastal people living in an open and coastal place. It is an assurance, to themselves and to the world, of their goodness.

I want to be good to you. May we be good to each other. May our hearts be as wide as the clearest horizon.

Talk to Me

If pressed, I could say that my thesis is about the many things in my many poems, like bears, tire-spinning competitions, Ojibwe manitous, winter, teeth, blood, fruit, etc. But this would be to miss the point. It is the human voice that gets me going. I love voices. How word choices can be so insular. How we can only explore the dark shores of ourselves by speaking to ourselves, quietly.

I imagine the voices to write in. But before my pen reacquaints with paper, I speak and sing. I howl in these voices. They say what they want and I listen. I find old voices in dead documents and tomes. I remember voices from the Horr Store before the owner burned it down. In lyric poetry, it is voices like these which, as Edward Hirsch argues, serve as the reader’s primary source of textual immersion. “We know we are

within the presence of a dramatic poem when the intensity of the utterance is so great that it blots out any surrounding context or discourse. It is a dream that refigures reality,” (Hirsch 122-123).

A new voice always begins the same way, with me mumbling in the shower. Then pieces click, there is a piecemeal convergence, a coagulation of heart-meal. The voice becomes more than a voice. It becomes someone speaking. This is what Ilya Kaminsky says good poetry provides us with, a way to affirm order from the inexpressible within ourselves. “From the inarticulate comes the new harmony. The lyric poet wakes up the language: the speech is revealed to us in new, unexpected syntax, in music, in ways of organizing the silences in the mouth,” (Mandelstam xix).

These voices speak to the priest in my heart’s confessing booth. They provide apologia. There can be found explanations for why children get hurt or why my girlfriend is awake at 3 a.m. and watching the snow fall quietly outside our window. These answers, good or bad, are welcome. Each answer is one step further from silence, where the quiet of night is God’s most awful bird.

Poetry is the light that will burn in the dark for as long as your heart can feed you words.

Mimesis

Most of the poems within my manuscript could be described as lyric poems with an emphasis on character voice and a tendency towards mimesis, or replication of emotional experiences through the medium of poetry. M.E. Grenander defines mimetic poems quite simply as short lyrics which “portray a brief span of human behavior,” (27).

I would expand Grenander's definition by positing that mimesis, as I am using it, is a clarifying replication of a person's interior dialogue. Mimesis allows the writer to creatively address the problem inherent in written language as an expressive medium, which is the abstraction and distance that exists between signifiers and the signified. Consider the word "cup." You can say it all day, but that doesn't mean you'll get a drink of water.

Mimesis allows the writer to find alternate routes to an intended emotional reaction within the reader. Consider again the word "cup." It still doesn't hold water. But there are always other uses for tools beyond the one it was sold for. The primary function of language is to communicate information from speaker to audience. For example, child says "cup" and his mother calmly brings him one.

Now consider a man standing behind you in an elevator. He whispers, "You moist squelch." You experience the sharp knife of fear. You wrap your fingers around whatever weapon is most ready. What happened? Look at the words, the information being communicated via language. Syntactically, the sentence "You moist squelch" is most reminiscent of the structure of insults. Even if this is true, what was the insult? The algebra of semiotics fails to account for this sentence. The information being communicated is nonsense. Couldn't he have engendered the same effect within you by squealing like a sow?

I don't think that a formless squeal would provoke the same reaction. In his essay, "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky posits that an emotional reaction to communication, like your fear in our example or an audience's response to a piece of art, is dependent upon a high level of intentionality and design. "The purpose of art is to

impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged,” (16).

The information being communicated was nonsense, but something was communicated in that specific sentence. The speaker spoke and the audience was frightened. The speaker didn’t appeal to your rational fears about being alone or of spider-birds. He spoke nonsense with no clear semiotic significance. Why were you scared? Perhaps you were scared because the sentence sounded almost right. The grammatical scaffolding around the sentence seemed familiar, but somehow off. It came to you from the Uncanny Valley of languages.

This example hints at one of the ways that mimesis can be used effectively to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Additionally, this example further delineates the difference between direct mimesis and the definition of mimesis as it has been laid out in the context of this introductory essay. If the man from the preceding example had stood behind you and made an audible noise that sounded exactly like an animal that frightens you, then that would be an example of direct mimesis. The fright you experience would have been different emotionally. It would have been more immediate and instinctual.

The terror that the man from the example makes you feel is largely dependent on surprise. If he does that next week, and every week from now on, it won’t be funny, but it won’t be the same kind of scary. The newness of “You moist squelch” was signaled to your brain by its sound, which told you that it was language and not a door opening. You

absorbed the sentence in order to understand it. As you held the infiltrating pieces of it in your mind you raced to find connections in order to make some semblance of sense. Maybe you strung together the separate threads of the insult-like syntax, your personal and negative associations with the word “moist,” and the suppressive denotation of “squelch. All three threads, negative in their own ways, were the only materials you had in this split second of attempted sense-making. Your mind initiated a split second of worst case scenario mode. The free association you created resulted in a powerful emotional response to this specific stimulus.

Hirsch claims that “Poems communicate before they are understood and the structure operates on, or inside, the reader even as the words infiltrate the consciousness,” (31). It is in this way that lyric poetry is able to make use of mimesis in order to evoke strong emotional reactions by using surprise and newness to circumvent the inevitable linguistic inoculation that so many people experience. Poetry is able to shock the system into every kind of heartbreak.

The Gods of Sun and Wine

The concept of mimesis has been, since antiquity, discussed as a counterpoint to diegesis, or narrative description. In ancient Greece, mimesis was considered the providence of Dionysus, as it implied the reckless, effacing subjugation of the replicator’s self in favor of the replicated original. Consider a dancer who sees a tree she wants to move like, so she imitates it. From the Grecian perspective, the self has been momentarily suppressed in order for the mimic to mimic. In empirical terms, you have zero things being the dancer; conversely, you have one-plus things being that tree.

Diegesis, on the other hand, was considered an Apollonian ideal which necessitated the pursuit of clarity through rational contextualization. In other words, the calming hand of narrative, through the alchemy of forced perspective and context, can change random happenstance into solid significance. The Dionysus-Apollo rivalry has taken many names in poetry throughout the ages and is most recognizable in contemporary poetry as the delineation between narrative and lyric poets. I'm not interested in "picking sides" but I am in need of clarifying the applicability and role of mimesis in my poetry.

Consider a suite of poems inspired by the following narrative. Superman loves Lois Lane. Someone shoots at Superman and Lois Lane, forgetting that the man she loves is Superman, takes the bullet for him. As she dies, Superman flies around the world, in order to reverse the earth's rotation. The narrator explains that this action will reverse time.

In the diegesis approach, we would see poems constructed around each of the significant events that have been previously mentioned. The story would be told in greater detail, likely with authorial contextualization to make sense of this senseless, senseless crime. The reader would follow the development of the narrative in roughly the same way that they would follow a novel, at a distance. This secondary-ness reaffirms the viewer's role as an audience member. The presentational/narrative/diegesis model has its benefits, but my concern is that it typically does not immerse the reader the way that mimesis can, due to the former's inherent reliance on a clear and consistent distance between the reader and the content.

