

JULIUS, LANGDON DEAN, M.F.A. *Tracks We Leave* (2014)  
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While many of the poems in my thesis address the death of my stepfather, several of them also touch on region and the geography of the Mississippi Delta, my home. Additionally, there is a longer historical narrative about the steamboat *Sultana*, considered one of the worst maritime disasters in American history. Primarily, my thesis attempts to interpret the varying ways in which human beings deal with guilt and loss: faith in God, for example, in “Furlongs Home,” or the ritual of erecting totems for the dead in “Augur.” But this manuscript is not only an attempt at creating a vestige to celebrate and remember the dead, it also examines of the fallibility of creating such a structure.

I hope that the poems here find a balance between lyricism and narrative. My work is largely informed by the poetry of Langston Hughes and Yusef Komunyakaa. Their ability to create clear dramatic situations and narrative while simultaneously emphasizing the poem’s musical cadence is something I am interested in mirroring. I have also learned a great deal from Atsuro Riley’s lyrical narrative *Romey’s Order* and the recent work of Bruce Snider in *Paradise, Indiana*. Finally, my poems owe a great deal to blues musicians such as Charlie Patton and Son House, whose music is deeply rooted in my experience growing up in the Delta.

TRACKS WE LEAVE

by

Langdon Dean Julius

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Approved by

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## Augur

Great River, Muddy Water, its coastline channels, troughs through

my memory, this landscape—cross-stitching of glacial hands—  
sallies over levee early in springtime, moseys out late in May.

In June, we fished the cane-brakes—catfish taut on the trot—

my father tossed back the rubbery skin, shucked bone off  
flesh like cob from a husk—took only a couple of strokes.

Midsummer, deep in drought—sun like a fever blister—

my father and I hunted the sandbar for arrowheads—Delta's  
humid desert—put sharp ones at the bottoms of our pockets.

Heat-drunk, we listened for tow boats, horns bleating in the distance

'til they drew us to the river, bugs to the zapper,  
large-mouths toward spinners on a crank bait.

At the shoreline, where land's edge steeped into river,

we found a whitetail dead on the bank, her skull brittle  
vellum, scattered ribs—an augur in the sand.

We took the chert-points from our pockets—still warm

in the palms of our hands—made an epitaph next to her body.

The channel-tide lapped slowly. We watched it swaddle her in.

## Eclogue

The highway along the river:  
an earthworm through mud.  
It trails the levee, sluggish  
toward the Gulf, meets brackish  
water in Lake Pontchartrain.  
The road there if you watch it  
close is flatter than a bacon press.  
In summer blacktops sweat  
so hot the line across the horizon  
looks like rain. Its pools recede  
to fool the few who think the river  
opened its flood gates. Wise men  
sit & play beneath the trees,  
gripe about the heat outside  
the shade, & croon Patton  
songs about summer drought,  
*Lord, it come an' parched up*  
*all the trees*. Buzzards pay them  
no mind; too long they've flown  
to find decay—some deer or empty  
bucket of KFC. By the time you pass,  
it's worn to muscle-scrap, chicken  
off the bone. The only trees  
for miles weep along the swales.  
Their persistent trunks give up to fields  
of soybean & sweet corn, stretched  
to form a quilt above the loam,

each one a patch—brown, green, gold.

By August, late, the patches fade  
to hues of umber, rust, &  
farmers burn them down to dirt—  
smoke rising over the road.



## **Lean-to**

Truck full of scrap, cheap  
metal, & a bag full of screws.  
We spent three days boiling  
in the heat index to put up  
the base and frame. He swore  
there wasn't enough beer  
that side of Bolivar County  
to quench our cotton mouth.  
We tossed empties in a gully  
our dogs dug out in the yard.  
By the second day he swung  
his hammer like a carpenter  
bee after wood, damning God  
each time he missed the head  
of a panel pin nail—his thumb  
swelled as though he got stung.  
When the shed was done, the  
sheet metal box of it, it took us  
a month to pile in all his junk:  
stacks of scratch & old tool  
chests, boxes of trading cards  
he thought would make  
a fortune online. But after  
he died, we emptied everything:  
bundled up coils of chicken wire,  
some moldy, taxidermy ducks.  
What was left we lugged

on the back of flat-bed  
to the junkyard south of town,  
sold the heap for a handful  
of twenties. My mother moved  
last June, & even now the old  
house is empty as that shed,  
& its rusted sheet metal  
like a bucket days after the rain.  
The way it stormed in April  
it'd startle me from sleep &  
I'd swear that sound was a ghost—  
his hammer striking hand,  
the swearing that followed—  
a bolt & the thunder after.

