The poems in this manuscript aim to preserve a quickly disappearing landscape, but also to portray a distinctly American experience. They are infused with the natural music of the swampland.
FLIGHT JACKET

by

Forrest Kelly Rapier

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HOW TO CREATE A BOY OUT OF THIN AIR</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROTHERS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWILIGHT FLUX</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMBER EMBERS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPALOOSA RIDER UNCHAINED</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAST DAYS OF THE ANARCHIST</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUBADE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCO CLOVIS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVENANT</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOUDGATE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CHARIOTEER WHO DRIVES THE NIGHT CARRIAGE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHOTOGRAPHY FOR ELISE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DITCH LITTER AS MOSAIC</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURSE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BORDELLO</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIGHTHOUSE SOLILOQUOY</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WINTER COAT</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOLF HOUR BONFIRE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRECTIONS TO ELYSIA</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXHUME</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RUBBERNECK ...........................................................................................................24
DARK GRASS ........................................................................................................26
BUCK’S CROWN ....................................................................................................28
BLUE RIDGE RANGER .........................................................................................29
PANHANDLE ELEGY ..............................................................................................30
BACKWATER LAZARUS .........................................................................................31
PANHANDLE SAUDADE .........................................................................................32
SUBLIME WITH HOUND SKULL AND COYOTE HOWL ......................................35
SMASHED SHELLS AS MOSAIC .........................................................................36
SUBLIME ON A BLADE’S EDGE ............................................................................37
FLOODSONG ........................................................................................................38
HOW TO CREATE A BOY OUT OF THIN AIR

a rifle shot flips dawn
like a film reel
pull an arrowhead
from the riverbed
rub the muddiness
from it—a spearpoint
between your palms
flaunt his portrait
on the edge of a buck knife
a droplet of blood
catching sunlight
cut him a centerpiece
of german chocolate cake
table his slice until the flour
eggs and coconut flake
into a baked plate of ash
surgically remove his tongue
replace that lyre
with a stingray’s barbed tail
ignite the black cat
bottle rocket fuse
stuck inside his blowhole
crank his dome radio
to full blown tornado
feed him delusions
rainbow bowlfuls
of frosted soggy o’s
as if you were washing
your hair—repeat this pattern
until the rest of his body
arrives by a procession of waves
a shoreline littered with lost letters—
instructions trapped inside
the emptiness of a liquor bottle
BROTHERS

This friendship is sleet
colliding with a thousand-mile
-witchgrass-marshland.
We are a Cascade-kind—
impossible to level, full of wind,
always shouting at mountains.

We chase foxes into burrows
from this side of the river,
find the miles of skin
snakes shed over a life
and watch neighbor kids
knock out their own teeth.

A loose tooth knotted
and slammed into a doorjamb—
a pearl at the end of fishing line
or a dogwood branch,
broken-off and landed on a snowdrift.
The next day, a flat bar impales three pig heads.

The ten-pound sack of feed
balanced on your shoulder falls.
This time, it wasn’t a knife
dragged across windpipes.
The blood didn’t fly out
like red moths.

At night, we creep downstairs
to lower our ears to the floor
space beneath the shut den door
where our Marlboro-slim
mother mutters and wonders
who will bring our father

back to this nowhere-walnut-tree-town.
An eon of alleyway return fire
until his M-16 jams—Death burns
frayed threads off his bomber
jacket. We dig fingertip trenches
on ink-black windowpanes.
TWILIGHT FLUX

Our Virgin of Guadalupe candle dimmers
Down. Bluejays riddle evening’s old blue dress
With their purple avian whistles.

Julia massages chords on Spanish guitar,
Until cathedrals shudder. Frets surrender
Beneath her rivers, her fingers. Thistle-

Downs & tulips stream open behind
My eyelids. Brown rabbits lick rain
Off overgrown grass. Dusk quivers.

*

Dusk quivers on the tightrope.
The cotton is high. These nights
Buzz, electrical horizons of youth,

Summer house deadbolts,
Unlatched. Air conditioning
Units snoring until morning.