In the mimetic approach to the Superman example, there might never be a reference to Superman at all, not because it's intentionally opaque, but rather because the contextual detail of Superman's identity would only hamstring the convergence of character and audience by reminding the audience of the significant and obvious differences. In his essay "The Word and Culture," Osip Mandelstam lashes out against such fleeting and tangential details as dangerous distractions from the "inner image" of a poem. "One shouldn't demand of poetry any special quiddity, concreteness, materiality. It's that very same revolutionary hunger. The doubt of Thomas. Why should one have to touch it with the fingers? But the main point is, why identify the word with the thing, with the grass, with the object that it signifies?" (Monas 531).

Consider a hypothetical poem written in the lyric voice of Superman as he flies around the world, desperately trying to rewind time and save Lois. In this example, the character of Superman matters only because it's the specific narrative we have been given. Yes, he is flying in this example, which is admittedly super, but emotionally, Superman feels helpless and frightened. We could have just as easily watched a father sitting in a hospital's waiting room for news about his daughter's surgery. The emotional states of both Superman and the father are the same, despite the different paths that have led them there.

This hypothetical serves to illustrate what I believe to be the most significant difference between the two approaches, which is how they involve the reader. The presentational model is *about* The Man of Steel saving Lois Lane by reversing time, which the reader observes from the distance of their typical position as an audience. However, the mimetic model *is* the replication of the poem-speaker's emotional state

within the reader. Somehow, the reader is surprised or “tricked” by the language of the lyric mimetic poem into empathy. The reader experiences, even if in the smallest degree, what it’s like to know that you’re going to lose someone you love.

Osip the Magician

Osip Mandelstam has a poem that is sometimes referred to in English as “The Stalin Epigram.” It got him sent to a work camp so you can imagine the content is fairly critical of the Great Mustache. The poem ends with this line: “And Ossetian torso is wide,” (Peschel).

It makes no immediate sense. It is broken and disjointed from the relatively clear syntactical patterns established early in the poem. The disorientation is intentional. The readerly confusion and frustration is due to the language, which flusters by moving in the guise, in the camouflage, of grammatical communication. It almost looks like it could make sense. According to Shklovsky, this “roughening” of language is necessary in artistic work so that “Its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension of space, but, so to speak, in its continuity. Thus ‘poetic language’ gives satisfaction,” (19).

I am left helpless in the face of Mandelstam’s nonsense. And I am clapping like a little child who’s just seen a special trick, a sleight of hand maneuver I didn’t perceive but am certain of. I want to suss out his every how.

This is a poem by Mandelstam called “Night Piece,” in which, the author conjures an emotional reaction within his readers through a very specific combination lyric voice, structure, and imagery:

“Come love let us sit together
in the cramped kitchen breathing kerosene.
There’s fuel enough to forget the weather,
the knife is ours and the bread is clean.

Come love let us play the game
of what to take and when to run,
of come with me and come what may
and holding hands to hold off the sun,” (Mandelstam 27).

How’s your heart? Is it broken? It is broken and here is why. Notice, now, how this piece opens: “Come love let us sit together.” How gentle it is. How tender to not even capitalize or delineate the pet name “love.” How heavy this tenderness must weigh on the speaker.

We see the implied external world forcing a sense of compression on “love” and the speaker in their “cramped kitchen.” We see the external influences of *want* and *not enough* which the speaker refuses: “There’s fuel enough to forget the weather,/the knife is ours and the bread is clean.” Look at how this poem moves in its silly, simple rhyme scheme. Look at the sadness which must be sung. The rhyming and the implied external threat create a garish juxtaposition, like a little boy playing jacks with his baby-teeth.

There is playfulness, though, in the sung sadness. The speaker is not trying to trick “love” into believing that this is really a game. His phrasing admits their helplessness, their impending displacement. But he is trying to convince them both that they *can* play it as a game. Almost overwhelmed by the implications of the external threat, the speaker lapses into the language of urgency, of tragedy, of refugees: “of what to take and when to run,/of come with me...”

The once furtive, fugitive language evolves in the penultimate line of the poem with “come what may.” The language stands up and it not only walks upright, it swaggers. In the word “come,” the speaker has identified the potential to use two common and similarly structured phrases “come with me” and “come what may.” The rhythm and pacing of the poem, which reaches a crescendo at this point, provides the necessary energy for his transformation, for him to find this connective tissue, this nervous bridge to transpose them from the fear of “when to run” to the flippant and defiant strength that allows them to “hold off the sun.”

“Night Piece,” is a lyric mimetic poem, in that very little is directly presented to the reader. All eight lines are from the lyric voice of the speaker. Nothing actually happens in the physical world of the poem for us to see. However, all these points of narrative are implied. We know that there is an addressee, a “love.” We know that they are living precariously at the time of the poems speaking. We have a sense of how their relationship is able to overcome this set of circumstances.

In this poem, “what happens” barely matters. What is significant is how the reader experiences the text and the level of interactivity that ensues. This poem is successful at engaging the reader in its immersive, mimetic effect because of the language it uses.

While we are not “love” we are ascribed that temporary role because of the speaker’s address and the language being used. The speaker uses a language that is both confidential and revealing. It is how lovers speak. It should be no surprise then that the reader finds themselves being cared for by the immediacy and the tenderness of the speaker’s voice. We are able to walk miles in the addressee’s shoes more readily because we sense that the speaker wants nothing more than to keep us/“love” alive.

Rum Heart Redux

Before writing the poem “Rum Heart,” I read five books and countless articles concerning the Spice Trade. About zero percent of the research went into the poem itself. But the research was necessary in order for me to create the voice of the speaker from the world of the poem I had imagined.

The poem is set during the Age of Discovery. The speaker is a North Frisian sailor who fell in love with a woman in the West Indies. Many years after he leaves her, the speaker is miserable with nostalgia and remorse, which manifests itself in fever dreams of the tastes and images he barely remembers from the island.

The poem was interesting to write because it marked a departure in my writing, in spatial geography and in the density of my lines. My writing became more “difficult, roughened, and impeded,” as Shklovsky said the language of poetry must be (19). The rhetoric of “Rum Heart” shifts sharply throughout the poem, pivoting on statements which alternate between positive and negative connotations for the reader. Throughout the poem, I also make use of anaphora to create a sense of perpetuity and echoing. There are many references to various food stuffs, such a gruel, salt beef, limes, plums, bread,

turtle meat, etc. The food based imagery and the repetition initially function in the poem as a form of thanks-giving, a type of prayer. “In her, my tongue learned the dervish plum. In her, the winter rains.”

However, this later takes on a different context in the poem when it is revealed that the speaker has long ago left both the island and the woman he loved. The speaker’s body and mouth physically disintegrate during this exile:

“...When I left her, my tongue
went bald from want. I jerkied in the years
of wind and sea, my teeth bent against the lime.
Each night, gumming the empty air, I dreamt
of the hummingbird beneath her skin.”

The speaker’s mouth, which had been the instrument of reception for the early barrage of sensory details, is revealed to have been invalid the entire time. We never tasted those things. We tasted his memory. We were eating ghosts.