## **Gar**

### **I.**

Trevor and I floundered for mudbug traps on the bed of a shit-ditch that gullied through mayhaws picketing our backyards. He stuck his finger through trap-boxes, pulled crawfish out by the pincher. My cousin, Vinabelle, hollered, *Get outta the bayou before the gars getcha!* That Halloween, I stumbled into adolescence with a pencil mustache, sprigs on my chest, & Marybeth gave Trevor his first blow job on the hayride past the cemetery. Her daddy pulled the trailer with his mosquito truck.

### **II.**

Marybeth said Trevor's uncircumcised pecker looked like a lamprey eel, & he ground his teeth to Masa flour cutting off the foreskin with a Buck knife, tacked the worm to her locker with a wad of spit, wet Double Bubble. That spring, we fished for crappie on the levee near Beulah. Trevor filleted them alive in the skiff, chucked back diamond plate skin. Alligator gar cut beneath the boat, spat out confetti of scales.

## Bolivar County

—Take God to tell when I'll be back here anymore — Charlie Patton

For you my stepfather sung—

doormat of the Delta, humid

son of a bitch. His dying request:

coming home to you. & he did,

until we laid him down in dirt so rich,

fields grew green as new dollar bills.

Like a black tire hanging on a thick limb,

your memory reminds me of everything:

the wake before his funeral, bourbon

we all drank after, the old seed house

at Dockery, or daylilies

dying quick as they bloom.

As a boy I swore I hated you,

told my mother, *It ain't right.*

At sixteen I tried to leave,

but Georgia was all I found.

Guilty as a dog, the Delta my mange,

I came whimpering back.

That's the funny thing about running

away—the need to come crawling

home. Crossroads, Hellhound's

Trail, still you haunt my poems—

dew rind, bitter in my mouth. Your thick,

soggy, wet-soaked mud, God-damn that

I could give it all back. Even now,  
you rise in the smell of whiskey, shit,

or the blues you make me sing:  
my stepfather, outlived by my mother,

& you, Bolivar County—his  
heaven—the hell I curse to give up.

## A Conversation

Stink-bait, rooster tail,  
cricket, night crawler,  
shad minnow jigging  
on a slack crappie pole,  
the river-water coffee  
black & our trolling motor  
treading the cup of it—  
a sugar spoon swirling  
in the pitch-dark.

My stepfather shuffling  
through stacks of lures  
buried in tackle boxes,  
the two of us casting so far  
past dusk we learned  
to speak with our eyes,  
*I'm dying, slow as headwater,*  
his say. Skillet fish flopping  
in ten gallon paint buckets,  
water popping like the grease  
when they fry. & later him  
god-damning the scaly skins,  
picking tiny bones away  
from the spines, fillet knife  
slipping, drawing blood  
from the pink-white crappie  
flesh. At the stilted trailer—  
fish-camp by the river—

cleaning meat in a rusted sink,  
we toss carcasses, whole,  
toward the river—each one  
limp as his cancerous liver,  
hepatoma cells dredging  
his gut—the mound  
of their bodies piled  
shy of the water, buzzards  
circling to scrap what's left.

## Highway 61

Small towns spring-up  
like pasque flowers, full  
blooms—light shafting through  
pines' limbs, going seventy  
down this asphalt river—rise,  
evaporate quick as eighth notes.

