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Oh Sinnerman, Where You Gonna Run To?

Semein Washington
Longwood University

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OH SINNERMAN, WHERE YOU GONNA RUN TO?

By

Semein Washington

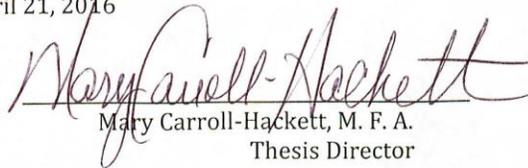
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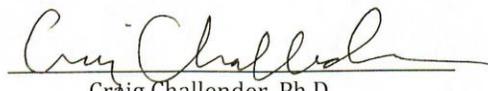
Master of Arts in English

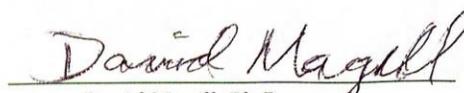
Longwood University

Department of English and Modern Languages

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Mary Carroll-Hackett, M. F. A.
Thesis Director


Craig Challender, Ph.D.
First Reader


David Magill, Ph.D.
Second Reader

Oh Sinnerman, Where You Gonna Run To

by

Semein Washington

A Thesis

submitted to the Department of English and Modern Languages

of LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of English Creative Writing

with a concentration in Poetry

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No Good Being

I was no good being a boy --

I thought all day only to find,
in the summer, those ants and white
ant eggs looking like rice
by the roots of my pecan tree

while, at the plastic swing set,
I found it better to pour rain water
out of its seats, hollow
and sealed except for a minute hole.

But the fact is, when it comes
to my memory, my tongue
has been confused,

as though I tried, at some unknown
time, to stack my building blocks to heaven.
Perhaps, this would cause

my neurons to spark
too low a voltage.

Yet so much is rebuilt
by life's first quarter;
I feel hot joy in burning
lungs from trying to make it on time,
tense across my body when I shoot
a good pool game.

Why am I ashamed,
after fifteen years,

dragged back
from understanding why

I ever knocked a tree limb
against the hood of that Cadillac
no one moved or drove,
to widen holes
where the body rusted through

or why, as it hung
from the evergreen shrub,

I pinched to death
a chrysalized moth?

Each Reunion

Strange how the heat came to nest
in lobed brains, confusing notions.
Dancing made each being hear;

kinsmen rocked back and forth,
seated in circle around fire:
a dance to prepare.

Drinking roots crushed
mixed with water,
they prepared for leaving
with so little trepidation to invent
canoes and cross glaciers

so does heat push up
from memory: a simple force?

Toe of a god's shoe
or the longest strand of gods' hair,
if the kinsmen entranced
went a little further

saw billion year old cells,
by evolution's blunt surprise,
spark reproduction;

eukaryote meiosis
help-mates to "let us make
a new Heaven, a new Earth each
mutation, each habit change..."

*Scientists say a gene makes humans wander --
drew them up against Java's coast*

*by notion of colors
they could not yet see....*

"Let them be different from us."

Risking Their Bodies For Once

Before the Kanaka landed
on scattered volcanic islands,
where Hawksbill turtles, sea snakes,
green honey creepers and lei flowers bred,

they were led by wind and celestial body
on double hulled canoes and only knew
that there was land somewhere.

In that water, were the boatmen considered adrift?

Were their heroes afraid that nothing
lay ahead? Navigation might have failed.

It could be that no new gods would greet
them on another shore. There might be no
new dances, songs or kingdoms.

We cannot speak for them.
Our words aren't even close
to what they would have said.

We are sure however
that our language,
in this modern world,
on the next continent over,
often doubts success,
anticipates disaster.

We can't risk our bodies once;
our tattoos are only marking, not twining.
Our death is
a simple nutrient exchange.

We have settled after all,

afraid of drifting,

towards what might
just feed us well.

Finding Our Bodies Again

Behind a reversible curtain,
the veil of life-death, one old woman,
the Spiderwoman,
sits weaving at the loom
on her high spire of red rock
her back to the void, in the black,
lighted by herself alone.
Each knotted finger rolls
exact like a typewriter key.

Her skin's loose velvet,
her eyes little slats
from the weight of drooping skin;
her jowls press in on her concentrated mouth.
Every few hours, she'll suck tooth-vacant
gums loud in frustration.

She feeds pulsating yarn into the loom,
blood and flesh-colored
which comes from under the curtain to Earth.

She then weaves in iridescent thread,
spinning tight out of the void. As she pulls
her threads together into a human body,
Spiderwoman hears a voice often,
repeating the soul's wishes
for what she'll make.

It is every soul's rule, though she sucks her gums
each time, that she catch her nail
in the human weave, just when she would finish,
and that it unfurl.
At that very moment, the souls start to beg her
to start again, like dissatisfied children
tugging at her skirt. She turns to
her template -- just for an instant to remember.

Now, souls still whine if she weaves
a body too different
from who they were before;

so she threads the same feeling:
same stiffness, or softness,
same length, or width or weight,
same eye-color or hair texture.

