



WHAT

TO DO IF

YOU'RE

BURIED

ALIVE

MICHAEL MEYERHOFER

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ALIVE**

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Praise for *What To Do If You're Buried Alive*:

Set against a backdrop of brilliantly rusty artifacts, and infused with personal history, this book showcases Meyerhofer's skill at advocating for overlooked people and the places they inhabit. With a compassionate eye, and his trademark sense of humor that hooks readers from the very first page, Meyerhofer sends us back to our earliest memories, and shows us a world of heartbreak and wonder.

- **Mary Biddinger, author of *A Sunny Place with Adequate Water***

Listen to this little sample of Michael Meyerhofer's music as he recalls working in an Iowa warehouse, avoiding 'forklifts / steered by broken / marriages / and thermoses full of Jim Beam,' or remember his mother's failing heart 'kicked up grave-sod like an errant mule.' Whether he's describing the brutal machismo of Iowa high school wrestlers or the tenderness of his father nursing his childhood wounds, Meyerhofer sings in a pure American tenor, his voice haunted by late night diners, small town heartbreak, and somehow, out there in the desolate vastness of the heartland, a flash of humor and a sweet glimmer of hope.

- **George Bilgere, author of *Imperial***

Between the marks the world leaves upon us, the designs we choose to mark ourselves and our worlds with--these scars and tattoos are the territory Michael Meyerhofer explores in *What To Do If You're Buried Alive*. Through pain and loss, Meyerhofer's poems are harrowing prayers searching for 'the charms of language' that might lead to forgiveness, to redemption, to love. While never flinching from confronting the irredeemable damage we do to one another, these urgent and necessary poems remind us 'that if you focus on what hurts, / face it wholly, it dissolves / like a light from a burnt-out bulb, / a curtain gone up in flames.'

- **John Tribble, author of *Natural State***

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Editor's Reintroduction to *What To Do If You're Buried Alive*

The poems in *What To Do If You're Buried Alive* are tenderly masculine, self-deprecating and humorous. They are the poems of an adult male poet looking back at childhood and puberty with anything but rose-colored glasses. He shows us how we see ourselves often through time – with a mixture of cringe and understanding.

Family is fittingly a major theme of the book: a strong and caring father, an abusive and alcoholic grandfather and especially, a mother lost during childhood to a heart attack. The mother is ever-present in her absence, as in “My Mother’s Darkness”

She whose last breath shaped into words
was a quiet, simple *thank you*

for helping her up the stairs to the room
she’d die in. For switching on the light.

And in “No Oasis”

On the off chance you’ve read my poems before
you know she’s dead and I’m something
of a melancholic sap, . . .

And that’s the emotional honesty you get in these poems. Meyerhofer knows who he is and who he was.

Another recurrent theme, again fittingly, is school. History (Fidel Castro, Churchill, Socrates, Caesar, Einstein) and science (Bunsen burners, algebra, electrons, geology) weave their way through the poems, reminding us how school is a major part of our forming of our worlds, and in the understanding of our pasts. Meyerhofer shows us the world of his youth – rotary phones, riding bikes, working on farms, weight lifting in the garage with his dad, roller rinks. He pokes fun at his own history, but also of power structures encountered as a male child in the rural Midwest: the exalted and abusive male athletes and coaches, the suburban family restrictive structure, the intimidating cliques of popular girls. In short, the entrenched ruling class of small towns. These are the monsters of a teenage-boy's youth, and Meyerhofer lampoons them in his poems. But he doesn't lose sight of their humanity. Even that abusive grandfather, as in "Returning the Lesson," is allowed compassion:

. . . after every waste, the heart
like a dog betrays us but we,
when we must, call this forgiveness

Meyerhofer is willing to share his life with the reader – the good and the bad. As the speaker progresses from puberty to adulthood, we get a series of love poems, which again are frank and earnest in their direct emotion, as in this excerpt from "Samson, After Delilah"

Still, you taught me to love
the line about how bodies can haunt,

how a single soft gesture
tattoos grace straight down to bone,
and afterwards – thirst so sweet
we almost deny its cessation.

These are honest and blue-collar poems. They are set in, and a product of, the rural Midwestern experience of cold winters and small towns and manual labor. The nostalgia and beauty of this world are infused throughout, like this description from “Ode to Four Old Men Eating Ice Cream at an All-Nite Diner”

Outside these painted windows,
Stars tongue the windshields of pickups,
Ditches echoing the brass sadness
Of crickets. . .

Or this moment, from “Twelve”

. . . And the swimming pool where we boys turned
near-sighted as crows, whose murders skirted our
little town whenever the hoarfrost melted: whose
black, brittle wings weighed sunlight and found it
wanting.

The simplicity is beautiful, yes, but Meyerhofer also knows the harsher realities of rural existence. We have poems of rural poverty, as in “Government Cheese” a kind of ode to the processed-food handouts given to poor families by the federal government. The speaker’s family seems to have an endless supply of the cheese, a marvel to the speaker’s parents:

. . . *This was free*

they stressed – as though victory
could be obtained simply by getting back
the leftovers from what was taken.

Meyerhofer lays the system bare. But he also addresses his own failings. His body, with its peroneal muscular atrophy, makes his insecurities of youth harder, the shame we all feel among our peers at that age sharper. He talks about the grossness of life and death. He makes us wince and cringe. That too is part of growing up, especially growing up *boy*, growing up human. Meyerhofer is expert in bringing us into this emotional space. But he doesn't reside only there. He gives us elegies and love poems too, like this moment from "December Mourning"

Outside, the enameled boughs of cedars
practice their rough ballet

while crows murder their calligraphy
high above a cornfield's frosted wreckage.

Somewhere, a black swan gives birth.
Somewhere, a library is burning.

What To Do If You're Buried Alive was originally published by Split Lip Press in 2015, a press that discontinued publishing poetry books in 2020. But these poems are still needed. Times

have changed, but humans still experience parental loss, disability, insecurity, and love, and still seek genuine paths through which to navigate our lives. Meyerhofer does the work in these poems to incorporate his past into his present. Our new edition brings these works to a new audience, a new present, the same truth.

– Danielle Hanson, Poetry Editor, Doubleback Books

One day Chao-chou fell down in the snow and called out,
“Help me up! Help me up!” A monk came and lay down
beside him. Chao-chou got up and went away.
-- *a Zen koan*

These are the warnings
that you must forget
if you're climbing out of yourself.
If you're going to smash into the sky.
-- *Anne Sexton*

I. SCARS

Playing Baseball With Fidel Castro

He had no fastball,
this tiny left-hander from Havana
with a nasty curve
and sinker, but at twenty-one,
he found himself
scouted out by the Pirates,
brought to the States
then rejected, after which he went
to law school, prison,
disappeared in the socialist
underground, almost
started a nuclear war, etc.,
until a cameraman catches him
drooling in his uniform
and wheelchair, wreathed
by machine guns.
I have no knack for baseball
or being an island
dictator, though sometimes
I imagine passing him
between innings. Marx forgotten
in the musk of cut grass.
The crowds with their pennants
and hot dogs reminding me
not to blink, urging me to bend
my knees and step into it.

Returning the Lesson

Three days after my mother's heart
kicked up grave-sod like an errant mule,
my dad's alcoholic father came by,
carting along his oxygen tank,
its little red wheels squeaking down
a sidewalk of women in black dresses.
This man who drank straight gin
and didn't even know for years
how many children or rottweilers he had —
still decades before DHS —
sardined up in that country shack
I only saw once, as a yellow bulldozer
took ten years off my father's eyes.

They kept him away, so I grew up
picturing him as a rural Hitler
who dreamt of twisting out cigarettes
on the scrotum of the baby Jesus.
But there he was — that old grandfather
I'd never seen, frail as a psalm
with plastic tubing stuck up his nose.
This day will pass, he swore,
squeezing my hard shoulder. Meaning
of course my mother in her casket,
her hair all wrong, just a dash
between her first and last breath.

I nodded along, but wondered how
this sentence fragment of a man

ever managed to lock my father in closets
without food – my father,
who can do push-ups until sunrise,
who has three college degrees,
who could have busted him like kindling
but instead, took him inside
with one open fist on his shoulder.

I am tired of alchemizing the indivisible,
so here is the lesson I want to forget:
after every waste, the heart
like a dog betrays us but we,
when we must, call this forgiveness.

Touch

Suppose we keep on keeping on
so long that nature runs out
of fresh fingerprints. Suppose you're the one
walking around, leaving the thumbswirl
of Winston Churchill or Socrates
on bathroom door handles.
Or undressing your lover with
the relic fumbling of a Neanderthal.
Probably you'd never know.
Just the vague notion sometimes
that you're not as unique as they say.
The brain in its gray oven bag,
fists knotting through boardroom doors.
But gripping your steering wheel:
the same epidermal ridges
that invented the first vaccine for polio
or shoved a spear through Christ.
As for me, I'm pretty sure
these hands did nothing grand.
At best, they pushed a rake in the shadow
of some lord's tower or scrubbed
cow pies off a shogun's radish.
And if they wrote, it was just
to speak of the need for paper towels,
pacifiers for a colicky newborn,
maybe plastic sheeting for the windows
now that frost is thumbing the glass.

