Spring 2019

Middle Car

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MIDDLE CAR

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Christopher Daniel Crabtree

May 2019

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English

Missouri State University, May 2019

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ABSTRACT

Middle Car is a collection of poems written during my course of studies at Missouri State University, and illustrates my evolution as a writer through a consistent focus on story. The poems explore the everyday, fantastical, often unexpected, and sometimes forced frictions between people and or environment, which cause moments of meaning and resonance. The poems collected here are introduced by and an essay advocating for the preservation of story through narrative and situates my work in a neo-Romantic position in a post-Deconstruction world.

KEYWORDS: poetry, story, narrative, free verse, midwestern, historical, World War II, romantic, deconstruction

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Respectful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following publications in which some of these poems first appeared, some as earlier versions:

Elder Mountain: "For a Better Life"
Midwestern Gothic: "Romance" "The Space Between" & "Time in a Midwestern Town"
Moon City: "Learning Chess"
Neat: "After Midnight" "September Leaves"
Paddle Shots: "For Martin" "The Familiar River" & "Traveling to Tecumseh, Missouri"
Sundog: "New St Louis Revelations" & "Post Modernism"

I would like to thank the following people for their support during the course of my graduate studies. I owe an especial debt to Jane Hoogestraat, for showing interest in my early work as an undergraduate, cultivating my confidence as a poet, and helping me see the magic. Thank you to Marcus Cafagña, for all the conversations, understanding my inner rebel, and being my poetry father. Thank you to the great Sara Burge, for expanding my view of poetry and always being ready to share a laugh. Thank you to Shannon Wooden, for helping me complete the transition to credible academic.

I am eternally grateful to my family and friends for their continued encouragement, love, and patience for when I had to disappear and write instead of socializing. Thank you to my father, for always believing in me and showing me how to dream. Thank you to my mother and step father, for teaching me the value of hard work and persistence. Thank you to Walker Neer, for keeping me balanced and grounded in reality when needed. Thank you to Nick Cunningham, for never letting me stray too far into the unknown without company. I want especially to thank Jessica Brenneke, for believing in serendipity and taking care of me when I could not take care of myself.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who knowingly or unknowingly provided inspiration for these poems, and to anyone who may read this collection in its entirety, thank you for your time.

I dedicate this thesis to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

IN DEFENSE OF NARRATIVE: THE PRESERVATION OF STORY IN POETRY

The following poems have been collected to fulfill the thesis requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and written during my years in the Missouri State program. Since the poems were drafted and revised over several semesters, they range in style, structure, diction, perspective, and theme as I explored and experimented as a writer under the apprenticeship of Marcus Cafagna, Jane Hoogestraat, and Sara Burge. While arranging the poems in the order presented here, I discovered that the common thread holding them all together was my emphasis on story. What started as a foundational instruction by my professors to be more concrete instead of abstract, developed into an understanding and passion of connecting with all readers, and a desire create poems that anyone could enjoy regardless of their poetic background and knowledge.

This is a critical introduction on the importance of story, how it deserves a place within poetry, and how my poems use story to provide a literal interpretation accessible to all readers, while still enhancing and stretching awareness which is inherent to poetry. If written poetry is to have relevance in contemporary culture as humanity progresses further into an advanced technological age, then poetry must embrace the use of narrative, reassert the value of language, and provide story to maintain a gateway for more readers to potentially experience and connect with poetry.

In his book *Why Poetry* Matthew Zapruder points out there is a general problem with understanding and connecting with poetry, because the first thing people confess about poetry is they do not understand it. “For over twenty-five years, I have heard this said, over and over in slightly different ways, by friends, family, colleagues, strangers I met in bars and at dinner

parties, on planes—so many people, practically everyone who found out I was a poet" (xi). If the common sentiment of those outside of poetry is that they struggle to find some coherent meaning when they read a poem, then it is difficult to justify poetry as having a cultural impact. In an article, “Understanding Poetry Is More Straightforward Than You Think,” Zapruder comments, “poetry has an unfortunate reputation for requiring special training and education to appreciate, which takes readers away from its true strangeness, and makes most of us feel as if we haven’t studied enough to read it.” He suggests there are many factors for this. Starting with being taught to treat the poem as a puzzle because many authorities on the subject still adhere to the belief that readers must master allusiveness. This practice has given readers the idea they need to find the hidden meaning in poems instead of approaching it through language and being open to possibilities. Then, there are young poets who believe that writing obscurely helps create a deeper mystery, the mark of a good poem, which has created a cycle of, "bad poetry in, bad poetry out," ("Understanding Poetry"). These reasons may very well have contributed to the general perception of contemporary poetry being difficult, but whether true or not, and regardless of blame, the result is simple, fewer readers.