Some care how she knits
lips together, as though a kiss
were ethereal concern.

In Spiderwoman's time, it is only a day or so
until her next remaking of the universe. Then
every soul will order a body to last a year.
Maybe they'll let her make eternal bodies
once they all get settled in.

The Hartford County Undertakers

You know my great cousin
and those other Indian men
in Pleasant Plains, marked

“Colored” by a Southern census
to erase them,

said there is no one to bury us
as we know how to bury each other.

We’ll build a church
but it won’t be their church;
we’ll call ourselves undertakers
but we won’t be solemn
shoveling dirt for rent.

We’ll be the well-wishers
of the dead.

We’ll be the clinking song of rocky
soil and crunching clay.

We’ll be the dance, the notion
that life seeps into Earth
and buds again;
we’ll be each other’s songs
as one by one we vanish

to pastures parallel and sweet.

The Manhood Rite

What will be required for my manhood rite?
Will I read the Torah in Hebrew, a Latin Catechism
while my voice breaks

or will I hit an armed man with a blunt stick,
coming close enough to smell the garlic on his breath,
to hear powder crack, feel heavy pistol ball rush
past my skull in dry heat

before marriage, council, hunt, war, feast?

Will they cord thick black scars through my back,
cut with a dull knife while the dripping rain
and torches scent this cool, dark lodge.

I might die unto myself,
step in darkness to continue, walking ankle-
deep in wakan, smothered in power,
rite uncompleted until light comes down.

Will I have to walk into town
and cause no trouble?

A House of Human Bodies

Four Kwakiutl boys --
Chief NaWaka'Wa's sons went out hunting
mountain goats. It was one of those stories
that explain someone's dance.

Before his boys left the safety
of the coast, their father told them
to mind the smoke because somehow
this would save their lives.

They were told to read brown smoke
As a sign of bears, white smoke for whales,
and somewhere down the line,
no doubt the most dangerous
was red smoke for cannibals.

The chief even gave them weapons:
the sort of magic that's really efficient.
He gave them a smooth pebble,
an alder-wood comb,
some fish oil,
and some mountain-goat wool.

Somehow, when the kids got to the mountains
and saw the many colors of smoke,
they went straight for the red smoke,
straight for the cannibals
as they were told not to.

Not long after, they met Baxbaxwalanuksiwe
the cannibal chief. He was a goddamn giant:
whistling, snorting, gnashing his teeth
like something out of hell.
The kwakiutl boys ran and used
the magic objects one by one
to cover their tracks.

They used the smooth pebble to make a mountain
the giant couldn't climb. The comb became a forest of alder
trees. The fish oil became a lake. The mountain goat wool
became a dense fog. Eventually, they ran all the way back to the coast
and hid from the cannibal at home.

NaWaka'Wa protected them by tying a cedar cord

around the house. He told the giant chief
to just come eat them later. The ploy worked.

The sons pretended to be dead, completing
the job with dog entrails. They set up an enormous chair
above a pit and lay motionless on the ground.

Soon, the giant came with his giant cannibal wife and child and sat
in the chair, a whole monstrous family with wild hair and disgruntled
scarlet faces.

All were amused by the trespassers' deaths
and charmed to sleep by their father.

Jumping back to life and shrugging off the dog guts,
those boys pulled the chair apart from under
the whole giant family and threw hot stones into
the pit they'd fallen in.

After all this time, the only things left are masks of great birds
and totems of Baxbaxwalanuksiwe himself. In the wake of
such desolation came much goat right away and, for all time,
the cannibal dance and society, the house of human bodies.

Across the Road

So much of the body is needed to drive;
I must be well acquainted, for instance,
with pressure all along the sole of my foot,
easing brake, easing gas, urging gas up hills
with gravity a threat -- all this from the foot flexed
forward or back on the pedal.

I must relax their arms, keep
my back straight for best visibility, for best
control over the wheel which must be tipped
as though pouring an exact measurement
for pancake batter.

So much depends on the wheel being fluid,
under the hand's full control. In this way,
I learned to adore driving as though it were
a perfect trance -- the mind made straight,
measuring out from the hood's snub nose
in conical vision across the road.

Sometimes, I am so concerned with getting
from here to there that I forget
to turn on the radio or vent the window
and find myself sweating in a silence
on the road. Sometimes I am so concerned

with the perfect posture, line of sight, hands
carrying weight, twitching to make a turn,
to change lane position; this is needed
for the feeling that you are assured, that the ton of metal
around you is no anxious prison but a sanctuary.

Still more is felt in the body, in the legs and ass and back,
when clinging to the right momentum rolling up and down
over the hills. Still more in the soul, there is hope
that what the eyes see through the windshield, the airy pink
billows of sunset cloud and the bright, exact red light
which cuts the gaps in trees, is a glimpse at destination

over the Earth's curve defeated by high mountains, over
the car's ancient, soiled smell defeated by pine air freshener.