Psalm of the American Warehouse

I wrote *carpe diem* on a napkin
and stashed it in my wallet.
It was middle June, this warehouse job.
I had just turned twenty.
I had just seen *Dead Poets Society*.
I had just helped bury my mother.
And there is nothing quite so lonesome
as standing between four-story shelves
under a roof of trusses and girders,
the untouchable skies of industry.
My uniform: whatever I didn't mind
snagging on corners of raw metal,
getting stained with grease or blue dye
spat from the slushie machine.
My job: prowl those aisles
with serial numbers and a pallet jack,
searching not for enlightenment
but the proper gears, screws, slats
of plastic and pulpwood,
goods to haul from here to there,
avoiding those forklifts
steered by broken marriages
and thermoses full of Jim Beam.
I kept it for twelve years —
my protest against bundy clocks,
against fluorescent tube bulbs
with their glow like bleached bone.
Meaning I forgot it was there,
Went back to college, got my degree

in sadsacking then found it
just today as I stood in line to buy laxatives.
The older I get, the more I think
we must each adopt a figurative stage.
I want mine to be Thermopylae
or an overstaffed emergency room.
Probably, though, it's that warehouse
where I dragged my orange wagon,
gathering whatever made God-
knows-what with the help
of sawhorses and torque, schematics
like holy writ, raw materials wrenched
by better hands than mine into
some precocious, unforgiving design.

My Mother's Darkness

I wonder sometimes if she saw it coming –
she who, while living in Davenport

with my father, interrupted one night
their routine of walking through the park

and couldn't say why, only that she knew
there was something bad in the trees,

all that shadow. And the next day
some girl's body found, cut up and raped.

She whose last breath shaped into words
was a quiet, simple *thank you*

for helping her up the stairs to the room
she'd die in. For switching on the light.

Notes From a Country Drive

When last I flew a kite, my mother was still alive.
Ronald Reagan was president. I was seven,

that biblical age when you know almost nothing.
The little string that leashed me to the sky

Slipped my palm, bobbed off like holy cursive
toward an abandoned cattle graze. I'd been told

to stay close as she slept on a plastic lawn chair
beneath long palindromes of cloud shade,

but I chased until that string-dance caught on
a stalk. Then I caught it. And forgot until just now

how I looked up – muddy, lost – and found myself
in a tangled pasture overgrown with clover,

weeds and blossoms tough as orphans,
mud and insects and air, all talking at once.

Iowa Wrestlers

I wonder how they feel about it now —
those bull-necked boys from the old days,

tin men taught to fondle or fight
so our town could add another trophy

to a glass box in the lunch room.
The hot-tempered one who teased me

until I made friends with free weights.
The state champ who twisted a girl's breasts

in P.E. because he knew he could.
Boys so straight, they once proved

their heterosexuality by crashing a party
and sticking the host's toothbrush

one by one up each other's asses.
Now, decades later, married to women

who surely have a bad story to tell,
as it seems all women do, of machismo.

Bloodied seasons spin themselves dry
in the shade of churches and a sock factory.

New births, health care debates,
same-sex marriage finally made legal.

Still new ones rise with the same biceps,
more boys trying to knuckle their way out.

The Geometry of Light

The first time they raised me
to a hospital mirror,
I was too busy wondering
where my right ear had gone —
now, scientists say
sight is just what happens
when matter bank-shots
caravans of photons
into the pinholes of our eyes.
High-rises on glass easels,
limbs of a sapling doing yoga
in some backwater gale.
Still, in the dark,
what our hands learn
follows the curve of earth
until falling becomes ascension
and it all starts up again:
more earth, more sun-breath,
more oil derricks like steel herons
baptized in dry, black roses.

And Not a Cloud in the Sky

Waiting in line for chips and queso
behind a perfunctory knot of girls
with yoga pants and attitudes,
I get a text message from my cousin —
the one I used to read to, the one
who's their age now — saying
she just found my birth announcement
in a box-bottom scrapbook,
my late mom's impeccable cursive.
She sends a picture. I text back *thanks*.
Still, it takes me until the loud-
speaker's sassy modern love song
warbles into a country ballad
and those young women depart
in a whoosh of perfume and strained lyrics
to realize she spelled my name wrong —
a couple vowels reversed, unless
I'm the one who's been screwing this up
on job applications, refill requests,
bylines for dating websites.
It happened mid-August,
a banal sex dream interrupted
by the heave of Dad's shoulder against
a bathroom door of well-aged oak.
Sirens, bad heart. I was the one
who suggested cremation.
But it's March now and the sun does
what it can, so many ditches
like bones marrowed in dirty snow.

So many storm gutters
pinned to last year's rooftops
that everywhere you turn, you hear it:
the sound of metal, sobbing.

How It Started

As a kid, a kinked spine
left me pains no pill could cure,
a knot of misrouted nerves,
bad plumbing in a house
built in the lousy part of town,
wrong side of freight tracks
gone rusty under the sun.
Nobody wanted to hear it —
a feeling from gut to bladder
like I'd been filled
with knives. In Iowa,
what you can't fix, you ignore.
This explains my parents.
But I learned one day
that if you focus on what hurts,
lower yourself right
down into the heart of it,
face it wholly, it dissolves
like light from a burnt-out bulb,
a curtain gone up in flames.

The First Orphans

She said, *I think this is called being naked.*
The boy didn't know what that meant

but it seemed kind of scary so he
sewed them skirts made out of fig leaves,

snaking grapevines around their kneecaps.
Then, for the first time, he noticed

the unashamed flexing of her toes
as she loitered by the trees. So he knelt

before a wild, as-yet-unnamed bush
and started braiding its thorns

into sandals. *Try these on.* She winced,
took a step, fell. He helped her up.

She decided not to hurt his feelings
so off they went. Before long, he got used

to her limping – she, to bleeding.
And everything kind of went from there.

After Isaac

Faith is a sorry, putrid thing
though one cannot say that too loudly
amid all these tents and hunger,
new priests with eyes like burnt rams.
How could I, for him, refuse Him?
Yes, I'd bathed that boy in a desert lake
near the place where lambs sleep,
all of him soft as a breast,
his wet hands hugging my neck.
But His was the voice that stirred me
deeper than all those whispers
from a barren wife who tried
to coax a miracle from my loins,
to say nothing of that quick-tongued handmaid whose
shadow melted
into mine like wine in sand.
But He fixed the stars to their brackets,
sewed flutes into the bones of birds.
So I bound that boy taut as a sitar,
his nipples pink and useless, his eyes
like fish before the net comes up.
You know the rest – wind, wind
everywhere. How I wept when, too late,
I felt His great door slam shut.
Afterwards, He would not answer
though I swore I'd learned my lesson,
though I vow each day to place
above His wild, bone-strumming kiss

the dust, the locusts, the mouths
of all who dared called me *Father*.

Headlines

Newspapers say we just snagged
a knot of stardust from a comet's tail —

this will tell us, they hope, how
all of us got here. I want to tell you

that Christ said: *Let ye who is without sin
drop the first bomb.* But like you,

I have bones beneath my skin.
Like you, I can believe in anything.

For Those Who Wish to Be of Use

The first thing they tell lifeguards: don't watch
for flailing limbs, cinematic screaming punctuated

by watery chokes, like someone's being mauled
by a shark. No. Here, the drowning go quietly

as children doing something they shouldn't.
Here, instinct stiffens the limbs to buy us time,

our mouths stalled at sea level, the eyes cloudy
mirrors maybe thirty seconds from breaking.

These are the signs you must learn to appreciate:
the unanswered question, the taut repose,

maybe a spasm of laughter tickling the spine—
a wicked punch line only the dying get to hear.

Portrait of a Weightlifter With Peroneal Muscular Atrophy

The doctor enunciates each syllable,
amazed my parents never told me
the full, scientific name for that extra link
in my backwater chain of chromosomes,
what deadens all below the knees —
I wonder aloud if they ever knew. Later,
I remember fourth grade music class,
listening to our bearded principal
lead us in shrill renditions of John Denver
when I glanced at the boy next to me,
a boy born with working ankles,
just a kid in shorts whose calves looked
not much bigger than mine. Even then,
I knew it takes time to atrophy,
knew it was now or never if I wanted
to wear shorts without standing out
like a barrel propped on twigs
in the thick heat of Midwestern spring.
At recess, on the swing sets,
the other kids pumped their legs
as their parents taught them
and gravity cooperated with proportion
to arc them toward the clouds.
I tried but only sagged back to earth
like an off-balance pendulum, toes
dumbly scraping the gravel. In Iowa,
the first lesson is never to look ineffectual.
I've misplaced a few decades.
Now, my father breaks our embrace

to joke that I could bench-press a bull.
But still I think I am back there
on that playground, my heels
kicking up fist-sized clouds of dust.

No Oasis

My mother and I went to a music store
one day when I was nine or ten,
skipping school because of a nervous stomach.
She'd promised to buy me the sheet music
for *Man of La Mancha* because I'd heard it
in a commercial, liked it, and my father
who was teaching me free weights
had placed her in charge of his paychecks.
On the off chance you've read my poems before
you know she's dead and I'm something
of a melancholic sap, but what I was
just thinking is that I have no idea
what that store was called, what town
it was in or even how she found it
in the age before the internet,
though I can still remember her smile
as I prowled the rows for what I wanted,
maybe puffed up a little, trying to look tough
as I moved between bright aisles of flutes,
entranced by all that sparkle and sheen,
French horns turning in gilded circles.

Parenting

When I was little, my father
used to hold me down
flat on the bed or the shag carpet
in front of the television,
Knight Rider or *Dallas* scoring
my near-apocalyptic tears
as he used a tweezers
to extract bits of furniture
from my palms, my bare feet,
my knees like knobby birthstones,
cold burn of rubbing alcohol
answering my attempts
to slide down the banister.
Outside, headlights strafed gravel,
cedars bowed into their own
shadows, lawn darts
rusted. God, how I hated him
though he only wanted to help.
Grip firm. His voice, a whisper.

