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TRAIN WRECKS AND OTHER ENDEAVORS

By

Adam Houle

THESIS

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2007

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This thesis by Adam Houle is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Dr. Austin Hummell Date

First Reader: Dr. Peter Goodrich Date

Department Head: Dr. James Schiffer Date

Dean of Graduate Studies: Dr. Cynthia Prosen Date

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ABSTRACT

TRAIN WRECKS AND OTHER ENDEAVORS

By

Adam Houle

The poems in Train Wrecks and Other Endeavors explore the relationship between individuals and their environments. The collection's thematic issues include loss, history, and the ways in which the characters affect and are affected by the landscape. Though the reoccurring thematic concerns deal primarily with characters' inability to connect in lasting ways with others, it is also a study in resiliency; by allowing the environment to serve as a reminder of the past, of losses, and of failures, the characters seek to mark their own legacies; in doing so, they are affirming their own claim to their lives. Similarly, they are equally claimed by the environments of which they are a part. It is these relationships and attempts at these relationships that highlight the tragedy of impermanence that the pieces continually explore. Ultimately, it is a study in the faith placed in human experiences and the human ability to persevere.

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2007

DEDICATION

†
For My Family
†

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Big Muddy: “Nabokov Westerns”

Lullwater Review: “That in Cozad, Nebraska Once”

Plainsongs: “On the Off-Chance that My Grandfather is in Heaven”

Portland Review: “How My Grandfather, Pipe and Track Fitter, Thought about Intelligent Design”

Premiere Generation Ink: “Shaking Because I’m Tired” and “Handyman”

The Hurricane Review: “Ms. Vang and Her Cigarettes”

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English

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INTRODUCTION

My creative thesis is titled Train Wrecks and Other Endeavors. This title reflects my belief that impermanence and loss are two vital components that shape my life and my work as a poet. By referring to train wrecks as endeavors, I am suggesting that there is willful agency on the part of characters and speakers which are partially responsible for the tragedies and incidents that occur in these poems. The poems contained also seek to mediate the relationship between the sorrow and the gratitude that I believe are fundamental parts of our lives. Since I became aware of these conflicts during my years between high school and college, they have continued to demand my attention. I have sought to construct a cohesive yet diverse group of poems that can best express the variety of human experience as it is informed and formed by both our joy and our suffering.

To achieve this expression, the collection is broken into three sections. These sections are best seen as spokes off a central hub. The nexus of each section lies in my attempt to catalog, and give voice to, a wide range of characters and speakers. While this similarity is important to the collection as a whole, the individual sections treat their own diverse set of concerns. In specific, they explore the desire for human connections, such as in “Third Shift at Mobile on the Run”; the fear of losing friendship and love, such as in “On Touching My Dog’s Cold and Perfect Teeth”; and the difficulties in our connection and relationship with the past, such as in “On the Off-Chance My Grandfather is in Heaven.”

However, I hope to temper these concerns and pains with a tenderness that appears at unexpected moments. This juxtaposition allows the poems to take on a vitality and movement that would otherwise be missing. Oftentimes, the poems rely heavily on location and landscape to help the narrator the character come to some acceptance with his or her place in life. For example, in “Why I Live on the Old Air Force Base,” the narrator combats his loneliness and sense of alienation through a series of topographical images with which he feels a sense of connection. This attention to the inner lives of the speakers or characters allows the landscape, whether a railroad yard or a parking lot, to present itself as an agent, as an actor, within the world of the poem. Ultimately, this thesis is a testament to perseverance and, while acknowledging the suffering inherent in life, seeks to explore the ways in which sorrow can serve as a touchstone to aid us in fully experiencing our lives.

In exploring these themes, the collection’s poems tend to be short, compact pieces crafted with the rhythms and music of language in mind. Though the poems deviate from strict traditional forms of poetry, I have carefully considered each line, grammatical sentence, and stanza. I also use modified forms of the sonnet, repetition of words and phrases, and metrical repetition. By paying consistent attention to these metrical and syllabic qualities of the poems, I believe that they read smoothly and carry from line to line a rhythmic and musical quality that further helps the pieces resonate with readers. In many instances throughout the collection, I tend toward trochaic words to allow the rhythms of the poem to reinforce the sensations it is meant to invoke. In other places, I use anapests and dactyls to slow the pace down, allowing the lines to breathe. Similarly,

to help pace the reader through the poems, I frequently use consistent syllabic count per line. This, in addition to being visually pleasing because of the consistency of the line length, offers the reader a cadence that is enjoyable to read and further suggests the world in which the poem exists.

