Burning the Negatives

Poems by
Jackson Hall

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__________________________
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Grandpa’s Leg

1.

The recip saw buzzed through the bone like PVC, serrated blade chewing the marrow while he slept, anesthetized, as if he’d just finished a Maker’s Mark and cola, home after piloting a red-eye from Denver to Montgomery. At peace. A piece of himself lobbed off, tabled, and wheeled to chippers or crematoria, cartilage and ligaments fried or pulverized, ash or pulp. Pickled in a jar, put on ice, shipped to Johns Hopkins, interns with lancets prodding it for a grade. Or bagged and dumped with other limbs of different lengths, colors, creeds, and maladies, each hunk tallied inside a thick file of medical history.

2.

A pale, crooked, cross-shaped scar marked the rounded stump where his left calf, dark with varicose veins, blue bruises, and liver spots, once swung from the knee. Diabetes, was it? Infection? Arteries clogged with hog fat, too much steak, lard, whiskey?

3.

Detached from Grandpa, the prosthetic is nothing but a rod, a titanium peg leg
flexing at a creaking artificial joint.
Linked to him, its hard metal
juts from his sagging thigh,

yet it’s his leg, fleshless, bloodless,
as much him as his ruddy arms
prickling with silver hair, as much him

as I am who, as a child, would search
the house for the lost leg, hunkering
under tables, checking broom closets,

until I found it underneath the bed
and then returned it to him, resting
on the couch, unaware it had disappeared.
Deepening

The clippers were buried beneath
柜台抽屉的垃圾，所以奶奶
放弃了寻找它们

and used a heavy pair of scissors
to cut her jagged jaundiced nail,
diabetic feet nearly numb.

Momma swabbed the toe with gauze
dampened in hydrogen peroxide,
consoling and scolding: “Why

would you use scissors, Ma?”
I watched my mother bend by the bed
where her mother, half-moaning

and half-grumbling, lay back flat
as her daughter wrapped, snipped, taped,
each woman’s grimace a map

of wrinkles deepening each day.
Dad's Law

Storms hide behind
his tremendous shoulders,
clouds still in the night
wind as he lifts the first fist
driven into my jaw. I fall,
he mounts my chest: his weight
bends my ribs, digs my back
into the damp grass
like a seed he knuckles
into the cold, black loam
for his garden, pressed
deep toward hidden water.
His law, a hand of thunder.
**Badger Balm for Hardworking Hands**

On a Saturday so cold it sharpened the edges of tools and ends of stray splinters, Dad and I dug post-holes along our backyard, piercing dirt to unplug lumps of clay like dead organs. We kicked each one tumbling into the ditch’s black-glass water, the last stretch of swamp our suburb hadn’t paved over. Cavities lined the property. In each we jammed a cedar fence post, wrestling its blunt end deeper until it lodged and was level, then poured gritty concrete mix to the brim, and then water, stirring it from bubbles to sludge. Blisters burned our hands, eczema flares scarletted my dried knuckles, bitten by a sharp breeze. Dad unpocketed the grimey tin and put it in my hands. Badger tracks crawled around the green can, claws that scrapped through sod and roots, rough work: my filthy nails fought the lid off.

Rubbed in, the oily balm smelled just like him, his calloused hands as they clapped my stiff back.
Televangelist

Pockets too fat for your ass to pass through a needle’s eye.
Deep Purple Genesis

FM radio rarely played in Mom’s Ford Explorer, and even when it did, she would turn the volume so low that snares, cymbals, and kick drums amplified for stadiums could barely hum through near-muted speakers,

but on rides to Macon East Elementary, passing ponds crowned with blue-grey mists of phantom rain, she would sing *smoke on the water, a fire in the skies*. Or maybe, as I remember hearing,

*a fire in disguise,*

as if combustion could shroud itself within itself, as if a lick of flame withering in the breeze could hide where it wasn’t welcome, *heat* another name for a trickster god.

Evaporation may also have been a trick, the perpetual motion of the water cycle another sleight of hand. At Macon East, I’d learn Pledge of Allegiance and Golden Rule, that God molded the earth, flooded it,

*then un-flooded it,*
carved ocean and river out rock, raised forests He’d then scorch, canopies dense with flame until a deluge snuffed it all, until there was nothing but smoke gathering overheard, an inferno now a cloud, a riff of tremendous thunder exploding

*as it did the day*

Mom braked to miss an oak, struck by a bolt, crashing across the road: bark and leaves burned in the downpour, the tree a black, acrid heap in our high-beams, our wipers whirring, the radio silent.


