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Written over the last two years and mostly set in Southern and Western landscapes, these poems explore family wounds, masculinity, work, memory located in landscape, rootedness, and the dualistic nature of music as haunting and healing.

TAP TONE & STRAY

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Clyde Daddy

Black soot house
beside the railroad tracks
in Berwind, West Virginia,
char of New River &
Pocahontas Consolidated Coal
on the fingers that frailed
the hillbilly tempo.
I laughed and I screamed
and he played the *rib banjo*
and coughed a locomotive
though I was too young to know
it was mountains.
When dawn came
his feet scuffed the porch,
a debt of long days
hunched and digging
the mountain roots he called soft rock.
The mine was complete
before his coughs stopped.
Tunes he used to whistle
forgotten as the coal town
where he smiled beside the baron's men
who showed in coats and ties
to claim the seams extracted,
and shake all the miner's hands.

Tap Tones

Here's a sound of partings:
the way a bridge's blue graffiti
pulses through my guitar.

I want to see her
again for the first time
when she appeared,
asking how I was inside.
There's sound for that
more than the memory
of a knock on a door,
or the way years later,
the rooms creak with changes.

One-Eyed Jenny

Her arthritic limbs and galloping fart-kicks.
Her raspy braying like ancient bedsprings.
We knew she kept her only eye on the far field,
her empty eye socket toward the pasture gate.
With rocks and pellet guns, we always said,
“the ass of the ass is your target,” and pelted her
wildly laughing when she buck-startled across the field.
One day, knowing she had never heard
an elephant leap forth from the bell of a horn,
we crawled up the hill with my trombone
while she slept tangled with cockleburs,
her tail of briars harassed by so many flies—
I blew as hard as I could into the mouthpiece
and pulled the slide toward my face. Her empty eye
stared at me before she fell with a thump
the good eye blinked in the last moments—
her tickle of sorrel red and mange all over.

Sugarfoot

Knots in the maple and
my grandfather's sun-burned face
as he sat on the porch
and peeled skin after field work,
sick and skeletal from the corn rows.
Humid summer mornings
so many years ago
he said the ghosts of old oceans
were suspended in the fog
above the Yadkin River,
pointed to how they
curved with the river's running
turned sharp at the east bend,
a river in the sky.
On a good spring day
we'd find arrowheads
in the bottomland after rain,
the ground plough-broken
and revealing.
Blessed to know place, he had said,
but cursed too, every turning leaf
mocked out another memory
from the stricken gallery.
There are days from my childhood
I see his screen door still
swinging on its hinges
and I'm pressing him
to drive me at least once
to where it was he said
the dirt road never ended
in the higher mountain counties.
A half quiet has settled over things.
Around the un-mown edges,
a rustling of ear worms
broods in the August corn.
The silt-scented fog lines
still trace the bends upstream
to where he always said was clear.

Sonatas

Curled the harmonica reeds
chasing the high bend's dissonance,
my lips pressed against the chamber holes
as thoughts of her walking
in the magnolias came over me.
Tried to say in my honking vocalese—
“I miss your long black hair,”
and the notes were as crooked as two sets of legs
tangled on a sandy bank.
I could summon Sonny Terry's whoop and call,
quick-wing the Piedmont blues,
sense that woman with vibrato,
in the space I imagined
if I ever got my hands back on her.

Breech at the End of Calving

See the first-calf heifer
alone in the hooved-out
wallows, lowing under locusts,

the running yellow and white
of her broken water, flies
prospering in her shade.

See her tail up and swollen vulva,
the calf's rear legs sticking out
but wedged at the joint.

She gives herself,
leans against their pulling,
roped to a tree

and the calf doesn't budge,
its legs bound
in half-hitch knots

as two grown men
tug a chain
from every angle

and reach inside her
to feel the pulse
of the creature

whose mother's eyes
have rolled full white,
her head twisted sideways,

as the men grunt
and a black banner of vultures
gathers in the treetops, sensing it.

