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This thesis is a collection of poems written over two years of study in the MFA Creative Writing program at UNC Greensboro. Poems dig up and tamper with myths concerning the sanctity of the dead, the nuclear family, cruelty, co-dependent lovers, and oppressive binaries. The confession is often intentionally utilized to, hopefully, debunk myths, reveal multiple truths, and productively work with shame and guilt.

NEMASKET RIVER MYTHS

By

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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All Snarl Out of Cape Cod Canal

Nearly curfew, fumbling in beat-up gloves,
I work the hook free from the fish's chin
and drop its body in the cooler. I give
its gills no choice, except to wrestle
with humidity, heavy of August. Hurry,
August. The sooner it dies the sooner

I go home. Mother's already worried.
Across an hour, way past curfew, sea-
desperate spasms fade only in frequency.
Each influx of life that starts in its tail
then surges through its body makes me
question its ability to die. Across an hour

I'm too afraid of Mother's grief to call.
Hurry, she pleaded, counting Granddad's
breaths, watching his nostrils flare.
Fewer each minute, each breath accrued
more air than the last, inflating his stomach
twice its normal size. Large enough

to exhale eighty-five years. Everything
else – the clock's inky hands, the monitors
ticking, clicking, humming, beeping –
kept medical time, regular and strict.
Hurry, let this be the last. Since last
week, she hasn't spoken to anyone.

Tonight, the glow of an early-morning
repeat casts shades of yellow and
blue across her face, muted and rigid
with new anger. I haven't called at all.
The roads back from the canal, dark
and carnal, take startling turns.

Hurrying home is dreadful, a useless
pursuit when it's already late. The cooler,
seven pounds heavier, slides between

both sides of the trunk and until
the highway, its crashing keeps a beat
as loud as the lives escaping us.

Syracuse with Varying Proximity to Death

Renting Next to Death

Good morning \$300 rain boots, polka-dotted,
taken by the mud. Good morning faceless

red chucks walking to campus through these
cemetery roads, chewed-up by a snow plow.

Living basement-level, I toast my morning
coffee to all the fleeting footwear, all the "T"s

I'll never know passing by my window.
Are we neighbors? If so, do we share the view

of late October's oaks all gaudy and skeletal?
I can pretend like I know these answers,

but the people whose carved names peek out
above the snow are the only neighbors I know,

quiet, comforting, buried at the same depth
as I am, a detail so plainly keeping me alive.

Sunbathers

A freshman skipping class in late April
is sunbathing beside a headstone.

He hits play on the boombox,
but the battery's dead.

His friends tip 80's throwback glasses
as if being on time to anything besides

such a beautiful day in Syracuse
is cool, something I should aspire to.

Steeped in sunshine and SPF 15,
they mimic the way the buried lie.

Their trashy novels are predictable
and so, too, are they, cooling off

in the shade of a newly blossomed
cherry tree, a grassy spot, wet

from melting winter, the cool soil
where no space is left empty.

Tailgaters

Somehow without slipping, one boy jukes
and weaves through headstones in the snow.

He resists what's come easy for me –
to ask why a dozen pick-ups are parked

on the cemetery lawn. Must be spillover, I guess,
from the stadium's lots. Oh well. Another season's

started without me, sold-out, full of loss.
The boy's father splits a sizzling burger

checking for shades of pink, and misses
his son break free for the pass, wide open.

The boy stops running to watch specters billow
from the grill. *Hey Dad*, he asks, *do you think*

these people care that we're here, stomping
on their houses? and waits for an answer.

Roosting Crows

Over the phone you ask harshly,
what the hell is that noise? agitated

by compounded collegiate stress:
your dad still likes to think you're 14

and helpless, your mom the role model
for repression, your friends all abroad

in London, Venice, and Glasgow, exams,
30-page papers, no money, winter

in Boston, the sidewalk slush that makes
your boots soggy, your toes stiff.