Writing Influences and Personal Aesthetic

The lyrical acumen and stark grace of a fiction writer was what first drew me to poetry. Cormac McCarthy's The Crossing challenged me with its sheer command and its pitch perfect blend of image and meaning. McCarthy writes of a "world running under bare poles toward a reckoning whose ledgers would be drawn up and dated only long after all due claims had passed" (The Crossing 5). The sentence runs like the world it's describing. In addition to appreciating its mesh of content and style, I find that idea of the "world running toward" something allows for greater agency of landscapes and geography in the lives of McCarthy's characters. This in turn creates a living environment that can act against or with the human actors in his works. I see this relationship between landscape and actor as an important component in my own work as well. It is an important theme in my poem, "That in Cozad, Nebraska Once." The speaker seeks to alter the landscape over which he moves. The speaker prays

for ergot poisoning, for a tie-dyed
hailstorm I could ooh and ah.
Some trivial madness to replace
highways with canals, flower
the roadside with wild strawberries.

Here, the speaker, dissatisfied and lonely, wishes to recreate the landscape to alleviate his suffering. Yet, it is a shallow and superficial change that the speaker believes can save him. This is my variation on McCarthy's line above. The trivialization of the landscape allowed for the speaker to be infused with a deeper sadness, and it also reflects the title's paradoxical qualities in that the narrator's willfulness has helped influence and enhance the wreckage of his emotional life.

I am also influenced by the evocative poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa. In his poem "Black String of Days," the speaker opens by admitting his sense of being a marked man. In a confessional way, the speaker says:

Tonight I feel the stars are out
to use me as target practice.
I don't know why
they zero in like old
business, each a moment of blood
unraveling forgotten names. (69)

Here, Komunyakaa defies our expectations for the role of the sky in poems. By enjambling the first sentence across two lines, the reader is pulled down the page to finish the speaker's complete thought. However, the first line also makes grammatical sense without the line that follows. In this way, the reader's expectations are undermined, and an unassuming first line quickly leads to menace and the speaker's antagonism with the natural world. By opening the poem with a concrete image of the stars, Komunyakaa is also able to earn the figurative language that follows. He takes a natural scene and moves

away from its concreteness into a realm where the world takes a stance on the speaker's place.

With the above example in mind, Komunyakaa's work in general is pleasing to my ear. His word choice and sentence structures demonstrate the pure pleasure of sound, what Billy Collins notes as "the immediate sensation that lets us know we are 'someplace else'" (3)¹. We are moved, initially, before meaning, by the sound alone. Our immediate connection comes from "our feel for the music of the poem." And while this is initially the connection, Komunyakaa's lyricism is fortified by a sense of immediacy and honesty that, while spoken beautifully, often betrays the anxieties and aches of the human spirit.

These reflections on Komunyakaa's work influenced my poem "The Cartographer's Failed Marriage." Here, I invert the antagonism, and the cartographer, roiling in his frustration, lashes back at the earth in the opening lines:

By August, he buys a post digger,
spends his nights with dog-day cicadas,
their new voices and hard bodies
spurring the arc of his arms, his hands
clamped on the hickory-handle.

Similar to the distinctions Komunyakaa makes between the sky and the earth, this poem explores an individual's relationship to the world through strong imagery and attention to the rhythms and sounds it creates. For instance, the "i" sounds in "digger" and in "cicadas" share very similar "i" sounds through which the lines connect not only grammatically but sonically as well.

¹ Collins' essay is "Poetry, Pleasure, and the Hedonist Reader" (2002).

