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I grew up poor in a rural area of western New York, and my poems wrestle with the poverty, and landscape of the Rust Belt region. A great deal of my work deals with the aftermath of suicide, and violence as a response to grief, so that much of my poems take the form or tone of elegy. I see myself as merging the real with the incendiary. Fire and arson provide a means of exploring the physical and psychological landscapes created in rural areas. Fire is often the clearest path for me to explore this region because it was ubiquitous; growing up poor, no one had money for dump tickets, so they burned their trash. When the cornfields needed to be cleaned of stalks, or readied for the next season, farmers burned them. Without air conditioning, our trailer was something of an ember. We fed our trees into the wood stove in the winter. It felt like the area had burned up my friend who took his own life. The work seeks to create a wildness that I felt was always below the surface in my rural upbringing. Being someone who hardly succeeded in school, and came from a poor family in an area that people call “nowhere” I always felt I wasn’t or couldn’t be heard. These poems are screaming. In my work I want to create landscapes, scenes, and characters that must be heard.

CONTROL BURN

by

Colby Cotton

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APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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I

Fuel

My cousins could wet their hair in gasoline,
they said, strike a match
and feel nothing. On my drive home

I pictured the line of boys in white t-shirts,
campfire heads walking the light
scalded hayfields. A little girl at the park

said she stepped on a colony of ground bees.
As the hive boiled over her
she leaned, scooped the queen from the throne

and ate it. I think every drone I see
must have ripped from her skin.
I think there's something wrong with me

because I believed them. I can't turn
from this image of bees crawling
from her nostrils, the boys circled

in a garage twisting gas soaked rags
over their bowl cuts. If I saw her in my kitchen—
a hum of rapid wings. If the boys swung

from branches outside my window
and made a flame tree in my yard,
my eyes would say no. This isn't true.

If she swallowed the queen, she'd float
her ghost through the rafters.
Boys can't sleep in beds of fire.

I like to think stories like these are possible.
It's not enough to say I stole a bird
from a cherry tree. Something wilder—

Elegy in Snow with Revolver and Busted Teeth

The gun was oiled, the chamber, empty,
and to prove it, you pressed the revolver
to my cheek, and *click, click, click*, nothing

happened. Birds shook ice from their wings
in the naked branches. Fishermen
cracked the surface of a frozen pond,

and when you turned the barrel to yourself,
I felt the bitter chew of busted teeth
in your crooked jaw, the metallic taste of light

driven down a steel line. The hammer struck
the firing pin. The cylinder turned on the pawl.
Click, click, click. And nothing happened.

The Carson Boy

A weed had grown through his shirt
by the time they found him.
He vanished in winter, last seen

closing the door of his college apartment.
The Carson boy, as they'd come
to call him, drove two hours south

through the night and walked the train tracks
and fields that run along our town,
letting his truck idle off a back road,

puffing exhaust to snow, melting it,
until the engine, too, grew tired
and died there. That same night,

on County Route 67, two cars would
collide head-on. Joe Woodard,
headlights on farm houses, road signs

and electric fence, on his way home
from the night shift at Dresser Rand,
drinking cheap coffee, rubbing sleep

from his eyes— the other, a blue van
full of teenagers with a booze-soaked
backseat, and cranked up radio.

The investigators later found
the Carson boy must have walked
the field above the crash that night,

a fist of pines, ragged trees
behind him. He may have seen the two
fans of light collapse into each other,

sat on the crumbled curve
in the new black silence, the moon
silvered grass, and threw stones

at the wreckage. He may have kicked
the windows out and laid beside Tonya,

the volleyball captain, under stars

spread like salt across a table.

And after, climbed down

the embankment, trudged farm runoff

past grain silos and wind turbines

into the knee-deep river, hands steadied

by stone, saw the sky in shards,

and the bass ripple through dark water.

And the coroner blames it on hypothermia.

The brain does strange things when afflicted.

That night, red and white lights turned
on snowy fields and twisted metal.

Buzzards, mothers woke in the middle

of the night not knowing yet just why.