*Was that a hitchhiker?* You'll say:

*I took it for a road sign.*

I'll say, *anything can happen*

*under a sky like this.*



## Talladega

My stepfather sleeps during a NASCAR race,  
dozes with a plate resting on the barrel  
of his chest. Gnats have gathered at the edges,  
combing the food for residual sweetness—  
what's left of corn's cobb, potato's husk.

The television hums lap 158, miles around  
a track he dreams he could race to ride  
away from what none of us yet know  
is cancer. He sleeps to keep down his meal, blood,  
but my mother is certain it will surface,  
says he can't handle formed food.

Then it comes—the spittle—it blossoms  
from his mouth, wets the carpet in petals.

It shoots him from sleep like a starter pistol,  
puddles at the foot of his chair.

Old food settles to the floor like pebbles  
to a creek bed—smoothed from the acid in his chest.

Bent-kneed and sobbing, my mother  
scrubs, prays until her palms rub blisters,  
hoping she'll cure his cancerous gut  
in the revolving motion that her arms make.

## Eclogue

A sliver of moon, summer humid,  
thick—street cats bed-down  
in my stepfather's tomato patch,  
eyes glinting like lightning  
bugs through the chicken wire.  
Nose pressed against the porch  
screen, I can hear their quiet purrs.  
*Get the pellet gun, he says*  
—mosquito's buzz—in my ear.  
*Put the bead on the slit of its eye.*  
Even now I hear them. Whispers  
that stayed long after his bones  
gave in to the worms, dirt.

## **Leave us a Message**

Going home still haunts me: this summer  
in the heat of our spare room, staring blankly  
face first toward the desk fan—its breeze a voice.  
I watched it oscillate some number of times.  
While it turned, pleaded with the blades:  
give me my stepfather's voice,  
that I'll remember the sound of his words.  
It blurred mine back, distorted. Radio silence.  
I must've sat there thirty minutes,  
three times ignoring the phone. On the fourth,  
the answering machine. Like finding a signal  
after channels of static—blur into blur then clear.  
& then he was, or wasn't, as he said.

## **Making Weight at the Pinewood Derby**

He whittled my derby car,  
carved a corvette out of regulation

pinewood. We carried it in a shoebox,  
painted it red as the volunteer fire engine.

*The fastest cars are candy apple.*

It was five & three quarter ounces,

pocket change over weight.

My pack leader said we couldn't race,

& stepfather drew a spey-blade  
from his pocket, dug a trench down

the chassis between each axle.

When it raced it sounded like a penny

whistle—air driving down the gap he made.

We didn't think about the cost of an oversized

casket. Most of us die without meaning to.

My mother bought him a double headstone.

She paid an extra four-thousand ninety eight.

## Coat-closet Prayer

Our screen door clipped  
raindrops like mosquitoes  
to a net, our backyard grid lined

as graph paper. My mother & I  
pressed our faces against its mesh.  
As the storm rolled in thunder

beat loud as train wheels on track,  
gaining speed, shaking the house.  
The porch lights flickered off, on

& off again, buzzing like rookie cards  
clipped to my tire spokes. Even in thunder  
we could hear them between tornado sirens.

One hand pressed against porch door,  
one tugging at my mother's blouse,  
with each boom I tightened my grip.

*Don't be scared*, she said—near whisper—  
*count and you won't get frightened.*  
Like porch-dogs waiting for a car

to pass we listened for each bolt  
to crack, counted the seconds—one  
Mississippi, two—each a mile

from the river. When the quarters  
came, thump-thumping on the roof,  
we cupped our hands in front

of our heads, prayed to the jackets  
& raincoats, searched for answers  
in radio voices, cicada-hums, static.

## **Ecdysis**

His things refuse to tuck  
away under the sofa:  
card tables for poker  
games with the P.D.  
They settle like cells in his gut.  
I've heard moths can't fly  
without dust on their wings,  
particles & particles of scales.  
As they age, they shed  
until the moth is glass  
flying on skeletal wings.  
His body too was pallid  
in the hospital bedroom,  
the fiber in his arms, slack.  
Bedsore peeled the top layer  
of his skin, laid their dust  
on the sheets. How  
the body manages  
before inarticulate dark—  
atrial flutters on the EKG—  
waves shoaling into ruts.