However, writers who also explore tenderness and joy in the world have had an impact on my writing. Junior, the narrator of Kurt Vonnegut's Timequake says that "a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit" (1), and poets such as Alison Pelegrin, Ryan Van Cleave, Virgil Suarez, Peter Macuck and E. E. Cummings have all helped to shape my ideas on how to create a tenderness in my poems that can counteract some of the anxiety and pessimism I work with. In "Trailer Trash," Alison Pelegrin closes the poem with this stanza:

Don't expect a wave
Where you see windows curtained with a Rebel Flag.
Expect the smack of sex
and backhand slaps. Machines on blocks.
A yardsale that lasts forever.
The meanest man to wear an undershirt
holding his grandson up to see
the faraway expression of the moon. (141)

While the juxtaposition of "the meanest man" elevating his grandson with the images of violence and decrepitude is a wonderful twist, its real power to surprise comes from the tenderness of the man's gesture. It challenges us to reevaluate our prejudgments of "trailer trash." From this example, and others like it, writing strives to find the tenderness, the joy, and the small moments of kindness in those instances that at first glance are ugly, broken, or "trashed." I sought to harness a similar tenderness in "Why I Live on the Old Air Force Base." After detailing the poverty, the constant financial worries, and the

unkempt yards, the speaker affirms his life through a connection between a stray cat and himself, saying that he stays

for the mice bodies
he sometimes leaves, still warm,
an odd homage seizing
on the stoop's uneven concrete.

This closing turns the stoop into an altar of sorts, and the cat's actions are something close to reverence. And, for me, reverence should be one of the central concerns of the poet.

Conclusion

My thesis, then, is an attempt to demonstrate that the world is worth our attention. It is grounded in my belief that to write a poem is to affirm the worth of the world, whatever state it may be in. By extension, I am affirming a deep gratitude for my life and the lives of those I come in contact with. These poems explore characters and landscapes through which, I hope, we can find glimpses of ourselves. I believe that the most successful poems I've written start with a slight pause in my thinking, and the recollection of some small moment that pushes at its boundary and swells until I start drafting a piece. Like Robert Frost, quoted on Poet's Grave, who said, "I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering," my poems start in the mystery of a phrase, a sense that there's something worth slowing down for in a clause, a sound, an evocative image. That said, they often don't go as planned, taking an unexpected turn in response to a specific sound, an image, or a pleasing rhythm. So,

while I like to think I know where a piece is going, I am, to quote Gloria Anzaldua, “picking out images from my soul’s eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images” (36). Given the chance, the words often seem to suggest which words should come next. In that way, the experience of writing is also an exercise in self-discovery.

Through paying close attention to the content’s relationship to the sounds created as well finding the most potent images that can also carry suggestive undertones, I believe my poetry should appeal to readers’ as a blend of language and meaning, each reinforcing the other in equal measure. It is my hope that a reader leaves one of my poems with a sense of the world from a new perspective, perhaps one in which transcendence and trash swirl across the same switching yard, each rubbing off on the other.

If the Locomotive of the Lord runs us down
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude

--Jack Gilbert, "A Brief for the Defense"



I



What the Tired Know

The tired know what shuffling feet
across rugs patchworked over wood
does for us, to touch doorknobs, coat

racks, to touch metal. The corona discharge,
a light both green and brief that sparks the air
between fingertip and doorjamb.

The tired have seen the stray
calico pad through a streetlamp's
halo and see this sideshow

for a dumb act of flesh and habit.
Sometimes, the cat's shadow slinks
across the face of a muted tv,

and the tired are careful to note how
the calico stops at a neon storefront
church and listens for a chorus, a nighttime

divine of coughs or prayer or else
only basks in the backlit doorway.
For the tired, the moon is a closet

bulb that swings from its chain,
its sway making playful the puppetry
of a coat's arm, reaching up to say hello.

In the Morning, a Miner Contemplates his Girlfriend's Daybed

The sweep of your calves
could bring a man to tears.

I've been warned. I know
this and more about gravel

pits beneath flesh, how
in a puff of dust, widows

are carved from shale, from false
veins. Even your sleep moans

addle men stronger
than me. Look, here's

nothing or everything. I don't
know which. Only heroes know,

and they don't live here anymore.

Nomenclature

If I bred shepherds they'd take their names
from your favorite things. Desert rose and sandstone,
the only two welcome in my house. The only two
with collars. The rest kenneled and pacing
the same worn patch of silty loam until I'd walk
the bitches into woods, loose them on ground squirrel.