The speaker’s disintegration extends even further than his body when the narrative tense shifts from the past to the present in the last stanza. The ending of the poem makes use of repetition and food based imagery again, however, these images lack the substantiality of the previous images. They lack the hearty adjectives which added heft and physicality to some of the earlier images, such as “battered gruel,” “dervish plum,” and “blackest bread.” When we get to the final three lines, the repetition and food images would almost seem like self-satire if the speaker’s tone wasn’t so exposed and helpless:

“The taste leaves me bashful and shoeless.

It leaves me strung on licorice and lemon pepper.

And when the rum runs dry, it leaves me.”

The final lines are describing the taste-memories he associates with the woman he left behind. They open with non-directly-sensory related details, “bashful” and “shoeless.” Both of these details carry a strong emotional connotation of helplessness which is contrasted by the comparative energy of the penultimate line. This line uses food imagery; however the food stuffs in question are actually just spices, not dietary victuals. They imply the illusion of sustenance. The word “strung,” in this line suggests an association with drug withdrawal.

These last lines are the only ones in the poem that are written in present tense. The speaker isn’t just remembering, he is being haunted by his memories. The repetition is downplayed by the difference in referents uses in the anaphoric phrase “____ leaves me.” Line one uses “the taste,” while lines two and three both use “it” at opposite ends of the sentences. The caesuras created in the reader’s interaction with the text ensure that the return to the anaphoric phrase is both surprising and perfectly natural. The rhetorical content of the line, which heavily implies sustained alcoholism, further adds to the desolation of the character. The images, syntax, and rhetoric of the final stanza come from “The art of last things,” which, according to Hirsch, “Is an art pared away to what is absolutely essential, an art of making language at the edge of a void where everything is undone, unmade,” (146).

One of the strengths of the poem “Rum Heart” is that the speaker ends up in such a terrible position precisely because he once loved so much. In such pain, there must be

some form of justification. He is holding on to the memories even though they are killing him. He believes his destruction is his atonement for past indiscretions. His redemption is an act of purification. He wants to make himself a worthy home for a love so desperate.

He wants nothing, but a heart so wide.

ONE

Rum Heart

I was born to buttered gruel, heir to the duchy
of salt beef and thick milk. If I had a tongue,
then it was blind before the Island

of Bright Peppers, before I lapped the sea salt
from her tattooed chin. In her, my tongue learned
the dervish plum. In her, the winter rains.

If it was bounty, then I couldn't see the forest
for the bushels, the skipples. If it was prayer,
I took it all—from winter wheat to the blackest bread.

I ate the turtle and thanked the shell, the cup,
the blessing of stock. When I left her, my tongue
went bald from want. I jerkied in the years

of wind and sea, my teeth bent against the lime.
Each night, gumming the empty air, I dreamt
of the hummingbird beneath her skin.

The taste leaves me bashful and shoeless.
It leaves me strung on licorice and lemon pepper.
And when the rum runs dry, it leaves me.

Antifreeze

I watched her go ass over elbows in the snow
when she tried to bury her cat. Death is bitter.
It's the good lord that makes it taste so sweet.

I'd been neck deep in some girl's Hot Damn
before I poured myself in the diesel. Before I fell
ass over elbows in love.

It was her moonboots in the driveway, stamping
out the puddle of antifreeze. It should be sour.
But the good lord makes it smell so sweet.

She couldn't wait for spring. The way her hands
turned pink in the wind made words
go ass over elbows in my mouth.

I stuttered the same shit they poured
for my sister—death is a trial, a hurt
that the good lord cures in his own sweet time.

The frozen earth came up in shards. This is what the dead do.
They dizzy our tongues with absence.
Throw our hearts ass over elbows in the snow.
Draw tears that not even the good lord can sweeten.

The Pickle Dump

I sing of cucumbers in endless lines
and the things we found between.

I sing in Spanish of broken fruit
and beer can shards, of stones
and roots and rabbit hides

tanned by the sun and of the deer
skull we workers found and named
after Daryl, the line boss.

O, Daryl, who smoked Dorals,
who spoke like potatoes.
Daryl of the pale fingers,

when our nails were dark with sweet earth.
Ours were the hands of Achilles.

Let me praise foilies
and the inventive science
of smoking meth,

hangovers and each of the 500
dollars Emilio offered white girls.

O, Emilio the Quiet,
the silent Mexican,
his lips, thin as a paycheck.

Of the lineworkers, let me praise Odawa Dave
and his one holy t-shirt,
and Craig of the twenty minute bathroom breaks,
of the cocaine nose bleeds.

I pray for John and the two hours
he lost to the hospital,
the autopsy of his newborn son.

On the line, we suffered so well
with nothing but our minds and the drum
of a machine that ate fingers
and shirts every summer.

I celebrate sixteen hour shifts of standing,
hands ground to hamburger by the belt,

the resilience of men and women who die
every day for minimum wage.
It shatters all belief

but that which is found in Basic Lights,
in Budweiser, in month-old opiates, in fathers
like Gil, whose son sold the cheapest weed.

There have never been giants upon this earth,
if not for the lineworkers,
who somehow wake up each morning

and place their hearts on the belt,
in a desperate gamble
that they will pass inspection.

The Michigan Dogman Watches His Wife Sleep

For Thao,

You kick your legs in sleep,
and I think of rabbits.

I whisper *run, run, I'll catch you,*
break my teeth with holding.

I recite your scent:
venison, woodsmoke, flour

lilac, ground water,
so I can follow in forests of sleep.

I promise to lock my jaw
and never let go. In bed,

you will pull me closer,
preparing for winter.

Now, your tracks are filling in
with snow, and though I can't see,

I taste you on the trees.

How the Dancing Bear Learned

The whirl of foot and claw, hips open
like a jaw. Teeth. Teeth. Vasily
spinning his coin. Misha. Misha.
Dance with me. The birch tree
in the window. The sliver of wind, a finger
in my fur. Allegro. Allegro.
How quick we were! How cold
the floor! Vasily was a flicker,
the canvas flower, the breathless
confessor. My tongue, his scent. Lemon. Lemon.
The swirling smoke. A bowl of chokecherries.
Home. Home was the spruce bout, the fraying
string, Stravinsky skipping. I hear it now,
the snow falling on my shed. Thirsty. Thirsty.
Vasily, Vasily, the silly twister, the slinker,
my sparkler, my fire builder. I couldn't stand—
everything spinning. I gnawed the boots you left behind.
I tasted Spring, the thaw. The spinning.

Wendigo

Grandpa told us about the winter of red snow,

but we already knew the slow math of months
is counted on the ribs. We named
every grain of wild-rice.

I remember the girl, how winter made her
limp, how my shoes didn't fit
the gnarls of her toes.

She wanted to be full
of anything. She let me taste
her nipples, brown as maple candy.

Bottom round, backstrap, tenderloin.
We named our naked bodies
after cuts of meat.

My hunger was a saltlick.
Her skin, pure venison.

She always cried when she came,
Don't let me go to waste.

How Many March Snowstorms Does it Take to Break a Michigander's Heart?