I Never Learned How to Ride a Bike

no-hands. Blame birth defects,
the way my feet angle, a little extra
orbital kink as they flat-footed
the chain of my ten-speed
in American figure-eights, beside
friends who pedaled with their arms
crossed, feigning definition
in their biceps as they hurtled
between football fields and baseball
diamonds, like all this was just
warm-up for rough-housing
in the shade of somebody's barn,
everything just that much
easier, including trying to impress
the occasional girl with bronze legs
and a ponytail – a girl who could
do it, too, needing nothing
but her knees to accomplish what
for me took both hands, all my fingers
folded by necessity into fists.

Elegy for Rotary Phones

In the old days, you stood on a chair
padded in forest-lime polystyrene,
just inches from the illusion of privacy,
each hole in that dial an empty
jewel socket for which you waved
your lonely palm like a windshield wiper,
part surgical, part erotic. You under-
stood that one mistake would tether you
to the entirely wrong person,
some stranger maybe thrice your age
would have to leave the couch
or the toilet seat and answer
your apology with rugged grace
before they slammed down the cradle
like a president launching nukes.
Then the whole process would start over:
springs, coils, sparks, that metallic
sea-sound whenever you let go
and went back to where you started.

Class Trip

I was eight when rap came to Osage,
autumn of '85, a periphery of barren stalks
wreathing the roller skating rink

where we went, permission slips in hand,
on vacation from conjugated verbs
and the pitfalls of long division,

that ever-elusive gold star. I remember
dark, carpeted walls – a convenient handhold
as we stomped and coasted along,

disorderly as electrons, bruised,
trying to pretend nothing hurt.
Then the owner, that veteran of Saigon

who doubled as DJ, loaded something new
into his duct-taped tape deck –
heavy bass line, fast drums, lyrics

foreign as those words from health class,
but catchy how it strummed our
bones like guitar strings, so we skated

or tried to in rough orbits, smiling
while the failed nuns who became our teachers
crossed their arms and Brother Giles

ducked out, mustache furrowed,
tugging at his starched, butterfly collar.
The next day, an announcement

sent home to parents about the dangers
of any song they couldn't follow.
But it was too late. In our heads, already

circling the strobe light darkness
of that day, beaming with wild reassurance, extending our
small hands to the fallen.

Conditioning

My father strips down to his boxers
and alternates between sitting in the Jacuzzi

and rolling around in a snow bank,
the kind of thing you'd expect

from yogis or athletes mid-conditioning,
though it must appear a bit strange

to the concierge at that mountain hotel
where my father is laid over on a business trip

just a few days before I'm due to be born:
this bearded, bull-shouldered man

out of Iowa for the first time
in his bones' twenty-three orbits around

the only star he can name, this man
who keeps unlocking those sliding glass doors

along the swimming pool, who shivers
but hauls them open anyway.

Curriculum Vitae

By the time we broke the door down,
the air was already thick with the smell
of what happens when the universe
has her second heart attack
while the rest of you are sleeping
and it's true, I've yet to find a committee
that asks about the way her throat
rattled when my father forced in breath
while I waited for the ambulance,
waited while shaking so hard
I nearly pissed myself like I'd been
doing for years thanks to a kinked spine
and no money for medication,
but this, too, is a kind of university
service: the woman who came afterwards
through the yawning front door,
who merely nodded to the paramedics
and cleaned up the mess and left
without leaving a bill or a calling card —
just the scent of bottled lilacs
as a scrawny, shirtless kid in the corner
told himself that this, too,
was something he must remember.

Iowa

While we were waiting
for the men to dig the hole

into which we'd pour
our maker's ashes, now

that the ground had thawed
enough to receive them,

my brother and I stood
in the little kitchen

of our mother's mother
who handed us towels

and said we might as well
finish these dishes first.

Scars

When I call my dad to tell him I know
what my knucklebone looks like, thanks

to being caught in the middle of a fight
between a sink and a beer stein, he tells me

Mom did the same thing years before
she died, drawing bright pennants of blood

from hands that once undressed me
and palmed bathwater over my birth-scars,

says that now, he can hardly bear it –
the necessity of submerging one's

bare self in suds that bubble and rise
like angels, sure, but down there in all

that wet darkness, that innocent clatter,
could be masking God-knows-what.

Sex Education in the Summer of My Ninth Year

I learned female anatomy from a sex toy catalog
in my brother's room while he was at football practice

and I was scouting for a fresh read. There it was,
an adolescent boy's Library of Alexandria

stashed between Encyclopedia Brown and a yellowed
stamp collection. Women in gynecological poses,

strangers performing acts undreamt of by those
other Catholic boys with whom I swapped tidbits

of false information while the girls shied away
from our new, grasping hunger. Imagine discovering

fusion when all you wanted to know was why
the sun appears gold or red depending on the hour.

Imagine thumbing through a directory of fetishes
when, moments before, you didn't even know about

the labia majora, the clit hooded like a pink druid,
that women wear a fine, petaled cleft in place

of what boys assume must look like theirs.
Imagine Hubble right after he looked through

that gigantic telescope leaning dumbly phallic off
a California cliff, that night his universe grew

exponentially. Doesn't everything lead to this?
Too much to take in, too hard to look away.

Urban Legends From Sacred Heart Catholic School

I learned in grade school health class
that the heart stops when you sneeze —

*Good thing, too, the nun said,
or else your chest would explode!*

Imagine prehistoric Hebrews harboring
whatever bad gene makes one burst
over a campfire whilst chewing
a bit of charred goat. So that afterwards,
the whole tribe whispers of petty
divine wrath, glad so-and-so
with the exploding chest hadn't procreated.
Imagine pollen as a plague, the stuff
of which prophets are made. But no,
that, too, was a lie. Nor will sneezing cause
our eyes to fly clear out of their sockets
like exiled jellyfish, as we feared
on playgrounds years before our fervor
turned to conception. How the bellies
of the unpopular reshaped the drape
of rosary beads, impossible to believe
that all matter hails from stars.
Those orphan filaments from whence
all dreams and bones were sewn.

Eleven

My father bought a dozen mirrors at an auction—glass set to 3x5 panels, each identical down to the daisy border-paint. The idea was to nail them along the bareback drywall of the downstairs bathroom so they'd reflect the light and make the place look classy. But one day, standing in the adjoining kitchen, my mother having forgotten the door just a crack, I—sisterless—saw her in panorama as she rose off the lavender toilet seat. The softness of her belly. Zen koan of her pubic hair. Her hands as she stopped to ply a wrinkle and saw herself—then saw me—then closed the door to the sound of running water.

Twelve

It was like coming home then realizing you've been locked out. Those beanpole girls we'd tackled in backyards, now blooming beneath their checkered uniforms until our palms dampened each Square Dance, fretting whenever one asked to borrow a #2 pencil, the room so quiet we could hear our sternums jumping over the slide of perforated test forms, the click of nuns' heels down the pregnant aisles between our desks. Elsewhere: gravel-spit, the dust-wakes of boys with licenses—such oddly noble anger. The brutish indifference of football coaches. Churches sounding their brass tax over fields of scarecrows and corn-rot, spray-painted underpasses, birth-dark culverts tunneling through ditchloads of witchgrass. And the swimming pool where we boys turned near-sighted as crows, whose murders skirted our little town whenever the hoarfrost melted: whose black, brittle wings weighed sunlight and found it wanting.

Tornado Alley

Saturday nights, we used to
gather all of us in Tami's basement.
Her mom brought down snacks
at quarter-hour intervals
while we spread out
on bean bags in the dim TV glow,
near touching, trying not to
breathe too loudly.
But it's hard to enjoy a romantic comedy
when you're still a virgin,
so most nights we boys left early,
stomping our bike pedals
down those field-shadowed roads,
all the way to Mom's Arcade
winking and bleeping
behind the old pizza place,
where glass women
leaned their great, luminous cleavage
over our nervous pinballs.
Sometimes, though, we stayed
to watch a bridesmaid
confess her love for the groom
after an extravagant misunderstanding,
John Cusack raising his boombox
like a knight's standard.
Afterwards, they asked us
if we understood, this now a test
and we, their star pupils.
We shrugged and looked down.

Outside, wind pounded the windows
which shook in answer,
as though asking to be broken.

Metaphysical Algebra

Always in story problems, the story goes nowhere. Sure, Sara has twelve apples and nine oranges, but what pinned her to her backyard with bags of fruit and no apparent destination?

And when they walk by – a parade of stray pigeons and donkeys – will she just stand there counting legs, the way Jerry and Juan did when they entered their clubhouse to find it overrun by stinkbugs and lice?

It is good that the shepherd has a thousand sheep, though I fear for him this winter, so deep in wolf country. And if Bob and Sally really do board separate trains and fly apart at the speed of heartbreak,

instead of stopping to flip a coin or divide the screws in a baggage rack, let them ponder another equation: this coefficient dance of factors hurtling us toward an inevitable zero.

Once Again, I Fail to Learn Quantum Physics

Now I fear I'm too far behind,
having failed to learn the names of birds,
let alone the trees they live between,
plus the nouns of the body
whispering from their rooty Latin throats.
So too the logic of chopsticks,
the exquisite currency of synonyms,
a better word than parallax
for the moon-jump over hay fields.
Even shop class seemed like witchcraft –
the strange philosophy of jigsaws,
how a crankshaft's dervish
brought us from horse to Lamborghini.
Plus the coordinated gibberish
of bones, foreign as the after school innards
of a piano. So for years, I sidestepped
the stoic glint of Bunsen burners,
maps of the ocean floor,
the sad genealogy of the Caesars.
But now, one by one, they call me back.
Here, some fool strings horsehair
over a hollowed coconut
and makes music. Elsewhere, Cree mothers
swaddle their babies in peat moss.
Thus, the names of the Orkney Islands,
still life of the Nazca spider,
symphony of the periodic table.
Until I am told to watch as two light beams
fired through cardboard prove

the existence of alternate universes.
And that quickly, I forget
the capital of France. The formula for milk.
Which blossoms open first, and why,
to the sun's wild, pyrite tongue.