Your postcards come, but I don't read them anymore.
They cover gouges and nail holes, places where paint
we laid together has peeled, and sheetrock freckles
like eggshell. From the sink, I see the runs
I'd make from cyclone fence and cars parked
on the road's shoulder to witness my fine dogs.

I can almost see you, back with no notice, pulling
the grass I let sprout between flagstones and tufts
bunched at the mailbox's base. The dogs whine.
They press their fences, pop the gates, and rush
your outstretched hands, eager for the music in their names,
eager to prove that everything you love is already here.

That in Cozad, Nebraska Once

I stopped at a Marathon
run by a woman pale as road salt.
Ice fog rose off wheat fields
and I needed gas and conversation—

truth is two hours east I slammed
a payphone's frozen silver tab with hate
enough to crack the earpiece. It hung tilt
in its cradle. Stubbing a Winston

into fresh snow, I drove on,
bald tires carving across the plains.
But she was no conversationalist
and pushed back my change

like an Atlantic City gambler
gone house. Then looked
away with lips pursed tight, a map-
work of radial lines

creasing her lower face. Outside,
eating two for a dollar
chicken salad on rye, I prayed
for ergot poisoning, for a tie-dyed

hailstorm I could ooh and ah.
Some trivial madness to replace
highways with canals, flower
the roadsides with wild strawberries.

Budding Introvert Turns to the American Civil War, Learns Lessons in Perspective

It starts when you notice breasts
tenting t-shirts like keels of small
boats unearthed by wind
after a fabled eastern snowstorm.
A flinch in your heart
syncopates farther and farther
from its first true beat.
You retreat into a frost-bitten
fife and drum private
at Fredericksburg, a confederate,
whose dreams in your day-
dreams are filled with hard
light sliced through pine
boughs, the wheeled creak
of cannon about-faced in a winter
meadow. Dark gunmetal
tilted toward darker woods.
Of mothers and other women
prowling spent battlefields.
They toe the dead just to be sure.
There you are: tap your meek code
across the plain, smoke
from a still smoldering mill
on the far shore of the river
rises into the windless
sun-filled sky. Hills filed
off to the west, losing ground,
one false horizon after another.

Cowtown Inn

I learned from my father
that there's no money
playing pool. Only hang-
overs and black eyes. Then
too-bright mornings in Calf
Canyon picking Krenshaw
melons for 7 cents a pound.

But we play for drinks,
winning until we're wobbly
and the migrants quit plugging
quarters into the table.
My shoulders slump as my father
rolls a cue across the green felt,
his hand smoothing the scarred
surface like a doctor feeling
for fractures, or a blind man reading
our histories embedded in slate,
hardened stone. Another night
reclaiming ourselves, measured
in degrees instead of pounds.

Shaking Because I'm Tired

not because I'm cold. Nerves
only fray so far, then they scrape
each other like the legs of 3 AM
crickets, numbing senses in a flash
of blood, cotton coating a dry tongue.

Behind the waterfall, I thought
about holding my life by its ankles
from the top of the shale and mudstone
cliff. Shake it until all the match-
book phone numbers fluttered

down to frigid water and the ink bleeds
across the paper, blurring names
unreadable. Change would nose-
dive, its weight a driving beeline
to the muddy bottom. 10 cents

a wish, 3 for a quarter. What can I
say except I am all angles and all
my angles hurt? Counting the skips
of jagged stones, uprooting stars
from the ink-water firmament.

The Watchmaker's Metaphysics

He's too tired even for love this morning.
The first shards of light cut through fawn
colored blinds, spark off floating dust motes
as if they were little planets on orbit
across sunny parts of the room. He traces
a genealogy of minutes, how night
and day ride the whims of an untrue
velocity through infinite

space. Wrist slashed by striations,
his thin arm reaches for the cord.
He stands before the window,
dazzled and cold. Kick-ups of powdery
snow refract in the sun, gust
off roofs of parked cars and remnants
of his body's heat spiral, lost
above a shadowed fold of blankets.