Blonde wisps rhythmically beat
Backward by ceiling fan circularity.
Neckline cherry traces of once wet,

Pulsing, carelessly left near
The beginnings of thighs.

*

Lighthouse swears on farther shoal
Lips, tanned waists, behind the ear
Breezes. Through dustless Venetian

Blinds, blades of grass fly. Those drifty
Nights where the sky moves too quickly,
& nobody has their headlights on.

Dusk whispers, Tonight, you will worry
About your sister. Tonight bears spring rain,
Wildflower & women with hair like white wine.

*

Tonight breaks before your reach. Seashells
Smattered in pieces, lost on white beaches.
These nights they come, when daughters

I have lied down with look to the moon.
Moon blonde daughters
I have lied down with look

Into the ceiling fan spiral
& hear my name. My name
In their ear like an old guitar.
AMBER EMBERS

We're hauling scrapped pines
from boxing-day curbs to flat sand.

We're dousing dry needles with a bottle
of lighter fluid & flooding Neptune

Beach with firelight. We're stealing whiskey
from our fathers’ liquor cabinets, swigging
bottles until a cherry bowl
is passed. A shovel smacks

a pit and we split dunes with knuckles
jammed dry by pinesap, riptide

flares of dark hair slide discarded pines
into a shallow coquina grave—pop

goes the weasel. Gunmetal flames
strip us stark as Prometheus—bound

to a cliff’s edge boulder, nude subject
of ethereal dystrophy—wind’s harsh spite.

Aureole arrow-bringers, fire-thieves,
we light this lunar shrouded beach.

Now watch this shore shrink into a cat’s
eye—stars pop out like hot grease.
APPALOOSA RIDER UNCHAINED

Your horses ride today to set you free.
No longer shall your voices be contained,
Or chained to the watchman’s land without a key.
Bone blades, longbows—here, weapons keep the peace,
Yet who provides shelter beyond the walls of rain?
Your friend will yell your name, then set you free.
Ignite the fires. The song becomes the key.
Unlock yourselves from umber cages, terrains
Of soot no longer bind you. Never lose this key.
Longships await offshore. Together we
Ford rivers of golden grain. Steady the reins
Of your horses. Let them break away. Let them be—
Unafraid, as darkness falls we ride across the plains.
Unbury your family plainsongs from the grave deep
Inside your throat. Sing out the missing key.
Reclaim your ancient speech from amber plains. See
Beaches aflame. History ashen again.
Our friends will yell our names. They set us free.
If your horse breaks away, let them be.
LAST DAYS OF THE ANARCHIST

In Paris
I planted
a black flag
into the waist
of dawn and drank
eough cheap wine
on a clover hill
to end up facedown
between church pews.

Later, with my head fallen
in a stone angels’ lap,
amber-eyed women
danced red leaves down.

Beneath the footbridge,
riverbank chords
sprang over swollen
water. For weeks
I fletched arrows
from patience, until
finally, my old boats
broke shore. Their
torches cut fog
hovering the mudbanks.
Boot steps trudged past
the cathedral’s ankles
while Parisians lay
lost within dram
dreams of warm sands.

Quiet as hornets,
my bad company
swarms Paris. Soon,
above the city, the queen’s
torn nightgown will hang;
a whispered surrender.
AUBADE

Sky’s blue dress
(the morning) slips
off her shoulders.

Sleep is a blind horse
sprinting through an orchard’s
harvest red curtain, over

wheatgrass, across folded
notes of lilacs, beyond
the titanic row of sycamores

asleep. I lose my mind
down creeks of ether
while counting creases

on cotton linens and flatten
hours in my palm—pennies
cranked through a carnival machine.