Tornados Thirty Miles Away

It was unexpected, when I stepped outside
to light a smoke in Farmville, for the sky to be bright
and warm yet cloudy in February, charged with a wind
almost balmy, metallic to the nose.
Intermittent rain fell, either sprinkling or showering.

I went inside to check the television,
to check if things were only strange for me.

I found out about the tornadoes on the news.
They were unexpected too;
thirty miles away, this system had killed
as many people as could be counted
on a hand.

When I imagined the dead,
they stood isolated
In a grey funnel. It was only a daydream
made out of shock. Funny how

the news station meteorologists
follow up the grave news with colorful time lapses
and dart across the screen. They sound urgent and certain,
with their fingers pointing out every fact shown in five minutes.

It must really be rare to report tornadoes
here in Virginia. I must be like a surprise Super Bowl
to them when an arm of cloud floats
from the Midwest to form a twister.

After the storm, I'm happy to say,
the tornados never came close
to town.

The storm system, as shown on the colorful news map,
drifted northeast like smoke emanating
from no fire in the brush. The rain behind it
only added to the melted snow runoff into the river,
swelling over the flat land to the back parking lot
of an old tobacco warehouse.

At Kenny's Health Food Store

Sitting in bright afternoon at Kenny's Health Food Store
with hanging baskets of fruit,
as the shop clerk Marlon makes sandwiches
slicing the bread and topping it green,

Mr. Kemp at the juice bar
said he'd caught the train up from Farmville
all the way to downtown Manhattan;
this was when the railroad ran through town
and when Brooklyn was his home.

He said "I'm older than Watson and Crick"
laughing as though, when he was born,
his afro hair and melanin were coded into
thin folds of nucleic acid not yet helixes,

but time does not erase place, only activity

much like the shops in town all phased
out, all out-competed by the Walmart
and Food Lion making it harder to buy local
or black. After all, what real religion does
not require the diet narrowed?

How hard to narrow the diet now?

When I came in and first sat down, Mr. Kemp
and Andre talked about the difference between
Indian, Indigenous and Native. All meaning
Misapplication, Melanin and Here.
Originally, perhaps, an aversion to massacre.
All portions true;
all how one narrows their diet.

44CH62 or Randy K.Wade Site

Archaeology, as I'd explain it
from a few hot weeks near the Staunton
river is the intellectual pursuit
of manual labor,

is pitching a striped tent cover
over a perfect square hole dug
with mattocks and shovel through
plow zone, then shaving
with trowel by the centimeter
through phases II and III,
until sterile soil, a fine
silt like damp brown sugar.

Between ripped context
in plow zone and the grainy
sterile silt, you may find
a perfect human skull.

At first, it will appear, as the trowel edge
peels back dirt, to be only a turtle shell.

An archaeologist can't have the luxury of missing
finds; it is your job to get at what
everyone has missed up until this time

or left behind in the wake of a backhoe
like a beer can fossilized by rust.

So, archaeologists do not just rip
up plow zone but shovel the dirt
into wheelbarrows and carry them
off to sifters. We leave giant piles
underneath.

Caught in the wire, besides the worms,
you'll find chips of silicate rock,

with oscillated breaks scooping out.
Bits of bone, shell, ceramic, all too small
to be found are caught in the mesh too
but you'd feel bad
if you found a projectile point, quartz
or slate in the mesh.

Those little points for arrows
were meant to cut and grip into
prey, maybe
even enemies.

They mean so much. Each point
must be found in situ;
it must be mapped into the imprint
of this ancient place.

As I'd explain it, Archaeology
can't be quite impressed until
as much bone and shell, ceramic
and stone can be found as possible.

Not until all are connected
can any artifact mean much of anything.

You hope it pays off like
a skull found in the loamy soil
connecting, like magic, to stacked
vertebrae.

A Love Supreme

John Coltrane sang “ A Love Supreme,”
over and over; you might as well not
add lyrics then some might say.

But I’d say it was the best choice
of words for a trance, a new one

with furious dancing, upward somehow
caught in a steam of trumpet
and saxophone, drums and piano
keeping steady interplay.
though all the players break at the bridge
again to drone “A Love Supreme!”

Naima though was a ballad
without words, gliding
in like a wind at night
through a street where
someone walks alone

or the Jacob’s ladder sliding
at an angle through the living
room window where a girl
shows off ballet to her parents,

the “Love Supreme” implied
there, coded into piano
and saxophone only. Like
“In A Sentimental Mood,”
or “My Favorite Things,”

the chords slip away in
a lament, romantic
almost as though the sound
has stopped a second to curl
its hair around a finger

or the sound jumps about
as though on parade
only for the love
of what is loved.

The Black Star Line

I'd have bought a ticket on the Black Star line
if ever it set sail,
if ever, in some other universe, Garvey
stood in epaulettes and high-crested
tricorn on the varnished wood deck
in hot Atlantic sun, as his flag ship
cut the Tropic of Cancer on the way
to Dakar.

Yet Garvey was disappointed;
his shareholders bid, in the end,
for ownership of nothing. The Attorney General
decreed a charge of mail fraud and froze the shares.

How fortunate that it was brought
to the government's attention.