**Purgatory as New York**

In the passenger seat the taxi driver keeps a hori-hori. In the ashtray a cigar smolders. Its embers flicker, then ash. Looking into the rearview—his eyes are green—he asks me, wheezing, *Where to?* I say *Brooklyn, Angel Guardian’s Home for Little Children*. Mom said old nuns fed my orphaned granddad scraps there and swatted his palms with rods. The cabbie nods, hands me a knife through the partition. I carefully receive it, admiring the edge and heft, ivory handle etched with red crosses and a Latin verse, inscrutable words twisting around the grip I grasp, and lift.
At Sweet P’s Barbeque and Downtown Dive

The crackling battered hides
of fried pickles crunch, snap,
and crumble saltily upon
my tongue. I hanker for

another bite, but Karylle
snatches the last hot spear.
She holds it, steaming, before
her lips, and then breaks it,

handing the shorter end out
the same way Granny held
one out to Granddad. She
was the Knoxville church girl

aspiring to be a missionary
who gave it up for the Brooklyn
orphan turned Korea Veteran
stationed at the local base

because she said God told her
he was her mission. Two weeks
after meeting, they’d hitch, lovers
splitting a sizzling dill, greasy

and steamy halves swapped
back and forth between pairs
of briny hands like my girl’s
and mine. Do we only share

with them a faith in salt,
sour electric prayer of palettes
answered only as we wipe
crumbs from our oily mouths?
Fight Like a Man

Cheeks swollen, I cough blood and spit my mouthpiece on the mat, gasping. Belt undone, my dobok sags, but before I can stagger up and raise guard, a referee cuts, whistles, grabs my arm: enough.

In college, when Dad was walking home, some thug struck his neck and flung him hard to the concrete walk, busting his skull. But he hopped up, ducked a hook, threw an elbow and booked it, ruined shirt flapping as blood dripped between his shoulder blades, like the blood spilling over my split lips, my chest, mixing with sweat as the ref pulls me out the ring into the still-hard arms of my father, stunned at my beatenness, though he’s tallied every whiffed parry and heavy hit since the bell first rang.
Whole Blood

Tourniquet strapped around my arm, thick blue veins bulge at the hinge. The nurse tells me to turn my head and breathe, then sinks the needle, a dark stream of cells pumping through the tube coiling from my chair to a tagged bag. I squeeze a stress ball and the plastic sac swells, pulsing like a ventricle. A chill creeps through me: I’m not sure if it’s the plasma flushing or a breeze entering the church’s atrium. Members spill into the massive room once service ends. A woman’s shirt reads He spilled his blood, so you could give, a cross inside a crimson droplet. “Almost done.” As the nurse clips the tube I look to my father in the chair to my left, reclined, eyes closed, napping, bag fat with his fifth donation this year already, my first ever on the tray. “You’re ready.” Steady, I try to lift out of my seat then stagger, buckling, the room whirling until somebody cracks smelling salts and my head reels back, everything a haze: my father and the nurse standing over me, crosses on the walls blurred and denatured.
II
Overboard

A salmon-colored tear of rum-spiked slush drips from the lip of Mom’s daiquiri, lightly held over the lido’s guardrail, the Caribbean Sea bluer than today’s clear sky. She points toward the endlessness of open water. “Wind’s whipping fast.” Whitecaps skate the crests of waves, then recede back to blue, a hundred frothy crests rising and dying all around us. “If you fell,” she says, “the ship’s wake would suck you under the keel and tear you to bits,” right before she loses her drink, a red blip plummeting ten decks into the wind-torqued waves, splashing without a sound, vacuumed into the current.
The Injury

1.

Day of the bowl game, Dad plops onto the hotel bed, naked ruddy back sun-rashed and marred with scars from picked-at acne and a former cyst that a doctor lasered and scraped away, leaving a pink-and-white mark near the tender shoulder blade. He strains to rub it, twisting, contorting his arm, unable to ease the recurrent ache. “Son,” he says for the nth time, “mind massaging your old man’s back?” And again, digging my knuckle into his sore wing, I press and shift muscle in small and large circles, his bone pushing against my hand until he says, “A little higher?”