The forgettable hours come back
as copper ovals. I know seagrass
dances a cool nude routine

for June. Through the grid
paper divide of Venetian blinds,
pink whistles of crape myrtles

dangle before a robin’s egg
shaded aerial canvas, as if
the flower-girl has suddenly

remembered her ballet slippers
forgotten at the studio.
COCO CLOVIS

Constant contradiction, cliché at her finest, Coco Clovis lies curled under covers for the second night straight. Azure oceans shut beneath those doe-like lashes—fairies scream as pixies drunk dream. Coco wakes upon being barely touched—her back tenses then spasms. We should fly back to the beach, float up to the clouds. It’s three hours from familiarity, isolation and similarity (of all that you said none of it scares me). She writhes her wrist away—her scars may be healed when held. I grip tight and whisper with eyes closed—breathe slow when I kiss her.
REVENANT
	night before last
	we made ornaments

together on our weak thighs

azalea-shape

bite-marks

yesterday

lacewing flies

hummed shaky

songs across the buzzing

micro kitchen countertop scatter

my cup unfolds

immediate remedy

an orchid of air

like when

you focus hard

enough the pain

disappears

tamped petals pressed

thin on the sill

a downturned sunflower

in the windowpane

her reflection

vanished
CLOUDGATE

Sideswipe rush, Ohio opens
her umbrella, showers darken
light scattered over Lake Michigan.

Articulate tour guides
loudly pronounce plazas
to passersby, yet go unheard

by Kate Spade directionals.
Nose-deep in editorials,
chin-down, and salaried

they tote Michael Kors,
advocate for marches,
‘sugar scrubs’, and cleanses.

Eked-out dust grows thinner
beneath domes, fire escapes,
and stoplight bodegas

—the walking shall be judged
by narrow standards. Painted
-face kiddos hopscotch

butterfly-sparkled cheeks
over magnificent concrete
meadows—jet plane

sonic nectar bursts
faders over Millennium
Park. Chicago,

your mute skyline
brims with infinite
vertical shrapnel.
THE CHARIOTEER WHO DRIVES THE NIGHT CARRIAGE

There is always another watchman standing guard afore the empty church, when petals blow over my loafers. A sparse row of leafless branches laughs.

Headless autumnal nights arrive by drawn-carriage—twirling leaves encircle the windblown town with shock. Humorless yesteryear graffiti knots blondes elbow to elbow, to mumble their fizzed drink orders across a greasy countertop. Gangly sweaters swap dark lipstick across glittered contoured cheeks—outside quiet snow speaks up. Harsher the weather, the farther I slide. Stiff September and wells evenings stiffen my body into a brick building where a woman nearly purges a patch of dandelions. My ribcage becomes a piece of butcher paper laced with honey. After the party, I learn the piano, & memorize the early dark notes of morning sheet music written along the nude backs of two women.
PHOTOGRAPHY FOR ELISE

The zap of a bulb
burning-out.

We should not have kissed
near whistling trains
and twisted rose bushes
dry as a bricklayer’s knuckles.

We should have seen the riot
building—a coliseum flooded
by firestorm. A fearless mass
immobilized; a buck on a snowbank.

We should not have kissed
after you bought the green dress.
After the secondhand store
score, you lit tea candles,
blew your hair dry, and fanned
your eyeliner into a lake of mirrors.

I saw wind rust the tracks impassible,
a calico kitten with a bone protruding
from her head, and stab marks
on my neighbor Leo’s forearm.
Scratches sharp turned as country roads. I saw a dot of blood fall
from his arm in lamplight. When
I went inside, you asked me for help
zipping up the green dress in the back.

You pushed your hair to the side
and inhaled—I put two fingers
on the zipper and lifted.

Later, I cracked a Coke bottle.
It tasted like the flash of a camera.
DITCH LITTER AS MOSAIC

green glass, soda cups, flat tires, bottle caps, loose tobacco, broken lighters, blunt wraps cold coals, a half-burned couch, flicked butts Miller cans, brown bags, match sticks, a silver crashed Mercedes, white storks hubcaps, algae, dragonflies, plastic forks bike tires, a thrown out fire-extinguisher lotto tickets, condoms, biscuit wrappers liquor bottles, televisions, feathers ketchup packets, crushed cans, burnt sparklers lost underwear, bendy straws, styrofoam pizza boxes, match sticks, gold pom-poms wet receipts, one high heel, yellow napkins backwater, turtles, herons, and snakeskin
CURSE

Your face unfastens, a loose button
on a blouse in a hot church.
Your mouth curves into a shovel head.

