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Heat Seekers

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HEAT SEEKERS: POEMS

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Dedication

Gavin Stephen Lambert Jr. 1950-2015

HEAT SEEKERS: POEMS

by

GAVIN STEPHEN LAMBERT III, BA English (2002)

THESIS

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CRITICAL PREFACE

In a sense I began writing this project, this master's thesis, in the late 1990s. Of course, I had in mind no sense of a project. I was just trying to become a writer. I wrote and read and did the things I thought were necessary to keep moving forward but, in hindsight, I never worked hard enough, and I never took myself seriously enough, which to my mind, might be the key issue for most beginning writers. We don't realize how much work it is and we don't always believe enough in ourselves. I wrote this way, more or less, for fifteen years, at times haltingly, second guessing myself a lot of the way. In the beginning I often wondered, who was I to think I could do this—that I had the right to do this? I come from a working-class family and this business of writing seemed like no business at all, and it seemed, in a way, like none of *my* business. I wrote short fiction (about sixty-five stories) and poems (hundreds of poems) and even the first draft of a really bad Beat Generation-inspired travel novel. I had some minor successes too—won a regional fiction contest, and won finalist in some bigger contests, and published in some literary journals. But by 2013 I was at something like a crossroads, a make-it-or-break-it point in my life. I felt like I needed a major change, a dramatic shift in focus. I was sick of my job, and I needed writing to be front and center. I needed, I thought, total emersion. I applied to UTEP.

Being accepted into the program gave me some impetus, gave me a “shot in the arm,” as it were. The relationships I've forged with faculty and fellow students have been illuminating, inspiring and challenging. I've made friends (writer friends) I'll probably have for the rest of my life. I've also realized how halfhearted I'd been up until now, and that I hadn't been submitting work nearly enough. I'd been doing the writing, but needed to be more diligent on the “business” side of things. During my first year at UTEP I submitted forty-five times. By October

of this year I've already logged over ninety-six submissions, and have had three stories accepted, five poems, a full-length poetry manuscript, and have gotten honorable mention in a prestigious short story contest. Before UTEP, I was lucky to have three or four submissions accepted in a year.

I've made it through the program (almost) and here I am with something called a thesis, and though all the poems in the manuscript were worked on and polished during my time at UTEP, the project is a culmination of fifteen years' work. One poem, "On Being Sick," has been around, in one form or another, since 1999.

I was accepted into UTEP's MFA program as a fiction writer, but as I took classes and as I advanced through the program it became clear to me that I needed and wanted to work on creating a full-length poetry manuscript. It's where my passion and energy lay. These things come in waves for me. For a while I'll want to do nothing but write short stories. This desire will pass—usually after a string of rejections, to be honest—and then I'll be up for poetry for a while. At any rate, at this point, when I thought about working on a short-story book manuscript, I felt a sap of energy. I felt tired just thinking about it. For some reason, the timing seemed off. So I got the approval from Professor Chacon to switch from fiction to poetry and set to work assembling a full-length poetry manuscript, all the while writing more poems, and even being fortunate enough to have some of them published.

What I look for in writing is work that contains within it what I call, "the stink of life." It can be whimsical and novel and fantastical, but if it is not grounded in the "real," the everyday, it doesn't interest me. It can fly off, but it has to start there. That's the main thing. I need sensory detail, emotional depth, geographical considerations, identity. Consciously now, and

unconsciously in the beginning, that's been a criterion for my own work. I want a poetry that has all these things but that also has what Harold Bloom calls "*primal aesthetic value*, [is] free of history and ideology and available to whoever can be educated to read and view it" (Bloom 65). In other words, poetry that anyone can read and get something out of, which isn't to say that it must be simplistic. A piece of literature can—and maybe should be—challenging, but not, to my mind, so difficult that it frustrates and repels the reader. As an undergrad, I was fortunate enough to take several classes with the poet and scholar William Slaughter. He said to me once, "In the end, when considering a poem, it finally comes down to, does it grab you?" Any poem, of any variety, can "grab you," but, time and again, the poems that tend to grab me are the ones that "stink" of life.

The poets with whom I identify delight in the novel use of language but they also keep things grounded. "Pathos" is important to me, as well. An emotionally complex and rich, sensorial poetry is what I'm looking for. This, I suppose, is why I've found myself gravitating to the Post-WWII generation and to nineteenth century British poets (the first poets to truly start writing about "unpoetic" things). Generally speaking, and although there are many outliers (Baudelaire, Rilke, William Carlos Williams), poetry written by poets who were active from the late forties to the mid-seventies and poets associated with The English Romantic Movement have come to be my two main historical focal points. The former, I've been interested in from almost the beginning, the latter I've only recently (the last three years) started reading with interest. But the two poetic "schools" have much in common, in terms of aesthetics and form. The aesthetic attributes I prefer are all there, but the poets of these two groups are, by and large, writing in forms I find appealing. I prefer short lyric poetry, or a kind of hybrid lyric-narrative form. To my mind, a lyric poem shouldn't be any longer than a page and a half. A lyric poem should be able

to do what it needs to do in under that amount of space. Any longer, and it seems to me, you're no longer looking at a true lyric poem. It's something else. Brevity is, or ought to be, a lyric's defining formal features.

Two poetry anthologies have been very important to me and to my discovery of a preferred aesthetic. I think I prefer the word "aesthetic" to "poetics." I feel a very real sense of aesthetic requirement when I read and write poetry, but I'm not sure I have a "poetics" as such. I like poems that look a certain way, and to be a certain length, and to be concerned with certain things, and to have a certain kind of voice or narration, but these are aesthetic concerns, and are completely subjective matters. The term "poetics" has an authoritative quality, and I'm hesitant to assume authority over something that is, ultimately, a matter of taste.

When I first started getting serious about writing and reading poetry, I stumbled across an anthology edited by Joel Conarroe, titled *Eight American Poets*. I didn't know it then, but this book would become a real taste definer for me. Of the eight poets showcased in Conarroe's book, four stood out to me: Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell. I loved the wildness of Roethke and Berryman, and the Controlled, eloquent mastery of Bishop and Lowell. I also appreciated Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath's work, but I didn't feel the same kind of closeness to my own undefined (but developing) personal aesthetic as I did with the others. Over the decades, I've read poets in this book over and over. Conarroe's sense of the poets' standout work is pretty amazing. I've been reading all of these poets for many years now, but I still go back to Conarroe's book. To this day, many of the poems he chose for inclusion are my favorites by those poets: Roethke's "Cuttings," "Weed Puller," "The Minimal," "I Knew A Woman," "The Longing," and "In A Dark Time;" Lowell's "To Delmore Schwartz," "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms," "Waking in the Blue," "Memories of West Street and Lepke," and

“Skunk Hour,” in particular; John Berryman’s “A Professors’ Song,” “A Strut for Roethke,” “An Elegy for W.C.W., The Lovely Man.” I also found Conarroe’s short biographical sections of the book. Preceding each selection of work are short biographies. Somehow, it seems, he was able to extract the essence of who these poets were. His biographical sketch of Roethke was so compelling to me that I was prompted to check out from the library the esteemed biography, *The Glass House*, and spend a whole winter weekend reading it in its entirety.

If Conarroe’s book helped me to solidify my aesthetic and to introduce me to some of the core poets who would influence me, then *Contemporary American Poetry* seventh edition, edited by A. Poulin Jr. and Michael Waters would serve to widen my scope and broaden my aesthetic notions. If Conarroe’s book was a kind of elbow nudge, and whisper in my ear, “Hey, check this stuff out. I think you’ll like some of what’s in here.” Then *CAP* was a shout in the dark followed by a book-hurl to the head. This book was a pirate’s treasure chest of poetry. It deepened my knowledge of poets I already favored and introduced me to poets whose work it might have taken me years to otherwise discover. (This is why I’m a big advocate for anthologies, and have a hard time not buying them at used bookstores.) For starters, I realized Conarroe was spot on with Roethke and Lowell, but not so much with Berryman. The Berryman selections in *CAP* were way better than Conarroe’s selections. How could he have left out, for instance, “Dream Song 14?”

The list of poets whose work I’ve come to cherish whose work I first encountered in *CAP* is long, but the most important ones are Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Alan Dugan (who I spent a couple years rather obsessed with), Louise Gluck, Donald Hall, Richard Hugo (who, in my opinion, never wrote a boring poem), David Ignatow (who wrote stark poems of dignified anger), Bill Knott (who I wrote a paper about as an undergrad that my professor read out loud to

the entire class), Yusef Komunyakaa, Stanley Kunitz, Denise Levertov, Philip Levine, John Logan (a sorely underappreciated lyric poet), William Matthews, Sharon Olds, Charles Simic, Louis Simpson, W.D. Snodgrass, William Stafford (who often wrote boring poems, but who also wrote some of the most enduring poems in the English language), Gerald Stern, Mark Strand, Ellen Bryant Voigt, and James Wright. These are all poets whose work I encountered for the first time in this anthology, and whose work I love and cherish and whose work has shaped my own aesthetic, whatever that means. *CAP* is, to this day, a kind of sacred text for me, and my copy is beginning to yellow and fall apart.