Ode to Four Old Men Eating Ice Cream at an All-Nite Diner

Four men in mussed overalls walk in,
laggard, smiling like they own the place.
The waitress laughs – *back again?* –
swinging her tray of drunk kids' dishes
and meager tips. The old men nod
at my wife and take a seat behind us.

Outside these painted windows,
stars tongue the windshields of pickups,
ditches echoing the brass sadness
of crickets. Meanwhile in here,
these old men wave off menus in favor
of the usual: coffee and ice cream.

All week they have waited until
sundown to plow, letting that Iowa heat
blunt itself beyond the hills. Then
they meet here to swap fables and spoon
ice cream drizzled with hot fudge,
caramel, freshly thawed strawberries.

Men unexpectedly at that place
in life where they could tie cherries
without blushing. Each gets his turn
at small talk, diplomatic as the housewives
who may be waiting at home,
under headstones shaded by cedars.

But for now, they talk weed killer,
last Friday's poker game, the brilliance
of their grandchildren – spoons
stirring, hands swaying like dancers
in some burlesque house, charming the air
with their fingernails' soily tincture.

At Sixteen

Come spring, if we wanted it, there was work
at any one of those farms scattered like lawn darts
beyond the blacktop, sprawling mansions

where wind and rain splayed off paint
and flannelled millionaires used hay balers —
as squat and sexless a machine as was ever invented —

to compress hay into eighty-pound cubes
they'd hire local boys to stack in their barn lofts
where, despite promises from *Penthouse*,

there were no buxom daughters waiting.
Just crickets and loose straw so thick
you'd see it every time you blew your nose

for a whole week afterwards. Still,
it meant a tax-free wad of cash at day's end
and nothing to spend it on but pizza and beer. So

when Tony and Dustin needed a third pair
of hands, I volunteered even though
birth defects gave me the ankles of an old man,

a visible trait mercifully concealed
by a recent trend in baggy jeans. I'd already
begun my addiction to weightlifting,

I believed in my arms even if I'd stopped
believing in God, so I thought I could
hold my own as those bales defied gravity,

wobbling up the conveyer belt, through a gaping
loft door into that broad, musty room
where we broke our backs all afternoon

and I swayed like a barrel on stilts.
Doo-rags tied to our beardless faces,
sweating until we wheezed, yelling at each

other to keep going, we imagined
we were Rocky Balboa training for revenge
against some foul, doped up Russian

or maybe just witnesses and those bales
sliding methodically up the ramp were Jews
like we'd seen in history class, marching

all blank and grainy to their deaths – which would
make us the Nazis, but we were sixteen
and not all that good at thinking out

our metaphors, let alone grasping the concept
of cultural sensitivity. So for hours
we built a grimy fortress out of hay bales,

each one ribboned in twine. By the time
it was done, we had the farm boy's
equivalent of a thousand yard stare

plus the cold certainty we'd been screwed.
Though probably the farmer told us
right away what he was willing to offer —

to hell with what his neighbors were paying
just a few miles down the road.
And we, just three wannabe-tough kids

who had never fought a day in their lives,
who saw words as a kind of flinching,
shrugged into our gloves and marched

toward that ladder, our muscles watered,
and tried not to scream when the machine
roared to life and all the animals fled.

An Unrepentant Confession

That was the year I shoplifted
a bottle of Aunt Jemima pancake syrup.
Homecoming weekend. I was out
with a carload of boys I hated
but needed desperately to impress.
We were chugging beers on back roads,
tapping each empty can against
the window before tossing it out,
tin flashing in the windy moonlight.
Somebody said we should
vandalize the coach's Camaro,
suggested we stop for shaving cream
and syrup and maybe toilet paper
to toss through the dark biceps
of the cedars wreathing his backyard.
Somebody paid for a twelve pack
of toilet tissue (how to steal that?)
while another boy slipped a can
of shaving cream in his varsity jacket,
and I – who played no position,
who never lettered in anything
and didn't even have to take P.E.
thanks to a doctor's excuse – volunteered
to walk out with that plump bottle
stuffed halfway down my jeans.
I got away with it. Somebody else
called the privilege of leaving
sticky figure-8s all over the windshield,
squeezing until his knuckles went white

and the bottle wheezed in protest,
but I was the one who snuck it out.

Subatomic Redemption

I, too, was bored senseless
when my high school biology teacher
described in neat chalk-rings
the orbits of electrons
around the nucleus, clean
fields of addition and subtraction,
which all of us could sense
had nothing to do
with the real world. Years passed.
More doubt, more body hair,
more black holes and botched affairs.
In time, truth wormed its way
into the apple of any brain.
Truth – electrons bounce and jangle
at the speed of light,
so erratic, so unhinged that
sometimes, literally,
they disappear from the universe,
fly off to God knows where
then return like nothing happened,
blushing like party guests
back from making out in the bathroom.
We should have known better
than to fear being laid
beneath the business end of a shovel.
Wherever we are going,
we have gone there before
and broke free using nothing more
than the paltry speed of stars.

To My Father, Who Carried Me to the Spigot

It's hard to look smooth, let alone tough,
when you're a skinny five-year-old
and you've just fallen head-first into dog shit,

tripping on your laces besides
as you sprinted for no good reason
along a broad phalanx of spruce trees

behind your grandfather's cottage.
In my case, add to this the sour indignation
of throwing up on yourself,

bugs tumbling through the stench,
gluing themselves to your lips like fly tape.
And all those girls watching,

pretty despite their collective grimace
as they lean in summer dresses,
back when looks mattered

even more than blood relation.
Years have passed. I am a stalk now,
a tilt on the ceiling of some vanishing point

buried miles below the light.
No point, I guess, in holding grudges
against golden retrievers,

especially since science tells us
that even atoms spend all day winking.
But today, driving with the windows down

through a county wreathed in hay,
grain silos raised like feminine missiles,
that same scent worms in

from the ditches, from the fields
I've spent every urban day since cursing —
finds me, welcomes me home.

The Shipbuilder

Once, my father built a ship by gluing blue velvet to a board, tapping in some finishing nails then weaving black and crimson threads about the nails, over and over, until they formed at last the full mast outline of a Spanish galleon. My father – the only one in our family who can swim. My father – that ex-con bodybuilder who broke down loading pallets for spare change at the junkyard, who found Christ in a cell for dope-pushers then taught me, on his knee, to read. For us, he woke each winter morning and grew heat despite that temperamental Iowa sun. Pushed it through the tin ducts of a stove he built himself while we shivered under blankets. For us, he traded his factory wage for trinkets, Goodwill coats. Then listened, half-asleep, while we talked of playground bullies like those who made him throw his first punch. Later, alone, he stole spools from the crown of his wife's sewing machine and built his getaway – that lean, lopsided vessel bound only for the fragmented ocean of his dreams. And in the morning, our scorn when he showed us his masterpiece but all we saw was thread, nails, our own white breath.

Sensei

My father learned karate breaks
when I was sixteen, practicing in secret
beneath the floorboards.
One day, proud,
he dragged a two-by-four
and cinderblocks up from the basement,
said he hadn't wanted to
show anybody until he was ready.
But I was playing a game,
watching commercials for cleavage,
and anyway I was embarrassed
by his deep breathing,
his shrill *kiai*, most of all
the sheepish way he carried off
the splintered halves after,
those cinderblocks leaving dusty imprints
in the living room carpet,
the gap where applause should be.

American Ronin

His fists have shucked corn ears,
silk tassels falling like mistranslated kanji.
But in another age, they picked rice
and folded roses from the shogun's silk,
fished off coasts fat with cranes
and snapdragons, Fuji's snowy tip
rising through a pale blue gown of clouds.
His lips have recited British rhyme,
memorized the order of dead presidents.
But once, they sang to ancestors
while he pulled cold water from a well,
moon in the folds of a kimono,
dark braids held by a comb of bone.
Each day, unarmed in his plastic sandals,
he braves mazes of asphalt, strangers
with round eyes. Hides his ache
for jade and cinder-capped agarwood,
faint memories of elsewhere —
that moon-soaked market where tea leaves
became top hats and gatling guns,
a bay of admirals in melancholy stripes.

Strata

Turns out it's not that hard
to understand the universe.

All you have to do is lie
on somebody's grave. Mind
the layers: fire first,

then bones, ash packed in darkness.
Then marrow, your own
memories stenciled in blood,

brainstems like blue orchids
frozen mid-blossom.

Then sky. Birds on their way
to somewhere else. Jets
with their vast, indifferent contrails.

Further: more darkness,
stars, spacing stretching so far
it circles back around.

Faces

Another — an aunt, this time — gone to hospice and soon I know it will be hard to remember which ones are alive, which ones dead.

My brother's lymph nodes swell to baseballs, my father stops lifting weights in the winter dawn, and I've lost so many

acquaintances to poetry that we could publish a yearly anthology, so it's hard to remember which ones won't call back about happy hour.

Add the guy my book prize was named for, plus the neighbor who rode a fiberglass bicycle with a daring better reserved for his children,

then the whiskey-voiced girl with Spanish curls who drove her skull right into a tree trunk. So, too, that carload from high school

killed by a backwater S-curve, the quick-humored boy suffocated by grain. And now I'm thinking of my hometown, slumped neighbors

who fussed like hairdressers over their perpetually immaculate lawns, who smiled across their ash-marked curbs while I pedaled past

on a five-speed since hung like rusty latticework in my
father's garage. My father who recently buried his father
called to say a boy

I'd gone to college with, whose face I couldn't remember until
I drank the same cheap beer we shared by the case, went slack
in his sleep

from a bad heart. Now I'm afraid of sleep, afraid something
might unravel like a ribbon pulled slowly from its neat bow
atop a gift box,

a box that contains nothing I want to see. Unless, like Pandora,
I've closed it with the best still inside, a vapor, an unlikely
salvation.