The Killing Floor

1. A Memory

Waking under lamplight, I'm at the troughs
again: a boy distracting sows
with white bags of feed, my uncle with a flat bar
raised above their chewing heads. I still see
the dumbstruck eyes. The pink crush—
the thin, wet trickle from their ears
to the nostrils, the mounds of swine, resting
on a cool ground. For years since
I've felt their disbelief, bodies frozen
and curled on the hardened Earth.
I still see the line of hogs exit
the mud fields with eyes full of sun,
where the sirens fired off the loading pens
and I wanted every poison in that valley
to unfold over my skin. The pink flowers
of the pig's faces draining off in the mud
and shit. Their teeth rattle
like white coins down the marrow of my sleep.

2. A Reckoning

For the one I put down like a dog in the reeds:
I praise you for your fine hairs
that boiled off in the worn vats on the banks
of the Canisteo River and burned my blood.
Praise you for the mayflies that hovered
my skin and your blank snout—
how your gentleness drove my knees to bone
in the creed beds for prayer. For it was your eyes
that turned the spokes of my cold bicycle
away from the slaughterhouse, away
from my mother, father, sister, auntie and uncle
who will never leave that town. When I die
I will open myself to the sounds of your curdled
scream, where you saw me there for what I was:
a scared sunburnt boy. A red, furious child.

Arsonist's Ode

You who sleep in ragweed and attic,
draw your red tongue over asphalt,

eucalyptus, aloe, snow melt.
You who struck the match

below the mattress, illuminated
the imagination of soldier and child,

warped the faces of dolls, who I saw
devour a car whole on the interstate.

Destroyer of villages, the Cuyahoga,
magnificent golden temples of Myanmar—

wake! Every bent stalk of corn
or dry feed is your opportunity.

You who stood behind flint, behind
every disused hearth so long, stretch

your arms in the lint trap, the pile
of rags in the hamper, whole walls

of fiberglass insulation. I dreamed of you
in the stitching of a baseball, behind

the yellowed page of the library book—
each leather fold in my wallet. Ignite

in my palms. Speak to me now through
faulty wiring, filthy crawl spaces, cord-

wood. O auroras of heat, impersonator
of suns, no sparrow or Cessna can escape

your black ceiling! Unquenchable
demon, crouched and rising in full sun,

show me now to the canister of kerosene,
the blowtorch sleeping on my work bench.

Landscape with Carcass at Loon Lake

After Milosz

Bees build around red liver
ants build around black bone
A fisherman mends a glimmering net
Autumn women walk through the fields
under umbrellas
 with tracks of deer and caribou
Moles slowly bore a tunnel
Here is the valley of shallow rivers
 Here: an immense body of white fog
I come in my broken body
 to deliver this sight:
carved suns and moons on the joints of pines
or crosses; bees building around a red trace
ants building around the places left by my body—
to walk on hills over waters
cities, roads, human customs
 An inhuman thing:
I may resemble a gardener
a eucalyptus grove
 an immutable untaught choir

On the Anniversary of His Death

They pack their lips with tobacco,
and spin bald tires in vacant
parking lots, climb the hillside in headlights,

toss wrinkled empties in the cab.
They're running from the water
he walked into, from the taut rope

around the oak's limb. They howl,
whoop at the campfire blaze that eats
the labels from their spent bottles—

chew deer jerky, dare each other to run
the coals of the fire. They want to see
the flame climb a pant leg. In the morning

they piss on dirt, take the mallards
with buckshot, they hold clay pigeons
like his hardened hands in their denim

pockets, wake with cross bows and level
their arrows at the injustice of the heron lifting
from a stream: *A life for a life, they say.*

Wild, patient, their lures rest all day on still
water. They want the steelheads in the lake—
something to fry with butter in a pan.

Elegy with Ice and Burning Barrel

You stand like a bonfire in the lawn
and I feed you ice. You stake a chair into
a snow bank and your mouth fills

with salt. This is the dream where I lose
my hands down your throat.
This is when I disappear

through your body. And when I wake
you are holding very still at the end
of my bed, and there's blood down

your shirt. You say there is a vast ringing
in your ears. Your teeth hurt.
When I touch your hair, nothing happens.

When I touch your face, nothing happens—
dust shifts around the fold of your collar.
At the church, I followed our carved names

along each row of pews.
I cut the hair from my arms
to be closer to your body. In the forest,

a trash fire traces the hillside, smoke
twists off a burning barrel. In the forest:
scorched earth, the burned-out pines.