Crossing Through Fields with a Wheelbarrow

Did you know that I'm known by my forearms,
their crosshatch of old bites? Town kids tail me ragged

through the fields, calling out until I stop and they stop
and I fold back my sleeves, shining a latticework

of white scars. Light gathers at their deep edges.
Have you seen: me bent, half in the woods,

half in the sun-drenched back field, as I pick stinkhorns,
stack them sardine-style in the wheelbarrow's rusty

bottom? You have. I've seen you seeing me. To you
I must seem sheathed in lightning, a man spit forth

from storms, his black hounds edging the tree line
ahead, a stranger made stranger by his markings.

The crushed thistle I mill in my hands and blow skyward.



II



Why I Live on the Old Air Force Base

People leave at night, garbage
bags packed with broken toys, dish sets,
last year's calendars, the days un-X'ed.
They leave past empty barracks
whose doorways glitter
with broken glass. Paint curls off
aluminum siding like onion skin
or sunburn, flips across uncut yards,
and catches on thistleweed, bramble,
on jutting corners of old signs
resting in tall grass. I stay
for the ORV trails, and the miles
I've walked them. For the find
of a plastic shovel lodged in the fork
of a spruce. I stay for the stray cat
who shits in my empty flower bed,
covers it in a pyramid of sand.
For the pawprint cast in mud
just beyond the arc of the screen door.
I stay for the quiet. And the mice bodies
he sometimes leaves, still warm,
an odd homage seizing
on the stoop's uneven concrete.

Nabokov Westerns

An existential slant on spurs and lassos
with lone heroes who are hardly
heroic and more like silent objectors
to their own lives. Outlaws dance
together in ballroom swoops and swirls
after they rob banks, riddling green-
grocers with buckshot. Villain cheek
to villain cheek around a fire high
in the hills, the posse bumbles
to mobilize, townswomen absently
work whisk brooms over broken glass.

Fade out on our faithless
hero, hunched on church steps,
contemplating metaphysics,
plucking cactus spines from his chaps.

The Cartographer's Failed Marriage

By August, he buys a post digger,
spends his nights with dog-day cicadas,
their new voices and hard bodies
spurring the arc of his arms, his hands
clamped on the hickory-handle.
Those perfect cores of empty,
he stands over them, staring
into where earth was,
now a cross-section of nothing.
Worm halves, tendrils of tree roots.
He forgives the cardinal directions
their rigid ways and imagines
a wind rose and its rendering
as it pushes forth in full bloom.

In Defense of the Unicorn

They did well to know their affront
to God and therefore to us.

Their clop on river-cobble, hooves
embraced in mud on the banks

of the Brandywine. Love, if my horse
had no compunction charging down

their bedspots stinking of saw grass
and terror, why should you?

Recalling a Distant, Glorious Victory Caligula Digs Out a Snowbanked Alero

What we needed were Clydesdales, slaves, elephants. A Mediterranean sun I'd part February's clouds to expose. Shovels forged from giant clam halves captured in distant campaigns. Should the sun fail—overseers barking orders over the wind, the driving snow, the tarp flaps snapping. Snow is guilty of worse than any of our crimes. We needed gilded observation decks. Bonfires spitting forth sparks at dusk. Something even night can't repel. There was none of this. A mushroom cloud in the distance. No. A watertower's bulb, steadying an unbalanced horizon.

Animal Cracking

Sunflower roots uprooting
asphalt along 161 nod in wind.
The grind of erosion could kill
a man, drive him to edge
the speedometer on sharp curves
or park twenty minutes
on railroad tracks--those rusted
scars running just above sand--
come lumber cars, come coal.
This is the story I can't untell.
How rutted ranch roads lined
by blood-flecked barbwire
send shadows reeling across
the mind like the scud of clouds
pushed north before a storm.
Balanced on a splintered fence
post, the human body is the tallest
thing for miles. I swear
it's x-rayed when lightning
forks and spiny flowers push
their petals skyward, towards
rain that will never darken
the hard-pack but streaks gray
down the horizon like double-
exposed film, like canyon walls
reflected in a dead coyote's pupil.

