

Homespun Heart

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Contents

Philosophy Graduate Student /	3
Missing /	4
Deaf Gossip /	6
My Great Uncle Who Barks /	8
Inside the dream catcher /	10
Ricky /	11
Camouflage /	13
Kationary /	15
Hey Austin /	16
Your Local Jobs /	18
Bad Word /	20
New Renter Agreement /	21
Hobert Lee Frank /	23
The Evicted Remains /	25
Bringing Down the House /	26
Dear Grandma Frank /	28
#InstaGrief /	29
I confess to the murder /	30
Duckzilla /	31
Binge /	32
Double Exposure /	34
Closed Doors /	35
Stay /	36
Leaving Welcome, NC /	37

Philosophy Graduate Student

An Ouroboros tail in mouth
I sit in class and stare
at your push-broom mustache,
contemplating the profound
question: would it be
morally acceptable for me
to shave the thick bristles
off your face? Of course,
I'd probably displace
a complete civilization
of Platos and Aristotles
behind the theoretical
curtain that shades your upper lip,
constructing speech with logical slips,
premises you unleash in lecture,
frowning at conjectures from students
who overlook the facts.

*If A is justified in believing B
and B entails C, then I am
justified in believing that
your glass mug is not full of tea
when you mention consensual
sex between man and dolphin,
ask us to debate the ethics
with a sound and valid argument.
When Socrates swan dives into
the herbal hot tub you're sipping,
I think maybe the world
as I see it is a lie,
the universe nothing more
than dirt trapped inside
the feather-duster under your nose
or a paradoxical snake's
essence spinning infinite
like a barber shop pole.*

Missing

If I had been born
a year instead of eleven
after my parents married,
I would have been older
than my oldest cousin
and the pioneer of public school,
which would have been nice
considering teachers saw me
as Jeremy's shadow – quieter
and almost as smart – and maybe
I could have tolerated Trevor
instead of hating him
for his fisted tempter,
even noticed Chase spiraling
on pills and needles
before he hit the ground.
Angela still would have beaten me
to having twins.

I would have met my grandfather
and Grandma would have made it
to my graduations, fifth grade
and above. Papaw would have stood
from his liver-declining recliner
and I would have been old enough
to think of asking him about the Navy,
where he was during Pearl Harbor.
I could have driven Mamaw
with my learner's permit to get a perm
instead of driving my family
to the hospital to visit
the sleeping body, counting down
each breath without life support.

If they'd had me earlier,
on the days Mom says
when I die remember
to look for the diamond
her mother had set
in a gold band, one of three
gems from her late father's ring,

I wouldn't need to search
because with the extra eleven
I would have seen her
hide the ring in the attic,
know exactly where to look
when the time comes.

Deaf Gossip

I.

Lucille rides her lawnmower
through the neighborhood
but if she had a license,
her picture ID – pink scarf
over yellow foam rollers
in wispy, white locks
and a hairy upper lip –
could not capture
her Eckleberg eyes
that glimpsed the twenties
and focus on small town dirt.

Ear measles painted words
on lips, Lucille's eyes viewing
a near-silent film after a few early years
of sound, leaving her
to enunciated conversations,
her mouth an unconscious mirror,
rapid eyebrow cadence her quirk
of interpretive listening.

II.

She stopped coming Sundays
before I aged out of Children's Church,
old age matching rickety speech
I used to think was typical decline.

I'd watch her husband drop her off
in their red Ford truck,
and she'd wobble to her row
and take her unofficial corner spot
on the other side of the sanctuary
with thick bifocals to help her greet
pew neighbors and read bulletins.

Mom would usher me hand on back
to grasp in feather shake
her slender, liver-spotted fingers
and say slow and loud
good morning. I always peeked

during the Lord's Prayer to watch
her head bowing, delayed
by a muted preacher's mic.

III.

With a southern streak
for treating land like an extra limb,
jostling on her red Craftsman chariot
door to door like a vacuum
absorbing the what and when
of who was arrested, buried
or divorced, she parks
in our garage, pats the dog
and asks for Mom.