Rhythm Slave

The first job I ever had
was strumming A-minor and F-major
monotonously while my father went to town
shooting for an epic moment
in the simplified rendition
of “Cowgirl in the Sand.”
He trilled Duane Allman style
in the tenth minute of a two-chord song
and called me out if I didn’t respond
when he tried to bring it down
or stoke intensity
while I strummed along unaware,
missing the intended strings,
fret-buzz and muted chords
choking with bad tone.
Old enough to change...
My rhythm was so bad at thirteen,
first calluses forming on my fingertips,
first kiss still forming in my mind.
How I held the guitar as if
I knew how to hold everything
many times while my father looked
for new places, always on the edge.

Uncle Jack's Tomatoes

Jack wakes early
in the widower hours,
the lawns still cold,
cuts the pulp of seeds
from his best fruit
to mold in containers,
in windowsill's sunlight,
leaves the seeds
to dry and be saved.

Outside his trailer
four rows of heirlooms
twist and fall around
cedar stakes planted
in the spare earth.
Cherokee Purple, Green Zebra,
and the Three Sisters.
One hundred plants,
ten thousand stray shoots
to pluck lateral suckers
from draining the sweetness.
The scent of his garden,
high-pitched and acidic
as old pines growing beside
the Currituck Sound.

Some men need work.
Bridge builder, game warden,
a climber of utility towers
now an old man
blotched with sun damage,
with liver spots and green dust,
grows his tomatoes
just to give away
to people he frequents,
delivers boxes of fruit
to their countertops,
packets of his seeds labeled
Heirloom Brandywine, Sweetheart Grape.
"Eat them now, it goes fast,"
Jack says, the days wrapped around him

at the crown of summer
before the evenings grow cold
when he'll still need his tomatoes
planted in the earth to stay alive.

In the Park

I visited an old love who misspelled *soccer* in her text,
whose two children ran through dust devils
on the baseball diamond where they kicked their shadows into home plate.
Life changed fast—we laughed—
and kids keep changing while we change less
amid the chipboard and debt of mortgage.
And the earth mocked us, it seemed: a guttural bird
on a treated-wood fencepost. Its song unlike
the Carolina wren's "We need you,"
but guttural and habitually scavenging,
bred of the nature morseled in a suburban park.
I couldn't quite verbalize to her what I wanted,
though I tried to hide what may have seemed deviled.
In six years, the lines cropped upon her face. The bird that croaked,
croaked from its gut—a species I never identified.

African Padauk

Here's to the parting:
the crying grain

between mesquite and yellowheart,
the sawdust of cayenne—

a teaspoon to cure
my aching side.

Camp Ponies

Their limbs creak along the frozen river
as they follow with heads low,

months since the last fair-weather rider's
visitation with carrots and photographs.

My hands are blown chap, fingertips
purpled and stuck in their lead ropes.

I keep seeing men's faces
in the tree bark, sad totems over

the river. My own grows tighter
upwind from the snow—

Cold snaps can kill ponies.
These mountain winds older than valleys.

Above us, a crow widens its wings, beats
coldness from his feathers, and rime ice falls

from the branches of birches.
The crow calls again, and I understand

it wants a pony to spook and shit so it can eat
the kernel from the droppings and then fly on.

The Brink

After he got out of the hospital,
my father practiced for months
sorting through the chords
of “Little Wing,” the black Stratocaster
perched against his belly
in the last hour before my mother
returned home from work.
So many times I ran
from his distorted notes.
The Baldwin piano upstairs shook
when he returned to the slurring descent.
The low frequencies crackled
from the lip of the amplifier speaker,
defiant to the signal he sent
medicated, as he rocked his dance alone
for the whole world to hear.
One time I crouched in the ivy
that grew through the windows,
hawk-eyed into our basement,
and watched his swollen hands
change shape up the neck.
I had heard it many times—
The length of the song
he had never finished learning,
his retreat into the pattern of a
scale he knew one-way,
always starting on the bass E
and working down the neck,
up the scale, to the high E,
where he struggled to retrace
the frets in reverse that had led him
to the point of bewilderment,
the stammer in the hold
of the edge of the fret board, land’s end.