The Adrian Girl

How they held her down in the cornfield
How the farmer found her with a skirt icing her ankles
How she stood at the bus stop with piss blooming from her jeans
How she twisted away the necks of the chickens
How she flattened pennies on the rails
How she held a lighter to the frays of her dress
How she felt a light pass through the pond of her body
How her stomach swelled
How she gave birth
How she buried the placenta by the pear trees in her lawn
How she cut a pillowcase into little dolls
How she left her body heat in the bathwater and her desire in the corn
How she swayed at the fields darkening edge until she was convinced
 every animal she saw was the ghost
 of another.

Transfiguration

That Christian Boy called us heathens for the last
time, so we tied him like a thin flame
to the electric fence in Martin's pasture.

He spread his pale arms like Christ himself
after we pulled a shroud like a body bag
over his head, didn't speak when we smeared

his temples with snake berry's and cow shit.
He pursed his cracked lips
when we streaked them in purple balm—

draped his shoulders in road kill—
a flattened rat snake slung from his sun-
burnt neck. Fat leaches from the Scum

Pond clung like black pearls to his freckled arms.
We prayed the mud wasps would build
a dark hood over his head, that his eyes,

would crust over with hives. And he took it
all: his rubber boots teeming with earth-
worms, the elastic waistband, his white

underwear brimming with night crawlers—
waxed eyes trained on the dark heat
of a trash fire probing the hillside, the broken

stalks of milkweed bleeding white at his feet.
In that field blazed with cornflowers
we stood in the immense ringing

of insects, the distant threshers churning
hay in their steel teeth, his head dazzled
in sweat, in dregs of beer we found in the creek

bed. We watched idly for a plea, a herd of doe
to amble their slick paths for the wormy pears
we laid at his feet, fish heads duct taped

to his useless palms—the black stream of vultures
circling the ragged hillside—the black-

feathered halo, spinning on his bowl cut.

Instructions: Grave Robbery

CLIMB to the to the top of your house. Your father is dead now, so tear down your gutter
choked
with leaves.

PEEL back the shingles on your roof.

RESSURRECT the bird clogging the throat of the chimney.

COVER your face in soot.

FEED the plume of feathers into a blowtorch.

MAKE it fly.

BURN dressers, speakers, mailboxes, his closet full of shirts.

NOTICE hay bales soaked with rain, the pair of overcooked eggs you left on the stove
and the orange coil breathing beneath it.

GO to the cemetery.

TELL the undertaker you are there for the sky to change colors, only. For air
in your tires.

REMEMBER matchstick longhouses. Science fairs: a rose dipped in nitrogen.
The glass jar he filled with receipts, his many pairs of glasses, the dusty stacks of
National Geographic's.

BELIEVE the grave is a basin your hands dip into.

CRACK his name like ice in your teeth.

DIG

KNOW it will be difficult. Your shirt will stain canary yellow. Your nails will rim with
filth.

You will

REMEMBER more clearly his hands, his voice on the answering machine,
his piano fingers.

DIG

SAY *I forgot to pack your watches.*

SAY *this will only take a moment. I'm here.* The surgical scars will still be there. The tumors will still be there, the western shirt with the ivory buttons will still be there, but

OPEN the pale casket door.

OPEN the trunk of your car.

OPEN the book of the dead.

CROSS out his

NAME

Control Burn

Farmhands descended

weedy banks, warlike in oily hats,
gas cans and rags, and pulled a head
of flame across the low, bent stalks—
130 yards of burn, a glaring galaxy of grain
collapsing in on itself, and in its center,
a scarecrow staked on a brittle pole, and in
the yellow haze of my mind, thick
plumes of smoke curling like long, gray
weeds across the sky. The scarecrow—
a man collecting his possessions and stepping
inside a furnace. The flame ate the seams
of his leg, the buttoned eyes, a fire crawled
as a scream from his burlap throat.
And who was I then, to want the heads
of grain silos torn off—strewn
like wrinkled cans in a boiled river, charred
threshers dragged like massive bodies
from the barn, buried like black seeds in each
solitary inch of that burning earth?
What was the part of me that filled those

ditches with lighter fluid, thrilled by
the spread of immutable destruction, the white arm
of a distant steeple swallowed in the smoke,
the joy in the tanned arms of farmhands
feeding this blaze. Imagine: the body of a man,
smoldering in the ashes.