Otherwise, Garvey the radical would
have given hope in paper form.

It would've played out with each passenger
awed in their evening suits. Their suit
cases would hang limp in hand
at the thought of black families
on a cruise to far off Africa.

Instead, Garvey landed in Geneva,
handing off to the League of Nations
a petition for the negro race. Instead,
he made a workers' party in Jamaica

and died in London. Perhaps he was
content that he had put men in office
or told the arrayed leaders
of the world in their plush seats
that 300 years had passed abusing
Africans. But maybe he still dreamed

of carrying off, above cargo hold,
a crowd of fair-goers to new homes
in an infallible nation.

Snake Killing

Once, when my father,
as a child, sat on the Black River's
grassy banks and fished
with his sisters and mother,
searching for croaker in
murky depths, a water moccasin
arched up and slid between
his toes. He must have been
petrified though he wouldn't
say so now, not as a middle aged man.

But before he broke into a run,
before the snake could strike,
alarmed at his movement,
and disappear into the water,
his sister Tiny came up
with a shovel and beheaded the snake.

Perhaps, it planned to do no wrong
but how could one be sure?

After all, how could a gaggle
of farm children do anything but
act. How could they trust that
the snake would just slip away?

Hindsight being a mercy,
they sat in their mother's backyard,
decades later, and laughed about
the snake as though it were
anomalous weather.

Between slips of liquor
numbing the tongue
and hot grilled meat eaten,
in light of the sun going down,

all my aunts and uncles that survived
disease and circumstance shuffle
around as though the next story
will make the fishing and the reaping
times matter again.

Sunday Tennis

Though Dad watches
football, basketball
and golf on any given
weekend afternoon from
his cloth recliner in
our living room, puffing
at a new lit cigarette, his
eyes narrowing as though
to concentrate the flow
of smoke;

he never squints so focused,
leans forward so interested
wearing his dress pants still,
stripped down to under shirt
and socks, as when he watches tennis.

In the French Open, Nadal smacks
the ball back to Federer, it skirting past
him so perfectly over the clay-court
that his last score is noticed only
by the announcer's binoculars.

So much force and action
comes only from the forearm
scissoring in like a trap,
the racket shooting the ball back.

Dad smiles deeper when Serena roars,
when her feet plant into the ground
at a sudden stop and every muscle
of hers strains into the racket hit,

he takes a sip of sugary drink
and taps away the cigarette ash
as content as he can be.

An Amateur Guide to Cigar Shops

I will give you my amateur guide to cigar shops.

First, you may enter the cigar shop in Farmville;
the owner is an old New Yorker, un-bristled
by the things people hear in magazines.

If you enter another cigar shop in Chesapeake,
a retired marine and biker may run the show.
He reminds me a little of my professor.

Both will tell you that Olivia V
is an excellent full bodied stick,
and prefer Maduro wrappers
citing the depth and strength
of flavor.

The cigar shop you may enter
may hold pipes and jars of tobacco,
ornate and heavy ashtrays, un-themed
and in a simple color. It may have
an array of torch lighters and zippos.
It may hold shisha and hookah bowls
but it must have a walk in humidior

or a humidifier to wet air and let
the boxes sit open with the sticks
lined up perfectly, each wrapper leaf
marred by no crack or blot,
not too many veins and tight rolled.

It's up to the smoker
whether they light with a match
or a lighter but they must turn it
to burn evenly and they must spend
an hour, each puff of smoke swirling
from their lips, sitting in a soft chair

or on a porch facing the tree-line
or the water right at dusk
and they must say something
important to someone placed
right there to hear it.

Mickey's 7

Mickey Lee, the Egyptian store-owner
played *Gone with the Wind*
and *Papillion* on Sundays when
he'd cook big dishes of food:
Eggplant Parmesan, Fish and Tomato
Sauce or stewed Lamb
with tahini and rice the constants.

In his shop he sold cigarettes.
When he kept a standing humidior
on the counter, he sold a variety of cigars.
Flavored pipe tobacco sat in pouches
behind glass.
There were big hookahs and fine shishas,
some that Mickey mixed, some sold
in their flavors.

For those in no such mood,
there were candy bars, big cans
of green beans and polenta,
curry seasoning and couscous,
two refrigerators with soft drinks.

There was perfect lighting
through the windows
And through the open back door.

Mickey would talk politics
often; how the Revolution failed in Cairo
and the elected government was deposed.
He'd say, "don't cry for me Argentina,"
and "I have dream that in one day, two days...."
He'd mean by all of this that you deserved to hear

that Mubarak needed his prison, that bartending
in New York sometimes involved swinging a knife,
that the strangest people caught your cab going
to a hotel called *The End of the Line*,
and that you were dear to him.

The Time I Learned to Watch My Mouth

I learned everything need not
be said on a school bus one Fall morning.
The bright sun had just risen
and the bus smelled like the vinyl
heated up, like a tire was burning slow.
I sat beside a big girl, girls were bigger than me then.