Ghost Ranch Turnoff

Nights when the cheat-grass crawls,
when coyotes spit floods of moonlight

over the rocky arroyos,
when a hatchet sky

reflects yellow upon the river—
the cottonwoods stir

though no wind rustles the trees,
and locusts thunder

tiny lands of dust
along the riverbank

calling me further into
the distance across

the night and its silence,
my ally.

Misha and the Grave

Dug out the deep hole
with rock bars and shovels
along the shade tree path
while the herd was in lower
fields, and left the rifle in the truck
because people believed
horses know intentions,
and the ancient Paso Fino,
too sick for the molasses
we dripped on grain and in water,
came and stood over the grave
when it was still morning,
waited there past lunch,
like a blinking statue,
never swatting a fly,
never pawing the fill dirt
mounded above the hole
we had left open to sun
in case that warmth
touched him when he fell.

Joshua Tree Inn, 1973

After Gram Parsons

Going back to Nashville
someday, my hair in my eyes.
Some call it alien,
some call it not *country*,
ever what they say,
blue-collar toughies.
The train I ride is
Out-a-Sin City Every Weekend
to fly right in the desert
on the tickle of metal,
sixteen coaches long.
The greatest hit of a cactus,
a hit of sky, lounge blue
between the toe.
The sweet and the far away
always told me,
don't jump in the sun
with chicken angel wings
unless you'll be a grieving
angel on the red floor.

Portrait of a Father, Psychiatry Unit

Each night I hear footsteps
on the paths outside

and I know they have come again
to speculate whether I'm

that character they dreamed
was brooding in their crop.

Each night is a slippery song
in an attic in August

where music breaks the shoulder
tap of silence hammering

at my darkest sides. It's
a father's song,

a walk down the hill through mud
in blue gum boots.

Such hard work to muster
the heavy strains, stuck in traces,

to pull hard during midday,
build something new,

be someone else all for you,
and you, and you—

Long Grade

The vision in your painting
coiled into the present fallow
though I see us still following the tracks.
The old paths were deer runs through rhododendron,
wash lines of brush rested along
the streams after heavy rains.
We were happy in the margins—
a shack in the countryside,
our haven from the pavement races.
The cove you painted is still framed
in the hallway, the busted earth and wood smoke—
We said once that we would never get away from
each other long enough to miss this walking.
Too young to be as sure as we were.

After Seeing *Pedernal*, 1942

Across the last cattle guard,
a scene of aspens yellowing along the arroyo
became so startling real and short seasoned,
that I felt my traction slipping before
I even opened your door.

Fall was tuckering out, and coyotes combed
the folds of high desert close to the house.
All your plants were drying in the window sill,
tinctures curing in the root cellar, so much
calendula oil and soap and seeds spread on newspaper.

I watched you brushing the canvas,
your look of red and yellow cliffs,
and drank to collect familiarity
in the lines of both our faces,
small beside the mountain.
I could have disappeared there,
stalked the open space,
waited for a rain to drench
the purple hills above, temper the arroyo
and block us into that scene
longer than the places we had only known.

Flyin' High

When Speedy shook it,
the ghost notes gave him presence.
The steel guitar danced
through cast aluminum,
resonance in the rear neck,
sympathetic on impact.
He palm-blocked the Bigsby's
last frets, played sweetened
western swing and shivers
with an added fourth and sixth—
the golden 13 chord
and applause at the jamborees.
Many tried to imitate his tremolo
on their triple neck steel guitars,
but no amount of amphetamine
could calculate what he improvised
in crowded halls, on radio,
and rural towns, somewhere,
everywhere, the playing call.

Idaho Solstice

When you sing to me,
 old stories become true,

and lost cry under bluffs.
 Out here we can be anyone.

The river says it underneath
 the summer, opening

to the key of your song—
 a sound of rain

when your fingertips patter
 the banjo head.

When you sing to me,
 I get the good blues

and the cracked earth breathes.
 The trail of your long hair

makes a shadow where I'd like
 to play closer to you,

the way you moan in your songs.