In current society, due to advancements in technology, the entertainment options have increased exponentially, but the amount of free time has stayed relatively the same. People still attend to their life responsibilities most of the day and are left with limited hours for recreation. It makes sense that people would gravitate toward easy and instant gratification, as opposed to trying to read poetry, and seeing value in the struggle. This lack of readership has also influenced publishing. In the article, “What Does It Cost To Do Poetry,” Michael Scharf points out that print runs for some of the biggest poetry publishers are about fifty percent less than smaller fiction houses (Scharf). With so many people having trouble understanding poetry, it makes

sense why there would be less of a market for poetry books. It is an unfortunate problem, but as Zapruder speculates the threat of poetry becoming extinct is very slim because if language exists so will poetry ("*Why Poetry*" xv). However, even if poetry continues to survive, the impact of a society that does not read poetry as it continues to evolve in a digital age could potentially limit humanity's progression by alienating those who may have awakened consciously in some new way through the experience of poetry.

The purpose of poetry, as defined by Paul Valery from, "Poetry and Abstract Thought," is to be "a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words" (65). Zapruder goes on to describe the *poetic state of mind* as, "something close to dreaming while awake, a higher more aware, more open, more sensitive condition of consciousness," ("*Why Poetry*" 11-12). In other words, a poem is a tool that promotes an enhanced conscious awareness within the reader. If this is the case, then to read poetry is primarily to train the mind by repeatedly engaging consciousness in an elevated state of awareness. Perhaps the real threat of a culture not considering poetry vital may indeed result in a stifling of conscious evolution and stagnation of collective consciousness.

With the potential ongoing decline of poetry readership and the unknown implications of how this may impact society, it is essential to note that this is not an argument against less accessible poetry. There have been many worthwhile building block contributions from poets who would be considered difficult to read, even by those in the poetry field. Poets such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, or a more contemporary example John Ashbery take extra effort to read. Even Shakespeare can have its difficulties navigating through its rhyme, meter, or its language of the past. The truth of it all is that poetry is continuously evolving. This is evident in the various poetical movements such as how the Victorians favored psychological realism and science over

the prominence of emotion, imagination, and spontaneity of the Romantics, which the Victorians perceived as self-indulgent. The Victorians then gave way to the esoteric Modernists who sought to distance themselves from the personal experience altogether and embrace what intellectual statement poetry could make about the world, based on a foundation of precise imagery influenced by the French Symbolists before them. This later resulted in a return to the very personal with Confessionalism. These are just some of the examples of how poets for centuries have continued to search for the next type of poetry. Whether it is a rebellion against a previous generation of poetry or an exploration into lyrical association or dissociation, these reasons for producing poetry are equally valid and vital to the field of poetry. To say a particular type is wrong would be ridiculous and go against the very notion of what poetry is, unlimited possibilities. Therefore, this essay is more about carving out a place for story within 21st Century poetry, regaining its rightful place as a respected style, and shedding the contemporary stigmas toward narrative poems by poets. Instead of insisting on categorizing a correct poem and fragmenting the poetry world further, it is about encouraging unity, and producing poetry that reaches out toward the reader to let them know this boat was made to carry everyone. A sentiment that has roots in Romanticism and grows from Wordsworth's view of writing poetry in the language of the common man.