Crows, I say. The same swamp of crows
arriving every dusk

from hundreds of miles away. Most
head downtown for a stoop where

the electricity's warm, but the others
I am forced to contend with on my own.

They settle in, like black Spring, staring
as I shortcut through the war memorial.

Luring Monsters

Zombies walk with slackened grace,
too slow to snatch my brains. Any ghost

would've trailed behind, swiftly glided
along the moonlit tar. Who cares if I

was dressed in jeans and cheap loafers?
I would've run until the sunshine scared

all the bloodsuckers back to their
coffins, wolves back to their office jobs.

I ran before they could even show their
swamp-soaked tentacles, the delayed

decay of their unwrapped faces, just in
case I ever saw anything. But when I did,

the shirtless stranger, grappling-hooked
by his knees to the wrist of a branch, I started

to jog. Would a regular guy be swinging
an oversized net full of moths at that hour?

Should I have run another path? Hell, even
if he had caught me, I'd've torn through

his net so fast he wouldn't have had a chance
to put me in a jar, frame me along a wall

with all the other spineless critters that
require pins to prop up their wings.

The Lion, a Statue Again and All Along

The backhoe driver extends the neck
of his rumbling machine, readying

a plot for my newest neighbor. *Another
young one, maybe your age*, he turns to me

to whisper. The engine's petroleum cough
wakes the old, stone lion who can't see

his kingdom growing, like I can. Since I moved
here, I've been visiting his sheltered den

to pet his mane and update him on his favorite
fare (new names, dates, quotes) that,

he says, sustain him when the ground
is frozen and cannot be dug. When these

are not enough his ribs punch holes
in his sides and I lie about the roses

(always fresh), the victims of violence (always
old age, in the quiet of sleep, natural causes,

or heartbreak) and why I choose to visit him
(for *his* well-being, to keep *him* alive).

Letter to a Younger Brother

Dear Ross, did Home Depot leach itself
back into your genes? Did that paint-shaking-machine
rattle your brain the same color as Mom and Dad's?
Within the last year you bought the following firsts
in this order: beer house weed-whacker.
You had the man grind copies of keys.
You smell of sawdust and peat moss. How
can we reconnect if I refuse to go back
to the place we used to pace every weekend?
Do you remember our trail of complaints,
chapped lips, that stale popcorn? Why
did you want a reason to return? Can I guess?
No other department deserves its own line,
but, if I had to, I'd sit with you beneath that canopy
of a hundred fans oscillating at varying speeds,
stirring together smells from hardware, houseware,
drywall, and we'd draw up blueprints
for what we'd like to do with weekends of our own.

Bonfire Confessions

I didn't always tell it this way—but I
was the one who took those cans of paint—
rusted shut behind the shed—and tossed
them on the burning leaves and brush—

At Nate's house I did everything
I couldn't at home—swore with every
5th grade curse I'd heard—burned
plastic toys—threw rotten squash

at my little brother—drank Coke and
choked a kid who laughed at me—
'Throughout my life I've kept places
where I do what I'm not allowed—

Out of my mother's sight we played
king-of-the-hill—struggling to stay
standing—I pushed my brother
so hard his body went horizontal—

his back hitting the concrete snow—I
tickled him until he stopped crying—made
funny noises—anything to make him
laugh—keep him from telling that I'm

not always the good guy— this time
there's no shed or tree to duck behind
when those old cans of paint explode,
awakening like prehistoric volcanoes.

Boys

At a small pond my friends pass a BB-gun between
them like a bottle. It ends with me, spitting nervous laughter.
Just point and shoot, they say, that bull frog there
suspended in murk and curiosity. I refuse for as long as I can,
waiting for it to think again then dive, or for someone else
eager for the wet-echo-plunk of steel smacking
the body of a frog a foot away from the shooter.
Might my friends, instead, stop me like I should've
stopped them when they clipped one in the leg, another
twice between its ribs? Others they gave quick deaths,
gashes in their skulls where, we joked, ears must've been.
Point and shoot, they say again to me, the wannabe foil
for boys to undoubtedly be boys, all sadistic and cruel,
their mothers say. I refuse to shoot for as long as I can.