The Places I Will Haunt

I do not want to wait until I'm dead
to choose — say, that dark lot in Iowa City
where I backed into someone's car,

first date with a woman already
less than impressed by my fumbled tries
at conversation and her bra strap.

Then there's the playground,
the bully and his gang watching,
May's grasshoppers grateful for reprieve

from having their legs pulled off,
gnats forming an angry halo around me.
Or the bar where I broke my arm

in a whiskey-inspired wrestling match.
All the death rooms of loved ones,
the kitchen where I still open bad news

from hiring committees across the land.
But the world grows tired of these
so perhaps I'll choose the reunion hall

where the bully — potbellied, divorced —
kept his distance from my new biceps.
Or the rotunda where that woman

grew to love me despite my driving,
and as she moved to my lap, her breasts
knocked the glasses off my nose.

To the Woman Who Saved Me From Killing Myself

I was twenty-three when
I learned how to shotgun a beer.
A house party. My girlfriend
was upstairs, sharing space
in a claw-footed bathtub.
Meanwhile, this biker chick
with chaps and a sympathetic smile
laid a can of Budweiser
on the counter, sideways
like a mortar shell, produced
a switchblade with gusto even
James Dean would envy,
told me: *After I stab it,
suck here. Suck until it's dry. Suck,
until I tell you to stop.*
And I did, by God. I did.

Portrait of a Midwestern Exile on Wheels

It was a ninety minute drive to work
the summer after my mother died.
I rose at five upon the third snooze strike
to shower where her heart burst —
same room, same hour — minus the sound
of water pattering a gray wash rag.

My job was to test for faulty seals
on factory-made ice machines,
my only tool a set of cracked water hoses,
my station on the line slightly lowered
so that I more or less worked
in a breeding hole for mosquitoes.

I rose even before my father did,
the house still midnight blue,
the coffee still dry in its dark cupboard.
Sydney, our friendly mop of a cat,
had been dirt-blossom for years,
our stairwell shadows just shadows.

This was long before poetry.
I wore a kind of hymen on my sleeve,
mouthing the names of beautiful women
who understandably wanted
nothing to do with my tape deck,
its loose wiring to two busted speakers.

I drove east with my time card,
a dry shirt, my dreams and copper tithe
for the factory's vending machines.
I'd stopped believing in God,
but not the myth of Eden. For that,
I still drive headlong into the burning sky.

Government Cheese

We called it Reagan Cheese then—
handed out by the government
in thinly-boxed loaves

to poor Midwestern families, part
of Ronald Reagan's plan to gain support
while using up excess dairy supplies.

I remember its odd nuclear-yellow
color, its thick processed taste
and the way it never melted right

but at least the boxes fit perfectly
around my brother's baseball cards,
at least as box after box

was stacked in the refrigerator,
my parents slicing hunks over crackers
or plain white bread, covering them

in mustard and butter until
it could be called a meal, for a time
their eyes glowed. *This was free*

they stressed— as though victory
could be obtained simply by getting back
the leftovers from what was taken.

Quitting Time

All over the factory floor,
machines stop at once.
Thermoses capped, radios unplugged,
everyone with someplace
better to be. Like the boy
who is still twelve years away
from writing this poem,
just that will-be college kid
who reads too much and can't talk
to girls, who every five o'clock
retires to a rust-fringed Ford Tempo
leaking oil in the lot,
drives two hours back home
with sunset leaking through clouds
and dreams up new ways
to feel sorry for himself.
But it's not yet cliché for him
to slow sometimes in appreciation
of that oxblood wash, birds
turning lavender as they migrate
between telephone poles,
maybe a jet's contrail overhead,
its steel belly full of strangers for whom
he has hours to make up stories.

II. TATTOOS

What To Do If You're Buried Alive

First, you should feel very glad
for having read this poem. Don't panic.
All you have to do is break
the slats. Breathing will be easier
if you knot your shirt tight
around your face – a caul. Your eyes
can't help you now so leave them
closed. Don't waste breath on prayers
or strength on punches. Instead,
use your knees to start an avalanche.
Don't stop. When loose soil starts
to flow through the cracks, pretend
you're riding a bicycle through
a rural downpour. Don't mind
the splinters. Remember, if you can sit,
you can kneel. Then, you can stand.

Love Letter to Oblivion

True, there isn't much to love
about stage magicians,

that smarmy sleight-of-hand
merely relocating spare change

for strangers in sore need
of a hero, but there just might be

something to this walking around
with a dove up your sleeve,

a live bird nuzzling your wrist
as you flourish through the day

trying to impress someone,
maybe from time to time sensing

a feathered bit of jostle,
a kinetic potential that must

in time be set free and left
to its own song, its own

fluted bones, never to come back or —
what grace — remember.

From the Husband of a Dead Confessional Poet

Now, they read your psalms of suicide and dissect the details:

the intellectual impossibility of believing in the God

at whose breast you suckled. The drunk abusive father stroking your absence like a calf until one day, you closed up

so that all above existed, at best, in frozen beauty. The oven, the pills, the wrists in ruddy fog. They say your kind

cannot help but go tearing at the starry tabard between heaven and hell, sewing them together, ripping them apart

so often it's merciful in the end to shrug it off – to leap free as though life were a stillborn, waiting to be recycled.

But I saw you on the porch in your sundress, unwashed hair smelling faintly, almost sweetly, of yesterday's oatmeal.

Dear Submitter,

If you're anything like me,
you imagine your work being read
over wine or whiskey next to a window
smeared with autumn rain,
some grizzled but soft-hearted editor
tapping a pencil as the Jazz spins
slow alchemy on a vintage turntable.

So maybe it will disappoint you
to learn about the big bag of Cheetos
leaning against my drab sofa,
the empty bottles of domestic beer
piled in the trash. I'm not
even wearing a \$1,000 bathrobe
or pausing sometimes to appreciate

a Van Gogh and scratch a one-
eyed sheepdog behind the ears
while ugly but wise children practice
their Latin, though I have to say,
the Tibetan singing bowl
I got at a flea market is admirably
performing its job of doing nothing.

A Buddhist Iconoclast's Love Poem

I loved God, but Christianity did not fit.
I loved Jesus Christ, but I knew I had

half a warrior's heart and this
was not evil. So in college I became

a Zen man, studying the principles
of nothingness, how things are not things

but only collections of pieces
to which we give a name. The obstacle

is the path. To achieve enlightenment
one must recognize the breast, for example,

as just the continuation of skin
which is the continuation

of the air we breathe. Do not try.
All things are one. But I know

that when she rises from the bath,
pulling her long red hair

into a thick wet ponytail behind her neck,
her breasts, her lovely breasts

full as a harvest moon
moving towards me, the nipples

pink as a cat's tongue
are different from the navel

which is different from my hands
or the bedsheets, for that matter,

and the sounds we are about to make
but the mystery, I say,

and our redemption
is how they are also the same.

The Only Real Thing

In first grade, we'd telephone each other
and say nothing—just *Hi and Bye*, separated
by long minutes of listening to each
other breathe. Our parents laughed
in the background, probably felt a little smug
for their own ability to spend two hours
gabbing about somebody's hip replacement,
a rude stranger who cut them off
in the supermarket by the snap peas,
so-and-so with the lousy gardening skills.
But now, on the line with you, despite
the profound separation of highways
and time zones, I think we were on to something.
Then, at least, it was enough: to hear breath,
which those big textbooks tell us
helps fuel our blood, the only real thing
that ever comes from the heart.

Dear Brigitte Nielsen,

When Grandpa caught me watching *Red Sonja*,
all those Italian girls dressed in chain mail blouses

chopping at bad guys with rubber swords,
he was already drunk – it was Sunday, after all –

and since it takes almost nothing to enrage
a vet with untreated anxiety disorders, he went off

about how your place was in the kitchen,
not hacking down misunderstood monsters.

How women were made to care for men like him –
guys who marry women like my grandmother

who grew seven children in her private garden,
baby-sat me while my mother was on dialysis

and hardly ever interrupted her husband's tirades
after he threw a television through the window.

No wonder I dream so often of snapping
bullies over my knee like bloody twigs.

No wonder I fall for slash-and-dash heroines
armored against the charms of language.

In Movies, Whenever Somebody Loses a Hand

Always the slack-jawed victim begins
by gazing down at his own spurting stump,

wrist and hand divorced by lasers,
chainsaws, maybe some prehistoric beast

nesting in the machinery gears.
See how he howls and hobbles off camera,

hugging against armor or jumpsuit
that sadly mangled arm which should be

shorter now by one handspan, but isn't,
the actor's fist merely capped in

a kind of ketchupy, prosthetic absence.
Then some pretty, beautiful sidekick

points at a building that's busy becoming
a mushroom of cinders and we look, too,

the remote control balanced on our palm
like a blunt blade, a forgetful miracle.

The World's First Impressionist

I would like to take this opportunity
to congratulate the first man
who ever lived for setting the world record

for being dead the longest.
Of course, his wife comes in second –
noteworthy given the billions

bucking for the title. But I imagine
that gave her small comfort
since this was probably after the Garden

but before Prometheus gave her
a palmful of fire to heat up the dead yak.
And more importantly, to chase off

the wolves pawing the grave outside.
And within, the chill of shadows
cavorting on the cave wall –

those walls she tried to brighten
with drops of her own blood, drawn
with a flint shard while her baby

squalled that first wild vowel
for milk and she could still feel a raw
nameless light roiling inside her.

American Angels

In Heaven, too, the angels complain
about preempted football, dropped calls,
bottled water's earthy aftertaste.