Before moving forward, it will be helpful to establish working definitions of story and narrative because as David Antin points out in "Talking Narrative," "These two functions are usually not distinguished because they are often seen together. Narrative is often seen within story and story is often seen wrapping narrative," (95). A confusion that leads to these terms being used interchangeably, but in this essay, are referenced with distinct characteristics in mind. Antin uses what Plato and Aristotle called diegesis and mimesis to separate narrative and story:

> I see story as the diegetic function, the articulation of the sequence of events and parts of events that shape a significant transformation, and narrative as the mimetic representation of a desiring subject confronting a transformation that he or she attempts to bring about or prevent or both. (95)

Or, in other words story is the more complete comprehensive understanding of what is happening and why because it describes the progression of events that shaped a change, whereas narrative is more about producing a sense of subjectivity for a situation or experience, a framework in which story might be implied.

Over the decades there has been speculation about how to measure narrativity. In the article "Weak Narrativity," Brian McHale questions how to classify the use of narrative. As there are a variety of examples of less formed narratives, to call them narrative or non-narrative would be insufficient. He brings up the degree approach as proposed by Gerald Prince, that narrative may exist on a scale. Or, as suggested by Marie-Laure Ryan, there are different modes or types of narrative. However, McHale is not satisfied with this and proposes the term *weak narrativity* which is telling stories distractedly with irrelevance and indeterminacy as to trigger a narrative coherence without committing to it, (165). This is followed up by Antin who clarifies McHale's stance by explaining what McHale really means is that weak narrative is essentially weak in story because of the absence of, "consistent spatial and temporal mappings that could specify unambiguously the events and relations between events producing the powerful experiences generated by the text," (95). A more fleshed out narrative, in other words, leads to a more accessible more comprehensible story, while a weaker narrative requires extra work on the reader's part to piece together a story. Whether strong or weak, it is the use of narrative that opens the possibility for story, and it is through story that more readers will potentially connect with poetry.

Of course, accessibility is not a new concept for poetry. One of the more well-known examples of attempting to bring poetry to a broader audience comes from *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, published in 1798. In the preface to the collection Wordsworth states his intentions of using, "the real language of men," (233), and to make, "the incidents of common life interesting," (235). Although, what Wordsworth means by this is a little different than just making poems easier to understand, because it is primarily influenced by the historical context of the rise of English Romanticism and the new threats of society brought on by the Industrial Revolution. However, when compared to present-day society, there are some interesting similarities as well. Wordsworth claims that the increase in urban population assigned to regular factory work has produced a craving for the extraordinary—a desire to escape the mundane routine—and that literature and theater have conformed to provide this outrageous stimulation at the expense of genuine quality. This, coupled with the increased speed of communication from an advancing age allows people to consume this material at a faster rate, contributing to the increased demand (240). Two hundred years later the popularity of what Wordsworth described as extraordinary has only continued to grow. Although there are now many more options for jobs, much of the population still inhabits the same routine of working the same position for most of the week, and the speed of communication has never been faster with the Internet. Perhaps, that is why the extraordinary gets the most attention. That there is a numbness imposed by the structure of modern society that people consciously or subconsciously wish to pierce, and the fastest, easiest route to satisfaction resides in overstimulation. Today, anyone can receive, with the click of a button, the next outrageous reality show, headline, or viral clip, the ultimate spoon-fed sugar medicine to give momentary relief from the everyday drudgery of living with modern society. How does this relate to poetry? Naturally, if people are choosing

to supplement their lives with quick, easy to digest, high sensory entertainment, then currently poetry is on the losing side if this battle for attention.

Along with society, Wordsworth blames the poets for only writing for themselves and indulging "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation," (237). A concern that has manifested again in contemporary poetry but in a slightly different way. Tony Hoagland, in his article, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," reflects on the current state of poetry explaining that, "American poetry has seen a surge in associative and 'experimental' poetries, in a wild variety of forms and orientations," and that, "Systematic development is out; obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in" (508). Although Wordsworth and Hoagland are referring to different poetic styles separated by hundreds of years, both approaches have their issues with general reader's understanding. Wordsworth is denouncing 18th-century Classicism in which poets focused mainly on imitating Rome, Greek, and Latin verse with elevated references and language. A practice that arguably alienated the less educated from poetry. Hoagland is talking about the current practice by many poets to resist narrative out of rebellion against Confessionalism and how the "inadvertent sentimentality and narcissism of many such poems have imparted the odor of indulgence to narrative," (511). This has resulted in the current practice of fragmentation, where a poem will consist of various lines that associate and disassociate with each other but refuses to have enough coherent sequence for a reader to construct a literal interpretation of the entire poem. The poet is less concerned about creating a narrative structure and more focused on providing a myriad of images and language with poetic spacing to communicate a slideshow that provokes any feelings a reader may want to have. This freedom may sound great in theory but can also be frustrating to the average reader who does not

understand that the uncomfortable feeling of not being able to pinpoint an overall meaning is part of the design.