Thirty-one. That thirty-first will split you
like a cord of striped maple. I'm kidding.
In Michigan, we're cheap wood,
some punked pine barely worth the burn.
We take pride in being knotted, in the birch-worm
that Detroit's become, in the burl that Manpower forms.
At parties, Michigan corners North Dakota to say,
I had what you have. But spring comes
and the stabbings start, just because they can.
Michigan's March is full of jokes. My favorite
is the equinox. I've never seen a green twenty-first
outside of the Remus Tavern. In Michigan, we pray
to the Weather God. It's mostly death threats
and heavy breathing. The meanest sonsabitches on the planet
live in Michigan. We call them weather men,
but only to their faces. Those goddamn sadists
with their goddamn jobs. Fuck Doppler
and every other radar duct-taped to the water tower.
Here, our hips always hurt.
Every Michigander is afraid of being a Fredo
for the snow to pull back in.
We're all from some town where, once, everyone froze
or burned up in a fire. I know Paul Bunyan isn't real
because he has a job. Michigan's is a mission of bitching
about salt-trucks and plows that never come,
about guessing which drift the mailbox might be.
If snow was the Plague, Michigan would be empty
from self-inflected flagellation deaths.
We deserve winter. It's what you get for loving the Lions.
In the memory of every Michigander, there was one March
when a warm wind swept across the gitchees
and put a thaw to our meanness, when we burrowed
out of our homes to relearn the word for sun.
We walked in droves to the partystore.
In our pockets, we kept our hearts
between our fingertips, like fragile checks
made out to cash.

The Chum Chum Thief

The daughter of the farmer is up to her ankles
in husk and rind. In the dark she teaches her hands
to unpluck the grove, to weave stem and tree,
to empty her wicker bowl of jackfruit seeds.

Tonight, against the baldness of branches,
she imagines a harvest of snow, the taste
of mint between her lip and gum.

She peels her father's rambutans, one by one.

The American says cherry-plum as she feeds him.

Her fingers in his mouth. She teaches him how the tongue
must push the pit, like a secret, past the teeth.

The Deer-Runner

Only the dumb go hungry in spring.
The woods full of fiddleheads, morels,
garlic—the snowmelt of a bulb.

Rhubarb stood bitter over the septic tank
as Ernie, half-wolf, half-cousin,
grew jaws that cracked the crock pot.

He ran breathless after deer-ribs
and shin bones. The tree-line flashed
with the blaze of safety-orange.

He ran the backwoods, the rock-piles,
the Sackett's field of potato stubs.
The tongue is the organ that loves

the body most. The heart is the part
the tongue wants first. Ernie's was the lust
of tendon snappers, of neck clampers, of the heart eater.

The four-ten is an accident gun.
It's how boys make sisters blind.
The timid bite of bird-shot cracked

Ernie's ankle into tender pulp. He gnawed
open the sutures and left the phantom limb
lapped shut. A morning blood trail.

The tiny bundle of fur.
The stability of three-legged things
is the secret of the leaners,

how the cook-stand holds the billycan so still.
I remember howling as dad cut the dirt
open like a door in winter.

Self-Portrait as Vic Mackey

I never took to doors I couldn't open.
What I called a wall found its purpose
in the separation of suspect and bicuspid.

If there was a guilty party, I brought the dip
to his skull. Give me twenty minutes, a table
made of steel, and I'll show you what bounces highest.

If there's truth, I'll find it. If you don't like it,
tell me I'm wrong to call this banger "beer-battered"
as I take the bottle to his scalp.

Tell me so I can drop this heavy gun
and walk to some better dream, some sleeping city
where women don't drink Drano and children live

like fauns. Tell me there's an end
to this desert, this wilderness where I have lived
too many years on coke and cooze. I've spun

too much in this revolving door. It's all I have of hers.
She said I could trick her or I could leave her—
either way she'd end up dead. Tell me anything

can change, and I'll show you the bullet's parabola,
how it apexes at daughter and nephew, how wolfish men
eat elkish hearts, how we are all so fucked.

I'm the saint of crippled horses.
You'll never know how bad I limp.

The Michigan Dogman Mourns His Father

He cut his beard with the kitchen shears—
each strand was a day, a piece of soup stain,

the carried taste of stock bones
boiled bare in the pot.

He stood shirtless by the sink
and could not eat the plums.

He left his phone on vibrate
and when he could not sleep,

he cut his hair down to stubble,
a cornfield in November.

He took off all his clothes
and ran into the woods.

When he howled, he gave voice
to the popping of the old man's sutured heart,

shook leaves from trees,
ignited the pale mercury of porch lights.

He ran till his feet were burger-raw
and his mouth was as dry as the vest of gauze

the old man wore when there was no more
blood to bleed.

Island Poem No. 23

I was alone with the loons who couldn't be alone with me.
They sang the night full of ghosts, and blood-moons fell
in the coldest water. I whispered *venison come home*
to my tongue. I prayed for rain to lay with me.

On pale mornings, I picked greenstones from the shore.
Buried in my lip, I loved their grit— forgot how to starve,
watched a snake die. Like a heart unfolded. In the sun, alone
by huge water, I wanted to drink all the beautiful venison I saw.

Glow in the Dark

My cousins caught bats with their baseball caps
in the haze between mercury lamp
and summer night.

When I stood in the dark, June-bugs popped
against my brightness. My thin arms,
poplar sticks stripped of bark.

For hours, Eric and Matt threw their hats
in wide arcs that stuttered
and fell with a chirp.

My cousins let them go. The leather birds
forgetting what it was to swoop, flew
in the dizzy lines of dad's headlights.

The gurgle of his diesel down the road
drowned the buzz of crickets.
I practiced my quiet list:

kitchen counter,
toilet-bowl, burn barrel,
broken cup.

De-Quilling the Michigan Dogman

What's man in him, is man enough
to know the porcupine means quills.
There's things that claws can't undo,

so I hold his head in my lap and work
the pliers slow across his lips.
What's dog in him, is dog enough

to forget, to chase the woods into silence,
to whimper and scratch at the door.
There's some things claws can't do

like open bananas or tie my shoes.
He makes November come too soon.
What's wild in him, is wild enough

to be field-dressed and skinned,
to be strung from the neighbor's tree
I've seen the things that hands can do.

When he comes to bed with fangs, he wants
and wants without end. He pants and laps
until the hunger in me is almost hunger enough
to forgive the things that claws can do.

Predator and Prey

“Eyes in front, born to hunt.
Eyes on the side, run and hide.”

For my brother,

In my dream, you're dead
the night I wake as a wolf
howls across the basin.

This is where they keep the old gods.
Pray the lake will never freeze.
You must live with a knife.

At first light, I go into the woods, singing
about skulls, tracing the socket
you once fractured. A scar of bone

beneath my skin.
So much below—the air
tastes like blood, the sweet marrow

of broken ribs. My fingers rim
a paw-print in the mud.
Brother, run.

A moose carries enough blood to bless us all.
You can starve till your teeth fall out.
I'm warning you of me.

We must run from each other.
The bones of wolves are cracked
like lines on a map,

but they won't unlock their jaws.
This is how we'll live.
Ready or not—here I come.

Hillbilly Band-aid

Little sister, her pigtails, her shunted ear,
crawled in the tomato sauce she spilled
on the trailer floor. The ravioli can
clipped her chubby finger down to the yellow
tendon. Her mother held her tender
in the rocking chair, as dad did
the best he could with duct tape and napkins.
His eyes, wide and white as saltlicks.

That night, I woke to the clack and snap
of cupboards and drawers as they opened and closed.

The Michigan Dogman Prepares for Winter

1.