Stones fall upon your tongue. Blood
on a quail feather. Dirt smears
across your lips. Open your mouth—

Razorblades. A raven shot
through the back of its beak.
Ice poured onto grass. Over there,

your house on top of the hill.
It is burning. Your dog runs
through the doorway.

Her fur is on fire. Your
husband opens his mouth
in the dark. A cocoon.

A field of cicada husks.
A field of cotton ablaze.
A drawer of dull knives.

A crown of barbed wire.
Somebody’s going to write
your name, sweetheart.

Your name here,
three times. Then X,
after X, after X.

A necklace of pulled
teeth. A field of corn gone
bone. No more honey.
BORDELLO

Across town there’s a house with a tin roof
and cornflower wallpaper gone brown
as burnt cork or pipe smoke—a wood stove
heats the whole place in wintertime.
On lonesome-starless nights, men trace
memorized footpaths down alleys
where dark-blazed foals drive riderless
carriages over cobblestones. Nighttime
murmurs skip over silence like stones
thrown off a river’s face. You may have visited
here yourself—hooked your hat
on the rack with your wool overcoat.

A woman in a leopard print kimono
leads you into an upstairs room
of beaded lampshades and forgotten
cigarettes balanced on the porcelain
ashtray lip—or nervous jalopy
headlights out the corner of your eye.

Perhaps, on the box-spring upstairs
you forget your father’s drunk fist
knocking the smile from your face
with one bourbon-numbed swing
or you forget his empty bottles lining
the porch—bruise-colored bottles
the lines underneath your mother’s
swollen eyelid. You forget red clay
stitching your pants together
like dried blood on a pillowcase
and sheets darken to shades of calm
waters. You forget choir practice,
the hymns rising and dust
blows off an unopened letter.  
The river rises days out of your mind  
currents swirl gray; a goose feather  
lost in a cotton field. Your thumbs  

fumble over threading string through  
a needle shaft—the night is a sewing kit  
you forget how to use. You may lose  

the mountains for the moonless.  
Her iris crashes blue-green—a wave  
of juniper into the starless night of her pupil.  

A crumpled leopard-hide in the corner  
and the oil lamp’s low burn illuminates  
grease stains on your unlaced boots.  

Button yourself and force the headboard  
back into the bed frame. A truck  
backfires when she leaves you to redress.  

Crosstown foals feel blow  
breath back in their stables.  
Downstairs, the house mother shucks  
sweet peas and shakes the bowl clean  
of shed shells—she charges you double.  
She says “You two glow like a cave  
full of firelight—smiles sweet as apples  
bitten under a tree.” You lied about wearing  
a lambskin—her stomach curves into months.  

Winter hushes the town—she is your daughter.
LIGHTHOUSE SOLILOQUY

Every night I put on my bright face
and wear a striped dress.
I write patient letters in wavy cursive
and play instruments of light—
my songs beckon your husband home.
Nighttime tides crash on salt-wet
rock walls as my bright equivalent
performs its disappearing act; moonlight
vanishes like a hand-mirror
using otherworldly sunlight
as a beacon. Ocean’s wane erases
the shoreline—I put on my bright face.
My silent siren brings crews of fathers
homebound—beforehand they visit
familiar port town women in satin nightgowns
whose shoulders are freckled
with distances—he unlaces her negligee
with casual dexterity. Longshoremen share
cheap cigars in wordless acknowledgment
across ebbing black docks—my dress
stripes faded like smoke in the dark.
Your brothers bring home their bodies,
tired and gray as a shipload of fish.
At shore’s edge, I put on my bright
face and sing in silence. Pale ship sails
rise above the dark—a heartbeat on the horizon.
WINTER COAT

At the kitchen table,
his wife turns the dial
with one finger.