## **Aporia**

Belief is hard when faith is paid  
advertisements on marquees,  
mile after mile of billboards:  
*Hell is filled with half-believers;*  
*upgrade your heart—drive to Christ.*  
Half-hearted, I trust nights as a boy,  
I knelt to pray, uncertain as a rope  
swing in summer. At seven,  
no taller than five, I climbed  
a live oak to the longest branch,  
reached for frayed line hanging over  
Lake Beulah's edge. I hollered  
like a hound when the rot-wood snapped,  
dove headlong toward the water,  
string of leaves in tow. Even now,  
I hope that prayer might quell  
my disbelief, bring me to Your altar.  
Author & Perfecter of faith,  
tonight, I tried praying as my father  
did, to give in the Holy Spirit—  
speak in mumbled tongues—but still  
my voice was hollowed out, rotten  
as that branch that broke beneath me.

## Stiff

Mosquitoes billowed in—  
smoke. We burst their  
blood filled bodies—  
firecrackers, red stains  
on the truck's headliner.  
At fifteen I shot my first buck  
with a .243, shocked him  
dead, bullet straight  
through the kidneys.  
We spent hours looking  
for tracks, no blood,  
found his carcass muzzled  
in chickweed & clover.  
My father said I scared  
the bejesus out of it, its body  
stiff as a church pew. &  
I thought about Aunt Lynn's  
funeral—open casket.  
He said morticians drained her  
blood, her eyes gunmetal grey;  
I turned from the smell:  
sulfur, ammonia. Corn spilt  
from the buck's gut, chest  
full of golden dimes. Mosquitoes  
flirted with my ears, head  
abuzz after gunshot.

## Shooting Range

*Light the fuse quick  
before mosquitoes  
bite you, my stepfather  
says, & they scatter  
in after-smoke, stragglers  
burning in the sparks.  
Bottle rockets, they pop.  
Nights like this we thank  
God for little things:  
box fans, bug spray,  
dregs at the bottom  
of beer cans—measure time  
outside in thirst.  
I can't help but jump  
when the shells crack &  
neighborhood dogs talk  
back with each burst  
of color. We breathe  
the scent of July:  
propane, DEET & charcoal-  
metal, gunpowder.  
Roman candles aimed  
skyward, we pluck  
junebugs from the dark—  
their flaming bodies  
bullet groundward,  
dying stars.*

## **Self-Portrait, Late Harvest**

Shuck me down  
to flesh fragile  
as a kernel, & burn  
my cob in the amber  
rows, ready to ignite  
like kindling.

The embers settle,  
my coals ashen,  
until there's nothing  
left but a husk.

## **Eclogue**

Summer is leaving, waving  
leaves as it turns its back.  
The woman next door too  
mourns its passing, shouting  
from her porch. Only her dogs  
come, slack as her calls.  
Yesterday felt like the longest  
day of the year, & today  
feels even longer. The flies  
in my kitchen have grown  
bored in its lingering,  
the way his blood pooled  
in death—water as it runs  
earth's curvature—settled  
at the centers of his skin.

## Charon's Obol

In the Delta, even corpses sweat.  
Toy soldiers unfold on themselves,  
leaving thick black smoke, burning  
plastic—a rain-wet burlap sack.  
Like the day of his funeral  
—black dresses, humid April heat,  
field fires ablaze on the horizon line,  
howling sirens, a police motorcade.  
Past the cemetery, a brush fire  
cremated sweet corn, burned  
its way to the river, & our pecan trees  
bled black while I waited to catch  
the water melting down their trunks.  
Soon, his tombstone will erode  
away, the river carrying his weight,  
& when he catches the steamboat  
ferry with two coins, he'll greet  
the captain: *only one will suffice.*

## Ghazal

Months I've stared in the mirror scrubbing  
away his words: *I miss you, buddy,*  
Scanned through faces in shopping  
malls hoping to find him, Buddy.