2.

A walk-on at Auburn, Dad hunkered down into a three-point stance, anticipating the snap, then exploded off the ball, rocked the tackle, felt his shoulder jolt out of socket as he thudded onto rough turf, whistle blowing as cleats stomping around his head halted, the two-a-day sun’s glare stinging his eyes. Inside the locker room, trainers shot him up with painkillers, applied bags of ice, and racked his pads while he shivered sweating on a wooden bench, bent over and shuddering, his wet red face cradled in tape-wrapped hands, thirteen gridiron years snapped like a bad ligament.
Dad crimps some rolling paper into a V and pours Goody's Powder into the crease, shaking the packet until it's empty. Chalk-white dust falls and clumps onto his tongue like snow, washed back as he swigs a Coke. I slip on a jersey, and he fights into a game day shirt, thick German head wrestling through the neck hole, large arms hassling through sleeves. Tugging the hem over his gut, he winces. “Hey, Pops, you all right?” Even though last night he tossed and turned, whined, threw blankets off the bed and back on, even though he plodded to the bathroom to splash warm water onto his sleepless face and gripe, cursing botched surgeries over the buzzing lamp and rushing spigot, he shrugs, “I’m fine. Are you?” Soon we’ll hike toward the stadium like we’ve done so many times, father and son, our pilgrimage, each step and cheer supplanting the words left unspoken and hanging in the air like a kickoff, spiraling down, our eyes fixed on the ball’s descent from heaven to turf, hands raised, screams deafened by the roar.
Home Game

“Look at him go! Run, nigger, run!” hollers my shitfaced uncle. Touchdown.

Springing from orange chairs, my family screams with the Auburn band romping

*Power of Dixieland.* Against the wall, third highball near-cracking in my grip,

I want to snatch him mid-chorus, my fist hushing him in time to the drum major’s baton as the band blares on. Laughing, my uncle stumbles to hug me. My chest, tightening, receives his vice-grip, beer-breath warmth skunking my neck. Why can’t I hiss the truth in his tone-deaf ear, shove him off tripping drunk onto a table, away from me? Why do my arms cinch tighter as his arms clutch me closer,

a stadium’s televised rumble humming far off, cheers quieting, and our breaths thinning, thinning until we break apart?
Becoming Best Man
For Kasem Abdullah

Three bottles rattle inside the cardboard box: whiskey swirls up each neck as I shake the glass, our friendship measured in Yuengling we stole from house parties and Shell stations, in Grey Goose we snuck out our parents’ liquor cabinets, in Gatorade we guzzled the mornings after to quell hangovers we’d suffer together, in the Fireball and Topaz he funneled and then threw up in a pool, bent toward its edge, while I yanked his belt so he wouldn’t fall, head diving toward the tiled bottom, chlorine filling his purged gut, a trail of bubbles the day after Christmas.
Bachelor Party

He waves the hookah hose at a random girl, mouthpiece neon under the bar’s black lights, a silver engagement ring glinting on his finger. He slurs and hiccups, handle slipping in his grip, pipe dipping toward his lap. Slumped, he sinks into the cushions and takes a hit of Tiger’s Blood, billowing like blown silk then vanishing. He’ll forget it all: chasing nocturnal tail, but someday I’ll tell him about the beautiful woman who disappeared in smoke.
Morning After

Our old house mutt laps up PJ from a steel vat skunking by the cracked back door. Knobby-legged, he skitters across the kitchen, knocks the tub aside, and purple ink spills on tiles, trickling off into pools and streams.

His scrambling paws splash. *Son of a bitch.* Muttering to God about hangovers, I hunker to mop up the mess with a rag. Our fleabag toes toward me, wet nose nudging my cheek, so I pat and scratch his head, which dips, tongue lolling, into vodka and Kool-Aid, and I laugh, head still clanging like a tapped keg, thinking hair of the dog: now I know what bit his tail last night.
Washing Her Hair in the Women’s Bathroom

We say nothing, improvising
sign language so we don’t startle
anyone, especially an RA,
in the stalls beside ours.
Steam rises, condensing
on the tiled walls as we shift,
twist, bend to grab a bar of soap
or shampoo from the caddie,
taking turns: squeezing dimes
of Pantene into our palms,
we dig foamy fingers into
each other’s scalp, scrubbing,
untangling knots underneath
the showerhead, then rinsing.
A single strand of long hair
sticks to her face, a black vein,
a dark scar I try to wipe away.
Halloween Aubade