Juniper and lilac
scented-soap trace
the evening steaming sink.

Interruptions of static
surge the dinette. Radio
waves drum war’s terrible report,
as if young soldiers
were simply talented players
taking fields for Sunday sports.

Thunderbolts came hurried as horses
and rain came quickly in torrents.

Entire neighborhoods went dark.
The woods hummed a beckoning
—the radio buzzed for days.

On the sixth, voices spoke
of our reckoning. On the seventh,
warships circled the bay.

His lonely wife, she sings
to the window—a world
around their home, broken glass.

Summer turned open
with a doorknob.
The year curled
into an autumnal room.
The singing windows shuttered
white without hope.

Winter arrived that midnight.
She put on her sleep, her coat.
WOLF HOUR BONFIRE

we burnt biscuits and fed squirrels
we scared pigeons from the phone
pole wires and flew banners of blonde hair

all six-foot-seven of Flynn
bunny-hopped his scooter
—he screamed I’m the bronco-buster!

War-pig hurled a lit cherrybomb
skyward—when it cracked
the night was a black widow

we buzzed our heads bald
took turns running uphill
we careened steep asphalt

in a schoolyard-stolen
-pink-Barbie Jeep
with wheels lubed by baby oil

and the cheap cases we rolled back
to the den on skateboards—
the clocktower draws dawn with bells

Koyle pours gasoline on an anthill
a writhing knot of fire came out
the ants were screaming

we dragged sweat-
stained leather sofas
beneath the magnolia

the sun; a flaming spearhead
I did my appaloosa whistle
I rode to the Gulf of Mexico

every word I say
scares off a painted horse
DIRECTIONS TO ELYSIA

Read this and all the cornfields

will burn—the sky
    an expert of erosion
    turns loam
    into a slab of limestone—grit

chews away
    a horse’s jawbone

houses like smashed teeth—

    miles of dunes performing erasure

    —

    a breakneck storm
    lulls before—a deposition
    of slate rain
        slants—a backlash
    of thunder
    the suspension bridge
        scrapes and blackens
            a knee against asphalt

    —

undo every knot you have tied
    with another body—follow
        your threaded lifeline to coal shores—

    resist the urge to scratch yourself limbless—

    follow the hidden-dot-color
        -map written behind your eyelids—

    drag your hand
    along the newfound cave wall

    —
no matter what voices echo familiar
never unhand

your frayed thread—
    the guide to untempered release

like scattered flight of scared birds—
    once you hear

a heartbeat of wings
    the wildcat yowling

before unending singing fields

g gentle mudslides rise over your ankles
    __

dark bogs—where hacksaw
    mosquito swarms buzz
    where swamp panthers slink

    a group of beasts in the mud
    stalk after you
EXHUME

Unearthed bog bodies lay in sinkhole silence near stone forests and lakes cursed by shades. A swampland where ospreys play the cypress chords of Spanish guitar. Suffocating jade spindles of kudzu ascend to choke the pin oaks bare as bullseye felt on a dive bar dartboard. Back in the bog, an anthropologist arrives with a tumbler full of boiled coffee his forearm tattooed with the Chinese symbol for strength—shovel at-the-ready he wants to be a dig-site dog nose-down in the dirt looting bone from earth. The barroom back wall is riddled with graffiti incoherence and pinprick misses wreaked by the skewed inaccuracy of drunks. Cigarillo scents edit out the cedars and stripped crape myrtles toss pink paper crowns down to concrete. Night is nothing but a lost scarf caught on a dark branch. A flak track of gravel kicks by a pick-up truck’s gunned wheels—no stars here. Before this wolf hour lolly gag away from Tallahassee seedy dives, dusk children scoop spoonfuls of pulp onto yesterday newspaper funnies—the piles of innards stain the sidewalk orange. After sifting days, the gravedigger reveals an immaculate curled pair of unbothered lovers—curled bodies as treasured as gunfire. Leave Florida before it chokes you alive.
RUBBERNECK

Anesthetic daylight numbs Georgia highway travelers into white-knuckled dazes of follow-the-syrupy-ambrosia-turn-signal-bumper-kart-traffic. Unbuckled torsos fueled by filling station java, they weave the Carolina asphalt saga.