I was friendly, maybe a little of an ass.
I didn't mean to offend in my plain red polo shirt,
but I smelled she had an odor. It hurt my nose
like vinegar. So I said, without thinking,

I smell something;

It was the first and only time I've been knocked out.
Even seated, her hook was perfect. Her meaty fist slammed
me out of consciousness and moved so fast I saw black
before I saw she was even angry.

I came to and the bus was yards from school,
the young trees growing by the sidewalk.
I left the bus scared and pushed through steel doors
painted blue. I never knew her name; never spoke to her
again. I was far too afraid her hook might catch my soft bones
by surprise again.

I learned to watch my mouth since then;
learned not to fuck around with a woman's anger --
she might be Ma Kali.

Beatitude

The boy now man remembers church songs,
a hundred voices in harmony,
men in suits and women in dresses
with color dependent on season
and the women wearing hats
with huge swoops of lace,
as though the sacred
desired to be impressed.

To him, all other music,
after Church music,
was melody only
a night's inn stay
compared to home.
Long in memory,
like mind and soul is the music's house --

He does not know how far old hymns
belted out by the choir in flowing drapes,
or a dance between pews and pulpit
by the old women caught in the spirit

brought him. Now, for comfort,
he chooses to sit under
a window in church, feeling
the sun come in like the first day.

His barber thinks the church people
do breathing exercises anyway,

They wouldn't guess that with each
song -- voices grow closer,
mingle, attain and keep trance.

The words warm everyone. Ground them.
If he closed his eyes, they would all seem one voice.

The Sky-God

Before Buddha or Muhammad took hold,
Mongols ranged the high steppes
with horse herds, worshiping the blue sky,

thinking it God.

Hard to disagree with them.

The sea is not so vast, so quick to change
cloud, wind strength and direction. In fact,
from my place near the Atlantic,
the sea is subject to the sky and the reaches
so disconnected that all the rest of it
might not exist if not for things to remind you,
like hurricanes or ships from far away.

Without the sea anywhere near,
the Mongols riding in furs then
on stout steeds hunting small game
might stop to pick up the struck rabbit
and see all of the sky around them all
at once with high mountains like a set
of teeth on the edges.

The sky may have stretched to them,
thinned out over steppes, hung like
canvas, bright color -- wispy cloud;

Below, a lifetime on earth
was occupied by moving yurts.
To survive, the nomads had to butcher, milk, graze, suckle.
The children and adults huddled in yurts
to wait out rain. Sometimes, in complete safety,
the men tumbled through their doors,
drunk on too much fermented milk.

Uncle Ed's Ice Cream Platoon

I was born in 1991.
Because I never met my Great Uncle Ed,
I don't know for sure.

My Dad says he lived to be over
one hundred years old. On Saturday
evening in Emporia, he led
the children, his great nieces
and nephews, down the country road
at a snail's pace.

Back then,
it was probably dirt
for a long ways with the forest
leaning in from both sides
of the path, with the insects
chiming from the weeds.

Uncle Ed would have come up the hill
and the children, like the segments
of a centipede, followed up behind
him and kept order for the abstract
fear they would not get dessert.

He talked to them, mostly in orders,
as they walked, making it seem
so serious like a certain freedom
would be lost by not walking

but after all, why use a car, especially when
cars were rarer and their slow pace
Was the only way to start off toward the world.

Many Years Passed Since the Last Hurricane:

blasting gales spun metal and wood
like shatters of confetti ripping into walls.
Floods fell in sheets swelling lake or ocean
shoving houses
with that green smell and yellow color to the air.

Often hurricane victims, not those dead
but coming back, found papers
waterlogged under the bed,
rotting furniture and carpet
mold and mildew
stinking through the front door,
photographs pulped in the flooding.

Brown lines mark
where the water rose; you can kick
down the saturated walls.

This can be done when we live places again,
when they hold us again,
when they bow once again under weight.

In such loss, reverse
the damage, tear up and re-staple
carpet, rebuild wall and reclaim
papers. Focus lens again and shoot
your photos on the regrown lawn,
by the tree's stump shaved flat.

No Easy Thing

Almost asleep
I thought
about my friend who disappeared.

Lauren, green-cat-eyed,
hugging me tight like an anime girl,
jumping side to side like a showman
when she spoke,
wearing no perfume,
sitting cross-legged on the sofa,
wide smiling with a rapid hello wave,
in her studio apartment
always open, case work textbooks
on the cushion right beside her.

Summers, she cleaned houses,
hitch-hiked out of school, was last seen
by a convenience store camera
as she slipped, in no characteristic way,
out of twin glass doors.

Memory sits heavy in the gut
like shit.

Now, I wonder how
Rumi kept light, his belief
still solemn as cedars

of Lebanon, still praying
all living things would know
they were divine light's reflection,
from his simple bed in a mud brick
hovel, all things smelling of wine,
flowers and earth,

even when his Shams was murdered.

No matter

if bullet,
not knife killed Shams,
cancer or heart attack,
Rumi
trembled with love
unconditional.

I'll tell you this:
it is no easy thing to believe in the light.