4 am: Switching Yards

What crossroads in purgatory
must look like: snarls of track,
currents around a few splintered
outbuildings. There's nothing
here for anyone. Tired arc lights,
barbed wire, creosoted ties.
A yard bull strolls boxcars,
alert, like some magic
worth his time lies in shadows
of derailed flats, between tankers
rusting in tall and rangy sunflowers.
He loves his badge, its heft
on a lanyard of cheap link,
solid and real as a favorite thought.
I pretend we've shared counter space
at a Denny's, laughed at old jokes
our grandfathers invented.
The first haloes of light
lumber through jack pine.
He straightens, runs a hand
down his paunch, and tilts
his hat forward to that angle
known to all men who have
shielded their eyes from dawn,
who have stared down their hearts
and saw precisely what's at stake.

Handyman

On the Astroturf porch
of our sagging home
she sits on the steps
in her pale glory.
Life here is spent
waiting. The stereo rumbles
loud as the Wisconsin-
Central coal cars running
beyond the chain link
fence. I've got watery eyes
and a graveyard hack.
Folding an ace of clubs
into an airplane, I float
it at the screen door.
She doesn't turn.
Something cold lodges
itself in my chest.
Her porcelain shoulders
blade through ribbed cotton.
Delicate as dogwood buds
under a late frost. I rip a Jack
in fours, push
from the table, scrawl
scotch tape in the margins
of a grocery list.

Third Shift at Mobile On the Run

In summers, when heat lightning
flickered like a subliminal message
across West Chester's skyline,
I'd prop two glass doors open
with ashtrays. I smoked Camels
on the threshold of humidity
and air conditioning. Night
bugs thronged the lights, spun
in a blind Tarantella. The streetsweeper
stole Powerbars. I know because I watched
his stained hands paw and slip the bars
through false pockets in his coveralls.
He'd stare, ask if the coffee's free tonight.
As for me, I never said anything
about the Powerbars Because I liked
his limp, how he hefted his weight
into the dark cab and disappeared, back,
I guess, to a barbwired city yard
on Market. When he left, the parking lot
shined a while, like a great onyx dancehall.



III



On Touching My Dog's Cold and Perfect Teeth

I hum Ruby Tuesday when I think of dying.
No more tired homecomings to this collie
in the hall, her nails tapping their code
across the hardwood. I'll hear nothing.
No whining, no mad scabble as she gains
her feet and storms the steps, glad I'm alive
and home, no matter what I've done.
I fret housefires too. Flames climbing
the walls, flames fanned by wind
through an open window. Would she blame
me for a bad outlet and the draft work
stacked on a bedside table? Most nights
I lie awake, weigh the heft of grace,
and listen for the click of the pilot light,
the forced air rising through open vents.

Ms. Vang and Her Cigarettes

It's so unladylike, smoking
on a bicycle, her head wrapped

in a wool scarf themed
with Christmas. Its ends

trail far behind, snapping
in her flight's wind. She pedals

like the fires of hell are behind her.
Maybe they are. This neighborhood,

packs of mean-eyed boys
with bike chains hanging out

back pockets. They whistle
her skittish and shapely,

scrabble for spent butts
she throws at them, a pilgrim

hedging her bets for safe passage.

The Man with a Broken Watch

loves its cracked face, the fissures in clear glass.
He is not late and he is not early and he has never once
been in vain. On the lakeshore he toes ore and glances
at boys skipping pebbles into the scalloped waves, where
the shelf turns under itself. He counts backwards
the skips, gambles them down, and guesses which stones

will curve clockwise, which counter. He peels a wood tick
from his sleeve. Some time later, after the kids have left
on bikes in sprays of gravel, he gathers sea glass unearthed
by scuffed shoes. Once clear, the frosted shards tumbled biteless
by lake waves. His words are like that, edged enough, a heft
in the mouth until they spill divorced from the tongue, and hang

like berries swollen by rains. He neglects to forget
such faith, the spurs he covers now with earth.

Watching My Father on Saturday Morning

My father, craftsman of shadow puppets,
sits in his second wife's kitchen. His hands
stretched in wide stars, bevel to the table's
edge. They are lonesome players on a white
tablecloth. Swan, camel, Eleanor the graveyard
dog, a goose whose neck he pulls in a snare,

swan again. At rest, his hands shrivel
into shells, or two mounds of shapeless clay.
I see scarred ranges, cliffs of veined flesh
warmed on a mug my stepmother refills
with a flourish, her gray housedress open
at the throat. Behind her the curtains shift

and still. I wait for them to flit against
the wall, breathless for designs to our day.