Flu-season troubadours play Powerball with pocket change and a minefield of Black-Eyed Susans thaw slowly like bodies of hikers lost on the face of a glacier.

* 

A black ice tapestry of medians littered with eighteen-wheelers upended like yard toys, where jostled journeymen inspect toppled haul without answer.

Who tows tow trucks? Who plays hero hours after fishtail dodging, tobacco-amped minds swerve to dial static radios.

Airwave chickenhawks preach loud flight patterns above paper Christ. Bible depots in nowhere peach towns advertise


* 

In a brown bag out back behind the Outback, mewls disturb gravel silence. A closing waitress fractures the dark and kicks open the back door to toss
the empties in recycling when she hears
a familiar motherless cry.
With plenty more to tend to—her son
and his spelling homework, an inoperable
stove, the stack of post to sort, which bills to
defer—she opens the paper bag
to find newborn kittens piled inside.
She sees her face in their almost-opened eyes.
DARK GRASS

daggers of wind
a pit of sidewinders
a farmland deep in Tennessee

field grasses crush
beneath dancing feet
their ankles brush infinity

we drove through fat rain
and were spread like seeds
over wet dirt in a singing garden

twisted snakes hang down
from sweet apple trees
the vineyards aflame

loudspeaker voices
all around like phantoms
blackberry bushes trimmed

with perfect patience
the banana trees
all too high to climb

my dreams are often
a collective garden
of fruit bearing plants

placed in positions
where my body
will be harmed

terrible fruits dangle
near a pack of loose dogs
they chase after bearded men

through long yellow grass
a few patches of farmland
have yet to be scorched

upon entering the farmland
we were issued helmets
and optional gas masks

our faces were covered
by those think tanks
I was with three girls

we wore binges of beads
bandanas and had a backpack
filled with confetti—a foldable scope

I can remember the farmland
it’s a minefield
I walked through blindfolded

the barn was on fire
searchlights chopped
over an orchestra of smiles

helicopter propellors
thumped air like a rabbit foot
the harpies kept playing their strings

Elton was on the piano
Elton started playing
‘Crocodile Rock’

when he said I remember
we ran to higher ground
there was one lone hill

I know you can see it
like a tarantula
jumping out of my palm

we crouched below a stone wall
I kept looking through the scope
Niña wore the snakeskin boots

she put blue feathers in my hair
she told me to watch the red piano glitter
she told me to look for the river
BUCK’S CROWN

At the edge of a forest
the horse you rode here on spooks.

Noontime fog confuses fools
to follow the gossamer
woodland songbird beck and call!

Voices blaze trails as laughter
etches echoes across bark.
Do you hear the singing ponds?

Cold waters say your name first
through tulle until branches
point all-one-way—toward her arch.

Stolen visions through
boughs pulled back—dew-wet
spiderweb mosaics trap a feast of light.

Nearby silver-haired bathers pour
crystal streams from curved vases.

The unstrung archer of your dreams stands
surrounded by a washing dance of voices;
they sing of world maps
lost underwater.

Idiot loons create threadbare nests
with her meaningless glances!

She vanishes at the snap of a twig.
Unforgiving leaves weave a skirt
of curses around your waistline.

Curved bones erupt your skull; a buck’s crown.
Your face grows shaggy, unfamiliar,
and your own crazy dogs eat you alive.
BLUE RIDGE RANGER

Sheepdog opened his good eye. The field sunk blue as an eggshell. Nighttime rose in a bucket of well-water-colored hours. An overgrown lawn like a necklace of strung jade, nearby white-tails stamp hooves on dry nettles. Bucks trace silence and tracks back to thickets. A knotted herd of fawn and doe grazes. The absence of hunter—leaves a forest of antler nestled beneath briars. Gunshots like bricks clapping past fenceposts and razor wire. Thunderclouds and roosters raise town from the wet hay of spring sleep. Wind-whipped wisteria purples sheepdog’s eye—The horizon gets sharp as a deer tick. Like a man back from the dead, Dawn buttons his white suit for Easter.