When she complains *my ei bor*
cu dow a tre on my pro er ty,
I hear a verbal sprinkler,
smile-nod while Mom fakes
a yawn, says *let Harley out*
from behind her hand
but keeps eye contact
so Great Aunt Lucille's skipping
speech flows while I clip leash
to collar and relax the muscles
in my grin. I overhear Mom ask
which oak the renter chopped
and I wonder how she knew
without an interpreter.

IV.

I turn right from my driveway,
pass the white house on the hill top
and behind her living room window
couched in the cushioned
impression of her recliner
she peers out from the nose up,
looking small and eighty-six
between the parted curtains.
Her hand that's never signed
anything but her name
on a Food Lion check
bobs behind the glass
when she recognizes my car.

My Great Uncle Who Barks

He stores banana popsicles
in the lift-lid freezer
of the garage that harbors
the first prints of his lost hobby,
and as I dip my hand
into summer's arctic depths
for the white package of yellow ice,
I notice a familiar farm scene
hanging on the blank concrete –
one that colored my living room
for years before I noticed
his cursive Hancock neatly-penned
over water-color grass, thousands
of fine strokes stolen by arthritis.

This artistic side
is at odds with the man
who has his own version
of *pull my finger*, where he
clamps a hand against his neck,
says *wanna see my dog bite?*
and tells you to lean in
for a closer look before
he barks in your face,
laughs if you jump back.

He'll dial our home number and talk to me
thinking I'm mom, having no idea
when I pass the phone mid-conversation,
and if there's a Carolina-anything
on television, he'll call to say the Tarheels
are going to win because he knows
I go to school there. He'll try to find me
during games, searching the screen
with his binoculars when he knows
I'm somewhere in the stands.

From the hill-top yard
of his house across the street,
instead of waving to say hello
he'll kick one leg up then the other

like a line dance in diabetic socks
while pumping hands to the sky,
reminding me that the red pickup
parked in the painted farm
was created by a younger man,
so then I'll attempt the robot,
swinging my angled arm
like an upside-down greeting
to the past hiding within

because under the painted fields
southern green above my head
are sheet-covered frames
filed away like books in the back
room of a private library.
One corner juts out of the neat row,
cover slipping, so I lift the fabric
and slide the wooden square
out like a lockable desk drawer
left ajar. The glass recently touched,
dust long settled wiped away
as I stare at the portrait of his late
granddaughter, my ice cream
melting through the package.

Inside the dream catcher

a T-rex stomps behind a spider web
as my blue truck rumbles by
on craterous asphalt, pits
dark enough to drop me
in the blue moon and
the truck becomes a chameleon
becomes a telephone box
then a tidal wave crashes
me into a wind chime green house
where I see Grandma,
get the hug I never got
before she slid in the back
of the Buick, pillow-propped
at the hospital, me waiting
by the home phone,
a thread snipped early morning
when I boarded an activity bus
crying for the cut I felt,
not knowing what it was.

there is a popcorn desert
with a flagless pole
beside a bookstore next
to the Biltmore estate
and sky-planted like the sun
in orbit is a grandfather
clock – tick, tock, it is half-past
pink scrubs, angel food cake
with tea, three billy goats
gruff, an eraser hogging
a microphone stand
and three blind mice
gnawing at the edge
of an invisible ink
and quill diploma.

morning never comes.

Ricky

As kids we joked
that the weathered, wooden shack
behind our great grandparents' house
was his summer home, old chicken
feathers snagged by corner cobwebs
his idea of interior decorating.
In those days I'd seen him twice,
spoken to him never.

That the aliens probed him
after he spotted their UFO
trails every mention of his name
and no one in the family believes
a tractor beam plucked him
from his backwoods yard.
I listened to a thousand imitations
of his signature laugh before
I ever heard the stop-and-go
chainsaw buzz that harmonizes
with his jostling, scrawny shoulders.

He sold the house his mother paid for,
tucked a trailer in the back corner
of her land, where it sits vacant
like the summer coop while he sleeps
under his parents' roof after fifty
or more years of empty wallet
and open palms. Maybe abduction
by a flying saucer's green men
made jobs superfluous, made him
nothing more than a cow
suspended in extraterrestrial light,
waiting for the fall.