Elegy with Mercy Killing, Some Daylight in It

You shut your boot on its busted head,
and the car-struck doe stopped thrashing

in the pond. When the water went still,
we pushed the body deeper. I stood

at the water's darkening edge while you
opened small game on the hood

of your car: mallard, grouse, waterfowl—
splayed chests steamed out on the slab

below you. The day you died, a thaw
climbed from the sharp grass into shutters.

Icicles dissolved on the gables. Pear trees
let go their frost. I sifted the coarse hairs

the sunken doe raised to the pond's surface.
A coyote limped free from a snare.

Horseflies shook from their eggs underground.

II

Landscape with Missing Girl

Add a canoe cut from pine, lean it against the house
with a scattering of glass

Add a fox skin nailed above the door handle
a rusted swing set dissolving in the lawn

Add his shirt, cut up the sides, a sock in his mouth,
milkweed bleeding white at his feet

Add his hair in the robin's nest
And a weed growing through it

the rim of sky going down like a sore on the hillside

Add strays licking dew from the high grass
Stick green blades to their sticky tongues

The Killer in the brake lights
A sunflower growing through her ribcage

Let the heat go from the creek bed,
The heat shimmer off stones

pull tentacles of lightning over silos
The Search Party: a long, shade passing

a wood shed peeling in the sun,

now for the horseflies, blue dragonflies hovering the water
now let the rope cinched to her ankle loose in the breeze

peek her hair from the high grass
let the rookie see it

now let the light catch her silver necklace
draw them closer

The girl: the blown pupil of the field's eye

AMBER Alert

When the father gathers the silver
fishing line, his tackle box, his phone
lights, then trembles in his pocket.

He answers.

Men carry carp like bright lanterns
from the drying docks to shore.

**

Bending her hands into her face,
The Mother lies her head on the cool table.

The Father remembers the placenta
they buried beside the lemon trees

in the yard. The white tissue paper
crinkling open, the blackened sack

she slept in.

He remembers her old sleeping bag,
a cocoon in the attic rafters.

**

A light opens like a steer's eye— a spade
crushes soil.

The Killer stands in his ambient red
brake lights, and closes the trunk.

**

The police walked the high fields with K-9's, and all
they could turn up for days were flocks of birds

blowing apart.

**

Anytime she lost a tooth, they pressed
them too into the soil, her teeth, studded

like seeds in the garden, so that now,

at night with the blue flicker of the television
pasted to the walls, as a voice crackles

through the set, he sees her growing

by the forsythia she loved, her red hair
just now peeking through the lattice

**

The phone trembles in the receiver.
An overhead shot on the wide-screen:

a helicopter. The rotating blades

of the ceiling fan. A tracking shot:
blue officers, blue tarpaulin, white cord.

**

smoking on the porch at night

a fire burns through her palms.

Honey, The mother says

Through the screen

The long gray ember
Of a cigarette falls to ground

Smoke cuts the screen

He pictures The Killer, seated Indian-style
on their roof, peeling back tiles,

His long, thin fingers

lick tar

like icing from his fingers.

**

At night, the mother sees the daughter
behind the cold, frosted living-

room glass, swinging on the branches, passing
her movement from one oak to the next

in the morning

stray dogs crouch like children
in the cut lawn, licking dewy grass—

the pink wafer of her daughter's tongue
turns over in her mind.

Ten full acres, a lawn, a mouth of green blades.

**

The carpenter bees are below the porch.
When the father presses his ear

to the lacquered deck, he hears them
working, burrowing

neatly through the board.

He remembers her below
a papery hive, driving a busted pencil

down her plaster cast, bearing
names of schoolchildren and crudely
drawn hearts: JOSEY. HEARTS

DEBORAH. HEARTS.

He unscrews the lattice from the steps,
and lays the white grid on the lawn.

He shakes the can of poison and sprays.
A bee nuzzles in the grain, and withers.

**

The Killer tamps the coffee can into the filter
He tamps the radiator kicking out heat

and opens a book of statues. Gabriel's
broken wings stretch beneath stone.

In the yard he loves, having crushed the egg-
shell, and kneaded it into a bed of roses,

the petals unfurl like bloody wings
to the bodies of bees. The Killer turns

the page, the blinds lay a black grid
on the carpet, the kettle on the stove groans,

then screams.

**

The black sheets of ice break apart
on the pond, lift carp like her pale hands
to surface.

**

A seed. Yes.
More of a seed now than a girl.