Wordsworth's solution back then was to return to nature and common language by embracing, "low and rustic life," because, "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity," (236). Wordsworth felt the language from this rural environment was closer to the source of our real feelings because it was less restrained by the pressures of a growing industrial society. Since then, poetry has gone through several literary movements spanning over two hundred years, and despite all the different views in style, the language has stayed relatively common. Even in Modernism with its various challenges to read, still sought to not use elevated language. However, in contemporary poetry, there is a different kind of communication breakdown between the poem and the general reader. Hoagland suggests the reason for this is because, "many persons think that ours is simply not a narrative age; that contemporary experience is too multitracked, too visual, too manifold and simultaneous to be confined to the linearity of narrative, no matter how well done," (511). Even though the language of contemporary poetry is not overly complicated for the sake of idealism, the ability to identify a structured coherence has become overly complicated because of the shared view by many poets today that narrative is no longer adequate to represent the contemporary experience. To believe that narrative is not suited for this task is to say modern life has no place for communicating story, which is not true. There are countless examples of story and its relevance from the art, entertainment, or information consumed every day, to the conversations people have with each other. If experience can no longer be communicated through narrative into a story, that is not the fault of the contemporary age; it is a failure of language to describe and make sense of reality. As Robert Hass suggests in a Lannan Foundation interview, it is unethical to consider reality

decisively outside the reach of language. To exclusively practice an art of which this is a premise and implication—that language is inadequate, that the word cannot reach the world—is a bad idea, one with a price tag attached," (Hass). For poets to insist that the experience they are communicating cannot be arranged with enough narrative structure for a reader to interpret some sort of literal situation, or series of situations, grounded in some form of recognizable reality, means they "think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men," (Wordsworth 236).

However, to reestablish the adequacy of language, narrative must exist within poetry to serve as a foundation for what Hoagland refers to as poetry's most fundamental reason for existing, "the individual power to locate and assert value" (518). In other words, the ability of the poet to give the experience of life meaning through poetry. To build on Wordsworth's solution of using the common language of men, and taking it a step further, is to embrace a common purpose of language, which is to communicate experience. In his book *The Storytelling Animal* Jonathan Gottschall explains how, "Tens of thousands of years ago, when the human mind was young and our numbers were few, we were telling one another stories," (xiii). Before written language, people gathered around the fire trading all kinds of tales, from archetypal characters, origins of things, to gods, nature, and anything else they felt the need to make sense of. They did this by applying a narrative structure to the chaos of life which provided a sense of order and connection to their surroundings. How even today, people are still obsessed with story, as it is found in just about every facet of daily life from on pages, to screens, and even while dreaming (xiii-xvii). Several reasons could be discussed to potentially explain why story has continued to be part of humanity, but the main concern here is to point out that story is how humanity attributes value to the world. For story to regain a place within poetry, poets must let go of their

negative perception of narrative as too, "simplistic, claustrophobic, even unimaginative," (Hoagland 512).

If the poem is a machine that produces an enhanced consciousness or *poetic state of mind* within the reader, then the innate characteristic of a poem is to encourage active engagement, which is an effect naturally evoked by the primary poetic device unique to poetry, spacing. According to Zapruder, "poetry speaks, while pointing to and reminding us of nothingness," (202). He goes on to explain how nothingness exists in a poem's spacing, at the end of lines, around the title, and between lines and stanzas. It also exists off the page in the leaps of metaphor, symbol, and association. It is this nothingness or silence that serves as a constant reminder of how strange language can be and how close to meaningless we always are. It makes evident the provisionality of language, and how through negation, a vacuum is conjured for other possibilities to fill. When this absence is felt, it is when the meaning particular to poetry can emerge to create these other possibilities (202-204). What he is saying here is that the space involved in the structure of a poem naturally promotes thoughts beyond the words on the page, beyond what is familiar. These possibilities not only can enhance meaning but at the same time be meaningless. This is because they exist in the gaps, void, or space in between, not on the page, but in the stream of consciousness that is triggered by the poem. It also allows language to change, to take on new associations and significance, but also shows how fragile and malleable it can be.