Joseph Kekuku's Lament, 1890

Somewhere a finger bone rests
in the gravel between crossties.

I'll mark myself with remnants,
make a saddle to speak the koa wood

and the afflicted man's mumbling.
A human voice resides in the slurring,

in the gut of the box,
trains come in from far coves.

Always the presence in crankshaft
of buried chanting.

Strays

They disappeared to Idaho in the 1980s and wandered the drainages above Hell's Canyon, found a place with a creek, enough water for cattle and gardens, and hearing God's voice one day in the ancient gulch, some Richard among them found a driven-fear in all their silence, and he built a cluster of teepee-shaped wooden buildings, nailed scrap metal siding on the outside walls to deflect the fire flood. Here they watched the sky's many changes as if it was a scrying glass framed by the canyon walls, and wondered, with the owl, who gets through. They dug highway culverts into the gulches hinged with man way covers, stored food and clasped the locks.

The teepees are still there, the metal sides flayed out and screeching like old mechanical windmills. You hear them before you see them if you disappear to Idaho with everything in your backpack, bound for a sense of the godhead, searching a small drainage above Hell's Canyon, your own last person in a spur of the fallen world, the burning branch.

Walking Away from New Mexico

Inside the letter, an image of Cerro Pedernal
photographed from her bedroom window,
the northwest side sharp as a hawkbill,
the desert brown folded into green and purple
at the end of the day.

This is where she will live, where she will farm,
the season to accept the past as one manifestation
of a continuously changing form.

She is there with her lover
in their newfound bodies.
Her jars of calendula petals soak in oil, deep and orange.

I imagine the air inside a three-hundred year old mission,
the adobe walls turn cold with autumn once more,
the mesquite smoke, a veil over her river town.

Saturn Return

To know an old home is
to know the dust in cold rooms,

the cobwebs, ladybugs
and stray cats,

the wood ash, the moth bodies,
the wings.

The you in the rooms
naked under a mildewing quilt.

This valley is emptier now,
no one to collect cohosh or bottle the spring.

My hands on this world,
something new

and into the debris,
straining work, tied in traces.

When you left one morning,
I held the door like I didn't care.

Round Peak

i.

The Friday porch idlers
are watching a backhoe churn

the rust colored clay
of their landlord's property—

all the floodplain acres
in the old bottoms

where arrowheads surfaced
from the earth after rain—

all the flood-marked trees
and low-water bridges

over the ocher flow
of the Ararat River

are being subdivided
since sprawl hit the back roads

just so a landholding clan
could uniformly agree

that their family holdings
were equally split.

And the idlers, their dormancy
hovers like the prospering dust

where uncertainty blisters
the spirit into faults.

The ancient woman living
on food stamps watches.

The Honduran migrant watches
the ruined harvest.
Here are

the words of their blank faces:

It is 2008
the Piedmont is cracked in drought.

Over the barns and sheds
a rattling wind

descends upon the salvage
that sits in forgotten piles.

A fiddle's strings
cross-tuned to resonate the memory

tickles every ghost
in the worn valley.

Buried grandfathers
overtone gently

rake the scalp
at the hairline boundary

catch the spirit
between clinging and leaving.

And they sit rocking in chairs,
fixed and silent

on rented porches
while a backhoe screams

black exhaust, flexing its boom
before the concrete comes

that will sleep upon
their vacant lots.

Ironto

Seventh night on a ten-day run
and as anonymous as truckers, we
skirt the neon off the overpasses,
remembering the few hundred we made,
the crowd that got loose for us,
old songs that bloomed again.
We play for them and for pasture creeks
frozen in culverts under the interstate.
Further into the night we'll go, on I-81,
with the hurtling eighteen wheelers—
wind the curves from Ironto to Natural Bridge,
to the gorge tunnels, to the edge of the berm,
not thinking about next year
or how silence intonates the frozen ground.
Over Ralph Stanley country, over three cross pastures,
the shadow of our van combs the highway tree line
up and back down this turnpike that doesn't return home.