I once opened my front door to see
him sitting in the woods across the road,
salt-and-pepper scruff a natural camouflage
in his tree fort – collapsible lawn chair
covered in leaves and rain-protectant tarp.
When he stared up through the canopy,
I thought *he's phoning home*,

wondered if he lingered between bark
and green hoping to return
to the only place he's been taken
for an exemplary specimen.

Camouflage

One of the weekends I'm home
my uncle's father-in-law
is having a chicken stew,
so I wear my cowgirl boots,
swap my peacoat for my sister's
extra Carhart jacket and go
freeze in November night
to see the few people there I know
I'm related to, others maybe
distant cousins I've never met.

Below the starscape above the longhorns
sleeping behind the electric fence
my sister once grabbed with both hands,
unable to release the jolts
as they grounded her frozen feet,
crying that the wire was not
what it seemed to be,
I'm scraping chicken from the bottom
of a seventy-gallon broth
boiling over the wood-stoked fire

when I smell cow shit on the breeze,
wonder if I'm the only person here
whose accent fights against rejoining
the homegrown speech around me,
pulled like salt-water taffy
until I settle into accepting
the sound of my voice
twanging still as steal.

On Monday when I open
my mouth and the effect
has not worn off, I see the
wide eyes of friends,
their laughter making me
drop the drawl
as quickly as I picked it back up.

Kationary

You said *meeka* instead of candy,
teaching us the definition
with a toddler palm slapping
against the chocolate-filled tin
once beside Papaw's recliner.
We dubbed it the *meeka* box
now bedside in your room,
a relic of harmless laughs
about our cousin's messy *alfro*,
your phonemes tangled
in his voluminous curls.
I would comb your knotted
prose when you said *me and Austin*
are like two peeing in a pot,
but I enjoyed each phase
that phrased you.

The *standers-by* who sniggered
at your verbal missteps
silenced the scholar. Reading aloud
became a punishment
as you stumbled over letters,
frozen tongue on a flagpole page,
dreading the mine-field
of words waiting to detonate
the roaring laughter
heat of shame.

Despite what you'd hear
as stupidity, I wish I'd written
it all down like the *Kerochee's*
syllabary, each entry a photo
for a graduation *alblum*
whose cover, you squirrelling
cob on the corn and picking bits
from your teeth with a *picnic*,
would show everyone that you
can *liberally* eat a horse
with an appetite unfazed.

Hey Austin

On the painted family tree –
all our names on thin wooden apples
dangling from small key hooks –
your crooked fruit angled
ninety for a fall appropriate
since your bail was mortgage-high.

So I pointed it out
to the rest of the family
who was there sifting
through Mamaw's house,
separating keepsakes from junk
from items we say we'll sell
in an estate auction we know
we won't ever get around to,
and we laughed,
pushing away the stale air
of her unlived years,
glad she didn't have to
worry about you,
thankful she couldn't
rip us a new one
for your failed armed robbery
we turned into jokes.

We missed you at Jeremy's wedding.

Aunt Teresa didn't cry
but just a little
when her son waited
for his bride, started
his five-year Chicago plan.

Katie got pooped on by a bird
when we had to picture pose,
and you'll never have to see
my mom and your mom dancing
to the wobble, wine glasses
empty on the table.

I hate you can't see Angela's twins.

I hope Easton Lane
grows up to play baseball
and Emerson Blake
grows up to write poetry,
but right now all they do
is cry, laugh and spit up,
unable to sit up,
but you'll get to see
the terrible twos
on their feet,
skip the slow start.

Happy Birthday!

There's no jail-sensitive Hallmark
so we sent you a sheep card
that said "herd it was your birthday"
instead of a get wasted, you're 21!
because there'll be no blacking out
the iron lines marring your vision,
but a "baaad" pun might help.

At least you'll be out in time to see Finding Nemo's sequel.

I talk to you more now
through long-hand letters
than I did in Christmas hours
and I find myself
sprawling sentences
like Hawthorne
to fill the page
just so you'll waste
more time reading
than wall-staring,
find myself explaining
Zimbardo's experiment
as a response to you
writing about guards
pinning chest to ground,
locking you in "the hole"
that I can only compare
to the chokey from *Matilda*
because I thought orange

jabbing roadside trash
was punishment
not privilege.