Audubon said the best look most of us get  
of a goatsucker are the reds of its eyes.  
He took me snipe hunting.  
I spooked a nightjar. *Scared you, buddy.*

Healthier nights in the hospital,  
doctors thought it was only diabetes.  
I brought him ice-water from Sonic,  
he smiled, *Thank you, buddy.*

These days I can't help myself  
from panicking over sunspots,  
culling the weeds at his headstone:  
1956-2012, Buddy.

There are hundreds of poems about kudzu;  
I won't let their vines blanket him.  
I listen for his voice in the thrum  
of cicadas, hear them whisper, *Buddy.*

## **Everything in Its Right Place**

Tell me what the crow said  
when my windshield met its feathers,  
& what our family dog, Churchill, said  
dying slow, there on the highway—  
body limp, what seemed a dirty towel  
in the road. I know so infinitely  
little of life and how much of it I have  
left. Even now the quaking aspens,  
after nearly a million years, give in  
to the teeth of mule deer, elk  
overgrazing on tender, budding roots.

Some nights I pray to the Father—  
tell me what's after death. Tell me  
what's next when shovels, slackening,  
heap piles of loam on my casket.  
I don't want to rot in the churchyard  
where the soil will erode my flesh.  
Throw me out in a plume of ashes;  
let the wind make light of my heft.  
Let the crows pick bare my ashen dust.  
The dogs will mark whatever's left.



## **Furlongs Home**

—*Chester D. Berry; survivor of the Sultana.*

I.

They drug us to New Orleans from Andersonville:  
me, Hamblin, the whole 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment—  
pale skin clinging to our bones. The Johnnys  
fed us crackers on the train ride there  
so our shrunken stomachs wouldn't split.  
I hadn't seen a cup of water in nearly a week,  
when we made it to the mouth of the river.  
Its body was so wide at the brackish Gulf  
I couldn't see to the other bank.  
We took the Sultana north to Vicksburg,  
so many of us, I slept on the main deck.  
I prayed to God I'd make it back  
to Calhoun County, the Great Lakes.

II.

Hamblin, brother, some days I can't tell  
the thread of Lake Michigan's horizon  
from that blue-brown water at The Gulf,  
& even here freshwater tastes of salt.  
It gets to where all the pines  
look like your body's fragile husk,  
bone thin, burning in autumn.  
I've been writing to your wife in Salinac.  
She says Huron looks the same.

### III.

Like musket shot, the sound came second,  
the smell long lingering after. The wreck of it  
dredged on the top most water—splintered  
wood floating like pine straw. I couldn't hear  
my own voice for the prayers of other men,  
calling out to The Mother of Mercy.  
Those who couldn't swim jumped ship  
on faith; I prayed my rosary would float.

When steam welled up & the pipes gave  
way the blast sent most of us skyward,  
the sound of it ringing like church bells.  
A few from my regiment treaded the frigid  
water, hoping snags would catch them—  
slick logs reaching out from the water:  
fool's gold, a false hand.

I saw one man die in an instant  
from the boilers steaming discharge,  
rise heavenward, burning as Elijah.  
This ship aflame, his chariot,  
the river—the Lord—his maker.

### IV.

I remember Hamblin, weeping near the wheelhouse.  
I took him by the shoulder, asked twice if he was hurt.  
*I'm not*, he said, *but I cannot swim; surely*  
*I'm going to drown*. I told him to hush

& showed him my plank, the other broken pieces  
of timber, told him to grab one like mine.  
He said, *Twice I've grabbed one, Chester,*  
*and someone snatched it away. What's the use,* he said,  
*this boat was built to drown.* I shoved him to move,  
& when he didn't, I called him a fool.  
I'm certain now, when I looked back at that ship,  
I could see his body bent & burning.  
Tell me, Lord, why I didn't give him my plank.

V.