**

The Mother climbs onto the father
And he nudges his penis inside

she rolls her hips, his hands sink
into her thighs. she peels

off her shirt. He carries one breast
in his palm.

He turns his head one way, and birds break apart
they leave in the shape of the tree they left.

He turns his head the other way. A glass
of ice water melts

into the nightstand.

When he comes, his stomach crawls
out of him,

when he comes
he shivers inside of her.

**

The Killer licks a stamp for an envelope

The Killer wipes moisture from the glass of beer on the coffee table

The Killer unfolds the garden hose

The Killer writes the chapter headings to his biography

The Killer pours cream into his coffee

The Killer feels the voice standing behind the stereo

The Killer stands under the gables for rain

The Killer wears the daughter's hair tie on his wrist
to the office—

The Killer wipes his cum from the length of the mirror

The Killer slices apples crossways

The Killer lines the two halves, two moons lying on the windowpane

The Killer opens the trunk of his car

The Killer collects the strands of her hair

The Killer collects another girl

The Killer drives for another girl

**

The Mother opens a drawer.
There is the glue stick,

there are the cutouts, little glittered
stars, and paper people, with holes

for eyes. Samantha in cursive, purple

Gel pen fingers, The Mother applies
the glue

to her forehead, razory cheeks.
She unscrews the smoke detector,

and turns on the furnace.

She opens the window to breeze.
Gooseflesh. She closes the cabinet:

her face, a landscape of red paper roses.

**

Underground,
a mole passes in front of The Daughter's eyes.

Above,
a pair of sparrows sail from a nest of twine
and twigs.

Above,
Her ghost watches the light bleed soft

through the birches—

see all that's left to see:

Deer chewing beechnuts by the shedding trees.
A search party pass like a long shade through

the budding trees.

III

Creation Story

Two skulls and a thrum of nerves and I was
waiting in the sweat sprawling
the small of my father's back, the bite mark

left above her shoulder. From the burning
orchard of bodies, skin peeled
to its pit. From two backs and two mouths

and all their limbs combined, came the pink
rush of tongues, the shivering out
of fluid, genitals, came their eyes rolled

white to the backs of their heads: the vision—
a window slid open: a swarm of fruit flies
quivering on the core of an apple.

Genesis: a cluster of nerves, firing.

Genesis: my body waking unto a body of light.

A Week After My Father Passes, I'm Fishing Again

I make a cut at the gills and draw it to the vent.
When I pull down on the head, driftwood
passes, and all but its patterned skin falls

in pieces to the lake. I oar back in full sun,
and the crab crawl from the low tide.
Birds rise in the shapes of trees they left.

I fry the trout with rosemary and oil, ease
the sharp, white bones from between my teeth.
Ice water melts a ring into my table.

*

Water and fish: what my father begged for
at the end with his catheter and machines.
I fed him bits of carp, pulled apart his soiled

sheets, and when I dipped a sponge in steel
buckets, or forked feathery meat
to his tongue, his bag of morphine dripped

on a clear line. The windows black grid
shifted on the carpet. The glassed eyes
of prized taxidermy eyed him from the walls.

*

At night I sit on the drying docks while the hot
stones on the shores darken, and cool. The lure
baited: silvery backs of fish roll on still water.

Elegy in Makeshift Aviary, a Sink Full of Birds

The sink is full of birds.
There are swallows in the freezer.
The ceiling sags, is warped

with crows. There are a thousand
small birds shooting through
these walls. I took down

every power line to coax the sparrows.
I find you beneath my bed
with feathers in your mouth.

You raise a lighter to the mattress,
and say, *this is loss*.
I find you in the lawn splaying

a grouse on a cord of wood—
your head turned
in the sun, *this too, is loss*.

You walked into a hayfield
and all the police could
turn up for days were flocks

of birds blowing apart.
I've mapped the heads
and measured each wing.

I could leave this place,
but I built it and sealed
the windows. There are no

shovels or spoons. The day
you died, I saw a tanager preening
its wings on a snow-caked branch,

The day you died, the limb snapped
under the weight of snow.

Against Rehabilitation

After Johannes Bobrowski

No toll of bells sounded
above, or hovered on asphalt
when I fled clinics, or lifted
hash from the coils of electric
stoves, the copper wire stripped

and cashed-in from plaster
walls was my own. Police never
passed in red and white lights,
or burned a spotlights on
a hiding space, hunkered down

in the alders' night shadows
beside weather-cracked tires
of ditched cars, or torn backseats
in junkyards swatting flies
from my face. Nothing came.