When one begins writing one has little more than the desire and passion. At least that was the case with me. I had to discover what I liked most in a poem, what I wanted poems to be and do, and that happened over time, slowly. A handful of books of poetry criticism and theory have helped with this along the way, but three in particular have, I suppose, formed my theoretical core, inasmuch as I have one. Donald Hall's *Claims for Poetry*, Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, and Randall Jarrell's *Poetry and The Age*. (I must reiterate, I wouldn't say that any of this has been systematic, but when one looks back one does see a pattern emerge. There's a reason, I suppose, that the Canadian poet Al Purdy calls poetry, "The Craft So Longe to Lerne," and uses this as the title of one of his books. It takes a long time for some of us to figure all this stuff out.) *Claims for Poetry*, a book of diverse essays on poetry edited by Hall, is amazingly egalitarian, especially when you consider it was first published in 1982. I defy a poet or scholar to not find something of interest in this book. Any twentieth century poet who has had something to say

about poetry has an essay in this book. (It must be said, too, that there are no scholars in this collection of essays, only poets or poet-scholars.)

“Inclusive” is the word that comes to mind when looking through its table of contents. There are, of course, more white males than anyone else, but, I believe, that’s because Donald Hall went with who was on his radar. But it’s a pretty impressive list. And one can use the word diverse to describe the book, as well: A.R. Ammons, Robert Bly, Hayden Carruth, Russell Edson, Tess Gallagher, Sandra M. Gilbert, John Hollander, Bliem Kern, Denise Levertov, Audre Lord, Alicia Ostriker, Ron Silliman and Alice Walker, just to name a few. Many of the essays in this book are definitive statements that have had an effect on a generation (perhaps generations) of poets.

My approach to things have always been a bit scattershot. For some reason, I’m constantly feeling a sense of urgency, of making up for lost time, so I have a tendency to rush through things like this—grab what seems useful—and hurry on. I’ll come back later, for a fuller picture, but I like to plow through for a general feel. This may be because I feel that I’ve had a bit of a late start in life, but that’s the topic of another essay—seriously, it is; I’ve been writing it for years. Hall’s book is littered with single lines and sometimes just phrases I’ve underlined, here and there, sometimes in essays by poets I’ve still never read. A.R. Ammons essay, for instance, titled “A Poem Is a Walk,” has a few choice passages underlined:

1. “...the purpose of a poem is to go past telling, to be recognized by burning (Hall 1).”
2. “Poetry is the linguistic correction of disorder” (Hall 3).
3. “My predisposition...is to prefer confusion to over-simplified clarity, meaninglessness to neat, precise meaning, uselessness to over-directed usefulness” (Hall 4).

4. “Nothing that can be said about it [poetry] in words is worth saying” (Hall 8).

I underlined those things years ago, yet I find them now as familiar as my own thoughts. I love the stubborn, contradictory, nose-thumbing quality they possess. I love the boldness of an essay about poetry that ends with saying that nothing can be said about it. This essay was one of the first essays I ever read about poetry.

Marvin Bell’s (a poet whose poetry I’ve still never read) short essay, “The Impure Every Time,” has a couple good ones underlined:

1. “...there is something more to poetry than accomplishment” (Hall 10).
2. “In the great scalepan of human vices, a bad poem doesn’t weigh very much” (Hall 10-11).

Robert Creeley has a very short essays titled “To Define,” wherein this single sentence is underlined: “We make with what we have, and in this way anything is worth looking at” (Hall 72).

In an essay by Dick Higgins (another poet whose poetry I’ve never read), these judgmental sentences are underlined: “It is fashionable to look at things. It is not fashionable to understand them, because that requires art of thought, which is literature” (Hall 165).

W.D. Snodgrass gave me these bits to underline:

1. “...a complete removal from any ulterior motive, an absolute dedication to the object and the experience [of writing]” (Hall 427).
2. “Too much consciousness, misapplied, leads directly to mousy poems” (Hall 433).

Apparently I got quite a lot out of William Stafford’s essay, “A Way of Writing,” because it is rife with underlinings and stars, and it’s only a three-page essay. Here’s just a few:

1. “I must be willing to fail. If I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards” (Hall 450).

2. “Most of what I write, like most of what I say in casual conversation, will not amount to much” (Hall 452).

3. “Writers may not be special....They are simply engaged in sustained use of a language skill we all have” (Hall 452).

Lastly, Mark Strand’s essay, “Notes on the Craft of Poetry,” has these nuggets:

1. “For the poems that are greatest value are those that break rules so that they may exist, whose urgency makes rules about how to write or not write poems irrelevant” (Hall 454).

2. “...intellectual criticism of poetry will never lead to the center where poetic images are formed” (Hall 456).

3. “Perhaps the poem is ultimately a metaphor for something unknown, its working-out a means of recovery” (Hall 458).

The Triggering Town I came to later, and only after discovering the poet’s poetry first, and then deciding to read whatever I could find by Richard Hugo, including essays. I fell in love with Hugo’s work through the selections I read in *Contemporary American Poetry*, Seventh Edition. I particularly loved the poems “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg,” and “A Map of Montana In Italy.” It’s hard to put into words what I loved—and still love—about Hugo’s work. The language in his poems is startling (“squirrels uttered by God”) and his temperament is similar to The Romantics, but fierier. Also, I’ve always loved short, blocky poems, and stichic poems (poems not divided into stanzas). I love the cascading, jumbled look of Hugo’s work—one long waterfall of words. (I’ve always liked this about Philip Levine’s poems too.) But

ultimately it's the startling sequence of lines, one after the other, forcefully moving forward. Many of Hugo's poems have a sense of urgency, and feel, to me, as if they had to be written. This is in stark contrast to someone like William Stafford (whose poems I love) whose poems are just what he was able to fit in that day. Hugo's poems seem necessary for him, which makes them necessary for the reader. They have a kind of desperate drive. I urge anyone who is interested in contemporary poetry, but unfamiliar with his work, to seek it out.

On the dedication page of *The Triggering Town* it says "For all students of creative writing—and for their teachers." Something about this makes me happy. I'm not sure if it's because I'm a student of creative writing, or if it's just because you rarely find anymore this kind of wide-open endorsement of creative writing programs. In a time of equivocation (about nearly everything) it's a small, simple gesture, but it means a lot. The book, as Hugo says himself in the introduction, "contains lectures, essays, and a couple of sentimental reminiscences. I trust they all relate to problems of writing" (Hugo xi). And they do. But, of course, some of the pieces are more useful than others. The one I've gotten the most use out of is the opening essay, titled "Writing off the Subject." It's not a very long essay, only eight pages long, but it does a lot in those eight pages. Hugo, in his best "smartest drunk at the bar" voice tells us what to do; tells us *how to write a poem*. There's a bit of finger wagging and a gruffness to the tone of the essay, but I find the essay so useful, that those aspects of it are more charming, and paternal, than anything else. Hugo, after all, was not an academic; he was a skilled practitioner. We, the ones reading the essay, are his eager apprentices. And here's some of his advice:

1. Your important arguments are with yourself (Hugo 3).
2. All truth must conform to music (Hugo 3).

3. A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem...and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing (Hugo 4).
4. You don't know what the subject is, and the moment you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain start talking about something else. In fact, it's a good idea to talk about something else before you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain (Hugo 4).
5. Make the subject of the next sentence different from the subject of the sentence you just put down. Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together (Hugo 4-5).
6. Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication. If you want to communicate, use the phone (Hugo 5).
7. Use words for the sake of their sounds (Hugo 5).
8. You have to be silly to write poems at all (Hugo 10).

What one encounters here is the seasoned expert dispensing a little wisdom. No fuss. No intellectualizing. Just the sort of thing an earnest guy or gal needs. This no-nonsense approach, coupled with the poems, and one is presented with a powerful example of the application of technique. Hugo practiced what he preached too. With some of the other advice one reads, you don't always get a sense of that. William Carlos Williams' dictum, "No ideas but in things" falls short to me once you start reading some of his poems, especially the exquisite, "To Elsie." Lots

of ideas in that poem. Are they all grounded in “the thing?” I suppose, for the most part, but he certainly veers off course, and that’s what makes the poem, in my opinion.