So many I never knew clung to the main deck,  
Hamblin, the ship dragging them down in the undertow.  
Their bodies caught fire so fast they lit up like matches,  
torches floating on the lip of the water. Their pyre,  
our only light. Voices sung hymns all around me.  
what few made it to the tree line, hung on to debris.  
The whole swollen river was dark with dead men.  
I saw a great many bones in the water, bones  
all blackened & wet. Some nodded like corks  
in the tar-black, going down & not coming back up.  
I called out to my regiment with what voice  
I still had—as Ezekiel did before the valley—  
*come breath, breathe into these slain.*

## Eclogue

Winter withers out, laggard—  
the dogwoods bloom

as though it will pass, but  
ice suggests the cold will stay.

It clings, cancerous as his gut.  
A warm front comes, goes.

It taunts like his *improving*  
*health*: clichés the doctors speak.

They can't stop the carcinoma.  
It spreads to his liver, bone.

## **The Only Time it Snowed**

Vinabelle and I rode the four-wheeler,  
cut figure-eights in the cold. She was older  
than me by a year & a quarter which meant  
only she could drive. So I clung to the rack  
with slick-mitten-hands, prayed  
she didn't sling me when the S's curved  
into eights. We drove out to the edge  
of the neighborhood, where our street  
dead-ended at the corn field, bet  
lunch money to see who could count  
fastest the stalks rising from the snow.  
It didn't matter how many she skipped.  
Like a bully, she won from the start.  
When we pulled off our ski-masks  
to feel the snot frozen on our nostrils,  
I saw her black eye—purple against  
white—spot around her eye like a dog.  
To me that was cooler than the truth:  
her mother popped her, stoned on drugs.  
My cousin saw her smoking by accident,  
curious about what she was up to, &  
that bruise rose quick as a scratch-biscuit  
cooked too long in the oven. It swelled  
like dough, the top of it blackened,  
so burnt everybody could tell.

## Soot Song

The sparrows trapped  
in our chimney: songs  
in the evening, chatter.  
& the acrid smell  
of our shared house,  
the odor of drugs  
from Aunt Lynn's room.  
It wafted from her door  
like a cold draft—perfume  
she thought could mask it:  
juniper, patchouli & embers.  
Once, I caught her smoking  
her pipe in the dim-lit door  
crack. I snuck around late,  
searched for the glint of her  
crystals—buried some deep  
in my pockets. Like my bike  
she swore got stolen,  
chain cut from the carport.  
When the pawn shop called  
my grandmother fumed  
(my ear to another receiver.)  
Days Lynn wouldn't speak  
of the bike or my cheek  
when she found the gemstones.  
My grandmother drove her,  
to a rehab clinic, too ashamed

to call the sheriff's department.  
That winter—Lynn left,  
we hoped she'd get sober—  
my grandmother opened the flue.  
She cried on the floor  
into her ashen hands,  
swept up bones for weeks.

### **Once I've Seen my Father Cry:**

The winter he put O'Mallie away, my father laid him in the bed of his pick-up—our dog too gimp to walk on his three working legs. He drove us out of town to the cornfield stand—where the white-tail often graze—roped its collar to a red oak so the bullet hit trunk on exit. He left the pick-up running & the radio—Rick Danko singing while he steadied his aim.

*Time makes me pay for these memories I've bought.*

“There’s always a pause before you finger the trigger,” he said, my heart beating like cricket-leg chatter. The swell of my lungs, the slow inhale, ears ringing, & the smell of gunpowder. Like the times I’ve stared at the breadth of a shoulder, exhaled when I saw the deer fall.

*No one lives forever. Who would want to?*

I asked him if he thought that dogs have a home hereafter. He said “the ground where he’s buried is worm-dirt.” I remember the crack from the rifle’s barrel, how the leaves on that white oak swayed. His hands trembling, calluses the shovel made, & that stick-twine cross, engraved river rock—where the hayfields broke at the highway.

Nights in December—bucks deep into second rut—we’d walk the trails heading back from the tree stand, mapping the tracks that their hooves made. If a gunshot split the dark we’d stop—the trees tall, silent.

*But every leaf that grows, in the language that it knows, says that winter will return now and these trees are gonna shake.*



## **Danny**

The difference between heartbreak  
& his name is a hand's worth  
of letters I try not to count as I spell.