Cryogenics

Nate's pet turtles, zip-locked,
stocked in the ice-box for years,
help define his father for me:

a former navy officer still crammed in
a submarine bunk-bed, he shuffles
back and forth down the

hallways of his house. Sometimes,
he'll slouch in a doorway but
never enter the room.

Until last June, when Nate was laid-off
and moved back home, I thought
his father was harmless.

Before I can bury the turtles, he told
Nate, no matter what season,
the ground needs to thaw.

Then Nate's iguana drowned and it too
was added to the ice-box above
his father's High Life

longnecks, restocked so often no one
thought he drank any. Just an
eccentric grump, I thought,

loyal to sports talk and Limbaugh, but
harmless, and amusing, as if words
like *wetback* or *faggot*,

were part of the act, satirizing an ignorant,
50-something Republican man who
I couldn't help but laugh at.

And most of the time, Nate laughs, too,
at his father's stubborn temper with
frozen pets, the alcoholism

he tried keeping secret by drinking
in his conversion van parked
in the driveway, but none

of these oddities, faults or addictions
threaten my friend as much as the
way his father watches TV –

frozen in front of that 9” box, forecasting tiny
storms all day long. Red Sox players
talk more than the people

in his home sometimes. Every time I call,
Nate says he’s done nothing all day
but become more like his father,

who once defended his sacred TV chair by
dumping a bucket of trash on Nate
for refusing to give it back.

Ask Nate how quickly he got off the couch
then. Ask Nate if he wants me to
start filling another bucket.

The Busboy Monologues

Upon the Burning of James Hook Lobster

60,000 pounds. 30 bucks a boiled body. Each is
reacquainted briefly with the movement of claws,
Each one clung to support beams blistering
and bobbing like sticks of butter in the harbor.
That unrivaled funk, that haunting stink that drifted into
the restaurant where I bus tables, I'll never forget how
it saturated every patron's palate for a week.
For the first time since starting I saw people disgust
themselves eating what once was canned, sold
with sterile brine. What once was flung on farmland
like manure. What once was fed to the poor,
to prison inmates, is now disposed neatly on a platter
with a smile and a price tag, stinking to the high
heavens of Boston's tallest buildings, as it did prior to
and upon the burning of James Hook Lobster.

The Drool Odyssey

Cinched bibs, equipped with tiny plastic tridents
and lemon wedges, no one's embarrassed by their drool
underneath this tent. A spirited crack of that ugly tail bleeds
blue and thus begins the rummage for pockets of meat.
Strands of their spittle drip jointly from the sharp corners
of their mouths, dribble down the crystal-white smile
of a cartoon crustacean, and mingle on the benches
where harbor gulls peck at rancid tartar sauce.
Mangy things better leave a good tip. I ain't a goddamn
volunteer. When the drool splashes on the mildewed
floorboards and seeps in between, returning to
the hiss and call of the ocean, I make a wish.
I wish that the next time the Chef poses for a picture,
cheek-to-cheek with his lobster, that just one
elastic band will snap off its vengeful claw.

Blue Blood

All ye grovel as the Head Chef enters, his greasy
apron a gossamer cape hanging off his neck, he lifts
the largest one by its claws over his white cotton crown.
The lobster, typically limp, balances straight,
stretching its tail to the ceiling like a gymnast.
The customers ask us to snap pictures and promise
that we'll fetch them extra cups of melted butter.
We runners, line cooks, and busboys hate this stunt
not 'cause the beast is boiled minutes from now,
but because the Chef will return to the kitchen
and order us around like if he wanted to he
could lift *us* over his head and cook *our* bodies
in a giant pot. He'd garnish the platter with lemons
and extra cups of butter, the blood of the blue collars.