As for Randall Jarrell’s *Poetry and The Age*. This book’s influence on me is harder to pin down and has more to do with license and with developing my own way of talking about poetry and understanding what makes a poem—or a poet—worthwhile. In this book, which is more a proper academic book or poetry criticism, Jarrell taught me much about what it means to write poetry through analyzing poets he loved and through explaining, to his mind, what it means to be a poet. In a straightforward, clear prose Jarrell tells his reader how to read a poem like a poet: “You need to read good poetry with an attitude that is a mixture of sharp intelligence and of willing emotional empathy....When you begin to read a poem you are entering a foreign country whose laws and language and life are a kind of translation of your own” (Jarrell 12). Randall also gives one permission to write badly, which is important because to write well one first must write badly. He says these startling things about Wat Whitman: “...all the bad poetry that there of course is in Whitman—for any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody—has helped to scare away from Whitman most ‘serious readers of modern poetry’” (Jarrell 113). “Only a man with the most extraordinary feel for language, or none whatsoever, could have cooked up Whitman’s worse messes” (Jarrell 117). I found—and still find—the frankness of this refreshing. This recognition of the unevenness of someone as great and as revered as Whitman lets one in on the realities of the writing live, even if it is in an oblique way. If Whitman could write “messes” than so can I.

All of these voices—contradictory and complimentary—inform my thesis. As I indicated in the beginning of this preface, some of these poems have existed as drafts for years, some of

them are completely new, written from draft one at UTEP, and UTEP is where the work was collected and made into a project, made into a book. UTEP is where the problems were solved. Going into 2013, I had an idea of the book as a geographically-themed project. But as I began assembling the poems, it occurred to me that was only a small part of the story. The theme of geography was, at once, too small and too large. I needed to be both wider and more specific. I needed to spend time with the poems I'd selected in a way that I am not used to.

I'm not one for spending a lot of time fussing over the meaning of my poems. I'm trying to manufacture an effect. But a poem, as William Carlos Williams said, is a *more or less small machine made of words*, and I needed to take apart some of these small machines so that I could understand what made them tick. I realized that there were, essentially, three groups of poems—or, I should say, the poems could be separated into three categories: geographical, familial, personal. They aren't neat, clean-cut categories, there is overlap, but every poem's main theme or concern fits into these groups. For instance, the poem "In Summer We Move Slowly," could, arguably, go into any of the three groups. But, in the main, it is a poem concerned with how our identities are made by our surroundings. It is, in that way, a geographic poem. But, the runner-up theme for it, is my family, and how they have been influenced by their surroundings. It is, in that way, a familial poem. The poems method of delivery is first person (singular and plural), so it is a personal poem, as well. This kind of parsing, of course, can be (and has been) done with each poem, and each one has its dominant concern that helps to allocate the poem into one of the groups.

I should say that I only did the arranging described above because I thought it was necessary, not out of a desire for some kind of order. As far as I'm concerned, the poems could be jumbled up and arranged in random order, without any sections. But, as writers, we make

concessions. We want to be read. We want to be understood (most of us do, anyway). Doing this seemed to me like a further clarification of my aims as a writer, and that is a good thing. One of my favorite poets (one I've, oddly, neglected to put much emphasis on in this paper until now) is Alan Dugan. Dugan might be the least fussy poet I'm aware of when it comes to these matters. For one, all his books have the same title, but with a number added to the end to differentiate, i.e., *Poems*, *Poems Two*, *Poems Three*, etc. Even his final book, his National Book Award winning, *New and Collected*, is titled *Poems Seven*. Dugan won two National Book Awards, a Pulitzer, a Lannan Literary Award and the Prix de Rome. All his books, excluding the collected volumes, are just a collection of poem gathered together in no particular order. They are not thematically separated or arranged. Each poem stands on its own, one after the other, and most of them are one page long. Many of his poems don't even have proper titles. His book *Poems Three* is 61-pages long and nine of the poems are titled "Poem."

I guess my point in all this is that it's all about the poems themselves. Dress them up all you want, order them in whatever way you seem necessary, but it's the poems that matter—not the cover, or the book title, or the way the poems are arranged.

In terms of my being a part of a tradition of any kind, I'll refer again to Dugan's book *Poems Three*, and something the very serious and extremely talented Louise Bogan said about his work on the back jacket blurb: "This is not young poetry. Nor...is it modern. It belongs to a timeless vein that comes to the surface of literature unexpectedly...a vein of powerful feeling..." I would never expect anyone to say something like that about my own work, but what I like in what she says is what I hope for my own work. This notion of not being a part of a group or school or methodology is what I'm talking about. Just a person doing what he *feels* necessary to do, and being noticed for that. That said, my work is strongly geographical, and I do have an

affinity for and a sense of belonging to a tradition, and that tradition is Southern. Much has been said about Southern fiction writers—Faulkner, O’Connor, Welty, McCullers, etc.—but much less about its poets. Most of the South’s fiction writers are household names. Most people have not read very much Faulkner (“A Rose for Emily,” maybe) but almost anyone—from any part of the country, and even overseas—can tell you something about Faulkner. He’s the South’s Shakespeare. But what can anyone tell you about C.D. Wright, Frank Stanford, Miller Williams, Leon Stokesbury, Robert Penn Warren, TR Hummer, Rodney Jones? Someone might be able to offer up that Robert Penn Warren won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *All the King’s Men*, adding, “Oh, he wrote poetry too?” But this is the group I belong to, poets from The South, if I belong to any group at all. I like the idea of, hopefully, being part of this clandestine group of Southern poets, if only in a small way. With all its flaws and scars, I’m proud of being Southern—of its literary tradition, if not its unfortunate sociopolitical history. The Mississippi fiction writer Barry Hannah, who admitted to reading more poetry than fiction, and whose favorite poet was Richard Hugo, once said that all Southerners are nostalgic by the age of eleven. He said this partly in jest, but it comes from a real place, and has some truth in it. Southern people are deeply nostalgic, and as misplaced and misguided as that nostalgia can be, it’s real, even if what they are nostalgic for never really existed. But all nostalgia is that way; memory is flawed and we all pine for a past that never quite existed.

In a real way, my own poems are, among other things, quite representative of this way of thinking about the past. I find that a good many of them are about my childhood or adolescent years. Many of them are also about being a young parent, and about early marriage. All autobiographical writing is, of course, about the past. It’s all the subject matter there is. But one has to have a strong sense of nostalgia to even want to mine the past for story and image. Many

of these poems remember a past that never quite happened the way they do in the work, but it comes close enough, and the essence of the past, I hope, is there. Who cares, anyway, if the facts are right? Nobody remembers those anyway.

HEAT SEEKERS: POEMS

The Worst Coast

The Oldest City from the Newest Suburb

We're so close you can almost smell
the fresh empanadas of St George Street,
hear the echo of 500-year-old cannon fire,
the baying of Spanish whores. Our cookie-cutter
house, built in '04, is an insult to the ruggedness
of history— our neighborhood, a post-post-modern
graying next to all that rough and garish beauty.
The wholesale violence of conquest next to the
calculated violence of commerce. At least the former
is muscular, of consequence. What McMansion
could possibly outlast *El Castillo*? Spanish sounds
so familiar to me that it's just a sexier, less
straightforward, kind of English. Even the drunks
here have impressive bloodlines: Old Europe,
not New World. Our small, gray home wouldn't
withstand a direct hit from a Cat 3. But I would
fire cannons from its rooftop, battle overland
invaders, to secure the small fortress of this drab life.