## He Must've Heard the Wheels

I wanted his bedroom full of toys,  
the comforter covered in racecars,  
tire-shaped bedside table, the hood  
he made into a headboard, &  
the constellations of cars in boxes  
on the walls. Each one had a name:  
Little Bush, Junior, Stiffdick,  
The King. I couldn't count the times  
I thought of opening each box.  
& every time he caught me staring:  
*Boy those cars are worth more  
than the hair on your legs.*  
Even his bathroom was a toy box:  
toothbrush, shampoo, shower  
curtain all covered in NASCAR.  
His toilet cover with Jeff Gordon's  
face had me scared to piss on the seat.  
Times I'd visit I'd pocket the cars  
he'd said were worthless, matchbooks  
with some racer's face. At night  
I'd struggle to strike the pack,  
burn the sticks off one by one.  
When the last match ripped  
I'd set the whole booklet aflame;  
its smell like bread in a toaster.  
I'd stash the cars in a Crown Royal  
bag I hid in slats beneath my bed.

He never found them or the matches,  
red phosphorus stains on my palms.  
But he wore a blister on my ass—  
knot hard as roll-seam pro-ball,  
when he caught me fixing his die-cast.  
He must've heard the wheels spinning  
across the hardwood floor, or the snap  
of the axle when its wheels broke:  
Jeff Gordon classic, 1995— metal  
chassis bent in half. My throat  
lumped when he raised the belt,  
teeth grinding, clenched together  
like my super-glued fingers.

## **Lotic**

*They dynamite the levee, thought it might give us ease.  
But the water still rising, doing as it please.*

The river loves this levee in a way  
we'll never understand. It rises  
furious & running in the rainy months,  
leaves sulking when it doesn't get its way.  
Here, the highway turns into berm.  
The cows graze along the side facing east  
—the ground they know is safest.  
We love this protection, the embankment,  
& the cow's endless need to graze.  
But we blow it up when the river peaks,  
send it flooding across the spillways,  
wrangle the cattle up from the pasture.  
This is the redemption we crave:  
to rebuild our mistakes. Like moving  
my stepfather, one hospital to the next,  
knowing we couldn't save him.

With terminal cancer, two-headed  
coins, the outcome is always the same.  
& our veins like the river keep pumping  
blood, to pump it all out again.

## **Tiny Little Nothings**

Night seems a shade  
darkest in winter.

Even the woodpecker  
struggles to solve hunger,

stabs at my roof  
for carpenter bees

thrumming to keep  
warm in the cold-wood.

I too have groped  
for answers to absence.

Prayed if only for ritual,  
my breath exhaled.

As a boy, I'd holler  
into a tin can phone—

words like stones  
in a well, knowing

silence always echoed  
from the other receiver—

a habit that lingered.

## Listening to the Hour Hand

Dying brings manila  
envelopes, divvying up.

A thin coat of dust covers  
all his stuff. *It's yours*

*when I die, and everything else*  
*I have*, Mom said when I visited

in May. I'm not sure  
I want it: the things I can't sell

for guilt or memory. The only  
thing I have left of his, I wear

around my wrist. Golden hands  
tick ticking. The rest: a yard sale

in late September. If I'm lucky,  
loose change, a few bucks.

## Eclogue

White oak, magnolia's white,  
white egrets in alluvial marsh—  
the sun set low on the horizon—  
pallid still-lives soaked in pink.  
Near the planar bayou shoals  
whitetail trundle the tree line,  
trace cattails swaying in the thicket,  
blackbirds scuttle through beavies  
of dark cloud, past the canebrake  
& tall grass. Where turbid water  
steeps into the river, cargo barges  
wake toward Waggaman, praying  
for the weather to change.  
Rain combs through the clouds,  
drowns rope vines wracked  
in the mud. Crawfish tunnels  
chart the soggy bank—water  
collecting in the chasms. Trot lines  
bob in the shallow trenches,  
channel cats hooked on blood  
bait. In the deeper water, eddies  
mull, towboats saunter out, &  
when the downpour quickens to  
deluge, the deer hike fast  
to the levee, water creeping-up  
the floodplain. Rising, it laps  
at the tree trunks, covers ground



roots with murky breakers,  
carting wetland further inland.  
Until the storm front ambles east  
toward Alabama plain, & the sun  
dives beneath the slackening tide  
settles like my stepfathers bloodstain,  
bruise—purple, blackening. It fades.