The Coupon Clipper,

dressed in gray sweats, faded white
t-shirt plumage, tears another like stale
crust from a pizza box, beak tilted,

her gizzards grind the piece back
to flour, warm water, yeast, and sugar,
filing it flat against a thousand others

a week or more expired, their cut rate
available only at participating stores.
The coupon clipper couldn't care less

and waddles in speckled-almond
walking shoes, untucking her undershirt,
and cackles on about another stack,

which the clipper harvests unprepared
to visit a grocery store or use a kitchen
she doesn't own. Instead, her wings

grow steady, first with scissors, then,
tracing broken lines only she
can see, she folds the squares into new

shapes, of meals sophisticated enough
for her taste: rations of chocolate,
cheese, a loaf of stale bread.

North on the Red Line

Some kids sprinted the length of the
car, squealing around a slow corner.
Others passed chips and gummy bears
over the laps of strangers. Even after

burping and screaming, no grown-up
broke character, no smiling, no smirking.
They sat so still I pronounced them
dead, but the kids still scanned for signs

of life. I began to see a collective head,
the kids' jointly swinging side-to-side
like a Komodo Dragon's, in and out
of peoples' privacy as if greasy

fingers smearing some man's
pressed khakis were a blue tongue
smelling for symptoms of death.
My curiosity revealed a beating

heart, so the dragon bit me
immediately, infecting me with
a reminder, when leaving the terminal,
that I was living, and going to die.

A child in a stroller blew a trail of
bubbles that sunk, then lifted
through the aisle. She looked at me
to point my finger out and pop one.

Indian Costume

Mom wiped yellow and red stripes
 underneath my eyes with
a ball of cotton and sewed me
 a small tan jacket.

She pinned fabric-store feathers
 to the back of my scalp
and slung over my shoulder
 a cardboard knife cut out
from dad's shoebox, colored with
 silver crayon and glitter.

They forced me to carry some
 musty floral pillow case,
and didn't understand why
 I was upset, why I wanted
the blade to look authentic,
 like it had blood on it.

Nemasket River Myths

One went like this—an old Wampanoag hunter—
Mon-do-min—had not eaten in many days
but decided to feed the roasted partridge
with which he had been blessed
to a woman starved for compassion—
She feasted—his body buried along the river—

Each afternoon my 7th grade school bus
caught a whiff of his sacrifice—The other myth
goes like this—any awful smell the windows
of the bus could trap—tuna salad farts bologna
burps or the raunchy crawl of decay down
the Nemasket River—was said by many boys

to have drifted from between Lena's legs—
Each afternoon her sacrifice was being
a teenage girl in America— Each afternoon
I left my words to fester deep in my throat
smelling worse than the river—As the last
stop I watched from inside the empty bus

her tears water the banks where Mon-do-min
is said to be buried—Reborn as golden ears
of corn—his broad green leaves tickled
my throat to speak—*I'm sorry I said nothing*—
I tried telling her, but the river always
flooded—drowning the myth of my words—

Half Spirit

Juniper-aromatic, clear as this first
November afternoon, the gin pours thick,

refuses a solid state. Just enough to coax
Granddad's spirit back from wherever

it currently watches golf and snacks
on crackers with cheddar and hummus.

Where else would I look after his no-
show at Thanksgiving? Where was he

if not raising a third "G&T" to
Grandma's cranberry sauce with

mandarin oranges and floating red
orbs? I like the kind molded

to the ridges of its can, the smooth
maroon slivers that never crunch

unexpectedly. When Granddad sneezed
after peppering his potatoes,

I ducked under the table and cried.
During pumpkin pie, the dying battery

in his ear sounded like an air raid siren.
Like his, my gin and tonic is half spirit.

I'm still unprepared for its sting
and to watch the frost on the glass

retreat from my palm, like a ghost.

After Me, Who Will Clean Up After You?