The Decline

It's not Vergil or Homer, but it is
a type of Classicism, this aversion
to scenery-free travel. Like a dad
who does not believe in the bald
efficiency of interstates, you take
promiscuous, gauche, past-her-prime
U.S. 1 south passed all the defunct and
dilapidated ("family-owned and
operated") motels and motor lodges,
ruins of 1950s pre-interstate quaintness:
defeated flead-out trick dens, now,
and ghost-roach rooming homes,
equal parts corruption and reclamation.
Robert Johnson CD in the player:
*from Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six
hour drive.* A flip-flopped hitchhiker
in an open shirt holds a worn-out
cardboard sign: "I'll buy the beer."
Having no destination, we leave him.
Coral, aqua and citrus-orange wood rot,
either side of us, drifts by amber-hued
in the spring evening. A neon bar sign
blinks on. A Florida decays in real-time,
a good backdrop for our impropriety,
for fucking around. This road was made
for fifty-seven Chevys and flatbed trucks,
for a wild, full-bore escape in whatever
beater's at hand. Your Nissan Sentra is
not as romantic as all of that, but it'll do.
Tall, thin cabbage palms lean away from
A nor'easter, clusters of dense urchin
palmettoes shutter, a sea grape waves its
glossy leaves, a regiment of spindly Florida
pines stands at attention, a mossy-haired
live oak escorts a lazy magnolia; the obligatory
roadside checkmated armadillo rocks in
the wake of cars; turkey buzzards collude
close by. A bombed-out Quonset hut
barbeque joint smolders. A sooty-looking
Jiffy, and a Circle K where day-labor drunks
loiter on the side; a strip mall with nothing in
it anymore but a tiny Pentecostal church,
hand-painted sign above the door: *Holy
Ghost Salvation Chapel.* A rare coolness

is in the air. I catch a hint of orange blossoms. We pass through an Anglo *faux Miamito*, a cracker village, by a trailer court named Frog Hollow where hollering men in coveralls drink canned beer and play horseshoes. A lean man leans into the mouth of a blocked Dodge Charger, curses the carburetor. We are not barbarians. They are not Romans. Women and children ignore them. We hear their coarse crooning through cracked windows. We are attuned to them, like spirit-drunk charismatics, like a boy with his ear to a conch shell; we ride as far as a tank of gas takes us, fill up and start again; nobody, thank God, cares what we're up to. We pass the occasional family-crammed sedan or minivan, someone's Florida-boy dad, just off work, strong-arming the wheel of a rusted-out whale. He crests the roller, half-drunk beer between his legs (five fresh ones in the seat). He disappears. We keep going.

Little Egypt

For Glenn

Southern Illinois is Kentucky resigned
to the fact that it is not Kentucky. You
take me to a town named after corn where
there are no cornfields. Everything here
seems like it had to be here, was not enough
for some place else. The hills here are not
majestic, don't roll. They loiter and slouch
like self-conscious teenagers. Something
beautiful is always around the corner, but
never materializes. A very old Indian sits
on a bench in front of a store that sells
knickknacks and trinkets. Tourist crap.
He is a trinket. We get tourists in Southern
Illinois, you say, but not many. This town
could be called Resignation, but it is not that
self-aware. I ask him to take a picture with me.
I like to help people, he says. His name is
Mongo, or something. He is Cherokee.
I'm too old to be your Souvenir, he says.
All I have is this bench and a cave in the
woods. He looks down. These shabby clothes.
I'm sorry, I say. It happens to everyone,
he says. I've killed rattlesnakes with my
bare hands. Killed a white man. You look
at me and shake your head. The Earth is Indian,
he says. She will kill us all in due time. We
don't go in. I feel both here and not here,
like an idea thought better of. You are here,
in Little Egypt, my friend, because it is too
hard for you to be anywhere else.

Graceland

I.

Summer 1996

We went just to go. It was the last time
we'd do irony together on a large scale.
I remember most of the trip: his grave,
the lone impersonator wondering the premises
who we decided was Elvis disguised as himself.
We fought about some now lost detail
and were quiet for the duration of the
self-guided tour through the house.
In a gift shop you bought a post card
with a photo on it of a very young Elvis
wearing a turtleneck. We agreed it was a
good choice, but didn't know who to send
it to. That night in our unair-conditioned
room at Admiral Benbow's we drank from
bowling-pin-sized bottles of malt liquor
and took Polaroids of our glistening faces,
fucked like harried vermin, and smoked
cigarettes, talked until three in the morning
when it finally became cool enough to
sleep. A month or so later, after we'd broken
up, I got a post card in the mail: young Elvis
wearing a turtleneck. On the back you'd
written "What a trip," just like that.

II.

Winter 1997

Two months into it we took our first road
trip. You had a Ford Tempo and daddy's
gas card. We took turns driving and got
there quick. The trees flanking the king's
house were stark and leafless and looked,
you said, like paintings of stark and leafless
trees. A suspicious impersonator (there's
always an impersonator) skulked about.
The king's car was kingly, the jets presidential.
"What a guy," I said. "He was hot," you
said. That night it snowed, and we took
to the streets. Our Florida clothes were not
enough so we bought knit caps and quilted
flannels at a two-story hardware store on

Beale Street. It was my first snow. I called my mom. We stayed at a Comfort Inn and drank cheap red wine and played bastard versions of poker games. Before we finally went to bed we walked outside. The snow had stopped. “You’re the only person I know,” you said, “who has been to Graceland twice.” We went to bed and quietly, like snow falling, made love, and nearly fell asleep connected.

Daydreaming Downtown

In this urban core you fall facedown or float.
There's no magic in dying.
We all know how to do it.
But being dead must be boring.
Here, where the homeless have the best phones,
hanging up is the same as letting go.
But who do they call?
Who would answer? A mother, maybe.
I haven't called mine in weeks.
It's okay, she doesn't mind.
We're not phone people.
I need to see your hands,
framing and fanning and flying—
picking up the indigent words and feeding them meaning
—making them sing.
I guess any setting holds some hellishness.
But true Hell is personal.
Death probably shouldn't be scary, but it is.
An old mad bum says, "Don't worry.
It's just gravity letting you go."
How perfect is that?

The Worst Coast

The sociopathic sun puts down on us
its piss-yellow indifference.
You like it, oddly. Love it, even.
It's me, you say, red-faced and sunblind.
I wanna be the poet laureate of heat and humidity.
Of swamp muck. Of us, sweating through our shirts.
This part of the state is not God's best work.
It's a wonder they're not all Atheists
instead of Baptists and Pentecostals.
At least there's no snow to shovel,
you say, swat a yellow fly.

At the Shell

Two beautiful
full-blown blondes
standing by the beer cooler
cackle cruel as drunk
teenagers.

In line ahead of me
an attractive
weekend smoker
refuses the two-pack special:

“I don’t smoke that much,”
she lies.

As I leave,
the middle-aged clerk
leaves too
for the day.
Her gait says *finally*.

She mutters to herself
as she twitches across the lot
premeditating her first hard hit
of something.

A serious young man
gases up his
perversely clean 4x4.

A grey-headed old-timer
checking the oil
in his small, dirty Civic
notices me,

drinking burnt tasting gas-station coffee
in the middle of the day,
forever gawking at life
and its sincere participants.

The Intracoastal Waterway

A rare brackish brew of bull shark,
bottlenose dolphin, skate and outboard-scarred
manatee: the Mississippi to my Huck Finn.
Merritt Island, a shaggy shrimp-shaped scab
of prime real estate, festered in the center,
a green dragon guarding its southern tip,
Banana River on one side, Indian on the
other. (But the dragon's gone now. Don't
go looking for it.) They're not two rivers,
but one murky lagoon—a place for false
distinctions, of blurred lines, obfuscation.
There's a story, probably apocryphal,
of a seventeenth century Ais chief wearing
a kilt as he strutted like a rooster along
the east bank on the Indian River side.
Some years earlier, in that same area,
an errant Scotsman had gone missing.
Just to the east, late-twentieth century,
on a barrier island named for falling satellites,
I sleep and dream up adventurous nonsense,
and on weekends, tromp and otter the lagoons
and their islets, eschewing the blond obviousness
of the beach, which is closer to home, but
farther from me, for the strange, green insanities
of the intracoastal, where easy peril can be
had, where once, on Spider Island, on the
Banana River side, I found oddly arranged
bleach-white bird bones, the remnants of some
dark satanic ceremony, and felt the full eeriness
of the place reverberate inside me and ran
to the bank, to my inflatable yellow raft and
rowed until my body stopped. Somewhere,
I believe, there's a stark, snowy opposite to all
this leafy, humid oddness. Somewhere in the
Outer Hebrides a sloe-eyed boy feels out of place.

Heat Seekers

Saint George Street, Saint Augustine, FL

I sit on a warm wooden bench
daydreaming straw hats and sunglasses,
conquest and protestant fortitude,
listening to the hot breeze bully
the dry fronds overhead. I try to imagine
how forbidding *La Florida* must have
been to a sixteenth-century explorer,
and how home, for most of us, is not
a decision so much as a birthright,
or used to be. The day is sun-shattered
—too bright for my naked eyes. I give
to passersby only strained glimpses.
I see some things. I'm constitutionally
Unprepared; sweat is everywhere. My hands
read the polished grains of the bench
like Braille. They say, "Stay here a while"
and "This is where you belong." Now
I sense other things. I feel it all on me
like an extra coating, a second skin that
glistens. It's oppressive, this heat and
humidity. A red-faced woman walks by
and says in an accent I'll call *Northern*,
"How do these people live here like this?"
For a moment, I hate her. I love it here.