I was thinking about kiddie weekend in the mountains.

I don't know what to say.

Your Local Jobs

I.

My pink plastic pig
that gorged on dimes
and half-dollars, hidden behind
my Minnie Mouse bed skirt,
was missing.

You had visited earlier,
walked across the road
so we could hide and seek,
and found more than dust bunnies
tucked under the mattress frame.

You dumped the emptied bank
in the shrubbery by my house,
stuffed it in a black trash bag
so you could return pig to pen
later without my notice.

II.

Ellen knew you didn't work for Spud's Plumbing
when you carted in loads of copper piping
to sell for scraps because she knew
my dad – your uncle well-connected
in the small town circuit,
which you learned when his friend,
the Chief of Police, gave you matching
bracelets you couldn't pawn.

Your mother called, said work it out
in the family, but the missing ipods,
cameras, prescription pills, jewelry
and vacuum tipped the scales
toward a mix of law and love,
Dad's decision half protecting you
from his once open palms
now curling into straw-veined fists.

III.

Your mom hasn't called back since
and you won't make eye contact

with any of us, walking head down
on the other side of the road,
change from other piggy banks
rattling in bottomless pockets.

I miss the boy who told jokes
to keep me from crying
when the four-wheeler slung
our sled into a snow-covered
ring of cinder blocks, flinging me
in rainbow arc across the field,
but I don't want him back.

I want the closed-blinds window
between our homes to have curtains,
the ones you bought with your labor:
pink fabric hanging from a copper rod.

Bad Word

Fuck, you were my enemy for so long,
your cymbal clangor in my childhood ears
was too strong. You, a moral abrasive,
and I, who looked down upon your tasteless
bond with crude cousins, stayed far apart for years.

I judged you with a strict and pure vision
as slick and lurking shadow – ally dealer
whose mission was to drug my simple
tongue. I looked, took notice of your dimples
and charming face, let myself get closer,

and *Fuck*, how wrong I was. You were the cayenne
zest for a dull phrase, the comic-book *POW*
of a Batman punch. You eased stubbed-toe pain,
consoled tardiness of unboarded plane.
An emphatic curtain or final bow

of an argument, you waited for me
inside the stinger of a wasp, a favorite book
submerged in sea. I saw your Puckish grin
become my own, knew you as genuine
delight but your design was first to hook

my threshold ankles, trap me behind
the rusty hinges of a golden door: stuck.
The blinders of childhood cacophony
are gone. I have fallen for your cunning
bracelessly tricked into growing up.

New Renter Agreement

You, hereby referred to as RESIDENT,
and I, hereby referred to as OWNER,
shall discuss the terms and conditions
of living under one of OWNERS roofs
in this almost-suburban neighborhood:

- I. After twenty years of cigarettes
caked the premises with yellow exhaust,
OWNER Clorox-mopped the walls
before rolling antique-white
over the plaque signatures.
OWNERS parents once built
and owned all nine apartments
on H. L. Frank Lane's gravel drive
and passed them down via will
so RESIDENT agrees to refrain
from smoking indoors in memory
of the original construction
and in honor of OWNERS hard work.
- II. OWNER rented apartment two
in good condition to a single man
with a small dog and had to replace
pee-stained carpet, claw-splintered
doors that the pet deposit
failed to compensate. OWNER loves
animals and pets of mammal kind,
but RESIDENT agrees that
such companions are not allowed
to fill the void or teach kids responsibility.
- III. Damage to property occurring
while parties whose signatures
appear on the lease are under contract
should contact OWNER about
said destruction in order to address
the issue in accordance with
rental property expectations set forth
by OWNERS preferences. RESIDENT is aware,
for example, that the attic's pink insulation
will not hold body weight

and if a human-size hole materializes
in the ceiling, RESIDENT agrees to alert
OWNER, not attempt self-repair.