This is where contemporary poetry and the resistance to narrative ultimately fails. To celebrate in the inadequacy of language is redundant because it is already evident in the structure of a poem and its use of spacing. In the very act of crafting a poem, the poet is adding and deleting words attempting to chip away, surround, get as close to, and succinctly portray

whatever the poem wants to be. To communicate every possible nuance in prose would arguably take pages and pages of language, and still may not succeed entirely in the same way as a poem.

The following is a poem "Prodigy" is by Charles Simic and shows how the use of narrative can help give the poem coherence while still engaging the *poetic state of mind*. The poem begins:

> I grew up bent over
> a chessboard.
>
> I loved the word *endgame.*
>
> All my cousins looked worried.
>
> It was a small house
> near a Roman graveyard.
> Planes and tanks
> shook its windowpanes.

There is a clear indication of character, the speaker who grew up playing chess. Right away there is something literal and the start of a narrative that pulls the reader along with a confidence of understanding. The word *endgame* is introduced, a common term in chess used to describe the tactical change from *middlegame* due to fewer pieces on the board. The actual defining characteristics of when this occurs is open for debate and would require the presentation of extensive research into chess theory and philosophy. However, what is interesting about this is how it relates to the speaker in their situation. There is the line about the cousins being worried. Is this because of the speaker's fascination with *endgame*? Perhaps, but the literal narrative shows the family experiencing real war with tanks and plans outside their small house. The cousins are worried because potentially the real *endgame* has started, the speaker is only concerned with chess, and they are clearly on the defending side. The poem continues:

> A retired professor of astronomy
> taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.

In the set we were using,
the paint had almost chipped off
the black pieces.

The white King was missing
and had to be substituted for.

There is more development of the narrative allowing a story to unfold. There is another character introduced who is teaching the speaker to play chess, and the year is established as 1944 or during World War II. There are also some interesting details about the chess pieces. The paint is chipped off the black pieces, the side that always starts the chess game on the defensive. This implies the hardships of the people; perhaps they have been enduring an invasion for some time. They are worn out, tired. Then there is the missing white King. The rightful person of power for the attacking side is missing, and someone needs to fill the role, so they found a substitute in game. Although, this also points to the real war as an allusion to Hitler. The poem ends with:

I'm told but do not believe
that that summer I witnessed
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother
blindfolding me a lot.
She had a way of tucking my head
suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told me,
the masters play blindfolded,
the great ones on several boards
at the same time. (Poetry Foundation)

With the conclusion of the poem, there is the transformation of language and the ideas presented within the story. The narrative is still easy to follow but packed with meaning that does

not necessarily need to be known to enjoy the poem or understand the story. The main change here is the blindfolding. What begins as a safety measure to shield a young child from the horrors of war, becomes a choice by someone who has mastered the game. They no longer require their eyesight to see not only one board but multiple boards, as they have developed their mind or imagination enough to be able to visualize all the moves by just knowing the coordinates of the pieces. It also speaks to a return to childhood. Playing blindfolded requires an active imagination. One can argue that imagination is most active as a child. The mother is protecting the child from himself and his imagination. However, being a master involves embracing this childlike imagination.

The multiple boards are also interesting because it is essentially multiple battles at the same time. During 1944, in Belgrade, Yugoslavia where Simic grew up, the Belgrade Offensive was taking place. This was a joint operation between the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria to liberate Yugoslavia from German rule. Their tactics were to engage Germany in three separate operations to divide their attention, which ultimately led to Germany's retreat. There is much more that can be elaborated on here, and probably a lot more not even mentioned. Though the point being that narrative can provide a logical structure for a reader to follow, while allowing the feeling of meaning, and promoting a full more active consciousness that expands the text and the reader’s thoughts in several different ways.