In Summer We Move Slowly

As a matter of survival. There's also
the sensual pleasure of sweaty slowness.
Summer is deep down here, men name
their daughters after it like a character
from the Bible. Our family reunions are
held during the hottest month of the year,
like a dare. "I wouldn't hit a dog in the
ass with that," said my uncle Royce (who
is not my uncle) in reference to something
my mother cooked one year. We are cousins,
he and I. Our whole rednecked family
is once removed for three generations back.
We lean to the side. In her early forties,
after three girls, my granny saved my dad
for last. My granddad, slowest of all,
walked like a wounded caveman. He
couldn't keep up. I barely remember him.
We are indigenous to this karst droop
of limestone, but not unique. Every land
carves a people, marks them heavy like an
accent. Geography and weather whittle
you down. The real estate in Florida goes
up as you head south, and becomes less of this.
We're middling, me and my kin. In this
state's center we've swaggered through
Walking Water, Windermere, Frostproof
and Winter Haven. In counties named
after *Conquistadores*, Indian chiefs and
Confederate generals we've made our own
dumb conquests, fought in woodrot bars,
committed petty crimes; have worked hard,
too, and shirked days away in palmetto
swamps, salt marshes, orange groves.
Have fished for brim and catfish, with
cane pole in one hand and sad, reliable
everything else in the other. It's hard to
do an honest day's work under the decaying
contrails of spacecraft. Breathing alone
can seem a chore when the day's breath
is that dense. But deep in the humidity
of our genes is an immunity to real
concerns. Hurricanes aren't even cause
for alarm, not anymore. We've learned
to distrust meteorologists. Ever since

Andrew every year is “above average”
just to cover their asses.

A Talk with Bill about the Weather

Old age is / a flight of small / cheeping birds / skimming / bare trees / above a snow glaze.

-William Carlos Williams

I know this is beside the point,
Bill, and my fault alone,
but it's hard for me
to imagine a *snow glaze*.
A good rain can glaze.
I can see that.
Raindrops, Bill,
are as varied as snowflakes.
Rain can drizzle down
on the whole of a warm spring day,
like a slow pestilence,
or it can explode
black against a steamy summer afternoon,
fight with the sun
for a few eternal minutes.
We've got pissers too, Bill,
and howlers.
Slow, slobbery dollops and stinging pin pricks.
Bucket dumpers and slanting walls of the stuff.
Thin curtains
that dance by in seconds
and disappear.
Whirlers that sting
and cold, quiet mizzle,
times when the stuff
hangs in the air
and clings to the trees
never bothering even
to hit the ground.
Yes, rain can glaze.
Some days
it glazes everything,
makes the outside world shimmer.
I don't have
a rich winter vocabulary, Bill.
But we Floridians
know rain.
We're like the Eskimos
of rain down here.

Fall Comes On Strong

For a heightened sense of mortality,
piss blood for seven days.
Rot is prodigious, a more interesting form of survival
than, say, persistence.
Winter is fleeting here,
shakes you like a baby rattle.
Summer lingers like a bad cold, seeps into you.
Algae bloom, bacteria fester.
But as fall comes on, as the air crisps, it turns cherry red and viscous.

It's not something that happens to men,
normally, the doctor says,
writes me a scrip for a ten-day cycle of antibiotics.

By late October, most of us are just into our cold weather delusions.
It gets below eighty I'm looking for sleeves,
people say. I throw away some of my boxers just in case,
and quit wearing shorts.

I'm out mowing the lawn the first discernible day of fall.
I inhale and get high on it.
It's just like a beautiful woman passing by.
There isn't a damn thing I can do about it.
It doesn't hurt. But I don't feel right.

Olacto-Micco

"...with the desire to read and write, however, ended all ambition to be like the white man."
-Minnie Moore Wilson, 1896.

Billy Bowlegs, last Seminole Chief, was not as brave as Osceola, half-white saint, nor did he possess the gravitas of Micanopy, High Chief on Cuscowilla, but was lazy and contended, until dread Grey Cloud, sidewheel steamer, took him up the Mississippi in 1858. Edgemont Key. End-stop Oklahoma. You could have seen it coming, Bolek, waking from one of your midafternoon naps, or while you sipped *asi*, legs up after dinner, under the shade of your ample chickee, like king-shit sultan. You should have known this life was too easy for an Indian, Olacto-Micco, Alligator Chief, last king of the 'Glades. I wish you could read this and give me some notes, but the dead don't read and you never could. How long did March of 1858 ring in your ears like a cracked bell, and what is liberty if not the right to a little self-indulgence? Is there an empty slot-machine at the reservation casino with my name on it? Can you spot me, Billy? I'm good for it, I swear. Three lemons in a row and I win one of your beautiful, angry wives, or your sullen, sloe-eyed daughter. Olacto-Micco, Big Man, king fisher, where the hell are you? In New Orleans, goosing a Creole whore, dancing down Burgundy with a bottle under your arm? Where do dethroned Indian chiefs go when they die—Cleveland? Kansas City? Tallahassee? Is there a Great Spirit, or is that bullshit too? Are you somewhere leaning on a sabal palm, Billy, like an indolent day worker, waiting to be bullied by Colonel Harney's men. It's the twenty-first century, you can come out now. No one plays Cowboys and Indians anymore, and you can't sit "Indian-style." What did you do, Micco, proto-American, when your life was foreclosed on? And what's Muskogee for failure—Oklahoma? House poor, henpecked, drunk and thirty-pounds overweight, you walk out of your palm frond McMansion to the edge of Lost Mans River and let the familiar chatter of feeding gulls carry you across the water to the other side where the scenery is better and less demanding.

Devil Music

Double Feature

A black-and-white film, nineteen thirties,
everyone urbane and drinking highballs,
whatever highballs are, and saying witty things.
A private library or study, a fat *grande dame*
tucked into a high-back in the corner, wondering
who is here to steal her fortune in jewels.
The tall, debonair Cary Grant prototype is
a cat burglar. (Surely this is just *To Catch
a Thief!*) And maybe the curvy, pensive matron,
smoking a long cigarette by the fireplace
and ignoring absolutely everyone, is up to no
good, has designs. Perhaps the thin tramp wearing
a small, shiny dress, a loop of pearls dangling
from her neck, and a Daisy Buchanan hat would,
if he'd only ask, kill the old bag for the debonair
man. Somewhere near the end a Mediterranean
sunset must be spread out over a horizon, waiting
for them to ride off into it, mist angling up over
the lip of a cliff, the smoke from my dad's cigarette,
two a.m., where he sits in full color in a TV-lit living
room, hulking in his recliner, passive, a string of
ten-hour workdays around his neck instead of pearls
—and fuck! to be a suave-ass cat burglar—
watching it all go down, fighting off sleep, knowing
the names of all the actors, knowing this one was
an alcoholic, the other a closeted queer, blackballed
during the McCarthy years—knowing everything
except for how it ends, because he's never
stayed awake long enough to find out, and doesn't
really care, because the real story is behind it all,
in shadows not celluloid, smoky and fading.

Pugilist at Best

From a photo of my grandfather, Gavin Stephen Lambert Sr.

Your arms up in a boxer's pose, hands loose fists;
a black-and-white photo circa nineteen-
forty, but I can tell your eyes were pale
blue, like no one who followed you. Granny's
Northern Irish blood intervened, gave us
all a dark Celtic complexion, smothered
out the Anglo-Saxon blue. Genetics
is like that, brutal, like your loose fists
that tightened on impact. This picture doesn't
say much: poor white boy, mid-thirties, handsome,
arrogant, bad with money. How much did
the photo booth charge, who went hungry or
without so that you could play at winning?
Who taught you that pose, the total knockout.

Shrooming with Germ

In the early morning, the good ones off at school,
my cousin and I head for the cow pasture behind his trailer park.

They're all over, and we know how to find them:
pick the thick grey ones and pop the stems,

wait for purple to appear along the stringy break.
We know the way we know Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

But we've forsaken that kind of learning for field work.
In the undulant green, at seven in the morning, we dodge

doe-eyed calves, steer clear of their vigilant mothers,
Kick dry patties at each other, like feckless fieldhands.

While our friends pledge allegiance to the flag, we load
our sacks with psilocybin and head back to his place,

parents gone, and eat a couple caps each, make tea,
our own ignorant alchemy, the only high we can afford.

Calamity Jane

She whirls through her living room,
like the inside of a Gypsy caravan,

anemic half-smoked joint hanging
from her lips, red Bic in her right hand.

All around, the sweet-smelling smog
of pot smoke mixed with the milk-grey

vapor of sandalwood incense. How
graceful my fatherless mother. How

gracefully she suffers the graceless,
swan dives into the daily calamity.

She flicks the flame with an orphan's
flair, waves goodbye, but doesn't mean it,

like she never liked you to begin with,
and she is glad you're finally leaving.

Wartime Lullaby

For Abigail Ann

You were born at night, Florence,
six weeks early, with war.
We must have craved you here.