- IV. OWNER has an aversion
to all insects and rodents
so RESIDENT must deposit
all garbage in proper receptacles,
pay for the cleaning out
of any plumbing fixtures.
RESIDENT agrees not to move out
and leave dirty dishes soaking
or the toilet clogged
like the new-to-town woman
who fled apartment number four
with three month's back rent
and past due sob excuses.
- V. RESIDENT will be held liable
for any water damage
caused by the desire to watch
living room tv from an inflatable yard pool,
and said decision will result
in RESIDENT losing initial deposit,
allowing OWNER to purchase
a hard plastic pool for the enjoyment
of OWNERS golden retriever.

OWNER understands the act
of having is to scoop
dirt in hand and claim the earth,
that OWNER pays the same
rent to inhabit the same space,
acknowledging that to own is not
to cash a check, to reside
is not to lose self to another,
that we all lease and move on
when the contract is up.

Hobert Lee Frank

If he was alive today,
he would not have been
my Pop or Grandad,
his severe too sharp
from what I've heard
for less than Grandfather
or anything close to affection.

He is the reason
Mom does not allow
alcohol in the house,
the reason I have
a dad who gives hugs
because she refused to
marry a man like her father
who worked for weekend drinks,
temper best unprovoked,
stern man with a high bar
of approval impossible,
nothing she did
ever good enough.

She told me the story
of *I love you* said one time
on her wedding day, his tears
she never saw, wouldn't see
again, and she never forgot
his alcoholic slip growing up
that daughters were not
enough, he only ever wanted
a son,

and he had one
that he could never claim
from a one night layover
of an out-of-town business trip
right before he married Grandma,
who forgave, neither knowing
about a child until years later
when it was too late.

Maybe he drank
because his happiness
lived a few states away
while she and her sister
sat at the dinner table,
and when he finally met his son,
gave him business skills
and a heavy sum off book
to start his own
under a different last name,
it still wasn't enough
because no one could know.

Mom found out long after
the whiskey took his heart,
questioned her tight-lipped mother
until she nodded terse,
but I don't think he ever understood
what it meant to his daughter
to have a framed picture
on his office desk
of himself with her half-brother
and no one else.

The Evicted Remains

Beige carpeting peppered with fleas,
charred rock of an unserved meal
in a pot on a cold burner and I stop
in the threshold, refusing to step in
unless armed with insect bombs,
air fresheners, a mouth mask.
There's a half-baked lasagna
topped with mold wilted in the oven.

Tamora Pierce's hardback spines
spread across a teenage floor
and a rat has moved into the upper level
of a doll house in a room furnished
for a little girl. Handmade earrings
and crochet needles trail
their way to the door,
beds unmade and pillows gone
under cop gaze and padlock click.

Goo streaks mix with crayon wall art
until I can't tell the difference
between sloppy flower and green slop
on the ripped wallpaper canvas
where squares a shade lighter
centered by nail holes once supported
frames of the removed faces.

We scrub, trash and bleach,
blanching at the jiggling jello
that is not jello in the fridge,
hands protected by heavy rubber.
Mine are blue with flowers,
ridiculous as I sift through clothing
and yearbooks and diaries
this person I will never meet
had no room to carry
or did not see fit to take.

Bringing Down the House

My mom grew up there
with a father who told her
he wanted a son and a mother
who birthed a second daughter,
Donna-hell-on-wheels, trying
to be anything but my mom, her
perfect sister: never expelled from
senior high, never eloping to Virginia
then slinking back broke and pregnant
to the open arms of family
she only wants when she needs.

Her fire trickled down
to sons, two mouths jeering
goody-two-shoes with every step
my sister and I took away
from throat-grabbing fights
of brothers unable to love
without lashing out,
but Katie and I ran night blind
into the rolling smoke screen,
a lighter shade of midnight
reaching up the hill, our legs
mud clumsy, lungs swirling
as we helped mom
raise the garage door,
duck under the ash cloud
unfurling from the front entrance
and call to Sugar, throwing
our voices into the void
between coughs, straining
to hear dog tags jingle
over heat-crackle air
rising from basement flames
while Chase ran his third degree
under our kitchen cool water
and Trevor called their mom,
Donna-asleep-at-her-boyfriend's,
to come home.