Not to mention the stalled modem,
the cashier who forgets to scan coupons,
the barista who serves every seventh

caramel macchiato without pleasantries.
Garlic breath, love handles, underarm hair —
all just the paradisiacal prelude

to lost or mishandled baggage,
the embarrassment of airport wands
whining over folds of radiant tinsel

while sandals roll like old married couples
down the conveyer belts of revelation.
No wonder they forget to celebrate

the lukewarm dinner, the tepid raise,
the sunsets enhanced by smog.
No wonder they use us as metaphors.

Today's Lesson

You can't fuck
if you're afraid
to touch, says
my boxing coach,
bruise-black
speed bags
under his eyes.
He says that
goes double for
fighting.
No wonder
they embrace
so often –
these Saturday night
brawlers beamed
by satellite
from Vegas – bare
arms tangled,
wet torsos
pressed like the backs
of postage stamps,
half-snarling,
so taut the ref
can barely
pry them apart.

As We Drive By

The homeless man
walking along the interstate
with *Smile*
magic marker'ed to
the back of his backpack
isn't smiling.

Our Balance in Blood

The astronomer explaining wavelength
with her projector and neat parabolas

says that galaxies moving towards us look
blue while those flying away look red,

just feats of light, figments of oscillation.
This gets me thinking about the sky.

Maybe it's really falling, after all.
And that deep fire we've read about,

our world's core retreating from itself.
Meanwhile, stuck somewhere between them,

we meet late and twine our limbs
like hemoglobin bound to oxygen:

half our separate hearts hurtling closer
while the other halves reel away.

Bikini Dharma

Thus, the Buddha sat--part flower,
part pretzel--and meditated
until salvation simply stole over him

innocently as this commercial
of sun-gilded, bikini-clad models
come to flounce between the halves

of tonight's documentary, as though
Siddhartha's life were two great
oceans between which Beauty

lounged on a wicker chair, sipping
drinks adorned with paper umbrellas,
pondering nothing in particular.

Today's Sentence

The old man sitting by himself at the café
tries hard not to be noticed as he checks out
the twenty-something in yoga pants
who keeps tugging at her sports bra and playing
with her blonde hair while she talks
about her job and her boyfriend and all
the stuff she's learning, isn't life just *crazy*,
especially for the old man in a dark sport coat
with patches on the elbows and probably
a whole bookshelf of Greek up there
but not one line trumping her polysynthetic
stretch, that Zen I'm trying not to notice, too,
as I fight with my wife over commitment
which, today, amounts to toothpaste
and vet bills for a cat with brain damage,
and our cups sweat the way our bones would
had the blood-wise world made them
out of plastic and stuffed them full of ice.

The First Crush

I was wise until fourth grade gym,
when Alison's hips jagged and shimmied
to *The Hokey Pokey*. Before that day, field trips
through the diluted holiness of nature,
dissecting butterflies and stinkweed,
I was really getting somewhere. I learned how
plant cells have walls, but ours don't.
How we have nothing to fear from sundown.
I was the height of a verb, sure,
but fresh nouns streamed in every hour.
I bear-crawled across the gym mats
in my Wal-Mart sweats, immodest as a platypus.
Then it happened. The nuns corralled us
into a circle. Needle met record
and Ray Anthony's big band told me
it was time to shake my inheritance.
Across our little circle jived this ribboned thing
hosting anatomical differences
we Catholic boys knew nothing about.
But she met each command with naked gusto
and I felt that first tectonic shift.
Somehow I made it home, bewildered
but sensing that henceforth, grasshoppers
and baseball would not be enough.
No matter that the rest of the world stood still.
I have been wobbling ever since.

On Separation

It's terrible to be caught yelling
into a cell phone while you're sitting

alone in your car at a red light —
especially if you've just dropped it

on your lap, yet another stranger
from the adjacent lane turning in time

to see what must look like a sad
old man berating his crotch,

his groin just the whipping boy
for this latest, botched connection.

Geeroticism 101

Class, if the equator is the world's waist, then you and I live somewhere around her right nipple. Assuming she's facing out, that is, and not in—towards her own heart, the red pores of undersea volcanoes, wide-jawed viperfish skimming the deep.

This places Shanghai with all those paper huts and skyscrapers in the neighborhood of her collarbone. Thus, Argentina and Australia are her ankles, her colossal stride shadowing half the world at a time. Notice how one hand rests in the Caribbean, the other wrist-deep in crude oil.

Next, her face: her expansive Swedish perm, those ice-blue eyes—the bane of wealthy explorers who died, still clutching their little flags. Further south, note the steam between jungle and savanna.

It should go without saying that she has never known a fulfilling lover. Closest are the one-night-stands of rogue comets, their promises gone to cinders by the time night gives way to a bruise-colored sunrise.

Sometimes she vows to do better. But it's cold beyond her blue gown and her only company, the moon, has been giving her the silent treatment for a few billion years now. No sense trying to make amends with anyone who blames you for his own acne scars.

Notice how he seethes, how his orbit wobbles whenever another fiery body squeals into town on a hot rod, telling her exactly what she wants to hear. All he'd say himself, could he find the words.

Driving West

He almost had me — the street vendor
at that truck stop in New Mexico who said

those fifty-cent bits of shale were millions
of centuries old, born out of the earth's

own scalding indigestion. I suppose
it was the thought of holding something

that old, even though we've been told
that our hands predate mountains,

every atom furnace-born in a star that died
without ever being given a name.

What I Found Behind My Refrigerator

At first, just the obvious detritus:
memories of childhood, sound of rain
pattering off a Sherman tank,
bones of saints still wet from wine.

But then I angled in my flashlight
and there they were: the first redwood,
its leaves crisp as lottery tickets.

The Mariner 10 space probe, chirping
like a hyperactive pre-adolescent.
All the old gods, cozy as matchbooks.

We can't just leave this back here,
said my wife, pointing at Plymouth Rock,
steeple like grasshoppers in the fog,
nestled between the ashes of Alexandria
and the grim shadows of Nuremberg.

So I grabbed the dust pan, my favorite
bolt cutters, and all that was left
of our napalm, but she said
Try this and handed me a thesaurus
she'd recycled from pocket-sized Bibles.

I opened it up. And just like that,
everything got sucked inside,
including us, so that we hear it humming
day and night: some great motor

plugged into a wall the size of infinity,
though like living by the ocean,
stay too long and you get used to it.

In Defense of Hipsters

A flock of hipsters walks in—but what to say after that? Maybe the alternatives (*gaggle, herd, murder*) but to be honest, I'm stuck on the way this guy's collar and bow tie blossom from the palm-wide neck hole of his sweater despite July heat wrinkling the exhaust of passing cars. This girl's dark glasses and the way she adjusts them—looking down, so that they slide off her nose as much as she raises them—just before she fishes in her knitted purse for money. And her friend—how smoothly he whips out his cash (no wallet) like a gunslinger, and when they thank him, shrugs like even gratitude is derivative. Which I guess it is. But I think he means it, accident or no, when he thanks the barista who slides drinks the color of a twilit savanna across a smooth, checkered counter, steam ghosting their styled bangs and sly, noncommittal smiles.

An Apology to Paul Revere

He warned, uh, the ... the British that they weren't gonna be takin' away our arms, uh, by ringin' those bells and, um, by makin' sure that as he's ridin' his horse through town to send those warnin' shots and bells that, uh, we were gonna be secure and we were gonna be free ... and we were gonna be armed.

—Sarah Palin, Boston, June 2, 2011

All morning, as the French toast
darkens the pan and the coffee swirls
from Kenya to Chicago
with the addition of cream,
I have this image
of a silversmith blazing through
that colonial, pre-iPhone night
with an Uzi in one hand
and a cowbell in the other,
maybe an NRA patch
sewn to his gray, tri-corner hat
as he grips the reins
with his teeth and wonders
what the hell she's taking about—
Lady Liberty, that is,
a whisper flitting about the docks
where ship masts creak
like woodwinds, like lances
in a land with schools but no king,
with textbooks but no law
saying you have to read them.

The Migration of Umbrellas

Like neon earthworms they rise
when called, they answer
the rough billiard smack of thunder
by unfurling their plumage
with nothing more than a puff
of silk and air, slight
as napping cheerleaders —
oxblood, cobalt, lavender,
some with curious birthmarks shaped
like elephants or Irish pugilists,
bright kaleidoscopes spinning
tears at your daughter's
wedding, your father's funeral,
floating like circus tents
through cities well past over-
crowded with hospitals and jails,
these lazy storm-chasers,
these water-walking prophets
with nothing special on their minds.

My Mother Sent Me

a text message
from her coffin.

It said *Glad*
you're not here.

She's always doing
stuff like that. She says
it's to help me
savor my remaining
days. But I know
it's because I'm
the only one left
who hasn't changed
his number.

Sleeping In

Morning and men with jackhammers
are making sunlight trampoline
off palms of busted sidewalk.
You have a headache. In the apocrypha
before the aspirin kicks in,
you lean away from the window,
nuzzle your face print into my armpit,
moan for different reasons
than what kept us both up half the night,
performing our full-body sign language.
You work at the Cancer Center
at noon. It's June, month of bikinis
and rummage sales, old tools
sold two for a dollar beside curtains
with yellowed lace, seams in need of rehab.
In time, all stitches become loose.
But I like how sound travels the way
light does, around the skin
without pressing, bent a smidge
by the gravity of your breasts, pink
hinge of your wrist pulling me closer.