Bush bombed Baghdad
while we fought you screaming
into a dark room.

I was born at night, too, you know,
while homesick boys smoldered in Vietnamese jungles.
We're night-war babies, you and I.

After, I went down to the hospital lobby
and watched TV.

No news of you. Only tracers, mortar fire,
smoke, quiet. This way war seemed timid
and amateurish, the deadly volleys
like the fumbings of bashful lovers.

After a while, peace bores, is as insufferable as war.
Conflict is, after all, contact.

Nothing is what you expect, little girl.
Being born is commonplace.
War, they say, is Hell.

Life, Florence, is a long, luscious mess.

The Geometry of Fear

When I was six, three older neighbor kids
locked me in a box. Dad got me out
and swore off boxes for good: all boy-sized
three-dimensional rectilinear objects were banned
regardless of their intended uses. Eventually
all straight lines were disallowed. We lived
in a curved world. I was sent swerving to a
private school shaped like an onion
where we read elliptical stories from circular books.
On weekends dad drove our cloud-shaped car
to Round Lake and we fished all day
with curling rods from a boat shaped like a bowl.
At night I slept in my oval bed and dreamt
of rhombi and trapezoids.

Home for the Holidays

This evening, I wanna say, is a gift.
There is good food and there are presents.
We drink and smile and hold babies.
Some small part of me wants to self-destruct.
But it's only a small part. Family is military,
or was, hundreds of years ago. They need you to know:
you are no better, no matter how good you get.
Gift giving and thanks giving are white lies, victimless crimes.
You have to pretend you believe them.
We can't give each other what we want.
We smile and say thank you.

Another Poem about the Moon

For Keri

Waking in a foreign city for the first time
in a long time, next to you, the way I should
always wake, I recall the Moon from the night
before, looking just like it did in some other
place nothing like this one. “You’re always
pointing at the Moon,” you say. “Always,
look at the Moon with you.” Look at the Moon,
so close you can see some detail and a face
and a cow jumping over it and one day we may
move there, some of us, a starter home for
wayward youths, and we *are* like children,
orphans on purpose, moving from meal to meal,
from rock to rock, tantrum to tantrum, ruining
every-fucking-thing we love along the way,
forever sad, forever bad, and forever searching
for more. I want to ravage the Moon. I want
to peak under its dress. I want to smell the
scent of the Moon, touch it gently. Is it salty,
like the beach on a windy afternoon? I think
of the Moon, too cold in the Goldilocks Zone,
which is just right, and everything is ours,
forever. Keri, look at the Moon. Do you
see your reflection? Do you see yourself in it,
pregnant and riding your bike on the beach
with me, controlling the tides, making them
dance behind you? I see that. I see you, us,
everything, a stupid string theory of us. I see
you driving us there, using your GPS, letting
Siri tell you the way to the Moon in her female
HAL 9000 voice, so pleasant and kind of robot-sexy.
You’ll get us there that way. That’s how we’ll
all get there, or wherever we’re going, from now
on and forever, and maybe that’s how it’s always
been: naked male awe, appropriate and dumb,
and the cautious intuitive female, a moon herself,
setting everything, everything in motion.

A Poem about My Grandad

My grandad, it is rumored,
had more than one family.
He died of cancer when I
Was ten-years-old. I met
him once when I was eight.
He seemed big, wide and
unyielding, like a beast carved
from a chunk of stone. By
then, my grandmother was
dead, and he had re-married
an illiterate mountain woman
named Olmer. Willowy and
kind, she wore a beige
eyepatch and attended to
my ailing grandfather with
the eagerness of a acolyte.
People reacted to him that
way, my dad said. You
either hated his guts or
loved him to death. We
did not go to his funeral.

Black Irish, or George Burke was Not An Indian

After a contentious family photo

On your World War One draft card
an unsteady “X” next to “His mark.”

Occupation: “coal digger,”
as if “coal miner” was not lowly enough.

Family mythology has you “100 percent Creek Indian,”
which is 100 percent bullshit. Dad says to let it go.

He never should’ve given me the photo, George,
of you on your knees on the ground
in the center of an upside-down dinner bell of poor Alabama girls;
your nieces, in their Sunday whites.

I’m guessing it’s Easter.
Annie, little-girl Huck Finn, leans on your right shoulder
with a wise grin and a jawline bob
that points forward like horns.

Alice looks left with dark, dejected eyes,
and a flower in her hair.
Her tiny hand reads the stitching
on your left overall strap like braille.
She almost cowers by your side.

My granny, Evelyn, looks left, too,
with her tongue out. You hold her up in front of you;
she can’t be much more than one.

It has to be 1914 or 1915, Covington County,
which would make you 36 or 37;
younger than I am now by at least a year.
But you look older, and could not read or write.

The photo, black and white,
makes your skin look like graphite or pencil lead,
and you are dark-haired. Cheekbones high
and a long, flaring nose.

I can see how someone with enough imagination,
and the nagging need for a narrative of her own
could turn you Indian. But I know some truth,
George, Irishman, brother of my great granddad.

I know something of who you were,
and like those who fall between us,
I make up the rest as I go.

Devil Music

The grime-polished soles of our feet,
like the pads of furbearing animals, *skeet skeet*
across the linoleum floor as we pass each other
in the kitchen. In a trailer the air-conditioning
vents are on the floor. (Heat is a luxury
Florida does not require.) She's the first pregnant child
I ever knew: Kool-Aid mustache, too-big or too-small
hand-me-downs; crooked, *home-done* bangs.
"My old man don't like my uppity school friends."
He gives me noogies and Indian burns and I feed
the crow. We wrestle each other, inflict small pains,
two little brothers acting like big brothers. He's not
so bad, keeps her out of the rain, but he's no real help
with anything. Momma's gone. "You have to ignore
a good many things here." He pretends his girl did not
drink from the well; that his wife's address does not
change weekly; that his daughter will not become
her. His child with child and I go to her room and listen
to contemporary Christian rock. It's terrible stuff,
but anything else is "devil music." We act as if
every occurrence around us is incidental, beside
the point: a willed blur of inconsequence. "You can't
internalize everything, it'll kill you." This is who
we are, a/c-vents-on-the-floor people. We're
used to a bottom-up approach to things.

First Love

“...he was already man enough to think he loved a woman.”
-TR Hummer.

One night, in the dark of her mother's car, she wrote “I love you” on his forearm with a black ballpoint pen. Home, he ran straight to the bathroom and turned on the light, read the words and felt a warm gravity pull at him from the inside. He smiled at his mocking, unromantic reflection in the mirror and wondered how someone who could have, didn't pick better. He felt a fierce dog-dull gratitude: for the first time he'd die for someone other than blood.

A Friend of Rain

“To live here you should be a friend of rain...”

-Richard Hugo

Summer days between three and five,
a thunderhead shoves through the west,
a towering black mess of cumulonimbi
that only snowbirds and tourists brace
themselves for. It lasts minutes but seems
like the coming of a minor apocalypse.
Who said the end would be a lingering
affair? Not you, who lived life as if the
end was inevitable, as it is, and might be
around any bend in the road. Maybe that's
the attitude of a man who grew up in
lightning's capital. Anything, after all,
has less a chance of taking you than a
bolt from above, and you lived to tell us
so, until a red-dirt rapture silenced you
and made us all lovers of storms, lovers
of brief blusters, lovers of microbursts.
Lovers of whatever weather we made for
ourselves. Braving danger it's natural
to fear came natural to you. You lusted
after what stank of death and finality—
you were your own Grim Reaper. Every-
thing fades, like you, Dad, even the
weather, and in the end, maybe it's
nothing but a quick flash, a low rumble,
and a good dousing in the late afternoon.

Self-Portrait with Daughter

My earliest memories are of me
being filthy. And jittery. Being quiet.
Playing doctor with the daughter
of a family friend. Getting caught, being ashamed.
Occasionally, serious shit went down.
Mom threw things at dad.
Dad went away mad and came back drunk
and happy with winnings from *Jai Alai*,
a cuckold, lucky with the numbers.

I refused to brush my teeth
and faked showers. Put Children's
Tylenol down the sink drain
instead of taking it. Brought blue
jeans to school in my backpack
on the days mom made me wear shorts.
Acts of civil disobedience.
From four- to seven-years-old,
I was obsessive-compulsive. Maybe.
I picked bare anything with fur
that I could get my hands on.
The Devil spoke to me in tongues.
I understood most of it.
It was your typical rebel-type shit.
Even now my internal chatter
has a kind of Tourette Syndrome.
It's probably, like everything these days,
genetic. I still have poor hygiene.
Still refuse good for the sake of good.
Still occasionally get the urge
to make bald the odd woobie.
But I have a little daughter now.
I try to set a good example, a task
for which I am uniquely unsuited.