*

From the wraparound porch, sourwoods bloom fiery and woodpecker preacher chatter breaks oak bark apart. Cumulus hillside church spires crosshatch shadows on bluegrass—laughter echoes off long blades in the pasture. That back of the neck buzz from noontime wind chime lullabies as rhythmic wicker rockers putter. Camouflage creeks feed the New River—a baby bird call divides the air; which came first, the nest or the hunger?
PANHANDLE ELEGY

This Tallahassee elevator rises
above Spanish graveyards and ledger-stones
overgrown by the homegrown undying

pernicious quack grass. And then Spring happens—
a centerfold-green-meadowland divides
campus where shirtless wunderkinds
toss down book-bags to pick-up the discus
and hurl that flat plate across a noontime.
Do dead petals still litter your nightstand?

When will we skinny-dip in the Gulf?
By then, will hurricanes have transformed
this beach into a shoreline subtracted?

Should I contain myself or study the eyelash
branches of a hundred-year oak? Its trunk
hollowed-out by carpenter ants—

I know where the pastures lament the dew,
where years of bark sound like a watchdog’s
throat, where a rosary of pink camellias wrap

around a wrist of wrought-iron fence, where
dotted-appaloosa-clouds trail fever-colored skies.
Resurrection is exhausting. Will you forgive

my faulty-wiring? Love tips over and shatters
like an oil-lamp. Please consider
this scrap and respond—toss your

bottled message over the pier edge.
Swear—I’ll swim for years
until I find your words

curved in glass, the bottleneck
wrapped with seaweed.
BACKWATER LAZARUS

Phone pole wires scratch track-mark
-shadows across the unfinished portrait;
my neighbor Leo’s pocked face.

The paintbrush Florida horizon
becomes a weapon—Leo & I shoot
swamp drawl. It styles outside

our mouths real easy-like.
A corroding Bowflex
guards Leo’s garage

—rust is an addict who only takes
& returns after nights of rain.
Helicopter propellers

buzzsaw blue off sky
— the loose handle falls
from his front door

like wrist falls from arm
in a farm-accident. Inside,
Leo adjusts his nine-millimeter

downward like a dance by himself.
Lightning’s quick laugh
— the revolver kickback flash.

From folding chairs in Leo’s garage,
we watch the capital city encapsulated
on one wet side-street. Ford fog

lamps flick-on near untended flowerbeds
& flooded crabgrass. Gutters false
glister while the devil beats his wife.

Night’s sfumato edge blurs. Loose chickens
cluck. Chanterelles raise the yard
—I want to fry an egg.
PANHANDLE SAUDADE

A forgotten sheet of biscuit dough burns and I will never know the mid-morning tree rings spun on Kimberly’s eyelids.

Smoke detector screeches unstitch our threaded sleep and a dream snaps like the trunk of a water-logged mangrove—marsh silence split in half.

*

We fan smoke through the kitchen window—Kim suggests an Apalachicola escape.

I have never left this pigsty—this brick house tottering at the edge of the Florida-Georgia line. Never cut back the knotted binges of vine and ivy swallowing the siding. I connect the flea-bites on my inner thigh.

*

I pick up a spent bullet in the driveway; a minnow caught by cupped hands dipped in a creek.

*

Outside the car window cattails and rushes spring up and raze.

When the light hits right the bayou grass—fire humming in the bushes.
Coastal cicadas
play harmonica
—a July jazz orchestra
and the eelgrass sinks
in silt with crayfish.

*

Kim slams the brakes—a pause
before an applause of shoreline.

A shovel-and-sand
-bucket-brigade of toddlers
waddle toward a bald-tired Odyssey. The gulf coast
is a siren song woven
from blue-green waves.