Mascara trails smear
and gold glitter dusts

her rouged cheeks,
blanket shawled over

her head. Last night
she was an axe-murderer

in scrubs, zombie nurse,
monster’s bride hooked

to my gangrene elbow
as we crept from bar to bar,

stool to stool, glass to glass
stained with her bloody

lipstick. This morning
her smudged maroon mouth

grins sharply, as if to say
she could kill me

or raise me from the dead,
her bed a scream queen

grave from which I must
soon exhume myself.
Talking in Her Sleep

Ghost hoods and giant crosses stab
the blood-black sky lit with fire.

Her family’s stalled-out sedan revs up
and chokes. They bury their heads

into the seat cushions as a pale mask
with scissored-out eyes phantoms by--

she’s told me how it goes. The dream
always the same. When her nails dig

into my skin as she whimpers, deep
asleep, I pretend I don’t hear what

I know torches inside her head,
lanterned masks white as my face

hunting her in the smoke-veiled night,
calling, their drawl and twang echoing

my own. A voice in the lynch mob
is mine, but not mine, a shared tongue

whose pitch pierces through every word
of love I can utter. Her eyes open.

I stammer some nonsense in the dark,
then quiet. I pretend I said nothing.
As My Dead Wander

An ambulance rips past,
siren whining, beacon flashing
sapphire and scarlet, a trail

of panicked light burning
a path through the night
that souls, when leaving

the flesh that harbored them
for so many years measured
in breath and blood, may choose
to follow. Barking behind
wired-in yards, pit bulls leap
onto fences, bright fangs
glowing among shadows
shawling their twisted faces,
a nightmare howled

into this grid of streetlamps
that mark the directions toward
and away from home.

When strobes of red or blue
streaking dark roads have faded
and that shrill echo dies, when
dogs hush back into kennels
and lamps dim, how will I track
new ghosts leaving our emptied
cul-de-sac, our sprawl of lawns
and locked doors, abandoning
neighbors they barely knew?
III
**Dream of the Scrap Iron Bull Sculpture**

A big bone’s shanked into its metal flank. Jammed between organs of screws, coils, and rods rusting beautifully after so many storms have stripped the skeleton raw, it juts out, the last hardened chunk of calcium left before the bull’s thick flesh sloughed off and the rest of its innards were made iron: stomach a steel drum, intestines a twisted pipe, tail a cable drooping between large hind legs, car horn for a voice box, broken clock for a heart.

Dream-lightning strikes, surging through its nerves: the shock ends at this, the last mortal bone, its marrow a conduit for elemental charge. At night, sparks fire from its twin horns, flares falling around its hooves stomping the earth. Thrashing and bucking, honking and bellowing, it spews smoke, spits oil, and coughs up gears and buzzing motherboards that shatter in the dirt.
Perpetual Sleeplessness Machine

Brain waves meander around midnight
along a neuron, sparks stepping
across the bridge of a synapse,

brain and body too hot with thought
to give in to sleep. Small stars glint
and a white beam floods through

the window, sieving between the blinds,
dripping from the cracked glass
sealed with duct tape. Rising to walk,

I stop by the window, my body
pale as light lost off the surface
of a full moon, press my hand

against the pane and pull it back
to examine the lambent dust
collected on my palm, inside

lifelines crossing my hand like wires
tunneling through a dense network,
glitching in the electric dark.
Wire

A plastic Jesus somehow balances
on a telephone line. The messiah

on a high wire, with sandaled feet, walks
on lightning, arms outstretched, his body’s cross

steadying him so he won’t plummet
into traffic—like Philippe Petit

who tight-roped between the Twin Towers,
hovering over pedestrians who stared

up at his miracle: a skinny silhouette
brushing clouds, wielding a five-meter beam

as a gust rushed from heaven and the wire
swayed—and for a moment the toy

Christ atop the telephone wire
might fall, and Petit may meet God

not on the other side of this taut line
hitched over the city,

but below.
Snake Myth

My cousin tossed a copperhead 
onto the pit, its sinuous body 
coiling and cooking, a knot of scales 
dumped on hickory, flames swirling

while smoke billowed and cloaked 
the viper until it vanished. 
Embers crackled, scales cracked, 
its head split: fumes funneled

up its throat like a leathery pipe, 
razor tongue unfurled, fangs bared 
as if the serpent would lurch 
and latch onto my wrist, teeth sunk

into vein. Its charred twisted tail smelt 
oddly savory, a tempting scent. We joked 
that its caramelized venom would conjure 
hallucinations in the backwoods:

Gabriel descending from treetops 
to talk gospel and heavenly cuisine, 
or the snake, reborn, sprouting legs 
and crawling out the coals.
Cockroach in the Folger’s

Belly up, it wriggles in the coffee grounds, pinchy legs twitching, trying to flip over and clamber onto the steel spoon jutting above the dune of Country Roast dark as its near-buried, thrashing thorax. Do its antennae sense the accents of robust nut, chocolate hints as it shuffles, stuck, in this pit? Do grains lodge in its joints like sand in a motor, a sputtering bug-engine choking off as it lurches and churns to power out of the trap, only to sink deeper in the mess, gassed, gone, dead?

Gulf shore pilgrims gather before the office windows housing her apparition, warped rays bending the body until she’s Saint Rainbow, the purple and rose gold folds of her veil quivering as the sun climbs. Some people empty satchels, shake jewelry from purses, toss watches and bracelets on the sidewalk where candles surround a statue of Christ raising his hand. Others snap polaroids, wave prints until she rises from grain, a blurry theotokos, proof of a miracle for moms and dads to frame or fit into photo books, or pin to fridges covered with postcards of grinning suns, sports ribbons, verse-inscribed magnets, and Confirmation certificates. At Easter, for a while, families will sit in kitchens to pass around photographs washed-out by years of retold stories. No one will recall, or care, about the rock some kid launched at the Virgin, shattering her into glittering shards that littered the grass for days until trashmen bagged every scattered fragment with the rest of the day’s refuse they trucked to the dump.
Authors Mural at Barnes and Noble

Dead writers, whose works littered
every syllabus pushed on my desk
in high school, sip brushstroked glasses

of bourbon, puff on pipes while spools
of white smoke swirl and bits of spilled ash
singe their lapels and dresses. Meanwhile

in this Fortune 500 bookshop, a woman
laboring over *How to Read Literature like a Professor* hushes her baby wailing

in its stroller, red-faced and tear-streaked,
tantrum its only language. Three tables down
a man spreads a newspaper, pins it with a mug

and small plate holding a cream cheese Danish
obscuring today’s headlines; his preschooler
shakes *The Hunger Games* in his face, pages

flapping like flightless wings as she begs him
to turn away from another la-di-da review
and decipher the sentences troubling her.

Above it all, Faulkner, Eliot, and Steinbeck
suck cigars and chit-chat in a bar’s dark corner,
ignoring us below, perfect, eternal, and alone.
**Dental Sonnet**

“I wanted to teach poetry
but studied dentistry, sold out,”
he grumbled hunched over
a gape-mouthed patient
baa-ing *ahhhh*, gums and teeth
hideous under fluorescence,

sickle-shaped probe snug
as a ball-point pen between
his gloved pudgy fingers,
steel hook scratching on cuspids,
incisors, and molars, the scratch
of metal against enamel

just another awful draft,
iambs aching inside a jaw.
Machine Shop Boy

I bathe gears in greasy hot water
until they’re clean enough to channel fire
into flight, their sheen like suns

rippling across iron faces.
Gloved, I dunk titanium cogs
into oil vats, hoist them out black and slick

in a fist from the sludge, toss handfuls
into baskets with hundreds more
to shove into a washer. Its massive door

slammed shut, I wait, parts churning
in boiling soap-suds, steam leaking
from a crease. I drill holes

into wastegates, turbines, and valves,
little ribbons of copper spooling out,
a handful of bits jiggling in my pocket

in case one breaks, a split tooth’s stump
spinning uselessly. Metallic dust on my arms,
barbed shards under my chipped nails.