Keeping Up With The Snopeses

In an unincorporated shit-area of Polk County, Florida, on Tarpon Rd, was a family that lived in a school bus. Fruit pickers. Mom, dad, a daughter, and four burr-headed boys, preternaturally mean, ranging in age from four to sixteen, who'd contracted lice so many times their folks just kept their heads shaved. They shared a pieced-together bicycle with no seat and got in epic all-day-long dustups with each other. One time the ten-year-old tried me. I declined his challenge and was called "pussy," "pussyboy," and "little bitch" for a whole week, until I caught him unawares and kicked him off his fucked-up bike, earning his grudging respect. The older boy, whose name was Herschel, but preferred Junior, was inordinately muscular and ever bare-chested. He liked to taunt a neighbor's Brangus, like a performer in a circus sideshow, kicked it in the head, between the horns. Took a sizeable tree branch and stuck it up its ass. Rode it bareback, like a lousy, unshod cowboy. The girl was fifteen and approached pretty but never crossed the threshold. Her name was Beautrice, "Putrid Beautrice," and she would take you into the woods behind their bus and let you do "whatever." My cousin, Terrance, told me that Beautrice and Herschel had had relations and the four-year-old (Tadpole, they called him) was the result of that union. I believed it. There, it seems now, was something in his burgundy eyes that confirmed it, an inborn shame, perhaps. Whatever it was, it smoldered in him like a lump of coal, and already, at the age of four, he was the meanest motherfucker around.

Desperado

A week before chemo we drove
from Oglethorpe to Macon for a rental
so I could get home for work.
We didn't talk about the black thing
in you that made you wince and curse
each pothole. Remembering is made
for moments like that but I wasn't
up to the task. The largeness of Death's
reality bullied me into silence. Four
months later I'd wake to a world
shucked free of you, but now I drove
and imagined it, fragile, deadly, maybe
even beautiful, like a Portuguese Man
o' War, riding the ebbtide inside of you.
Finally I'd take your hard hand and
squeeze out a final, unnecessary "Thank
you," and I'd still remain silent. They
played "Taps" at the funeral, instead
of "Desperado," like you wanted,
and everyone cried, because every
newly dead man is a kind of hero,
even those who don't try, never
cared, but always said thank you.

Nostalgia

Nostalgic for the Light

Nostalgic for the light of my childhood,
where the cabbage palms make shadow suns around me.
Where fires come every few years,
like playground bullies, and make a black mess of things.
Where rednecks can be surfers, and surfers rednecks.
Where alligators aren't feared so much as respected,
like great uncles who've been to war, but won't ever talk about it.
Where sugar sand sours hot days,
forces you to move closer, get down into the seams and joints and folds of things.
Where all my assumptions are, and stay, and don't biodegrade,
refuse to sink to the ocean floor,
but wash up instead like salt-smoothed driftwood, still what they are but worked over.
Where the light of day, no matter the season, can be summer light,
midday light, sitting-under-a-porch light,
too much and not enough.
Where mothers lay out on the beach, opened against the horizon,
like the slender anoles that patrol the sidewalk,
still and unworried, oblivious to my footfalls.

Starlings

"Call those high birds hungry and your vision meat."

-Richard Hugo

I'll be forty this year and hardly know
the names for things. I need to know
what to call these birds. Even without the Old Testament,
even without Adam, a name means something,
contributes to a good parsing. Agnostic means you don't
know. The birds I hear now are just *birds*,
melodic blurs. The slight pain I feel is hunger, off to the side,
like a stitch. I'll call this one a swallow, this one a sparrow,
this one a starling. No birds of prey here, no barn owls,
no peafowl. Only what is small, suburban.
But these birds are hungry, and have names.
I like starling, as a name, best. I'll call every bird starling
until I can come up with something better;
my vague, pathetic hunger I'll call a pigeon: dull,
ubiquitous peasant. I say them and they land
where they land. I suppose it's not important
to get it right, as long as you mean it.
These birds are starlings because I say they are,
and I am some pedestrian starling.
Some possible meat. Some aberration.
An off note in our respective singing.

Proteus

Lost deep in the lush ignorance of a moment
I find a wild, foolish me, try following.
The inside of life's infinite, or as big as you're able to make it,
and colored in odd ways, and like nothing ever anywhere, and ever-changing.

This can be done to some startling effect
when one is sick, say with the flu,
as I have been for six days now.

The eyes glass over and turn inward, and fever fuels the voyage:

You burn some of you to move you,
a small fare for such rare sightings.

Dark Turn of Mind

“Some girls are bright as the morning and some girls are blessed with a dark turn of mind”

-Gillian Welch

What year was it we decided to move to The Keys
and raise chickens and be approximate Hemingways,
little exotic disasters, instead of the common ones
we were quickly becoming? Oh, I guess it doesn't matter.
It could have been any year. And we could have been
any two misguided people in love, dreaming up absurdities
for themselves, but you, bright thing, went dusky,
and turned on yourself, as beauty unaccounted for can do,
and decided you weren't worth anything bold and bright
and reckless as island life, went the way of grimmer fictions,
velvet undergrounds and filthy last exits, not in Brooklyn
or Paris, but frondy, humid Central Florida, which is a poor
substitute for Brooklyn or Paris. And I, unmoored, drifted
a little out to sea, but found my way back to shore
once I got hungry, and have done okay, have stayed,
more or less, hungry. You got better, too, I hear, and live
on a mountain now, which is a kind of island, with two
babies, and a mountain man, which sounds pretty damn good,
and I hope it is, because you deserve something more
than approximations and doomed, childish romanticism.
I wonder, though, what our lives would have looked like
had we gone native, been brave enough for each other
to find that little clapboard house on Fat Deer Key,
and raised those chickens and hell together.
But there's richness, I suppose, in not knowing,
in haunting the bright outskirts of what could have been.

Something Thereabouts

My natural state bemused
so bemused I am, alone
right now in a low chair,
watching the upward mobility
of birds and storm fronts.
Even when a leaf falls
it doesn't fall straight down
but a little towards something.
Everything but me seems charged
with desire. So much movement
is *away from* movement, here
where I come to rest.
I don't always look deep,
but I usually look long.
Surfaces are sometimes enough.
It's not art or philosophy, really,
but something thereabouts.
It's my modest thing, somewhat
useful to someone, I hope,
backyard thinking, drifty,
gentle, amused, sad, content,
ungulate, and not of the heart of things,
but around it, and, I guess, lazy,
if we're being judgmental.
It won't fly off,
but it'll scoot around
till it finds the right spot, one
good for a moment's peace,
and a little meaning. I'm, maybe,
decent company who stays over
a little too long. If you let me,
I'll drink all your beer.

Old Friends

“When the devil came / he was not red”

-Wilco

I met the devil one night
when I was six
and he took my idle hand
—held it
like an attendant ghost, while I slept.

I worried what it meant.
I liked the devil; he was kind and gentle.
God was distant as a god.

We’re old friends now,
a modicum of respect between us,
blood brothers
who’ve gone our separate ways
after going through hell together.

No fiery lake and nothing cold at all,
the landscape was more Hundred-Acre Wood than bog or fen,
and the fallen Seraphim were tender toward me,
like young uncles.

Now I get gut feelings,
operate, at times, in a stunned state.
Don’t need a god for reverence or awe,
just the kind of orphan innocence
a god does not countenance.

Things change quickly these bright dark days,
and we like to linger in the moment,
the devil and I,
being idlers by temperament.

Kleptomania

Today I feel like letting myself down,
the way I did the day I stole Skoal Bandits
from the Eckerd Drugstore on Havendale Boulevard
when I was fifteen and got caught.
My friend, Israel, had dared me a good
backyard scuff-knee dare, so I did it.
Getting caught is wrong, when you're fifteen,
when nothing, not even sex, is worth confinement.
When your dad has to leave the loading dock
to pick you up from the police station
in his car that won't start unless he pops
the clutch in first on a push. Shame is universal,
like love and giving up, and like an amateur
drunk the morning after, I swore I'd never
do it again. But theft is catching, and sexy,
and so is owning what you didn't earn,
and pain has no muscle memory, and being
a poor kid with street cred and a shitty attitude
only get you so far. There's always room
for improvement, so I've pilfered along the way,
have gotten better at it. You take the time
to learn the things you love, and you love
what loves you back. By now, theft has shaped
my face, my body. I stoop and squint, and examine
things, like a pawnbroker, like a diamond cutter.
The air around me has even learned to whisper.
Anything I have that's worth a damn I've taken.
This poem is stolen, these words. After a while
things starts to look like yours, and you can't
even remember where they came from.