1 pound of venison backstrap, sliced a quarter inch thick
2 eggs whisked in a bowl
2 cups of flour
1 tablespoon of dried sage
1 teaspoon of salt and cracked pepper
1 stick of butter, unsalted

Combine flour, sage, pepper, and salt.

Melt butter in skillet.

Wash meat in egg, coat with the mixture.

Fry till browned, till the blood seeps up through the flour

If it's your first kill, take a minute and pray.

Serve with cold beer—

wild rice if you've got it.

2.

His first solid food was pickled deer heart.

He remembers the scent of gut-piles in the snow
and his father's guilt
as he said, these days, even the Indians waste.

You don't forget the taste of venison.
Even as he cuts the maroon flesh into thin slices,
it's flavor is a familiar memory,
the voice of a dead uncle.

Mix blood with a buck, you'll never be the same.

He tongues the lean fibers of the raw
meat, tastes batteries,
is reminded of his wife—
the smell of her skin in the morning,
the rank chill and pepper of it,
his teeth dragging against her neck.

3.

He's afraid of what he might do.

When we fight, it's always quiet,
as though a child is sleeping.

When he turns, he doesn't howl
or pop the seams of his shirt.
He simply becomes someone else—
it's like screaming for him.

His eyes yellow,
his teeth in the kitchen light.

I lock the door to our room,
and he washes the dishes.
He performs chores like penance,
until I am drawn from anger by the smell
of something on the stove.

I ask him to teach me. I want to learn.

He shows me how to hold a knife,
though he uses his nails.

He guides my hands over open flames,
but no matter how hard I try,
it never tastes the same.

He insists there's no secret, no right way.

*It's like prayer, he says. Cooking
is just keeping someone you love alive.*

Eavesdropping at Starbucks...Again

She wants to know about tonight,
 how many tacos to bring,
and you give her a list of meats
 you don't have.
She asks if you have coffee.
 She googles *rump-roast*,
sifts through the porn to get to the wiki,
 delicate as an otter
cracking crab on a stone.

She wants to know if you're making jello-shots.
 She's had them once—

A Halloween:
She was Dorothy.
Slutty Dorothy.
She filled her basket
with tequila-lime gelatin,
woke up to someone
like you, but not you.

There's no fridge at your place,
 so she googles *cooler, ice, and cold*.

She doesn't know where to go
 from there. She gives up.
Whimpers,
 "I'll bring wine."

You've already hung up.

She googles *how to open*
 a bottle with nothing but your hands.

Without You, I'm just Keanu

Baby, lock and load. Tonight, we fire-fight.

Tonight, it's every barrel blown. Let's leave
the Mitsubishi in pieces. Let's bleed beautifully
and Schwarzenegger for hours under covers,
under this quilt of old wifebeaters.

I've never seen you reload but I believe you.
You're the baddest mother forgetter
to ever chew bubblegum and kick aspen
in the absence of bubblegum.

There's the ocean and I don't care how deep it is.
You make me feel like hanging from the helicopter rotor.

With you it's more than just popcorn and bullet-porn,
it's the buddy-cop combo of bicep and M60,
it's the smash of Gary Busey's teeth. You need to know

I will never be too old for this.

I want to be your road warrior, your Plissken,
your fist fight at high tide, your green wire—no,
the blue one.

Wild Grapes

They hung on an old fence, the way corn clings
between teeth. Someone, some time,
wanted wine. I ate the grapes. I ate everything
dad showed me: wild onions, rhubarb stalks,
gnarled apples. It was hard to believe
in winter. Everything looked gold
when it died. I practiced my letters
on strips of birch. I aimed my .22 at starlings.
I fuckin hate starlings. I learned from dad
what a heart looks like, a water moccasin, how easy it is
to die. This is what happens,
he said, rubbing poison oak into his arm.
It's how he loved in a world of teeth
and lead, where somehow, so much lived.
Don't itch. You'll want to. Just don't.

Cripple

I saw someone walk the way you walk
and I thought you were leaving.

You've been dreaming of wolves again.

Snow is coming.
You can feel it in your knee.

I stand in the kitchen cutting:
potatoes, onions, mushrooms.
I can think of nothing but the snow and your knee.

You come home. You insist on walking.

I scrape my knife clean; and leave it in the sink.

You speak with your hands
of a man you met, who lost two brothers this fall.
You tell me that the wolves in your dreams
are asking you to leave for the winter.

You want to go. You want to run again,
feel tendons push bone beneath skin.

As you talk, I look out the window
and pray for snow to come and lock your knee,
for it to fall and fall and fall and never leave.

The Michigan Dogman Tastes Human Flesh for the First Time

When a methlab blows, trees speak in burns,
the heart of a methhead beats
against a ruined chest like a bird
breaking its beak on a mirror.

The dogman follows scent, the way fire leads ash,
to a crater of shrapnel, the embers of a body.
Like everyone, he is amazed by flames.

The dying man speaks, or sings—
there is no way to tell—
cries *angel*, and the dogman taps a claw
against fang.

“What sort of hell
must you have lived to mistake
me for a messenger of God.”

*my heart was strong
this is how i loved
him above all else
o angel o saint of fur
of this prayer
tell no one*

The dogman takes him in his arms,
walks miles in the dark.

The methhead whispers *amen*
as each inch of charred skin and cloth
is eaten away— the dogman thinks of Christ,
of the tracks he will erase,
of his tongue which will never be the same,
of the saints and how it must have felt to heal the sick.

Mix-Tape: After-Bender Sex

I wake inside you—the back and forth hunger
of a sprung metronome. I've been days without
food, sleep, you. I want teeth
to find purchase on the summit of your candle-
smooth ass. You're the wax put back
in the box, too pretty to burn. Your skin
yellows in the moonlight. Lips sliver
with breath. Hipbones arc. Your nipple,
the fingertip reading the Braille of my tongue
as we come like history
on repeat. The greatest hits: Pompeii's silhouettes,
Dead Custer of the Golden Hair, the miracle
of the wing, the first man
to suck meat from a crab.

Bobber

One summer, my doglegged cousin drowned in Dumont Lake—
something to do with the riptides, their mindfulness,
the silty undersides that make slippers of us all.

He was, I heard, many minutes gone to sleep. So calm,
so out of breath, and dead, but the shore was full
of firm breathers. They twisted up the undone spool.

They brought him back with sump pump and tender uncle.
He spoke of water then, but dying makes you stutter.
So he went for many years a mumbler, a shovel-swinger

in Grandma's holy war against the Michigan rattlers.
It's true. Two-death men need more from summer
than a blanket of snake leather. We blamed the water, its oil

slicks and twisted pike, when my cousin took a chisel
to the neighbor's barn. Like a sunfish on the hook
torn by its sister, my cousin came up

a darker bird than he went down.
He did what we knew he would—something with a bar
and a flatlander's daughter. That pearly girl,

those city teeth that could chip a slip-sinker.
He told me once what dying was. You're
under water. Sunlight ribbons like a ladder.

You've been made a perfect shark
before the door that breathing opens.
God finds you and his mercy is a sour thing

that makes the taste of blood okay.
With such heavy mud, he washes
your charcoaled heart to sleep.