The streaming light of morning fell
from the closed sky; slats of light
shimmered like gold broth
all around me; I came along
baseball diamonds towards liquor

stores and half-dead dealers
for a needle in the river of my vein
on the dull brown floors of half-
way houses. Laughing. I stood
behind the high fences in a cloud

of mosquitoes while the silver rattle
of morning traffic carried me
by the sounds of the weedy highway.
If my body were a temple,
I built it, and if it should be burn
let it burn in ecstasy.

Pulse

Eight crooked necks hung above
the trailer hitch while my father pulled
a buck knife through each white belly
of the geese. Kidneys. Lungs. Heart
dropped like kindling
to the frozen ground, the cedars
alive with termites. I found a dog
in the creek bed with her ribs exposed.
Watched a fox press its teeth
in a toad's rocky back, a blade of light
spread on the splintered handle
of an ax. There was a thaw
in my bones like a tapeworm uncurling
in a glass jar. I sat beneath an oak
and watched antlers rise from the rye grass
with shell casings at my feet.
I could feel the cud turn in the steer's jaw—
The crocuses were still, purple explosions
at the electric fence.

And what brought the trees teeming
with black crickets, the static sound,
a deer tick to burrow through
my sunburnt forearm, what snagged
the grouse in the snare, conjured
me with a pocketknife and a robin
at the property line. The ribcage cracked
open. The heart tapped out.

Laying in Bed, Telling Me Your Secret

Sweat had broken like a fever against you
when you found the missing girl's body
it was like white petals had folded into her
skin— a body like a mirror, turning back any light
that would touch it. Not a mile into the forest,
a girl yourself, she was like

a husk blown from a hand, or settled like
a seed at your feet, clots of soil along the body.
The only way something could look like that, you
said, was if buttermilk were poured through her—
a shock of pink and white in the forest,
a permanent stare trained on the branches, the light

wisp of clouds, the buttery sunlight,
and what was left of her blood was like
a little red gill had opened from her
broken lip. The leaves sifted through the forest
in the cold morning and fell on the body,
said she reminded you of the carp you'd

see washed up on the shore by your
father's cabin on Lake Erie, as if it were the forest
and not the thaw that pulled the dead towards light.
You said, running your hand along my body,
you felt your head split in two, something like
a dull throb when you buttoned her

paisley blouse, the mini-skirt, brushed back her
hair, and when the red and blue lights
came to turn on the trees of your family's forest
you knelt beside her and peeled leaves like
eels from her cheek, her arms, it showed you
bruises, a girl your own age, a body

no different from your own, really, a body
with a secret, like the one you tell me in this light.
You had seen her the week before, emerge like
an apparition from a tree line, the forest
near the playground, and climbed into a truck, her
head turned in the sun, and looked straight through you.

Poem Made of Peanut Shells and Your Root Beer Lip Gloss

In the whirr of wheels and dollar bills floating
in glass booths, beside the portable blue

toilets holding their blue water,
you said the cherry ice cream was good,

though runny, as a child was pulled
away by a father's meaty hand.

We clapped on monster trucks with funnel
cakes: Gravedigger, El Toro Loco crushed

cars like steel lungs. You toppled
me below the bleachers, cracking

peanut shells in your teeth, licked
yellow mustard from each pillar of

my fingers, and twisted cotton candy
from my hand. Was it ever so good

as standing there by the sashes
at the coronation of Miss Allegheny,

as the elephants, (those great move-
able walls) sauntered nose to tail, kissing

your collarbone at the butter sculptures—
the blue and pink wads of cotton candy,

my fingers rushing your salty hair?

Elegy with Revolver and the Ruined Temple of Delphi

It was not you, but a boy that reminded
me of you, packing a glass pipe with weed
and reclining with a smoking mouth

on the banks of the river in town.
In the last letter you wrote from Greece,
another dry morning, and the tourists ascend

for the ruined temples of Delphi.
You said toddlers were cutting their teeth
by the red blooms of peonies, mothers

rubbed sunscreen into the burning faces
of babies and sliced bread. *They were preparing
for Athens as if it were an afterlife.*

