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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

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This thesis written by Forrest Kelly Rapier 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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## 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  
enough 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

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

Over One Thousand Guns! Lowest Prices  
in The State! A thirty-foot  
sign warns One-in-Five Will Overdose  
over chicken-scratch-backroad-haunts.

\*

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 propellers  
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

## SUBLIME ON A BLADE'S EDGE

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