The Mecosta County Fair

We made our barrow behind the rabbit barn,
with the burdocks and pine, needles in our hair.
We'd put down what we had—a farmer's hand
of paper and jeans, of t-shirts and plastic bags.
It was hard work, but a good trouble, to slip and fumble
until the rivets worried themselves open and denim
peeled the way an apple skins. I tasted the pink
of her thumbprint and my tongue melted the memory
of how once sugar spun into cotton. The summer sun
was warm but her skin was a better spice, a dust
of saffron and cumin. I was a happy glutton, a mouth
so heavy with peaches. We bent and we birched,
we curled in the barren field. The earth was hard but still
we furrowed until the river sky covered us
in slips of night. She toothed the burl of my shoulder.
The fireflies gimped the dusk like mumbled prayers.
The fair flickered with laughter and the beer tent strum
of old dulcimers, which older fingers slid from dip
to dirge and home again. The night smelled of water,
a summer lung, not yet rain or dew, but soon. I thought her voice
would pop the air. She said, I'd die. I know I would.
If it snowed right now, I swear to God, I'd die.

TWO

Tom Cruise Reviews Survival Knives on YouTube

He's a straight-blade, a scandi-grind,
the backyard full of feather-sticks.

Kids called him *knife-mouth*,
snaggletooth, which sharpened him
to a biting angle. In his video

on how to remove a patina, his hands
are calloused from edges. His thumbs
have a hundred thousand views.

His channel is full of arm hair
shorn to baldness, the tang of honing oil,
his dad's breath.

The old man was a sawback folder,
built to fuck a pocket up.

Tom was taught the serrations
of a tongue, *candy ass*, *little faggot*,
so he grew up believing his trap
was best kept shut.

He said little as the first woman split,
less as they nicked a vein to take his spleen,
nothing as he held the phone
his daughter dialed from jail.

The strop whispers *cocksucker* with each pass.
He's running out of things to cut.

Crush Cage

That I could come to some understanding
of balance, I tasted the cocoa bean,
the salt of a magician's palm.

That I could come to understand the cage,
I considered the tongue. And I wept
for all the children I would never hold
in the swaddle of my maw.

That I could understand benevolence, I counted
my seeds. The rinds I liked best. There's luck
and there's the shuffle. A bear is nothing
if not the body willing itself to whirl. Feed me
fruit and I'll cower, I'll spittle you a fever dream
of durian and straw, of bed and pit. That I could,
I did. I remembered my mother and the beads
that soured in my mouth. I howled. I bawled.

That I could understand that I could stand,
that I could come to stand the cage,
I gnawed the bars, the phantom paw.

I understand the crush cage.

It confuses the heart:

grow to here and grow no further.

The Hunter's Wife

This is the season of center-fire dawn,
gunpowder dusk, of viscera and puppet strings.
This is the hour of popped lungs and gut-piles,
a sizzle in the snow.
This is the moment of his absence from their bed—
the swallowed tooth abscessing the jaw.

But tonight is hers.
The moon, a muzzle-flash of hipbone,
and the deer stutter in the dark.
They come to her, hot breath and all.

She picks a male, his eight points
slide across her thigh, tine-lift the hem of her dress.
He's rut-wild, can barely breathe.
She's a living salt-lick,
pulls him to the bait-pile of apple halves,
their frozen grit. She's missed this: the hunger
before winter. The bleat. The grunt.

She feels freezer-full,
runs the deer-path home,
prays for a son of backstraps and tenderloins,
for spring to bring him antlers,
for her husband, hands full of black hooves,
to decide, once and for all,
which little piggy has none.

The Michigan Dogman Fights at the Remus Tavern

A beer spills—men have burned the world for less. The Defenestration of Berlin, shattered steins and lacerated skin. The dogman remembers the story of arms hung from a tree. *Some gods are easy to please.* A fist cracks his jaw out of place. Bone on bone: the dance of a northern honky-tonk, the movement of hands scoured by buck-knives and engine metal. *Here, so much is hard.* The dogman swings, each punch presses claw deeper into palm. He throws fists in a panic of beer, broken glass, blood, Grizz-spit. *Meat. We are the tender, and the tenderized.* He thinks of his wife, the taste of iron. *Blood, beautiful in barlight.* Teeth grow in his mouth, slow, like her skin as she lowers her dress. The dogman swallows his itch to howl, is pulled from the bar. He looks at his hands, the indents and blood.

He breathes in the dark, fails to stop,
afraid of what comes when teeth sink
into the thin chord of our voice.

Amen

He wonders why anything happens,
but does as he is told, wraps fingers around her throat, her ropey

carotid. Though he doesn't know the name for it,
he knows how to press. He is just

a tool, a noose, a nail, something to hold
what wants to fall. He leaves Matt

and Luke at the party. They'll never get it.
So be it.

Pale-Boy in the Breezeway

He dances on the boot grate, on twenty years
of slag and serrated rust. Winter makes him

stamp and stutter.

His teeth, this bowl of ice.

Pale-Boy barefoot in the breezeway.

Skin, cheese-white. He's cut.

Spinning now, in circles of duck
and goose, while his hands, little veneers,
brush the baldsides of buckskins,
the badger pelt—Pale-Boy's new cape,
finger pinched. His footsteps, the clap
of dropped meat, red as lipstick.
He smells basement,

the wounded loon. Pale-Boy
looks inside. All he needs—
one last piece.

Starvation Point

This is how the woods works—hunger like a fist
flexing in your gut. You learn how

to be empty. The language of starving
is spoken in pangs and dreams.

There's nothing you wouldn't kill
after eight days in the backwoods,

eating wildflowers, drinking swamp-water,
tracking moose through quaking stands

of decimated Aspen, cracked and stripped
like corn cobs.

When the wolves to the west sing of death,
of what they've killed, of moose-flesh

pressed into dirt, you must sing
the song of your tongue aching

for the hinted blood. You must come to them
as hunter and prey, with only the meat on your bones.

Your gut will howl as first light cracks pale over the trees.
They will be behind you.

Hold your knife like fang to jaw.
This is how the woods works. Someone dies. Someone eats.

John the Baptist Lives in Baraga

It wasn't always like this—

I lived in the desert with my sun-brown wife.
We ate bugs as big as fingers, drank
from the river, spoke our tent full of psalms.

But things dry out, and you have to go north.

We had nothing, lived on woodsmoke,
the leanest venison.
We were always cold.
Maybe she prayed for the county plow
to come and cut everything in two.

A Ford Festiva can split like a seam
with the right angle, enough speed,
the hard shadow of black ice. In the snow,

you couldn't tell the blood from antifreeze.
I felt God's voice sever in my chest.
Jesus called, left flowers.
There was no water.

The pipes burst. Ice was in the walls.
I washed my hands in the quiet woods.
I mouthed the only prayer I knew.

The Wizard of Diamond Lake

There is magic in the neighbor girl's hair,
but he's always caught with the kitchen shears.

He walks the cedar swamp by moonlight,
casting spells on the sleepers: Zelda's Lament, the Song
of Storms—it sounds like a broken flute.

Dollar Tree! Oh, Dollar Tree!
Let it rain money!

Their open windows—he's quiet,
beheading cookie jars and pulling drawers
like thorns from paws.

His mom says he was born at the witching hour—
between the belt and the backhand.