Red engines blocked off the street,

gloved hands working to retrieve
a thick-glassed black and white portrait
or a great-grandmother's hand-knitted afghan
for every sledgehammered wall,
every inch of water flooding downstairs
where we four grandkids had climbed
through spider-webbed storage
on barefoot adventures,
where my mom had coughed a secret drag
on her first and only cigarette
while her parents worked.

That night Chase was smoking
and unrolling firework gunpowder
into a bedside ashtray,
shooting up in the house
Grandma willed to his mom,
Donna-take-and-take-again.

As I watched smoke
spiral into the peach-haze
crest of morning, I wished
they'd finally move away,
take with them the midnight
distress calls and siren songs,
but after the stove dropped
through the kitchen floor
and the volunteer firefighters kicked
down bricks in the living room,
a new house bulldozed the old,
flattening generations to dirt:
things they do not want
always theirs to burn,
ours to lose.

Dear Grandma Frank,

remember that crystal teardrop
pendulum I wanted when you died?
Sorry for asking
with a child's grasp of mortality
that I also wanted that jar of marbles.

You'd already had both hips replaced
but you took senior bus trips
across the country so I didn't think
there'd ever be a time
when you'd leave
and not come back.

I want you to know
that my last memory of you
is through my bedroom window
as I watched Mom and Donna
help you into the backseat
of your Buick, drive you
across town to the hospital.

I don't know what happened,
something about a bad reaction
to the steroids for your hips,
something about red cells
destroyed by white cells,
but I was too young
to pronounce hemolytic anemia
and I never said
thank you for picking my full name
or helping me struggle with fractions,
never got to welcome you home
after I never got to say
goodbye.

#InstaGrief

Duck-face depressions
iPhone mirrored in black tie dress,
clumped mascara, smoky eyes
crossed for close-up, grandma
dead in the background,
open casket, best friends
group photo at the wake.

She loves her hair, hates
why she's dressed up.
He misses his granddad,
flexes muscles, photo
of the day. She flaunts
boyfriend as gorgeous,
has cried her make-up off
so *#ew* but *#funeralselfie*.
R.I.P. Like for likes.

I confess to the murder

but I warned him to stay away,
eyes of the abyss locked on
my every finger flinch.
He darted, inhuman speed,
so I attacked with adrenaline
and sneaker, beat him
until one by one
by one by one by one
by one by one
by one
all eight legs stopped twitching.

Duckzilla

As a child I tossed bread crumbs
to Mallards in Ocean Lakes,
squatting barefoot in fertilized grass
and coaxing webbed feet closer
with shorter throws so I could try
to touch the feathers of busy beaks.

With a purple Little Mermaid
one piece and cowlicked bangs,
I was ready for the beach,
tent strapped on top of the rental
golf cart, my green bucket
full of sand toys perched
on the back seat, but Mom wanted
to rid the countertop of a stale loaf
before wrestling the waves,
so I chose what seemed to be
the safest pond in sight,
but it was only a matter of time.

The red-rumpled mask of the
Muscovy nightmare emerged
from the quiet woods,
the monster waddling
like a heat-seeking war-bird,
black and white mass
closing in with practiced rush,
plowing through smaller wings
too slow to clear the bank.

I scrambled toward my parents
like Ariel when she first got legs,
slinging whole slices to his razor bill
and screaming go go go
as I leapt onto the back seat,
knocking my favorite sifter
to the ground but leaving it
behind as we took flight
with a slow tap of the gas.

Binge

Wednesday night sessions inside my dad's shop
where blue collar beer bellies escape
frozen tray dinners, work calls or wives
with old man gossip and southern slurring
behind three garage doors and our back deck.

I am home on summer break
watching ten Netflix episodes
pajama-clad with a tall glass full
of chocolate milk when I am called
to play sober taxi for Barry.

He stumbles through headlights,
fumbles with the door, falls
into the passenger seat
and Dad steps up to my window
laughing at the squinty-eyed man
who drops his purple bag
of half-full Crown Royal
to the floor as he wrestles
with the seat belt. *Drive careful*

and I do. My dying air freshener
will not cover the smell of vomit.
Barry asks about college,
says *my ex-wife is a*
whore, daughter wants
nothing to do with me.
He's glad that classes are going well.