I grind names and numbers off the sides
of starters, bullet-shaped aircraft parts
big as my calf, till the abrasive belt dulls,

and the motor whirs like it might blow.
Sometimes it does. Sometimes the belt slips,
grazes my ungloved knuckle or wrist,

and leaves red skids of rasped flesh
smooth to the eye and the touch
like a deburred strip of trimmed steel.
Feral Aquarium

Gunked green under the sun,
dumped in the bushes growing
wild beside the brick wall
surrounding my father’s garden,

its water sloshes, ripples, and stills
like a troubled bog—lid fogged,
depths thick with sludge,
pebble-and-grit floor a slimy blur

where legs, antennae, and wings
dissolve in the sour-milky murk.
Spiders, roly polies, dragonflies
float on the surface. Sometimes,

bobbing on a wake trembling
from a breeze, they twitch,
a sudden tremor, alive and then
dead again. I grab a thick stick,

its end forked into two branches
for stirring the bacterial funk,
probing brittle glass corners
that, bending, shudder when poked,

as if one last jab will finally
unleash the flood—until, suddenly,
the weight of something. I gently
fix the whatever-it-could-be

between my branch’s prongs,
and slowly, not to cause a splash,
lift it out: a garden snake, slack,
sagging, residue glinting as it drips

down the limp leathery tail,
scaly head still submerged,
as if it were straining to stay
buried in the acrid muck.
Years After the Spill

Floating on a buoy, I dream
of a behemoth

asleep beneath
the Gulf of Mexico’s cold surface,
the water patient, reflective,
exactly like

in a poem or brochure
but disturbed, its visibility

dropping off, muddled
after a few feet,

and I know the darkness sloping down
below the water until there’s nothing

is the behemoth, a submarine body
of oil too thick, too heavy to drift
away from the memory of itself,
an iron fish swimming against
gasoline currents:

from black skies
descends our Lord’s endless downpour,
the impossible weight and color of heaven
mirroring these dark waves that rise
and break against white banks, and when thunder
rolls, floating along the horizon, I hear it fall

from above and below and within.
Wildlife on I-85

Dogs, deer, and foxes
litter the shoulders, carcasses

measuring my trip
like mile markers. Bodies,

ballooned in the heat,
blur at the periphery,

shrink into the mirror’s
version of the world,

and disappear, the road
tallying so many corpses

past the vanishing point.


Camps

Nazis in Alabama

On his birthday Herbert Werner was drafted into der Heer. Naturally, he was given a Luger and a rank

and then fitted, unwillingly, for the jackboots that he and eintausend Jungen

wore as they marched in lockstep, a machine of Übermenschen. But now they step off the train and onto the red dirt

of Aliceville, singing battle hymns of the Third Reich. Sheriffs and marshals point their rifles

at the ground and direct the flow of POW’s, like livestock herded

back to the barn. The townsfolk gathered around the station scratch their heads. Shoving

to the front, an unnamed old woman points at Werner, her words etched on a plaque flanking the photographs

hung in the little town’s museum: “Well, by God, look at how young he is, about the same age as my grandson.”
Japanese in California

The family has packed lightly, as instructed. Four bags rest at their feet while they pose by the roadside, all nine of them. Machida is painted on their luggage, their surname spelled in white letters, and beneath it, a suncross. Their mustached father wears a fedora, round glasses, a formal tie knotted a little loose around his collar, his leather jacket zipped up: he confronts the camera, back erect, hand resting on the shoulder of his youngest boy, who turns his head, looking off at where the frame ends, expecting the bus to arrive from nowhere. A tag is pinned to his coat. Other slips are clipped to his siblings, hanging from their collars. Certainly there are words scribbled on the tags, but because of the distance between the Machidas huddling together for their portrait and the photographer aiming her lens, they seem merely blank.
Americans in Germany

Patriot of bone, skeletal hands clasped behind the back, a POW thrusts his gaunt, bare chest before the barbed wire that separates him from Himmler. Colorless garrison cap skewed, army slacks rope-tied to hips thin as the barrel of a gun, he’s less soldier than military husk, more hunger than warrior, shirtless, gun-stripped. While stars and ribbons bedeck the Nazi, a rib for nearly every year of war juts against skin, taut, cold—skin he may wear home or underground, brothers-in-arms dumped in gangs festering over him. It is 1940, or maybe 1941, according to the photo, but scanning it, his name is captioned nowhere.
Photographing the Lost War

The old veteran’s sunken Lost Cause eyes flit under the shade of his black kepi visor. Waving, he says to come closer, to focus on his collar: “Be sure to get these colonel stars in the picture.” He cut each one from his ancestor’s uniform and stitched them onto a surplus jacket.

