

Burning the Negatives

Poems by
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*For Karylle, Cameron, and Kasem—
for keeping me together*

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I

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
cabinet drawer junk, so Granny
gave up digging for them

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 overhead, 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."
Steadying, 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.

3.

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?

The Madonna of Clearwater, Florida (1998)

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
sing 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 scritch on cuspids,
incisors, and molars, the scratch
of metal against enamel

just another awful draft,
iambes 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.

IV

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 under-
ground, 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 barterers 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.

V

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.

Zippering 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
hanged himself. Jim Gatling.
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 unknitting, 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.