An Unknown Place

I've only been to unknown places;
I don't quite return home.

The Formosa tree in my backyard
will have changed her clothes,

my father's eyes will be different --
the glaucoma a little more blue.

I do not know, walking into college
receptions with new young people eager to start,
if I will fall in love, if someone will love
me, if no one will feel anything

or if they will think I am too strange.

I never know what anyone feels,
but have the air ripple
like a bird flew past;

the bare tree, my father's eyes,
the young folks who are nice enough
all never mean much more

than an unknown place and maybe I am happy
it is new; maybe I have eaten my regret.

Since I Still Stand, I'll Walk Home

I've killed every danger in my dreams.
First, I choked the velociraptor

in a junkyard with a chain,
fending off sharp teeth with a trash can
lid. Later, I beat monsters, mercenaries,
attack dogs made of paper, witches with
burning chips of wood.

I've woken up, stirred by window sunlight
in the bright morning as a dream conqueror

given respite from sleep battles,
saved by the light.

Now, I age awake,
know risk and injury
lie in clean, cold air in the bar parking lot,
as my surrendered hands drop fatigued
and a drunk man, wiry and dark-skinned,
punches me, enough to cut my cheek
on teeth. He hit me hard enough
to seize up my back leg, for saying "goodnight."

Since I still stand, I'll walk home,

deciding if the light saves again
or if I got out by chance.

The Fullness Thereof

Yuri Gagarin,
when his rocket broke
atmosphere, left

all preachers, prophets,
and medicine men as staring
blank no-names, left

human history like
a mud-puddle not three
inches deep.

When blue nitrogen sky
deepened until black, when
more and more continent

and ocean was under him
until all the Earth was
under him,

Yuri Gagarin said, while hung
in gravity like a Christmas
ornament,

“the Earth is blue,
How wonderful....”

He was in too high a place
to be tempted; civilization,
on proud clay feet, was smaller
than an ant hill and was not

all of the sudden what Divinity
cared for. No son ever died for
heaps of city like shining
flecks of granite

but for a wonderful, blue Earth
with cloud undulating -- tight skin
moving, each breath.

The Obstacle Remover

While drinking Iron Goddess tea
with Violet, she reminded me;
the body still stands colonized

even though we are far from asylums,
far from marking “invalid” those people
thrown away for their speech, limbs,
or brains.

She said that words
and diagrams pile,
showing function
and form for muscle and bone;

She said none of these suit
the living she learned
being heavy, stiff,
fragile, tender, numb.

Under her backyard parasol,
with tea steam in the summer
breeze, she was a short,
strong minded woman,
blond haired with eye-glasses,
willing leg muscles
against cerebral palsy stiffness.

Her research focus
was to find disability written in the canon
and she made footnotes
at every bend in human culture.

Through jittery muscle,
bent foot --
what is called
shapelessness,

reported deformity,
she found
we gain compassion,
immutable identity.

We gain our shapelessness
at birth as yods
on the star chart,

fingers of God
on forming skin:

convergence of planets
in a triangle
to make form new.

How else could there be a Ganesha sadhu:
long skin drooping like a sheet
from his face: his placid un-covered eye
and the flesh, like a drape, a pseudo-trunk
like the obstacle remover.

Instead of Cruelty

Waiting
in green barbershop vinyl chair,
smell of mint iso-alcohol,
sound of men screaming
Tech football, Tech football
versus West Virginia on ceiling T.V.,

I know there is, outside
normal business (cut
hair swept up and who's-
the-best-wide-receiver,
best Kanye track), Hobbes'
cruelty -- state of nature

I see the old man next
to me read the same article again
about seventy-some dead a month
in Chicago. He shakes

his salt head, squints eyes
small wrinkled, "Cruelty. Great Day.
Cruelty My God." Asks "No dreams no more?
My God and visions won't happen?
Nothing but cruelty, my God?"

When the people go mad starving,
I got no answer for my old man

because

I know Cruelty like neighbors
across the street, like their
blinds are drawn over windows,
like they wouldn't let me in.

The old man stands up now,
shuffles his limbs like
driftwood straight from the hip,
to get his curls cut down
by a rough-neck
at third booth, right side.
He shakes that young man's hand.

He knows Mercy well;
you can hear it when he talks.

He expects it to be real.

How do I say Mercy never came
to some?

How One Loves

When my brother took the check,
we sat in checkered shorts
at the Ruby Tuesday's bar.

As air conditioning
settled my skin,
shimmering from open sun,
I wanted to pay

for my expensive burger,
for berry lemonade
with a twenty in my pocket.

With each red-brown skin cell
urging me to act, wearing simple
deodorant, tennis shoes and anxiety
slowing my step,

he showed me it is best to wait,
eyes open, giving freedom
until giving relief,
and this is how one loves.

The hot summer day
was free and his three inches

extra height, his twenty years
extra life, the Turkish color
of his skin, his calm and spare grace
in spite of gout taking the basketball
out of his knees, his care all his life
for cologne and snazzy shoes, all

humbled me and will
until I think myself alone.