He’s been marching across north quad, battle flag hoisted before a dead Confederate’s statue. Carolinians thronging toward either side of the barricade thrust handmade signs above the crowds--Heritage, Not Hate and Your Heritage Is Hate. College kids and Dixie nostalgists bicker soundbites before mics.

After dragging bullet-pierced infantrymen across Antietam, Alexander Gardner would arrange dead gangs of men in rows. As he focused on the splayed corpses already festering, the anonymous lot of crooked limbs and bloody tatters lay still for the lens.

Here the bronze-cut Confederate grays on Silent Sam bear no lead-ripped holes. Students chorus murdered names. Fusillades of shutters snap-fire at every face. The vet’s likeness sharpens in my sight, the lost war blurred like the pell-mell around his head.
Hand Coloring

The pastor holds an ear of corn and barters with customers who stop by his pick-up to consider crops.

A wooden sign on the truck’s side shines, its words bright red like everything Jesus said:

_Are ye prepared to die?_
A black woman stands by the words, her thin crossed arms

and wide eyes distorted behind thick-rimmed glasses still in monochrome.

I tint her iris with a cotton swab dipped in dye, a quick dab of blue until the film is stained,

this day’s forgotten palette filling the grey and white likeness of each person long dead.
**Spirit Photography**

Lincoln rubs his wife’s neck while she stares ahead, her late husband a vapor shaped like a man holding his breath, his bullet-pierced skull patched up with new flesh and hair. So the dead blur near us. Washed-out daguerreotypes seem to shift. What if when flash powder bursts and blinds the room with light, smoke solidified into a loved one’s fingers, their touch really tracing along our coat collars, brushing stiff shoulders?

After hours of quietly posing, what if Mary Todd felt tempted to turn her chair and share a brief word with him?

When holding a framed print of my late Omi, I wish for such a reunion. She leans weakly against a doorjamb, cancer-pallid, except for her blue eyes. Behind her, as if the heart attack never took him, Pa strokes her nightgown, whispering words she might have loved to hear, only a few brief weeks till she would finally join him, two twilight figures fixed in this picture, as yet unrestored.
Maternal Instinct

Killings and kidnappings broadcast on channel five fueled her fearful love. I twirled jingling car keys like rings around my finger, but before I escaped she’d shout from the couch not to linger in West Montgomery, imagining knives and bullets that would butcher her son in the night for whatever borrowed cash was crumpled in my pocket—thugs mug kids like you every day! Sighing, I kissed her wrinkled forehead, paler every year. I’ll be fine. As I sauntered to the car, did she note the cut and color of my clothes before she’d shut and double-lock our door?
“Young Edwin in the Lowlands Low”

The crankie tells silhouette stories
on an illustrated scroll:
in a town or village scissored
out of construction paper,

a daughter’s father beheads
her lover, and a mountain’s
jagged crags gash a yellow sky.
The outline of each thing--

drawn and cut and pasted
by my grandma, who keens
this ballad while cranking
the spools that turn the scroll--

is fringed with the glow
of a dim lamp. Shadow-like people
plow fields, break backs, marry,
carry children, and die, their lives

a flimsy sheet reeling
on creaking wooden wheels
thinning and then filling,
the tale sung again and again.
Michael Jackson on Vinyl

Omi sharpied her name onto the cover. Written in cursive, the letters resurrect the movement of her hands, how they’d fit stylus into groove, spiraling murmur more like a buzz. Needle scratching vinyl, bassline scattering dust, a synthesizer’s jarring squall swelling against my walls,

his sweet falsetto scores the street-drama: a libretto of leather jackets, switchblades slipped out of sleeves, assassins gliding on rollerblades and women who inspire their violence, blood wars on dance floors.

Omi shuffled on the rug to the classic record, vacuuming, but when her collie spooked, yelping at the turntable, the loose power cord tangled her ankle and she toppled through the coffee table, the record skipping as glass shattered, Michael wailing for her, fallen.

Ten years later, I hum to the song now locked into a loop, my hand tracing around the words her deft wrist carefully wrote: Ilse and Thriller.
**Generation Loss**

My iPhone flashed with grainy .jpegs of our would-be daughter’s ultrasound. Still-forming near-fingers stretched toward the dark borders in which she was wombed, her silhouette rimmed with a white haze.