## At the National Portrait Gallery

—after *TV Garden*; Nam Jun Paik

Mistaking her in the quiet-dark for a friend  
I came with, I said the installation made my heart

flutter, leaned in close enough to whisper,  
sweet—my breath on the lobe of her

unpierced ear. I caught the smell of her  
long hair, a perfume I thought was familiar.

I'd have touched the fawn of her cardigan  
sweater were it not for the jacket in my hand.

From that angle we could make out  
the televisions, hidden in fronds of palm

bush, screens flashing—swatches of color—  
vibrant among the leaves, green thicket.

Around us murmurs, shoe-feet shuffling,  
art guards telling children not to touch.

I craved the televisions' music, to dance  
like the figures on screen. But when she turned

my face went ghost, hers not at all  
familiar. Without a sound she clasped

my hand & we stood both dazed  
in the chromatic spectrum, waiting

for the other to speak. I swear I saw her  
lips move; though, I couldn't tell what

she said. Would it was true—her fingers holdining  
mine—were it not for the jacket in my hand.

## **On Trying to be a Mockingbird**

Since he passed I've wandered  
the streets trying to imitate his voice,

but mine is never the same.

Little things so worth remembering—

a carton of milk, a loaf of bread—  
are the ones I often forget.

Cleaning last night I heard a poorwill;  
from the hedgerow it whispered

his name, though I can't remember  
how it sang. Even the dishwasher's

hum: a meditation that fails me—  
mocking bird with no one to hoke.

## **Execration**

I've grown so tired of elegies,  
much more of saying I need  
you. But the wren keeps calling  
each morning: repeating  
those words in my head.

## Buffalo Nickels

I.

The giant saguaro can live for hundreds of years,  
its body gorged with water soaked up from the damp soil.  
When prolonged frost takes root in the desert  
the columns explode—penance for the body's distention.  
Mammals too, when shot in the gut, will drudge their weight  
toward the nearest water. Consumed with dehydration,  
they'll search for miles to bed down in the cool-wet,  
drink till they drown from their own consumption.

II.

After my aunt's funeral I said she deserved it, everything  
rehab couldn't fix. Words I can't take back,  
like the dirt that covers her coffin. Cancer, like honey-  
suckle grows quickly; they buried her with its gangrene.  
Even now it crowns her headstone—blooming  
little trumpets—the sick-sweet parasite.

The same as the algae that choked our river-rock  
pond, dead tendrils browner than earthworms.  
For weeks I watched street cats from the bedroom  
window, fishing out the dead koi. At night I'd prowl  
the backyard with a flashlight looking  
for scales until they shone like buffalo nickels.  
The closest I can get now to the memory  
of the whole—loose change stuffed in my pockets.

## Half Empty, Half Full

Here sits a glass of whisky, a wedge  
of lemon stagnating in its amber—

like the river after it floods, the glass  
leaves rings around a coaster on the table.  
My neighbors have a blind Bichon Maltese.  
She barks at me each time I pass their yard.  
I'm certain she can't see me when I'm there  
because she runs headlong into each slat  
of the fence. Her owner says: *you can't control  
women*. After seeing his dog, I think, I agree  
with him. Yesterday, I called my stepfather  
from a payphone. He told me *leave a message*  
after the beep. I admit, I hadn't prepared  
for this: I said everything you'd expect.  
I told my mother, once, she'd go to hell  
for divorcing my biological father. She turned  
my mouth red as the end of her cigarette.  
I can't take back all the dumb things  
I've said, let alone the honeyed messages  
on my stepdad's long-dead cellphone

—its air-filled space is full of my regret.  
I hang around the bar until the lights go.