To keep me you spill another thousand
gallons of cold oil when you cry.
It shouldn't work but has.

On board an idle train eager to leave
consider this wave goodbye my resignation
as Chief of clean-up. Take back

the brush I used to scrub our shared
coastline, its palms cupping crude oil,
pouting requests for a volunteer.

The rubber gloves, the yellow coat,
take them back too and see
if they fit you or someone else

willing to lose themselves trying
to love you tirelessly. Consider,
also, this wave my introduction: I am

every oil-soaked feather too heavy
for flight. I am every swallowed drop.
Hi. Hello. I am hypothermic,

shivering and can't stay afloat.
Underneath my train the tracks
and wheels are too slick to sit still.

Self-Portrait as a Moose

Why I finally gathered my gangly legs,
it's hard to say. Worn-out, reckoning
what I expected to slam into my body—
an endless line of invisible Big Rigs.
All I can admit is I'd been duped
by the larvae laid in my skull. For
3 years I stumbled from the constant
high-beamed oncoming charging
towards me. I can't say how but the last
remaining tendril of my brain knew
it was time to lay down, in cold
algae streams, let words like over-
chewed bog grass spill from my lips.

My Great Garbage Patch

Heart exhaustion. With this, I paddle through a stew of what you left, sentient debris mostly, floating the twin bed we shared the last summer in Boston. Most of the tactile stuff stays elsewhere in boxes, unless it helps, like the black coat you got me on Christmas, the one your family helped buy, missing buttons, covered in dog fur, its arms now knotted to my broomstick mast, my provisional sail and tent. You see, the stew is not comprised of things stenciled somewhere with your name but of everything else; the discomforting ambience, the deep-sea undercurrents of guilt, a slow tidal-pull that drags with it worry, panic, a plenitude of impulsive what-ifs amassed in pieces so small they refuse to crumble.

Dear Nice Lady

In your memory, since mine is
in pieces, does my car thud

like an old oak crushing a
playground? Do you and a greased-

up chainsaw clear the wreckage
of my broken limbs? Does the blood

in my hair stick like sawdust to
the sap smeared on your hard hat?

Or does my car splash like a giraffe
slipping backwards from its mother,

the roof skating across the icy
pavement? Do you drag your purple

tongue to mop the heavy fluids
so my joints can't congeal? Do you

judge or love me for interrupting
your morning coffee? Do you

nudge my body on to its new hind
legs or think to turn the radio down?

At the Mercy of a Couch

Like a sky-diver stuck in a sycamore, the cotton stuffing dangled from my dog's ass. Like a peasant with a plastic bag I bent over to dislodge it.

What a perverse metaphor for all I can't will myself to do. The free couch I got in Boston had adapted to Greensboro

so well it lured me and my dog like flies. Sitting in the comforting mouth of it I eat every meal. Write all my poems.

Read over and over Pollan's *Botany of Desire*. Crochet scarves while watching cartoons. Make-out with a new lover. Break-up

with an old one. Take naps in late August afternoons. Wake to cicadas and neighboring dogs. Perched atop the couch's back

my dog hears them too and whips into a frenzy of growls and pillow cushion thrashing. She can't resist its curious scents, its

lattice-work upholstery of pastel pink flowers. Does the beauty of the view it holds her in have a purpose? Most things that seem

to sit still must move in other dimensions . I yell, *Emma, No!* but each time I look away she stuffs another helping, the soft buffet

of my couch's flesh, inside her cheeks. She returns for extras, even when the first servings don't, and I with a

plastic bag must remove them. Both of us crouching, at the mercy of a couch.