He says prayer is for pussies.

He's built a new god in the backwoods out of birch bark,
cattails, binder twine, a coffee can, a corn knife,
a coyote jaw with all the teeth.

In her sleep, the neighbor girl unzips
the yard cats of their skin, drowns the kittens
in buckets of blue milk.

He offers a broke-back faun from the road.

Come home, Dad.
Come home.

The Michigan Dogman Gets a Lap-dance from a Girl He Loved in High School

Beneath the gyrating lilac, the sick-sweet jasmine,
the cocoa-butter, the generic Vaseline:

how she used to taste—sweat and sugar water.

He remembers: forefinger, the hummingbird
feeder, the nectar—his surprise it wasn't sweeter.

She grinds him, stone and bowl. Between them—flour.

Just one more song.

The nose knows.
His nose is prophecy:
trailer-tin, bruise on bruise,
the hour a banana turns.

She keeps time by strobe light,
cocks collarbone to brush his lips.
He smells entire histories of men: tobacco
Crisco, gunpowder.

She rides him like the last horse
out of town. Her fingers in his hair, pulling.
She wants him to. *I won't scream.*

The whole drive home he plucks
the glitter from his fur.

Pluck

She wants to change her name to Nightingale and live in Vienna's oaks. She pulls all the tissues from the box to make the bout of her practice violin. The living room, strewn with feathers, and she's learning cursive, so she lets the pen pull smooth across the page. *See how close they are? Violin and loving?* She practices movement, follows the names of rubber band chords from bridge to scroll. Soon, she'll get a bow. She wants to use her own hair, but he loves it and tells her so. She waits for an open window, for her learning to begin, for his hands flitting to somewhere she doesn't understand, his voice on the chin-rest of her neck. *Little bird, this is how you sing.*

Remus, MI

Some brothers never make it out of the hometown
river, the water swelled dark with spring melt.

Some are given to the corn auger, the baler, the car-wreck,
the combine, the two twenty-three. They leave holes filled

with coyotes at the tree-line, with grief like a harvest of wind,
stubble and snow, land made bald by drought.

A man carries the bullet his brother gave him.
He walks till he can't, wonders if his legs are cold.

The paint-peeled barns are full of men
that hung themselves like fish in the smokehouse.

Here, brothers touch only what's hard and sharp,
keep buried the prayers that give thanks

it wasn't them,
the prayers that offer up everyone that's left.

White Meat

He calls his boys the Sisters.
Eighteen and pale,
nosebleeds every hour.

They wait in the bedroom
as he measures out powder and rocks,
presses them into handshakes.

It's a slippery slope that leads from the Samoan
and his lines to between his sheets.
It's easy for six months to pass

when you've stopped dreaming.
His visitors never ask. They don't have to.
He likes white meat, the way it bruises

between teeth. A door locks from the inside,
latex-tight. What's his is his.
The Sisters never think of leaving.

Addiction is Easy

When you fall, it's always through glass.
After that, it's like you've never known air.

The Sisters do their lines
as careful as kids and cursive.

I reach for their hair,
brown skin against Dutch blond—

the feel, like cloth worn smooth by sweat
and time. I say pretty

and they coo, look up at me with that doll blue
in their eye, the iris already starting to glass.

Light

There was always a lake of night in the living room
that threatened to swell and pull me from Arsenio.
The light of his teeth stuck in my eyes.
I brushed the wall, sure I would die
each night of red eyes and shadowmen,
of prayers I didn't say.
Mom came home with the moon, the cold air,
the scent of White Rain.

I'd help count tips, bills folded into shapes.
Once, I pulled apart a hundred dollar bird.
Long nights, the smell of coins.
Said *love you* until my mouth was dry.
The neighbor's son came to watch me
when I woke. He let me hang
from one arm, climb him like a jungle gym.

Mom's men cycled through with dogs and trucks and beards.
One built a house. One ate all his food with a spoon.
Her weatherman swerved for woodchucks
on Sunday roads to the Church of Silver Blankets,
where everyone slept on the floor.
Mom's favorite said he was a genie. I wished for power
one thunderstorm, for the lights to come back on.

Night became dusk, dusk became light.
I stayed up late with the neighbor's son.
I drank the house dry of Mountain Dew.
I watched movies where cavemen thawed,
where girls had see-through phones,
where only the Germans died.
I watched those tapes thread-bare,
until voices warped slow and deep,
until silent mouths tasted static,
until the tracking button stuck.

In the sun, he took me to the park. It was hard to see
in all that light. The blistering slide, the stove-top carousel.
I held white sand in the nest of my hand,
waited for a girl to pass my monkey bars.
I scoured her flower-blue iris. Her mother slapped me.
I blamed the sun. It hurt my eyes,

wanted me to go blind from staring.

I always woke to the snap of elastic.

I woke to breath, not whisper.

If I was quiet, he gave me a piece of blue glass.

A robin's egg.

The smallest window in a church.

It broke between my fingers.

I waited for my mom to come home.

The Michigan Dogman in County

The dogman got a Sale and Manufacture.
Four months of cage and lockdown—

the gum rot of tweakers,
the whiskey knuckles of a man
who beat his wife in the Art Van parking lot.

But it's the cellmate that makes the dogman
choke. Meat gone sour.

Wheelchair-bound, legs blue with gout,
the scent of menthol and bedsores,

a tooth that came up crooked.
The cripple stinks of a sweetness
for the young, for a foster daughter.

For the stillness that floods her
when he grabs a fistful of pigtails.
For the quiver and clamber of her legs in his chair.

The smell draws a skinning blade
slow across the stone of the dogman's spine.

He looks out at the jailyard in the dark.
The dogman never locks his car.
He won't eat corn without sugar.

He wants to bleach the cripple raw,
to pepper the dirt with twisted bones.

He can't stand the smell.

The Mecosta Burnout

The sixty-seven Falcon, black as a court date suit,
shudders on the blacktop as mohawked kids pluck grubbies

from the puddled run-off that washed away
the curled skins of tire-treads.

The driver cracks her suicide-door like a Tall Boy.
The hand she raises can't close from the busted jaw

she gave her son when she caught him in the woodshed
with the good gin, the neighbor girl.

She strokes the engine, the coo of high-intake manifold.
The crowd, sun cooked and booze wild, hollers

for all she's got to give. She buries her heel.
The Falcon grinds, side to side,

like a trailer park dog fighting a chain.
She washes the crowd with a wall of white smoke.

The horses are in her chest.

She won't let go

until everyone knows it.

The Dutch Sell Guns to the Mohawk

In every man, there spins the sinewed head
of the cold and reckless owl. It'd be easy
to let it roll, to grow so wild. I know the sled we pull
is heavy with our divvied dead, these beltless knives.
But no matter how this river oxbows or how slow
the melting snow, when spring comes, our sons
will still be drowned. A land, so full of goods
and beaver, can't help but turn brave men
into snake sisters. So let us brother
our feckled hearts against a winter of want.
Let the poplar join the pine and we'll stand
as blood spillers against a spring of bleeders.
Let the River Men cower before the sons of flint
and thunder that we must be. What lonely tongues
we'll lose in the ember-hour, in the trade of brothers,
in the zeewan strings, the hatchet-heads and kettles.
If you pluck this river clean of cousin bark-biter,
the tail slapper, the castor rat, if you pelt me
with whatever beaver you dream, I'll thank you
with powder and shot, enough to deafen every devil.
I'll thank you as the coney thanks the barrow.
Let us live as if we had lain under one heart.
And anyone who won't allow my brother at the table
better know he'll lose more than bread and tables.
Because the Great Spirit never made men equal,
he made the gun. And before he turned his back, he said unto us,
I leave you to it. Good luck. Good hunting.