Zipping terse texts my way, her mother recounted how her belly felt the wand grazing gelled skin as kicks answered it—*thump, thump, thump*. Three states away, my hand trembled, yearning to rest against her navel, then filed the pictures in a folder housed in the cloud. When she miscarried we deleted each other’s names. Now I search for what’s lost, recovering only what’s left: images degrading, our girl just pixelation.
The Wind in High Places

It’s all open chords
during the first movement.
The strings never press
the violin’s neck, so light

the touch—of finger,
of bow—the sounds
seem to wander,
like wind, around the landscape

of a concert hall in Los Angeles,
of Alaskan mountain ranges,
of my car on the way to Chapel Hill.
The quartet performs live

inside my speakers.
John Luther Adams wrote the piece,
his first for string quartet,
after hearing

his friend had died. Sudden, inexplicable,
out of the blue—all the words
people work out of air
to make sense out of forces

that are plainly elemental.
Hearts give out.
Folks lose their footing
and hit their heads.

Two weeks before freshman year
my history teacher
When I found out

I wasn't standing
on a summit, but in a Starbuck's
parking lot, the spaces empty,
trying to cry, but failing,
the humid midnight air,
the breeze around
my naked neck,
coming from everywhere.
Stars and Soles in Fall

The Milky Way dusts her shoes, galaxy clusters and dark matter rendered in acrylic on canvas: a pair of cheap, tough Vans she bought to skateboard in Durham. She would ollie off lawns onto asphalt, kick flip over sleeping cats coiled on sidewalks. But now she sprints in her starry kicks, chasing a chipmunk on the quad. Her stride, a long and rapid lift-and-plant closing (almost) in on the rodent, a swift new universe turning, its cosmos busy and swelling while Karylle runs herself breathless, yelling at the chipmunk as it darts up root and trunk until it’s gone—a rustle of fall leaves, snapped twigs, and fur.
Love Song for Damaged Knee

Squatting, she balances against the cobblestone wall lining our hike from the lab to her dorm. She digs and twists her fingers where the pain burns through her. Kneeling, I hook the right calf, palm the knee, and, squeezing, lever straight her rigid leg, joint hinging on a cadaver’s grafted hamstring.

One, two, and stretch. Now, flex.

Pressing the cap, my hand glides hesitantly to graze a bone-stiff tendon untensing while the muscles slowly warm and she winces until a long ahhh breezes out of her, grimace unknotting, my fingers rubbing the taut rubbery cord that straps sore hip to knee-pit.

One, two, bend. Now, extend.

Pliant for a moment, she hoists herself up by my arm, sturdy enough, though her doctor predicts someday she’ll need a cane: by thirty. Then what? Walker by forty? Prosthesis by fifty? Do I love her enough to know I’ll love her even then, each day massaging a ghost limb, a fire in invisible tissue? Please jolts her soft voice, Go slow.

The walk home isn’t long.
On Granny Dying

Convinced, I hid the egg,
picked from a robin’s nest

fallen on the sidewalk,
underneath her,

knowing that soon
a chick would hatch

from the shell. She held me
while nesting in the Lazy Boy.

Her warmth put me to sleep.
In the morning, no baby bird

or egg, broken or unbroken, only
me, curled up, dazed

in the chair, wondering where
Granny had gone.
Clearing Out Her House

Omi’s piano gathers dust
in the foyer, window’s splayed light
shining on the wood. Motes
rise, float, and fall in the air.
I stare at the ivories faded
yellow, the ebonies scratched.

Most mornings, before clots
bound her to bed, cannulas
plugged her nose, and IV’s
needled into inflamed veins,
this daughter of a concert pianist
would fiddle with the keys,
a few bars of Beethoven drifting
through the halls, then stopping,
followed by the fall board’s

faint shut. I tap a black key;
an awkward note dings
out of tune, lingering,
rings of white dust
on my fingertip.
Black Is the Color

of a heavy metal thunderbolt
blitzing through Angus Young’s
crimson Gibson; of the ash
Dad dashes from his Marlboro
after he takes a puff, coughs,
then holds the cig outside
the window, whipping winds
mixing with burnt riffs and solos
exploding like digital napalm
burned onto a CD-ROM;
of his tumorous lungs
after thirty pointless years
of patches and lozenges
and damn Nicorette gum;
of my suit, shoes, and tie
as I drive toward the wake,
scanning classic rock stations
and wondering which songs,
like obituaries in the air, will play
as we bear, then bury, the casket.