Permission Slip

I can recall crouching beside a cow
on a low stool that knew, kicking
the barn wall behind her, that I
was not her calf. So I can't appreciate *some*
synonyms for bovine: unconcerned, complacent,
and stupid. *Ignore that*, the farmer said,
and tug toward the tin pail. Just a kid on a class trip
convinced that my milk came from her.
We churned what we'd collected and
spread the butter on saltines.
Rounded up, boarded on the bus, we watched the cow
lick her own nose. From this passing view
she *must've* looked unconcerned and complacent
with manure-caked hooves and variable sunshine.
She was anything but stupid.
On the trip back we stopped for ice cream,
shadowing more cows. One smacked at flies,
another's tongue slobbered between fence posts
and licked drips of chocolate soft-serve from my knuckles
until her brows sprung up, her lips
flopped over her gums, as if recognizing the flavor
as one she had not given me permission
to enjoy.

Downburst

Soon the sound of swarming helicopters
develops like a photograph hung in a darkroom.

We're okay, Mom says shaking, worried that Dad
isn't, and shuffles me and Ross upstairs.

Outside, scattered hail melts like our terror
in tiny craters around the lawn.

Awash only in a soggy blanket of May's
green leaves we ask, *was that a tornado?*

Like vultures, the helicopters keep circling.
They report over the radio the name of the storm –

downburst, a shell of cold air that plummets
toward the ground, then straight-line winds

stampede at 104 miles-per-hour lasting only
15 minutes. 15 was long enough for us,

huddled in our basement's unfinished half,
watching out the ground-level window

the trees play limbo in the wind, snap-ready.
But the wind reconsidered, left our home

calm, stunned, power cut off, our hearts
still beating – a dial tone Mom interrupts

by calling Dad's office. Her knees buckle
under the weight of not knowing. When he

picks up, says he's fine, loves her and is glad
we're okay, my mom, like the trees,

stands again, but slightly to the east.

If Buried in My Avalanche

Assuming you're still conscious,
stranger, black-diamond skier,
don't be tempted to slam your boot
through generations of snow.

You'll only cause more tremors so settle
for dormancy. Try not to remember that
for those buried the survival rate drops
exponentially after fifteen minutes.

Scrape a small space in front of your
mouth, purse your frigid lips, and hold
a pocket of oxygen. Press all you've
hoarded today, into the snow:

a planetarium of pocket lint, pennies
more useless now than ever, a balled-
up receipt with gum inside. Assuming
you're still conscious, let me confess

that once, out back of my house,
by the bogs with creeping vines and
berries, red like the snow beneath your
head, I knocked loose a boulder perched

in a mountain of reserved sand. So don't
bother with the lighter. It'll run out before
the snow fully melts. The credit cards, too,
give them back and I'll pay off your debt.

To the Preservation of

Dead Indians

Before any construction could continue
on our family's addition, my little brother and I,

holding junior anthropologist trowels –
plastic, CAT yellow – tossed dirt clods

on metal screens and shook the frames,
hoping arrowheads, chips of baked clay,

a bead, or several, would
hop across the mesh.

If we had found a human bone
among the bottle caps, nails and acorns,

let's say the left half of a lower jaw bone
with a few remaining molars, neatly spaced,

the town would've christened it the
newest exhibit at the museum of local history

and artifacts –we would've cheered
as backhoes stampeded in,

baring their iron teeth.

All the Tender Boxes

We dug a new direction through the backyard
for the water to drain from our basement.

The sump pump preserved our memories
stacked in tender boxes rarely opened

labeled “X-mas ornaments” or “misc. wires &
cords.” Sometimes I’d slip into kindergarten papers,

“My Favorite” whatever, the only stuffed animals left
after a yard sale, poems I’d written the same year

I stopped kissing my parents goodnight.
I thought I could bury them on the page, then,

in a box with stray pieces of puzzles I’d
given up on lining the bottom, still soggy

from the first flood. Now, my dad jokes,
as he does every year, how he already knows

what to get me for X-mas – another puzzle
I’ll never finish. I tell him, when all 500 pieces fit,

I want to find the box that’s kept a decade’s
worth of nights I slipped upstairs without

a kiss goodnight, still warm and dry – all
the sugar-coated stuff I’d like to dig through.