A Plea for the Cessation of Fruit Metaphors

No more allusions to pomegranates,
grit of the kiwi's sweetness,
the heavy reassurance of melons.
I am saying goodbye to papayas – all those seeds
and not one tail among them. So too
the bland but reliable banana,
stylish melodrama of the pineapple,
the slow forgiveness of cranberries.
Times have changed, and I've undressed
too many oranges now to forget
what they cost at the corner market. To think
it's still exotic to dwell
on the equatorial musk of tamarinds,
the sly acquiescence of cocktail cherries.
But the oceans are just fish tanks
and the stars are coiled ropes, and I know
too little of physics to call you
the resonance to my wave packet,
the Planck's Constant to my quanta.
So we end where we began:
the callipygous pear, the braeburn
with its five-point heart. The passion fruit,
violet skin flecked with *cyanogenic glycosides*.
Cyanide. Its rind – what I peel in ribbons
you throw out, one handful at a time.

Anima

I am tired of dropping your name.
You lazy, esoteric catch-phrase.
You shy figment of Greek leisure. For you,
we became sketch artists,
we puckered our hills with mosques,
we raised churches in beltways
until the rafters became our ribcage.
Underneath, we argued over
how many of you could jig on a pin
or backstroke in the thumb hole
of a rainbow bowling ball.
It takes almost nothing to craft
decent myths, details to save them.
Besides, portraits need something more
than naked canvas to inspire.
So I declare you an oxblood cow,
a milk-blue snapdragon with the gills
of Christ's adrenal gland. A golem
raised from orange peels – see
how you rhyme with nothing but yourself?
I am tired of chiseling ether.
But men could learn to love a linchpin,
oh you lavender rhombus,
you albino blackbird in a ski mask.
I will trust your fin-shadow,
your great braids of volcanic ash,
your macaroni-shaped third eye.
Forgive us our handprints and leaf rot,
our trespasses against foreskins.

Meet me beneath the paper moon,
by the lonely helix of tapwater.
May we bloom like saltspray. Amen.

Poem Written While Eavesdropping at the IHOP

*I meant to take a picture of the kittens
to show you, says the waitress with the orange
hair bun to the black, balding cook
handing her a plate of eggs and pancakes,
and from our window-side table
we smile at the unexpected intimacy,
our hands not yet touching, ends of toast
haunting the platters between us.
It is midnight and I am jealous
of the steam tasseling off your coffee cup,
the half-eaten crepes by your elbow,
cadence of your laptop keys
as you pilfer an internet signal
from the Super 8 across the street
to fine-tune your essay on the suffragettes,
work in a reference to Voltaire
that you hope will impress your professor
the way I am trying to impress you:
this borrowed pen swaying in my fist,
this ache beneath my ribs telling me
to stop writing – just stop – and look up.*

Suburbia

The blue shoelaces of twilight,
Chinese food sizzling in buffet troughs,
salons where full-figured women
with rock star haircuts
and husbands serving in Iraq
fuss over the bangs of college kids.
Schools and a diamond field, all left empty.
Yards sprawled over bedrock. Upstairs
we practice knotting limbs,
then lull off to dream of oceans.
From Memorial Drive to Wheeling Avenue,
amid yield signs and storm drains,
breath zipped in like the bones of birds.

The Stuttering Headsman

A failure at tea and diplomacy, strong-shouldered but sloppy when it comes to planting, too wont to daydream while the plow rakes along, at least with *this* gig, the teasing stopped. Now, they just ignore him. Still, tradition requires that he ask forgiveness from the accused—an act he's shortened to three syllables. Often the condemned mistake his chattering teeth for guilt and, moved, freely grant their absolution. After that, the heft of the axe isn't so bad, the taut pause before the priest's nod, the transformation of a living man into a fountain of rose-water while crowds gasp and children clap their grubby palms. Then he wipes down the blade and starts over. By dusk, his arms aching, the king safer (or so they claim), he can barely drag himself home. There, his wife waits. She's been kneading bread all day. The cottage smells of flour and the sweet rot of yeast. She helps drag his work boots off, says nothing about the stains. It takes him forever to thank her. She doesn't seem to mind.

Samson, After Delilah

I woke from a dream of you.
But let us strip from this accusation
the stencils of sad contracts,
complaints born of bad translations,
yesteryear's heart-tongues
paving the road to a sweeter hell.

No, all I want to say tonight is how
I, born from no birth control
in taut fields of backwater psalms,
lifted into a fingernail of moon
like one of Phan-ku's busted figurines,
really deserved no better.

Still, you taught me to love
the line about how bodies can haunt,
how a single soft gesture
tattoos grace straight down to bone,
and afterwards – thirst so sweet
we almost deny its cessation.

I read how scars knot the brain,
how some part of us always remains
in the valley where we were
caught, naked and alone.
But I think this might be true
for something more than bruises.

I wear you like a wild violet
pressed too long between dictionaries.
I find you like smoke in my hair
years after it's grown back,
all those temple pillars gone to dust.
How to do anything but forgive?

Conjugal Visits

I wonder what they think of us—
the inmates at the Delaware County Jail
who just so happen to reside
across the street from our kitchen,
windows fixed like arrow slits
on our breakfast routine:
her in tousled hair and pajamas,
me in sweats and no shirt,
silent film of the tea kettle, our limbs
twining in the blar of dawn.
These men who do sit-ups
and attend meetings with counselors
while we hug over poached eggs,
switchblade click of our toaster, a kiss
scored by the downtown church bell.
So many years since Robert Hooke
first shaved off a bit of cork,
leaned over a microscope
and named what he saw a *cell*
after the little rooms monks live in—
still, somehow, we all remain
in these private, rented cages.
Here is your burnt porridge, the prayers
we were supposed to be studying.
Here is the imprint of a key
knuckle-deep in a bar of soap.
And the holy blasphemies
invented by gray-rose brains

tethered to their respective bodies,
crafting distractions to last a lifetime.

Haibun

If my inner child ever grows up, he will be the one on the factory line whose job it is to add that single slice of mushroom to Chicken Portabello TV dinners, of which I've eaten plenty since the woman I called my wife in poems but not in law moved out east to the crowded, mythical coast, that cauldron of restaurants and sex-shops, apartments the size of a litter box and parks the size of our old backyard, taking with her all those recipes for works I was too proud to cherish.

smoke from the kitchen — the cat playing
with the burner dial

If the World

were like this apartment building,
I'd know the bathroom habits
of men in Scotland. The guitar rock aspirations
of Russian teens. Chinese women
would shower at sunrise, around the time
a bleary-eyed Canadian hauls a husky
across the street to a rainy park.
African children go out to make snowmen
in the lull between thunderheads.
Across the hall, they're fighting again,
marriage morphed by now
into a kind of Gaza Settlement,
the merits of which the rest of us debate
while smoking on the fire escape.
See the cinders we cast over the rusty railing,
out over parked cars and oil wells,
despite our landlord's pleas for caution.

Tattoo Parlor

Here, too, I do not belong
though they welcome me just the same —
the buzz-cut blonde with a skeleton
reclining over her cleavage,
skull propped under bent phalanges.
The man with shamrock-green spider webs
hugging the knots of his elbows.
Slow day. They look up from their chairs,
thumbs doubling as bookmarks,
but I've only come in to ask directions.
Barbed roses embitter the walls.
A redheaded fairy raises her teacup,
unfazed by the clown with a scythe,
steadfast columns of kanji,
an eagle preening violet feathers
near a backwards swastika nailed to a cross.
Down a block. The woman points,
smiling like a kindergarten teacher.
The man says, *Want some ink first?* A wolf
with quarter-moons for eyes
bristles within his frame,
watching either me or the salmon
motionless on the far wall,
itself studying the Nazca monkey
who looks like he couldn't care less.
I think of all the tattoos I never paid for,
the kind even therapy and cocaine can't erase.
I mention none of this. Instead,
I joke about the rash of college girls

with Celtic zigzags crowning their tailbones,
oblong trees and handlebars,
the superstructure of a Navajo spaceship.
How the first tattoos were probably
an accident, soot or ash rubbed into a wound.
Good thing – or else we'd be out of work!
The woman laughs, returns to her magazine.
Outside, the sun sets like a tangerine
wrung dry over the rooftops of America.

Albert Einstein Eats a Snow Cone on the 14,000,000,000th Birthday of the Known Universe

If I could go back, I'd warn God
how long he'd have to spend flushing
the white nostrils of stars,
powdering the bottoms of nebulae,
burping galaxies like bean-spit
down his own clean, blank bib. Really,
how could any omniscient
understand, before black holes,
what a bright, sorry mess he'd made?

You've seen the pattern—
first, spangles spread like field grain,
then galaxies spun by the bushel
until one day, they'll find out
even universes bloom on stalks.
Even radiation can, *incomitatus*,
yield matter at ten trillion Kelvin.

I am tired of living as a solid.
I want to be water again. Without facade,
able by sheer force of will
to seep from this tarnished bassinet,
these bones like walking sticks.

Pablo Neruda was weary of chickens,
but I am weary of prophets,
metaphysicians in their lab coats.
We are fooling ourselves,

all of us, if we believe
better divinity couldn't exist right here,
right now, at room temperature.

The Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic, 1962

It's not as funny as you think. Imagine thousands of people with eyes like wet daggers. Girls barking like skirted hyenas. Grown men giggling until they retch. They say it started with a joke, a wicked punch line lost in translation. One by one, schools closed. Laughter spread like stage fright. For the better part of a year, townsfolk suffered long, sporadic fits, their skin petaled in rashes. Think of prolonged tickle-torture. This happened in Tanzania, by the way. Doctors blamed scholastic anxiety, recent independence from Great Britain, etc. Sometimes, this is called mass psychogenic illness. It happens in deserts too, whenever wet-eyed crowds believe so much in the awfulness of the world that they swear they see the sun dancing.

December Mourning

I woke early this snowy morning
and chose to contribute nothing to society.

Resisted a breath, haunted by the click
of the furnace under the baseboards

then returned myself wholly to this
rising moon of sleep, stirring only to read.