Of Ritual Also

Orca whales, Blackfish
as the people call them from the shore,

feel more surging foam through water
than humans through two switching legs,
with huge beveled two-tone bodies, bisected tails
and whole bodies often freed spiraling from the water,
shooting spouts of brine from blow holes

in the heat of a seal hunt. Each perfect conical tooth
bared in the water, they squeal and squeak and moan
a language older than humanity, sharing selves with their families,
staying by century-old mothers
who bore them fat and live in the cold water,
twisting like bunched may-poles
to a bubbling world.

They owe themselves to the old cows for life
and mourn for them if they fall out suddenly, proving
mortality. They even, on occasion, choose death
all at once.

Surely they are wise enough to know
(science has yet to measure their minds
up to ours but they may well pass us),
coarse sand from slipping fluid, weightlessness
from gravity, against their sea-worthy bodies,
that they cannot break, and they know the hot sun
will dry their skin, which will
fail their organs.

Still, they face the dry sun
willing, the hard sand,
the first feeling of the Earth's pull
and their soft mass united,
as another washes ashore
sure as the knock of a metronome:
speaking their language
'til the end.

As Process Acts

While pouring cake batter,
flour, baking soda, yeast saturated
with water and egg, yolk and white,
and soft butter, many times
heavier than syrup,

I see it pile and flatten between
momentum and the solid pan
giving off a custard scent,
pressed in wax paper
sticky to touch from coconut oil,
filled complete,
then the batter is still.

How odd it is still
when all of the batter wells up
in one place; my whirling elbow's
history, evidence of a swirling
wooden spoon,
can't be discerned.

In oven's heat action that same
batter wells up, expands solid,
without big bubbles pulling
but comes back still,
custard scent warm now,
buttery, falling like a sheet upon my head.

What a miracle
for the cake to only need cool,
for only dollops of icing, strong vanilla
and sugar to the nose, leveled with the back
of a spoon, with coconut shavings spread
even as seed.

It leaves no wonder
why grandmother
treasured her Bundt pans
like idols, kept
wood kitchen chairs sanctified,
as though they weren't bought
at Sears, Roebuck;

how she sat still, hair dark past seventy,
eating fry bread, though my mother knew not

what to call it, feeding me a breakfast of salted cod,
toast with a slice of yellow cheese,
and sweet coffee, creamer rich,
making me as reverent to active process.

Each Dawn for the Love

What is the scent of geraniums
to an office space
with spongy cubicle walls,
spongy ceilings, the taste of almonds,
breakroom drywall vacant after hours;
or how do I forget the taste of almonds?

Am I terrified by loss of something sweet?

Then I'll urge myself to hold onto the facts;

even as my spine grounds sway
from in and out of shoulders and hips,

one walks in beauty
Dine say,

that is how close one holds
smooth mesas,
vast scathing amber dust,
fathoms of blue sky,
dry wind sweeping away
all scent so you do not know
if next it will be cacti flowers
or shit or the leftovers of prey
or rain even, a vast absence
of scent moving,
like bird calls, yelps from coyotes,
rodents' chatter,
in the word and image's intellect,

the sun is made real, hot and bright
a billion times in excess of shimmering coals,
only by walking in prayer each dawn
for the love.

An Amber-Black Hope

Only a burden that anyone
cause imprints on bodies. They collapse,
arthritis in knees, carpal tunnel in hands,
sudden cancer ripples.

Is time indifferent now that
the body breaks?

Or does it move on

beyond tumor, x-rays, chemotherapy
starving the bone or the fact that you will
shit in a bedpan?

How it must hurt
makes me wonder,
is knowledge
mysterious;
is the core of it
an amber-black hope?

Does it leave anyone staring out
as though death were calm waters,

as though one only need dressing up to take
a ship back to that land of such warmth
that time has since dissolved?

A Sunflower, A Sun

A gold sunflower stood fed by sun,
casting yellow light;
radiance spanned hot.

Each silk petal,
width of a small sauropod tooth
yet un-serrated,
caught breath
in afternoon sunlight because
riotous solar
out-flare never reaches Earth.

Only rays of light
come from the undulating sun
through a magnetic
placenta, defusing
waves lapped from that molten
iron-nickel ball snuggled in
crust, mantle, outer core,
never settled on either pole:
a cooling pool
for Surya's fingers
as he waves nuclear arms.

This is life plucked ripe
from paradise,
as tender as those
sunflower seeds
waiting for the autumn
to dry them, to shake them
loose into top soil, only
six inches deep
yet the mother
of all observed life.

How hard now to see
this marvelous
secret so naked
we only
forget our clothes?

Love Built Up

My childhood played
in a one story red brick house,
fifty feet long, a building block with bedrooms
at one end and Dad's tax office,
once a garage,
at the other.

My house was
Love built up; Dad and Grandad planned
its walls to hold, measured
and cleared the plot of land,
the wide, long front and back yards,
sweating in open sun atop riding lawn mowers
or with weed whackers in hand
leveling brush, tall grasses, immature pines
with jokes bubbling from their chests,
with needs and memories
concerned in each square foot.