Grandpa Boss John

His chains of drag-tooth harrow.
The trilobites from when his
river valley was the ocean floor.

Broken shards of Confederate
ambrotypes— the gritted teeth
of his people sat before
sepia thickets and piney groves.

He was so sure antique stores
would buy the relics.
“Mark it up,” he’d said.
“Someone from New York
will find it quaint enough to pay up.”

How he laughed and composed the harvest
during his final days, hoarded the rust
that speckled his new cash crop.

He would have sold them
the sounds of himself
drunk on homemade,
the way his star hooting and slug shots
got smothered by the layers of endless
chirrup in the Great Dismal Swamp.

Old Trouble

Before heavy rains, he'd get out in the yard
with a shovel, digging earthworks around
the basement entrance to stop the water from

flooding near the circuit breakers. My father
thought himself an unlucky channel
between the river and sky, stretched so long

above him. But our bad luck—just a broken sump
pump, money saved for the repair, spent
on something else, groceries and the movies.

The first time the water rose a few inches
above the electrical outlets, my sisters inflated
beach rafts, and we celebrated the river reaching us.

After a week of drying, mud caked the tile work.
Then the banisters began rotting. Some unnamed
grief in the flood marks.

At night, the five of us quiet in our beds,
the highway behind the house sounding
like the falling water yet to fall.

Song for Eckhardt

It didn't take much to send you away and your drifting now lost in the memory river
running past the flooded bridge past the driftwood snag oh bury it now always the dream
sends me away and I'm falling down lost in the memory river running it carried you far
far as rivers end oh bury it now it carried you far far as rivers end oh bury it now bury it
now it carried you far but I wonder still I wonder still I wonder I wonder.

Grandma

Silence drives silence
while she breathes
through the changing shifts
of nurses, the nerves of her eyelids,
spasms at ninety-six
and a day—faith strong
and the arrhythmia of her
falling chest wheezing
like the clay around
the springhouse intake,
the clay that dusted the shoes
I left outside her door
when she used to call
me inside her sleepy trailer
across the tobacco field
from I-77 when I was a child
in the humming yards,
the day getting late.

Leading Flash to the Barn—January

A mile downriver from the barn,
the retired thoroughbred racer
no farrier would shoe even
during a calm wind,
is shaken by his own hooves
striking the icy gravel,
is wind-spooked and on the edge
as we pass a plastic bag
caught in the bank's undergrowth
that shudders in the strong wind,
he pulls against the lead,
tense and white-eyed toward the river.
I pull many times,
reign force down on his halter,
try to keep him from grounding
into that constant instinct,
but he always wants to pass me,
even though I swing the excess
rope like a dead snake as a
reminder of the leather tippets
I've whipped his nose with,
to protect myself more than
to insult his wealthy owners
who would think I had trespassed,
correcting their rarely-handled horse
worth fifty-thousand dollars,
startling it like a master,
while on their time clock,
worth all the rope in my hand.

Uncle Billy's Blues

Way of the drunkard in the second-born
Billy, twenty years old and sore with the world,
drinks the calm out of brown liquor
flecked with the marsh
because he likes how it touches his blood:
a lover from out the trouble.

Tannin pitch on the way in
tannin dark on the way out

and glass bottles to throw: one high and fast
at nothing, one at a culvert, a pylon,
in the gravel down a sharecropper's lane.

Through the stupor he sleeps, thinly-veiled
dream of staggering down steps into a river,
clothes washed and hung on the rim of rattan baskets
sun-drying.

High in the pine tops
high in the backwaters.

Who's gonna hold your pretty white hand...

How the spirit moves him to escape routes.
Car parked on top the tracks,
Billy passed out behind the wheel
sleeping through the night
like he doesn't know or hear what comes down that line.

Portrait of the Fiddler Crab

i

A man who is someone's father
strums an out-of-tune ukulele
singing a song of valleys demising
and faces vanishing behind rural house walls.
He is barefoot in broken glass,
his back against a bridge pylon like it's
the column of a caravanserai and he,
a bard with the voice to bring
buildings down—across from him,
a few strays tote their everything
from the battered shoulder of the interstate
to their hiding canyon. The sky above
is crowded with the cawing of arriving crows
and the June haze from passing motorists.

ii.