The Ambush

In a Roethke kind of mood

Some things never break
Never need fixing
Just are until they aren't
Grains and particles and snippets and seeds
The muck and dust of things
Spent essences and drop-offs and ends
Snatches and to-the-wayside foam
The lees, the lost, the leavings
Empty hulls, renderings and bits
Of smidgeons and blips
Sea-smoothed glass, driftwood
Beached, deflated jellyfish in the sun
Sea lice and sand fleas
Push-up Lizards and jumpy wolf spiders
In the corners of your room
Multicolored Tickseed, brown weeds, wet roots
Cuttings and scrapings
Bits of scabs
And bit-off fingernail crescents
Snores and snorts
And farts and burps
And sobs and squeaks
Stomach warbles and
Teeth grinding in the middle of the night
The remnants of moments
Cigarette butts
And the lees of wine
Smears of beige brewers' yeast

Things without aspirations
The sour smell of pimple pus
The shit behind your ears
When you don't wash right
Skid marks
Teeth plaque, gingivitis
Nail quick, bird shit
Ceiling fan dust
Toe jam, underarm film
The sweet pungency
Of a sweaty Ten-year-old
Eye boogers, semen
Dirty sheets,
Course, oily dog fur,
Horseflies, Hemorrhoids and greying hair

justified for being there

Saint You

We just go from here to there...
And back to here.
Devotees of the prosaic.
Every place is sacred
or near a sacred place.
No need to wander off.
If the world were just slightly different
I'd do whatever you wanted me to do
(within reason).
I'd name a town *Ahora y Aqui*
just for you
and there'd be no past or present there
just today
and we'd stay forever
and we'd have no histories.
Immortality, after the fact,
is not a political endeavor.
(You say this, and I believe it,
but don't quite understand it.)
Children are born immortal,
unaware of any other way to be,
all whim, all now, a little naughty,
until they aren't.
Then they're us.

Poem

“Writing is just something you do.”

-John Berryman

Looking for something irreducible,
I turn to the least *least* thing I know.
Sort of know.
How do you say anything?
The impurities sweated out of you,
you can find rhythm, a moment's little-bird heartbeat;
describe a summer shower,
show a tawdry, whimsical scene;
a perfect, quiet imperfection; a bent limb,
a broken bone; a dull, illusive moment,
a frustration worth sharing;
something irreducible;
a line to carry along on a scrap of paper
in the back pocket of your mind:
a small worthwhile thing.

Root Work

I wake this morning, thirst rising
in me like a croak, and walk to the
kitchen, into its morning breath of
stale beer. Legacy and blood work
a thick red hoodoo, put the roots
on you. Each careening blood cell
is an omen and a hex. I pinch the
blinds and look out into the street,
the murky winter morning. Something
not a soul is mired in me. Head
aching and desolate, I turn from
the window, the cold, the light,
and go for some hair of the dog.

Us and Them

The reason, my dear, that I couldn't get back to sleep last night after hearing a strange sound (one like an electric drill?) is because the same biological imperative that says "love," says, "kill." It seems unenlightened to say so, but that doesn't change the facts. My genes are coded for killing. Yet isn't it odd that you had to shovel-stab the copperhead on our front porch, and that you did so with wide-eyed abandon while I stood by in horror and felt like fainting? I could dismember a man, I'm telling you, and have felt the desire, but that snake struck some deep, fearful chord, rendered me useless. Last night, lying in bed, waiting for sleep, I couldn't shake these thoughts, and when I finally nodded off I dreamed I was in an unfamiliar house, in a room full of dressers. All I needed was a sock to match the one I had in hand. I looked in drawer after drawer and as I did people appeared, family, some I hadn't seen in many years. They talked to me about their lives, about regrets, as I searched and found photographs of random children, knives, pens & pencils—one drawer was full of cutoff jeans—but no socks. Pink Floyd's "Us and Them" played in the background at doctor's office volume. A cousin, a dear friend, almost in tears, told me how much he missed me and how sorry he was he didn't make it to my dad's funeral. I knew this dream was a dream the whole time. Sometimes you don't know, but this time I did. Yet, for some reason, I kept looking for that goddamn sock.

I will make you

word by word
until you resemble a little axe
and I'll use you to hack at things

at night we'll sleep together
in a bag on the floor

and we will both dream
the same dreams

when we wake
we'll remember everything

you'll be a great little axe

On Being Sick

After three weeks
you still feel like shit.
It's a persistence you admire—
the will of an ill wind, the tenacity of a bug,
the pugnacity of a virus, the worldliness of this:
walking pneumonia. Like the names of plants—
Wandering Jew, Weeping Willow, Virginia Creeper—
it explains itself to you. It moves you.
It moves on, emphatic, speaking
in a language you know, speaking
in a language you never had to learn.

A Prayer

Like the atheist
who loves gospel music,
the sailor who can't swim,

I luxuriate in divine sloppiness,
content as a toad.

I believe in this weirdness,
this pure dogma of contradiction,
I take it as I can and force
no context.

I take knee here
and pray to the god of all this
chance and improbability.

Please, I say,
never make this
make sense.

If This Were Enough

“Don’t worry, Levine, you’re ugly enough to be a great poet.”

-Berryman to Levine, from an anecdote related in Levine’s *Bread of Time*.

If ugly were enough, I’d be braver.
Words would come like gentle rain, perfectly aligned.
My best efforts would mirror nature.
My banalities would be sublime.
All the birds would flock round
and witness me like the birdie rapture.
There’d be a subtle air of triumph about everything I did.
My behavior would be wretched and excused.
If ugly equaled talent, I’d be lousy with it.
I’d never need to write another poem.

Notes on Poems:

1. "The Decline" borrows a line ("from Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six hour drive") from the Robert Johnson song "From Four Till Late."
2. "A Talk with Bill about the Weather." The epigraph of this poem is from the William Carlos Williams poem "To Waken an Old Lady."
3. "Olacto-Micco." The epigraph of this poem is from Minnie Moore-Willson's book *The Seminoles of Florida*, published in 1896 by the American Printing House. I found the excerpt on the FIU website *Reclaiming the Everglades* (everglades.fiu.edu/reclaim/bios/bowlegs.htm).
4. "Devil Music." The phrase *drink from the well* is an archaic euphemism alluding to pregnancy, i.e., a woman who is pregnant can be said to have *drunk from the well*.
5. "First Love." Epigraph of this poem is from the TR Hummer poem, "The Beating."
6. "A Friend of Rain." The epigraph and title come from the Richard Hugo poem, "What the Brand New Freeway Won't Go By."
7. "Starlings." The epigraph of this poem is from the Richard Hugo poem "Orcas in the Eye."
8. "Dark Turn of Mind." The title and epigraph of this poem are from the Gillian Welch song "Dark Turn of Mind."
9. "Old Friends." The epigraph is from the Wilco song, "Hell is Chrome."
10. "Poem" ("Looking for something irreducible,"). The epigraph of this poem is a quote from John Berryman, talking about writing, possibly from the *Paris Review* interview.
11. "If This Were Enough." The epigraph of this poem is from Philip Levine's memoir *Bread of Time*.

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Vita

Gavin Stephen Lambert III (Steve Lambert) earned a BA (2002) in English, as a Neal Gray Scholar, from the University of North Florida. From 2004-2007 he was a reader, and then associate editor, of the literary journal *Fiction Fix*. From 2005 to the present he has worked in libraries, as a Library Associate (non-MLS librarian 2005-2013) and a Library Assistant (2013-present). In 2005, with the scholar and poet Mary Baron, he coordinated the Poets in the Jails travelling library exhibit. In 2006 he was selected by library administration to judge the *VOYA Magazine* teen poetry contest, and in 2013 he won two “Innovator Awards” for his work with young adults, including creating the library system’s first ever ComicCon. In July of 2015 he was selected to present the NEFLIN webinar “Creating a Comic Convention at the Library.” Over the years Gavin’s poetry and fiction have appeared in many literary journals, such as *The Adirondack Review*, *Dead Mule*, *Orange Room Review*, *Haggard and Halloo*, *Word Riot*, *SOFTBLOW*, *Red River Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Big River Poetry Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Mad Hatter’s Review*, *Spry Literary Journal*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Into The Void*, *Picaroon Poetry*, and elsewhere. Four times his short fiction has been a final selection in contests held by *Glimmer Train Stories*, and his story “Fishing with Max Hardy” won third-place in their 2015 Very Short Fiction contest. His story “A Helping Hand” was nominated by Red Truck Review for a Pushcart in 2015. Also in 2015, the literary journal *Into The Void* interviewed Gavin for his poetry contribution to their inaugural issue. The independent poetry press WordTech Communications has selected a draft of this thesis for publication, tentatively to be released in August of 2017.

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