I watch him survive the key gauntlet,
bending to lift the mat, slow-motion
momentum planting his face
against the screen door –
all spotlighted by high beams.

But the lights are off
inside the empty house
and his Crown sits
forgotten in the floorboard.
I find it when I park at home,

overhead bulb absorbing
shadows around the drawstring pouch
I now remember packed full
of marbles in the toy chest.

Double Exposure

We don't dedicate a scrapbook page
in our memory to the sloppy stroke
of lips we may not remember
when morning turns night to haze,
when candids of the physical slur
would be enough for blackmail.

We crave to forget, let soak
all our unfiltered flash recollections
in the red cover of a dark room,
hidden away before blacked out actions
can fade to clear, but I want
a print framed of you and me
to hang above my door,
the last thing I see
before I leave at night:
a reminder to go easy
on the Schnapps shots.

Closed Doors

It was a kind of poetry
I hated, meeting him
in the elevator, stomach dropping
then jumping back before we
boarded the metal box,
doors kissing closed.

I should have taken the stairs
because standing near him
felt like racing down
seven flights of steps anyway,
and I hated it.

I hated that my stomach rose
and fell in the five by five tiled space
that ferried our small talk
from one floor to the next,
our meetings never opening
into more than goodbye at door's close.

Stay

This patrol is harder to finish.
I have to pause and rest halfway.
Lately light is not as bright,
bottlebrush tails not worth the chase.

I let my people help me up
and down stairs. The rocking chairs
on the porch, brick house wall – I bump
into everyday things I no longer see.

Something calls quiet unlike
the bark of an angry sky shaking
me paw to nose, but listening
scares me the same. I hear my name,

feel a hand on my head, and a voice
I know keeps me calm. I smell salt,
think of when my people leave me
for days, but always come back

from wherever they go. Water drops
warm on my ear, shaky palm to fur,
good dog, let go. I could but
not yet. One last patrol to finish.

Leaving Welcome, NC

Ten minutes on Old HWY 52
and I'm in and out of
what zoning laws call
our census-designated place
since towns apparently have
more than three stoplights
and don't shut down at ten
so there's no milk to buy,
no gas to pump.

Kerley's Barbeque,
owned by my sister's
best friend's grandpa,
has the best hush puppies
and the highest chance
of Dad running into someone
he knows and talking nonstop
while we wait and starve.

Looking at Tom's Barber Shop –
it's unofficial nickname
after my cousin's dad
parked his truck on the porch
and had to pay for the whole
remodel, getting arrested
with the snapped half
of the spinning pole on his hood
because of a whirling slur
of pills dissolving – the new
blue slap of paint
on the Mayberry clipping place
hasn't stopped the swap
of a few grams for extra green
in the tip jar, or so I've heard.

The defense-against-the-dark-
arts restaurant (currently
Dions, formerly The Lima Bean,
before that Bella Napoli, early on
The Diner) is for sale
again. Dr. Schmunk's old vet place

became Mr. Daniel's karate dojo,
but I never performed katas
where animals were brought
to live or die because the cardboard
cutout of my middle school P.E.
teacher glaring out the glass door
in his screen-printed black belt
and bald head with a rat-tail
we all swore was glued on
kept me from ever stepping foot inside.

Reggie of Reggie's Flower Shop
arranges with his boyfriend,
and everyone says partner
in a hush of white-washed
conservatism. Students
might never stop
that's so gay-ing their friends
in a place where some
raise the war of northern aggression
in every tobacco dip chew spit,
hear the diesel roar of men
who want kitchen wives to obey,
pass down slavery jokes
to match the white robes
once pinned to dry on a great-
great-grandma's clothesline.

"Welcome to Welcome – A Friendly Place,"
two signs for coming and none for going,
but as I pass over the CDP limit,
I want to steal a metal green rectangle
and toss it in my trunk like a spare
in case I end up flat in a city
that has none of the irony
of Rick's Smokehouse catching fire,
or in case I want to look back fond
of my decision to keep driving.