How to Survive in the Heartland Citadel

You'll be fine for months
with canned peaches, Spam, licorice
whips, Monopoly, Risk.
If the power goes, read rules
from the dusty insides of boxes
by A.) flashlights, or B.) candles,
or C.) rags dipped in kerosene.

Youngest player goes first
but receives the smallest dinner.

If power stays: conserve. No
Xbox, tv, VCR. No radios. Study
the strategies of Rommel by wan light
filtering through the reddish haze
of fallout. Realign the continents,
name them after your high school
history teacher, dead pets, the girl
who peed her pants in 8th grade.

Imagine a swell of desperate men
sprinting trenches while you finger
the hollowed pits on the face
of a smooth white die.

At the Rest Stop, I-80, Cornflower, Nebraska

So this is how it ends, with a flurry
of snow balls and violence.
Winter's had its seizures, closing
the only road out of here. Troopers'
lights spin with the snow, a squad car
parked across the ramp. It's pointless.
The only blue here isn't flowers. But
the gas station's sign hisses vibrant teal,
and the pock-faced kid who ran
the overnight walked off into the blizzard
hours ago. This is what nowhere
feels like. It's here that souls
forget they are souls and are left
tired, lungs filled with ice crystal.

How My Grandfather, Pipe and Track Fitter, Thought about Intelligent Design

It started with knowing tapered threads. Figuring

male pipes from pipes with vaginas
and which snug best. A match maker

of sorts. He handcarted the SOO Line,
tracking the flight of grouse roused

in a whirl of gear and leverage.

Birds, tiny pistons themselves, he forged

into parables, never once reconciling
The oiled glint of sun-warm track,

pontooned through pine swamps,
with how it must feel to ascend

into the brilliant and fugitive sunrays.

Jonah: Amateur Cetologist

Undazed, he plucks long strands
of seaweed from his hair. What

sort of whale? Feeling for matches,
which are soaked and useless

without cigarettes, he ponders
the shores of Nineveh. Tarshish

it ain't. His shoulders, bleached
by gastric acids, redden now

in the slanting sun. He blames
the sailors and their cross

dressing ways, their straw-draws
in the storm's whiplash.

But even the Ninevite dogs will fast,
wear cloth diapers, and practice

the rudiments of prayer. All will
be saved. All will be saved

but Jonah, who tells of a future
he changes in the telling,

moves in the shadows of his hut,
blows notes on a cracked rib flute.

What Happened Before I Stepped on a Rusty Fish Hook

We were a menagerie of lonesome,
swimming in a lost quarry edged
by reeds bent under their own weight.
Refuse the cold, my scrotum a wad
of chicken skin shrunk to my body.
I am unashamed that at first
I was ashamed, that the water
made my knees look like scarred
oak root. I was young. I stared.
And those strangers
are with me still. I'm sure
that the sun blazed on granite
sheets struck no one but me
as the shade God wears to a wake.
And how we laughed when I fell
in the black clay and rose, slick
and glistening, almost in love
with the whiteness of a woman's
foot as she tucked and dove, her toes
pale effigies of tulips,
the water tight against her.

On the Off-Chance that My Grandfather is in Heaven

Tell me, at least, that you bit the whiskey back.
That in your war on penance you were the man
who held his breath for years, laid bones
with the devil in a whiteout. Tell me you drew
double-blank on the last draw. Tell me you didn't lose.

Last I heard, you could stare down a cyclone,
con a fox into a burning leaf pile, and sleep with your eyes
open and rolling. But real history is a different story
and I'm curious: was it the axle or your spirit
that snapped, skidding you over the Wolf River's ice?

Now, my grandmother, your tired widow, calls me by your name.
I tell myself it's nothing but the tectonics of sorrow
unearthing the decades, grinding before it bedrock
and legacy. I tell myself it's her glaucoma
casting long shadows. There's nothing here to see.

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