Clean, Clean Yards

When fueled by iced-coffee my parents
were tireless diggers, their weekend work

hindered only by their share of a million or so
rocks an ancient glacier abandoned

creeping up the continent like a slug.
Not that this ever stopped them.

Perched on the swingset, I watched
every kick to the butt-end

of the shovel-blades, worrying that mom's
handle would collapse in on its duct tape, or

dad's kneecap might burst
colliding with another unaffected rock.

Not that this
would've stopped them.

In fact the blades of my parents' shovels
grew dull carving their mid 30's

into one new project after another - a patch
of rhododendrons planted, a brick patio

arranged for idle furniture,
holes dug deep to fit thick cement legs

to support a deck, a propane grill,
mom and dad, too exhausted

to change out of their work clothes,
sipping white zinfandel.

Whitman Casting's Metal Scraps

In March, the piles stand as tall
as the iron stag guarding the foundry,

taunting my parents at the dead end
of Cherry Street. Mom slices her hands

picking scrap iron like rusted ginger
from her garden. What else could

she have done for her tiger lily bulbs?
Every 4 AM industrial behemoths like

the Jolt & Squeeze Molding Machine and
the Goff Tumblast crash on and wake Dad.

He gets a hundred signatures just so
they'll start at 5. What else could he

have done since we lived on a landfill
guarded by an iron stag, standing taller

than us all, contaminating the water?
It made the neighbor kids nastier.

One time, a boy dropped a brick
on my brother's head and watched him

bleed on the steps of our playhouse.

Tiger Lilies, Ants, and Peaches

So speckled and orange-vicious mom's tiger lilies
looked more tiger than lily, more predatory

than the morning-glories scaling our house
like monkeys. While her pink and purple

rhododendrons bewitched bumblebees
the tiger lilies grew so jungle-tall

they could see the peach tree in our backyard,
the one from which only ants ate.

Those lucky ants. For 8 years my parents
tried transforming that house into a home,

dirt that was mostly discarded scrap iron
into a garden full of beautiful flowers.

In 8 years I never ate a single peach.
They're already rotting, Mom said,

tending to the tiger lilies, as if
she couldn't contend with tiny black ants.

As if she needed to give up once.
In '96 we moved; my parents were sick

of living beside train tracks, drug dealers,
and wild kids, but I think they loved

the home they made for me and
my brother, who like the tiger lilies

had grown too close to the hanging fruit.
Their stamen each like saber teeth.

Jump Mountain

Close to the top we watched an owl
plugged-in to a fence post like
a magnolia data processor, nocturnal

white, waiting, it seemed, to fly files
up the mountainside
to your parents' house.

Could the owl's talons, pressed in
to gaps where rain cracks the wood,
connect its body to ours?

Could a wireless feed fire
along the fence's crossbeams,
up through the tires?

I could only hope. I didn't know
how else your parents could love you
for bringing me home.

When the owl shut its eyes,
it uploaded pictures of us
to stream on their kitchen counter.

In a side-by-side slideshow
I'm presented in one eye and you
in the other, like we were some

two-pronged cable, a glitch that
could have misled them, but the owl
self-corrects, spinning its head

to blur our virtual positions,
obscuring ones and zeroes
like only an owl can.

Star Gazer at 102,800 Feet

After Joseph Kittinger, but for Carrie

Before I walked-off the highest step in this world,
I stood inside the gondola of a hot-air balloon,
held space and tasted nebula like pomegranate seeds.
Star-clusters raced away, melting like snow
on blacktop. The taste on my lips was a galaxy's
that no man had been to before. I wore
a suit pressurized with pure oxygen to
keep me guarded from frostbite, high-winds,
what little I knew of heartbreak in Outerspace.
I couldn't tell I'd been falling faster than my voice:
in love with my susceptibility to the ground,
in love with the yielding of my wrists to your grip.
Sling them over my head, I said, like a parachute.
I'll float the rest of the descent back to Earth.