The brick facade
was hinged on thick wood beams,
given up by decades
of undisclosed tree growth,
hatched into and between angles.

They laid those bricks fixed,
alternating, with pat pat
of mortar,
each level like teeth set
in a determined mouth.

They pasted ceiling plaster to harden,
swirled with a plane into raised waves stuck
into the shape of Fibonacci snail shells.

I wonder if they even know I use these
words for them and if these words
ripple back like a stone dropped
in water to reach them even
as they hinge the door.

In my mind still, love built up
can survive
a fire and one would not tell
if it started within or without,

much as the bush
that startled Moses at Sinai
was on fire but not burning
and effused the voice of God.

How strange that now Love built
up has since been sold,
has had so many guests,
before and now,
I wonder if
the doors coming in or out
have had their locks replaced.

To Gold Almost

I spent one whole day
helping clear tree
limbs and trunks once
for a small-time mining company
out in Prospect, Virginia;
the tall weeds were first cut down,

along the rise and fall of eroding
clay, by Jay somewhere in his forties, pony-tailed,
tee-shirted with crow-footed smiling blue eyes.

We followed him down the weed-whacked
path, through fallow Earth,
smelling of the cloven grass
and wild onions,
where the loggers had already
hollowed out the acres for their pines.

Jay and his co-owner and girlfriend Jess
with her fragile bones and big relaxed
eyes, same age as he and
smiling like she smelled fresh bread,
told us to watch the clay underfoot and throw
what we found in mud puddles for later,
or keep them if we so desired.

To my surprise, the ground bore up
mineral crystals, semi-precious
stones; here, scooped from the Earth
into my hands,
were mica in bits that almost
stacked and pressed into slate,

a small rock knob speckled
red and white that had almost grown to
garnet and quartz but floated up
instead, above vein, to stripped topsoil.
Then there was hard kyanite
still scattered about, blue
or white, red veined in the clay
it seemed a wonder isolated.

Yet after helping, when
we settled all around
the fire in the evening cool,

with pit bulls big as county fair pigs
on leashes lazing about or barking
like slammed doors, the evening sun appeared
to paint red-orange veins in the sky

like rust -- gaps filled in with electric blue.

Clouds stayed stagnant but light shifted,
then turned to sand and silt colors, then
sandstone, to gold almost at last --

I see now there is metamorphosis
in air as well as stone.

Both show the intermediary perfect,
each phase speaking complete,
whether passing into the blue-black night
with so many stars like pockets of copper,
or frozen in the Earth from an ancient heat,
unable to vanish though it has been moved.

Making Sure

On a hot summer,
the green grass was a smell
and the color of the sun almost a taste,
like tart but not bitter in a lemon,
Uncle Lamb tottered, middle aged
and bald, grey mustached, sweating
from his broad

back and belly, the beer coming out of his pores.
He swung a horse shoe
to the goal: broken end of a broom stick.

It skirted the pole
and stopped in
soft dirt --
the next one he threw was a ringer.

It takes two tries to do anything;

The first always fools us
that the job is done.

So Aunt Tiny, given to chatty rough speech
and violent motions with a wooden spoon,
keeps vigilant,
turns meat over fire,
barbecued chicken, sausages, steaks,
allows heat
to make drastic transformation,
turning us
healthier or sicker, hungry
or stuffed in the end.

She never attempts to control
the drunk men playing horse shoes,
sipping Brandy and beers
at the picnic table
near the backyard tree line

This is her part and, for now, that theirs.

A Kind of Asleep

My grandmother with her thin
black eyes, with her mouth
and chin like an Easter Island Head,
but wrinkled by then, told me
in the backseat of Mom's car,
as we drove past the Dismal Swamp

about

Bootsy Grinley, old booger woods
haint -- in the swamp,
he come by stranded folks

walking at night alone
through knobby pines, breeze heavy
with liver-swamp and Black River
water. He say:

“How are you? Where goes you?”

If it seems that way,
he guards it all, like he's a right to.

I've come to know since,

that you always know a spirit 'cause
they show up like they used a door
to walk back to sunlight and oxygen,
like that's only a room in a house.

So nosy too, smug because they
have no way to lose,

everything zig-zag after death.

I wonder if it's all we can hear
him say “How are you? Where goes you?”

as though everything we do
is a sudden dream
and Bootsy stands over us talking in spite
of us, telling us we are not alive at all but a kind of asleep.

He felt as though he'd left himself, split himself
in half but who was he to love? Maybe lust, pairing,
animal function.

Read this: all fathers are scared of who
their children might be.

Easier after all
to sweep away the soul, memory,
conscious mind containing
connection with her mind.

Easier to march away,
without anything except dark litter on sidewalks,
except closed down shops. No knowing where to go.

A neon light shut down with shop show window shuttered
reading
 Pythons
 Boa Constrictors
 Corn Snakes
 For Sale

He grimaced, doffed his hat;
 in the late night he could not make a choice.