I pictured you infinitely there,
as something ancient yourself: your pagan hands
goring a bull in the full sun, or laying

your cold brain on the marble altar of Zeus—
that you had streamed through the vision
of the Oracle of Delphi. Pure mythology:

the revolver in your mouth on the shores
of Crete, your body risen as an apparition
on the Black Sea. And was this what

you wanted? To close your eyes with coins?
What ritual of creosote and lamb burned
so inexplicably inside you? Drove the nail

so cleanly through the marrow of your sleep

Ars Poetica

I don't want to know how his brain begins
each morning. How my other self feels

most at home at the window, watching
Japanese beetles, Gypsy moths make lace

of our gardens. I don't want to know
about his hands, his weight falling

on a lover. How he feels the bats form
a black heart in the attic rafters. He runs

his pale finger along a crack in my brain.
He slices my tongue slices my tongue cross-

ways, and folds it into little pink soldiers
on the snowy page, and tells them, *get*

going. I'm tired of his eyes searching,
searching, searching. Him at the property

line with a robin, and its chest cracked open.
He wants me to draw shapes in chalk and

candles along the hardwood, close my eyes,
to kneel like a mantis inside my body.

Father as Coyote

You find this rank animal, lifting
his gnarled head into your light.
The icy jaws snap up the last of
his red meal: your mother, sister,
brothers—these bodies he fed on
so long, are no more than gristle
in his wet teeth. Your hand tightens
on the cold Remington mahogany
stock. The high, yellow fronds
crust over with ice, and the grass encased
in frost peeks from the torn blanket
of snow laid across this field—
a field that has come to a single, halting
thrum, beating in your throat.
And in that blank space between you,
in the limp grouse you've splayed
and offered at his feet, with blood slamming
through the tips of your fingers,
the night is so still, you could dust off
this snowy wind like the glimmering
surface of a frozen pond, or crack it
with an awl. No choice here,
in the branch-shattered moon-
light, with his neck craning upward,
your whole body howling
forward, but to level your rifle—
end his song.

Self-Portrait, Drawn on a Bedroom Window

Leaves pull across my forehead
when I sleep. Two sets of eyes, extra
legs and more toes than I know what

to do with. Cigarette smoke can climb
my stepstool spine. The snap peas
and hyacinths I've admired

in the garden now grow freely
down my shirtsleeves. I have a reason
for insomnia, for horizon lines,

my knowledge of airliners—whole flocks
of geese to clean from my teeth.
I hold the sun like a fiery dime.

Paint and horseflies keep me up
at night. The mere thought of it—
how anything could be a part of

my cracked membrane
and what rattles against the house
is beyond me. I'm free to exist in two

places at once, in my body
and in the icy slide of the moon.
There are joggers like fine-

toothed combs through my grassy hair,
my eyes permanently open
to the leathery path of bats, the tree roots:

a divine knitting through my ribcage.
Here, I'll never die,
here to stay long after I'm gone.

Elegy for Seven Years

Had you been able to breathe or even stand,
I would have walked you to the river

and held your head underwater.
If I had found you in snow-

deleted fields, still alive in the shade
of sycamores— if you had failed

to pull the trigger,
I would have lifted you

in the pale orchard
of my hands and unraveled

your skull, a sun-
rattled coin spun across the field,

a flock of cardinals tearing apart
branches. If you had asked me

to cock the hammer,
or run the blade

down your arm, I would have
slicked my hands through your hair—

would have scattered
your teeth in the blue shade

of the barren pasture—
where the winged seeds

of box elders twisted

to ground.

IV

Albino Dragonfly

Blips of human heat suspended on a bomber's screen—
red hands kneading skin into flame,

and what's left is something ancient,
a hovel covered in dust with a high ringing

like a horseshoe pitched in the ear
and driven down the body,

something that slips through a keyhole

and peels back the feet, unlocks
the joints and stacks the self

at the window without so much as a boot print
leading to the bombed.

The drone lifts in Kandahar,
an albino dragonfly rising

in the light. Across the desert,
a farmer uncovers the hunter-gatherers' last

movements, eating terrapin, placing a berry
on outstretched tongue. The dead

have known this feeling: the breaking apart
like grain with stone, the crumbling

of bread for millennia. And what do they say?
The reanimated skull in a bog

grows back in pixels on a screen,

here again if only to repeat, *there's more*
below the parking lot. The child vanishes

from the aisles of clothes, the girl with packed bags
climbs into a truck on a highway

and what they tell us is simple. We disappear.