*

Kim kills the engine—blush
paints the horizon. Kim
lights a pipe that reeks
of an oil spill I cannot see.

Her pipe tastes of diesel
and black cherries.

The spill happened in a quagmire—
the delta lowland where gills muddy
and thicken then turn impossible.

A flock of pelicans skim the surf line.
The entire flight drenched in crude
slick—America wants all the oil she cannot see.

*

The only permanence I have ever known
is loneliness—the cycad tree.

123 years ago in Zululand
a botanist named John Wood
found and uprooted
the Jurassic plant

unable to fertilize
unable to mate
unable to die
any way but alone.
SUBLIME WITH HOUND SKULL AND COYOTE HOWL

On Virginia’s edge, a slack-jawed mutt
yanks her leash the whole way
through a patch of brambles. Dry
briars tear my cheap coat
—bits of cotton gash
like snowdrifts snagged on thorns.
Rifle shots slash
downrange—trigger sworn
gunfire clears the branch blurred scene
—an innocent skull
in a patch of half-green
lean spring grass alone on a hill.
Beside the complete brainpan,
a dog tag and the unfolded jawbone.

*

Appalachia shows her scars
—hazy-foothill-cobalt
-jagged-ridge-lines not far
from this unmarked gravesite.
Near dark pines, a loose rescue meets
a pack of snarl—I often witness
little deaths. I am led there by a compass
inside myself. Later, coyotes smell my boots
and howl up the dark skirt of starlight—
I want to rush out to the woodland
and bite a dog’s ear—no one wants to see
my body and nobody
knows how to read my mind.
When wildcats claw another
set of cuts into the palm of my hand,
I skin myself. Pitch-black fires
burn beneath my eyelids
I dig craters on the dark side
of the moon—tomahawks
pierce behind my skinned-knee.
SMASHED SHELLS AS MOSAIC

—a button, buttercups, baby’s ear,
a lion’s paw, golden triton, sun
rays, rose petals, the ocean’s eye,

a lionfish spine—lady-in-waiting,
pear-shaped, angel wings, the queen’s helmet—

Venus’ palace, a jewel-box,
lightning-tulip, a sawtooth pen,
a zig-zag painted egg, geisha fanning herself—

Venus-in-chains, moon-eyed tiger sharks, a jackknife—
skeletal scattering of shells—the king’s crown
light shining through a keyhole

—a kitten’s paw, satin slippers, a silk nightgown,
the alphabet scratched on an old ladder,

abandoned bungalows graffitied-over—
the dried-out membranes
left behind by jellyfish
Above the Mount Mitchell marble kitchen countertop I angle this dull knife to reflect the moon’s wane. Watch this horizon blaze amethyst—cirrus clouds ribbon my bride’s curled hair. Wrap her wrists in lace and grip her waist of waves. Inhale her raven veil—this horizon a rose window lit in a church only the knife’s edge can see. Blindfold her—lean close and wed her upon the forest bedding. Leaves fallen, the scarf of her neck pressed on green clover. Her throat spines light—strips dark from the night. Breeze her name as embers ash over and cinders whisper swears. Beyond Mount Mitchell a blaze engulfs Floridian backwood wetlands because a man gathered books to burn—a drought and a hurricane scattered the flames. The dull knife in my palm flirts with moonlight—my nude bride and the horizon offers the pearl. As the moon peaks, hill crests blue—
FLOODSONG

the hooves of horsemen
put the children to sleep early

crows caw curses
over beak-sharp
interstate highway
switchgrass and straw
the thunderstorms gang up
then pour onto tin roofs

the front falls loud as hail
a woman rocks her chair
she sings through the veil

a gray kit slinks up from below
the porch lattice to climb the front steps
the tabby twines the woman’s ankles
and shakes the soak off its fur coat

the way I heard it
a few degrees lower
and it could have been a blizzard

the storm stuck around
like a bad cough or a binge
of moths on an exposed bulb

a season of unopened magnolia
buds and empty blue bottles
stuck high on a dead crape myrtle
call it poor man’s stained glass