Outside, the enameled boughs of cedars
practice their rough ballet

while crows murder their calligraphy
high above a cornfield's frosted wreckage.

Somewhere, a black swan gives birth.
Somewhere, a library is burning.

Genetic Memories

On this, the one year anniversary
of exactly one year ago today,
I am trying to believe in *spiritus mundi*,
Yeats's pre-Internet dream
of a universal consciousness. So far,
I admit that Japan and Africa
exist, plus other places I've never been to,
but mine hail from the summit
of a trench. Some mention
of a great-grandmother who changed
her mind about boarding *Titanic*.
I have never had a tattoo,
sure, but I know the Alphabet Song
and use it from time to time
for crosswords and code-breaking.
Speaking of four letter words
for the Annunciation, I am no good
at being right-handed, a trait
shared by less than ten percent
of the world but one hundred percent
of my biological fathers.
It's hard to be all of *something*
at *something*. My closest is failing
at every romantic relationship before
the one that hasn't happened yet.
When I stand in a soup line, do not ask
if I am only between summers.
Dear unborn, the word *digression*

comes from a Latin word that means,
in English, *digression*. Don't forget.

The Indiana Blues

Next stop, Walmart, says the bus driver
over the intercom as his steel-gray vehicle
cruises by my corner apartment
once every forty-five minutes, on the dot,
all day from sunrise to sunset.

I guess I could just shut the window.
But my cat likes to fold like half-hearted origami
in the breeze and stare at the law office
from whence spill blushing teenagers
still shaking off their Friday hangovers.

Today, the downtown church bells
are busy piping out their pre-recorded hymns
to drown out the Toby Keith songs
emanating from pick-up trucks with steel nuts
sparking beneath the license plates.

This is Muncie – home to a closed jar factory,
tattooed libertarians, and a university
of failed writers trying to inspire
the next crop of millennial farm boys
moonlighting as slam poets on weekends.

White River looks muddy this season,
bellying along between banks of tiger lilies.
Friends complain of property taxes,
the latest edition of *The Norton Reader*,
the openly gay barista at Starbuck's.

Then my lover stops by with news:
the Cancer Center might lose its funding,
already she's been asked to give up
her private office and stapler.
I tell her it's our memories that kill us.

Still, the fired bricks of Old National Bank climb skyward
like palms minus fingers,
still the whitetails stray onto Cardinal Greenway
and nibble on the roses of Minnetrista
where art majors hang construction paper.

Tonight, I will stop to smoke a joint
in an alley named after David Letterman.
I will pretend to like Garfield cartoons.
And if anyone asks me where I'm from,
I'll look them right in the eye and say: *Iowa*.

Written While Waiting on Hold

In hell, too, there are operators.
Eternal proles dressed business-casual

except for jeans on Sunday.
No one uses surnames there.

Brad brings his own nipple-capped
water bottle, which he fills

from the break room tap. Pam hangs
cut-outs of gender-neutral animals

beside a fireman calendar.
Phones pulse from an overloaded

queue – dirges of unexpected roaming,
requests for a change of address.

The boss, who majored in British Lit.,
nurses a novel in the basement

of his hard drive wherein the hero
is a lovelorn spy named Jack

who simply gets too involved.
On smoke breaks, they all look down

bright streets at billboards
for eyeglasses and golden arches.

Now and then, they talk
about how good it feels to go on

denying refunds to strangers,
whether they deserve them or not.

Oasis

I spent most of this day trying to decide
whether life is more like a lacuna or a palimpsest
when I realized I would be better served
at that bar down the street – the one
with swords and deer skulls hung on the wall,
the pretty waitress who has never heard
of J. Alfred Prufrock, retired old men
propped against their pipes and beer steins.

I confess, I find it hard to mourn
the loss of polar bears without first toasting
the extinction of soda jerks and Christ,
the fact that what happens in poetry
still stays in poetry, Vegas be damned.
And the bearded boy from my Comp class
who stalled a bullet with his skull,
who left more than his heart in Afghanistan.

Let there be pretzels and microwave brats.
Let there be coasters for Irish beer
imported from some factory in China.
Let there be cigars that go well with cognac
in a town that serves no cognac,
one shot called the Mind Eraser followed
by another called the Non-Metaphorical Sunset
and its sour chaser, All We'd Die to Forget.

Consummation

Odd how we only kiss
face to face – I want the back
of my skull to know yours,
I want that primordial
rush of ocean when
your ear mouths mine,
when my navel lies
on yours like a sand dollar,
tails on tails. I want
our ankles to rub enough
fire to wet our tongues,
jig to saw, turret to trench.
I want our elbows
to neck. I want our fingers
to steeple, sign language
of noses, feet the sky
from whence I comma,
you chandelier, we chevron.

Post-Production

When the end credits roll
of my casket lid
who on earth directed all this,
of casting, not to mention
narcissistic script,
milquetoast stuntmen
the makeup artist who always

I do not anticipate a re-release
box set on store shelves,
the menu of deleted scenes,
that could-have-been-famous
storyboards only to die
the cutting room floor where

on the underside
it'll be nice to finally find out
the bozo in charge
the hack who penned this
who hired such
and manic costume designers
left my eyes puffy.

in theaters, no anniversary
though it'll be nice to browse
undeveloped plot twists,
kiss blossoming off
in post-production, left on
it assumed a life all its own.

When the World Will End

Not while you're warming your porch swing
with Dostoyevsky and a good merlot – nor will it end
while you're pantomiming a linchpin with someone
whose name brain damage couldn't erase,
the bedroom curtains trammeling like a ribcage.

It will not happen in winter, it will not happen
after some hard-won breakthrough with
your therapist, your parents, your publisher.
Nor will it end when the moon cocks its eyebrows
and cherry blossoms carpet-bomb D.C.

No, it will happen during your colonoscopy.
It will happen while you're waiting in line
for a roller coaster, for the restrooms at Wrigley Field.
It will happen just as you catch yourself eyeing
someone a bit too young, too old, too blood-related.

It will happen as you're driving past a billboard
for the Boy Scouts – *Be prepared* – past a bum hoisting
pleas in rain-proof Sharpie. He tries to catch you
with eyes like wet agates, but you look away.
You pretend you dropped something. You reach.

On Your 59th Birthday

Seems these past ten years cannot yield even one cathartic metaphor. But my breath depends on this so I'll call you the burnt out star I circle, nursing uncountable craters. I took all your pills, trashed them while the men with scissors and sorbet-colored gloves fussed between your breasts. Your husband went in after them—saw, I'm sure, the *Hustlers* I'd tossed because no one wants to feel human on the day their mother dies. For years now, I've been talking about how much we can learn from blasphemy. I spit my syllables like a venomoid copperhead, I eat my track like a train wreck. I am alive. You are dust. Let me not be saved.

Ode to the Old Women at Poetry Readings

Somehow oddly beautiful in how they park
their soft bones in libraries and coffee houses,

tough to offend after six or so decades
spent in toil under capitalist sky, old women

who bore the sons of alcoholic war vets
now dead, birth itself a kind of battle,

old women whose daughters never call,
who smile when pastoral poems turn erotic,

who recognize that knitting isn't cute
as Keats and Byron and Shelley aren't cute,

old women whose eyes go damp
for no reason – abruptly, like autumn rain

on a blue tablecloth crowded with wine,
like twilit thimbles of snowmelt, old women

who volunteered in munitions factories,
who shucked corn on the back porch at dusk,

who were up by dawn, wrist-deep in soap,
who drove through a tunnel of frowns

on their way to vote, to deliver casseroles
to so-and-so with dementia, who inhaled

the spent breath of Alzheimer's, schizophrenia,
a rosary of cancers, whose frail hands

could crush walnuts after the combined
heft of a few hundred cradled infants,

a million sponges powdered with lye,
old women who fought sunlight to a stalemate

and wear such scars with nonchalance,
with the wild *élan* of fighter pilots,

old women whose cinnamon-apple pies
still bring all the stray dogs to the yard,

who absolved countless broken windows,
fractured curfews, stints in rehab,

who shouldered hatchets clean through
the neck of a thousand chickens

without savoring the murder as men might,
as they enjoyed the weight and swirl

of skirts gone social in church basements,
square dances smoothed by bourbon,

train rides perfumed by mountain air,
delivery rooms scented by the wild cry

and the briny afterbirth, and the kiss,
a wet approving badge on the forehead.

Cowboy Buddha

The guy across from me is wearing spurs.
Indiana summer. As far as I can tell,
he got here in a pickup. But there he is, leaning
with a sweating bottle in his fist,
smiling with saffron teeth at the bartender,
big metal sundials trailing his boot-heels
like he meant to saddle up and ride
for the saloon then remembered we have
internal combustion engines now,
plus palominos tend to drip even more
than your average oil gasket. But why the spurs?
Imagine them snagging the floor mats
as he tries to shift gears, driving his knees
into the steering column. Still, there's music
in that steely thump as he strolls
from barstool to pool table, knuckles rapping
the pasture-green felt, a reliable jingle
following him the way they say flowers sprang
from the footprints of the Buddha.
I doubt that lasted, though. So hard
to push through ignorance toward something
called enlightenment when everywhere
we go: blossoms, blossoms, blossoms.

From the Poet--

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About the Poet



Michael Meyerhofer is the author of five poetry books, six poetry chapbooks, and two fantasy trilogies. He has won the James Wright Poetry Award, the Liam Rector First Book Prize, the Whirling Prize, and other honors. He earned his B.A. from the University of Iowa and his M.F.A. from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He grew up in Iowa where he learned the value of reading novels, lifting weights, and not getting his hopes up. He currently serves as the Poetry Editor of Atticus Review and lives in Fresno, California. For more information and at least one embarrassing childhood photo, visit www.troublewithhammers.com.

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