Searching a garbage bag prowled by seagulls,
kneeling on the unseated ball joints of his knees.
All the junk college students litter
upon the curbsides semesters' end,
he sees the potential of the salvage:
a woven couch with four cushions,
its wooden legs gnawed through the finish,
the sand and salty humidity
settled into the fabric's constellation of soils.
Seated atop its busted-spring-cushions,
he asks a stranger in his head for help
hauling it up the stairs to the vacancies of a living room
he would like to be inside of
for long enough to be comfortable

Fire in the Barnyard

After Thomas Hart Benton

It's a wonder the man
and the spooked horse he leads
do not spill into the mercurial prairie,
the moving shadow of his legs
stretched long on the ground
like the horns of gazelles.

In this moraine,
anything rising is a wave
of quicksilver sliding:
mind turned from body's labor,
animals pacing their stalls with white eyes,
buckets of water spilling onto the ground
from a trough angled on a downhill slope.

Lasting memory: on a far fence line
a scarecrow in the shape
of a farmer bows as if the air
is too heavy with smoke,
his fiber sundering back into prairie,
retching into the curl of those hills.

Wild Ox Springs

They drive through high desert not speaking, following the map his father once taped over an atlas page of Oregon's cities. He thinks he is on the right jeep road. It stalks a creek lined with bull pines charred by fire. Behind them, small mineral lakes turn black reflecting the sun at the vanishing point. None of this reminds him of his trip here as a child.

At a pull-off, he parks the truck, grabs his shovel, and leads them down a short trail towards the stream. He walks into the water splashing, sees a ring of river rock underneath the current, and places his foot into the warm sand. They take off their clothes, offering each other hands to steady, and place more rocks around the spot, fashioning a wall of stone to capture the resurging heat. He digs into the sand. The crickets chirrup, and a scent of ripe service berries surround them.

In the steaming creek water, he likes how her skin looks purple. It is close to nighttime, and trying to enchant her, he speaks at length about his trip here as a child, of the inner-hell of earth that heats water, that convects it through miles of earthen passage. He says the resurgence there takes two thousand years. Christ rain.

The woman drifts away into the shiny tree roots on the bank's edge, and thinks about telling him something she thought she'd never say. She doesn't say anything. Her hair stiffens in the sulfuric steam.

Nolichucky

I envy the river—listening to the low pitch
of its rapids under the sound of the coal
train's braking hiss. It possesses itself,
is present in all places. Today, I couldn't
tell you how my father has spent his last
ten years. It's midday; the river and the gorge
are keening. All morning the Nolichucky trains
have gone past, heavy with their mountains
passing through these mountains in motion and loss.
Between the retreat and return
of my fishing line, a spring pours white
from the culvert's muddy mouth.

Rust

Degraded grain of iron
crustified from water and moisture.

Rust of ocher shades
in ancient caves, rotting

tractors and barbed-property lines
throughout everywhere.

Rusting, as in, a treble hook
anchored in sand under the whitecaps.

Rust of purpura,
capillaries bursting and releasing

hemosiderin, a subcutaneous
fireworks show when human blood leaks rust.

“Rusty,” my ’71 Dodge
Adventurer Sport

highway black
through its floorboards.

Rusty, my father’s best friend
who used to drink and drive,

who took away my father’s barrel-pitted rifles
so he couldn’t shoot himself.

Stem rust. Rust fungi. Rust spores
adhering to cuticles of wheat,

reddish like iron rust—
Bred in local winds and jet streams,

the epidemical and biblical Ug99
pronounced *puccinia graminis*.

Rust of tetanus,

rust of soil, rust of shit.

Tet-an-o-spasmin,
poison and tetany.

The burnt crayon,
the nicked Piedmont's red of clay,

bulldozed and churned
where tracks of blistered faults

are all gored-red—what I've called
my native soil.