Foreclosure on the Flower Farm

Nothing can erase a man from the land
like the trunk-space of strangers.
Their hands in the polebarn, in the peacock cage,
in the moldered box of her sweaters.

Where will my daughter come home?
This is the yard where she said “spin me,”
this is the yard where we picked apples
when her tooth was loose.

So what if the dollar withers in my pocket.
So what if the Toyotas fill with flats of springwood pinks.
So what if the Mossberg holds five bucks in slugs,
my little girl’s on the phone saying don’t

turn off the Tuscan blue, don’t leave
the dahlia bulbs to the billy-goat grass,
don’t let the moss-caps dry.

I put down the gun and say a prayer that starts
may she never buckle. May she never know
this carnival of pickers. May home
never run out on her. Let her, let her know
that thunder is how the world shudders,
that I have grown such flowers.

Chance Gets Back on the Horse

The worm fell from the sky because the bottle
got lonely. Little bird, when I heard you sing,
I wanted to fall out of this bar. But I just fell
in love with you. If that's your car out front,
I'll cash this W2 and take you to a place I know

where the mai-tais can strip the red off a barn
or this the park in Holland where I hear the tulips
don't grow. I'll take you there. Meet Willow
Meet An OK Paper Plate. Darling, I'd understand
if you wanted to buy me something pretty

to drink. A little bucksnot of blackberry,
and I'm yours. Baby, I know you want tooth tracks,
a bed to hum in, a hummingbird feeder full
of Hi-C, so we can see how fast the diabetes beats.
I'm sorry about your mother.

I remember my own momma bird,
how she was always in some other tree.
There was a week when I ate nothing
but sauerkraut, straight from the jar.

The Tunnel Rat

He lives most of the time in Mexico,
avoiding taxes, poaching turistas
from the lesbian discotech, paying a doctor
to shove pig glands in his shoulder.

What's good for the goose is good
for the liver. Stateside for the summer,
it's all windows dark with tar paper,
a fifth of Kessler's, a hooter of homegrown.

He only leaves for the liquor store,
telling Tammy her tits were all he had
to dream of in Tijuana.
A tender mouthful. He was never alone

in the musty villa of memory: the mama-sans
of Khe Sanh, the brown thighs,
the boats full of dragonfruit.
He tunnels beneath the chuy trees,

the sick-sweet smell of the dead, firebombed
from heaven into putty,
a mother and daughter twisted together
like copper wire. Tammy, baby,

I'll tell you what I know.
There's the hole you crawl into
and the day you can't get out.

Kenn Peterson Shares his Dream with the Michigan Dogman

I am an old man in the west of my life.
In my dream, all the birch are stripped bare,
bones piled into walls—
deer skulls, the ribs of men, the hollow
spines of wings. I hang myself
from a tree for three days
to learn the songs of my mishomis
and from my father's fence of kinsmen
I draw the words to forge. And you,
Wolf-with-Hands, Hunterson, sing
with me. We sing hunger from children,
sing away trolls and wendigos, sing hearts
whole, sing guns silent, sing bones unbroken
and buried in a body. Our voices break.
We dance until I fall. It is a good death.
In my dream, you build a great canoe
for the fire of returning to dust.
From the longhouse of my ancestors, I listen
as you teach the silent earth to sing again.

Euchre

Tonight you want to slap the table and go alone.
With me the odds are worse, my farmer's hand

of nines and tens. You're sick of getting euked.
You want to flip the right and run

back home to the bully loons,
their croon like cats twisted on antifreeze—

I'll say it again—I'm sorry about the garden gnome,
your pumpkin patch. Those tulip bulbs

made me sick as hell, but I was bitter then.
I'm better now. I got that job in town.

The shoes are new but my heart's still dumb
and the door's still locked. I shouldn't have

stepped out on you. It's always the bower
we most need that ends up buried.

I'm sorry but I love you
and I will always fuck this up.

Let me make us something to eat,
the last bluegill on the counter hasn't spoiled yet.

Mishupishu in the Garden of the Drowned

The Horned Lynx, Spirit-King of Unbreathing, trolls
the forest at the bottom of the lake. His orchard
in the petrified-timber blooms with the fruit

of human driftwood, Superior's frozen jetsam.
He glides between them, their floating hands,
the Nish in stasis, the capsized Finns.
The Underwater Panther pauses in the quiet

pressure of depth. A young girl, her dress
buttoned with rotten blackberries, is moving
like *sink* or *breathe*, like she'll take anything
but another silent decade beneath the riptides.

Mishupishu, Manitou of Teeth, loves
to see her try. So he holds her in the pocket
of his jaw. His tongue can't help but taste
this little miracle, this putrid swimmer—

the tang of sheep-oil, the bouquet of pine-pollen,
the saline of her toes. Together,
they climb towards the powder-burn of sun.

The Wildcat of Wet Night surprises himself.
He's rooting for her.

The Shooting

Here is my mother opening the door, her hair abloom
with White Rain. I've seen her kiss the bathroom mirror.

Here is the door filling with her ex, his oiled overalls.
Here is his gun. Here is how it starts with the silk

velocity of bullets as they pass through bodies,
through walls. This is her thinking go, go on and sail

through the night and into someone else's life. Take anyone
I couldn't love. This silly, feckless prayer. This boyfriend,

bullethole in his throat, trying to say don't be scared.
How quiet a home becomes. How deaf we are.

How she carries me now in this box of blue air,
past the candy-cane couch, past the cup I filled

with pipe-cleaner roses. This is the song she is singing long ago
when the grass was green. How strong her voice, how much

she gives to her boy, to her ex and his best friend. Listen now.
Pretend to sleep. Let her sing to you as she sang to me.

Go years, gnarled and scared. Be hard to love. Tonight,
as you dream, the fist unmakes itself. The hole it was,

a flower now. Run faster than you can in this summer rain.
Though the phone hums, she hears you.

Though it crackles, she hears you say
this is how I sing. This is how I carry you.

Works Cited

- Grenander, M. E. "Problems of Representation in Lyric Poetry." *English Record* 21.2 (1970): 27-34. *Education Resources Information Center*. Web. Mar.-Apr. 2013.
- Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. 1st ed. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1999. Print. Harvest Books.
- Mandelstam, Osip, Christian Wiman, and Ilya Kaminsky. *Stolen Air: The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*. New York: Ecco, 2012. Print.
- Monas, Sidney. "Osip Mandelstam: The Word and Culture." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* ns 2.4 (1975): n. pag. *JSTOR*. Web. Mar.-Apr. 2013.
- Peschel, Bill. "The Long Killing of Osip Mandelstam." Web log post. *Planet Peschel*. Word Press, 27 Dec. 2011. Web. Mar.-Apr. 2013.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." *Literary Theory, an Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 15-19. Print.