The next poem, “Learning Chess” is mine and is influenced by “Prodigy” as it uses narrative to ground the situation in reality and works to develop possibility through language and spacing, while still providing an understandable story. It also deals with similar themes such as war and learning chess at a young age. The poem begins with:

His hand picks up the black knight to move
in L's— a cavalry's flanking maneuver
around the checkered board. "This do this,"
he says in his best English, a green tattoo
between thumb and index— smeared by time,
marks him for a guerrilla revolutionary.

The situation is relatively clear from the beginning. There is a character who is moving the knight chess piece around the board explaining to the speaker how it moves in the game. However, already there is a sense of transformation. For example, the letter L is functioning not as language but as a pattern to which the piece moves on the board. This is expanded on by relating it to one of the most effective ways to use cavalry, to ride around a line of enemy troops and charge them in the flank, which is then juxtaposed by the character who is trying to communicate in a non-native language. As the poem progresses, more information is revealed about the character. It continues:

He walks to the restroom again—
frequent breaks, bullet hole scars
like extra belly buttons, a bayonet stab—
for defeating Japan in the Philippine jungles.

Here the character rises to go to the restroom again, and the speaker notices the scars of fighting during World War II. The literal situation is that the wounds received by the character have damaged his bladder. However, where the transformation continues to occur is after the line about defeating Japan. What is interesting here is the turning over of the positive association with winning. The character was given no reward in the form of a medal or trophy, only wounds. This perhaps causes some extra thought on war and who, if anybody, actually wins.

As the black and white armies engage,
he shows me the importance of the middle,
how to open attacking lanes, set up defense.
His finger tip touches the queen, then pawn,
"This eat this." I laugh, say "Not eat,
take." He laughs, "Oh sorry take— take."

And as I learn my moves, he points out
the hidden traps, teaching me to pick battles.

The last part of this poem strives to bring everything together. On the surface, the character continues to instruct the speaker on strategy as the pieces are moved around the board. At one point the character uses the wrong word to describe the taking of a piece and the speaker corrects him. There is a playful dynamic of who is teaching whom. What is presented as a story about my grandfather teaching me to play chess is easy to follow. Just about anyone could read this and understand the situation and how it is compelling. Where it stretches the awareness resides in between the lines and with a few key phrases and words. A poem that on the surface is about learning chess is also about language, war, and the ability to adapt and reason through a presented situation. Here we see how language is not perfect as a native and nonnative speaker attempt to communicate. More specifically with the example of *eat* and *take*, which in the context is really not that far off in the sense of making something disappear, showing that words are malleable.

Even though the characters are not able to connect on a deeper level through language they do through the game of chess, of course, there is war and the reference to picking battles which goes back to Sun Tzu and the *Art of War*. Here we see a real application of picking battles on a chess board, but also the implied meaning of learning how to pick battles in life. The ability to look at a situation and see the pieces, then plan accordingly for the desired outcome is not just applicable to war but to any life situation. This can even go back to the knight and how it can be considered one of the strongest and deceptive pieces. A perfectly placed knight can not only threaten attack but also provide defense that is not always obvious to untrained eyes because of its moving pattern.

Language, learning, life, and so on the L is represented. All this is here and not at the same time because it exists beyond the words and takes an active conscious reading to facilitate the possibilities, which the poem promotes through the use of poetic structure and language. It is true that language is not perfect in the sense that everything is clearly defined. However, to have a so-called perfect language is to reduce experience to zeros and ones, where there is no leeway, and essentially construct a prison-house of reality. To describe an experience in less than perfect language is to allow for limitless possibility, give experience meaning, and value to language. By providing story in poetry it would enable an entry point for more readers to potentially enjoy poetry with a better understanding, and experience the *poetic state of mind*. Though, language may never be perfect, through poetry it can be.

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PART I.

For a Better Life

As a child she planted rice in the fields
outside of Manila, working as fast
as she could to get the bonus
on top of her daily Pesos, stooping
for hours, till dark, her back numb.
She gave the money to her family
for food, slept on the floor
with three brothers, three sisters,
in a one room bungalow.
When she was a young woman
she worked two jobs in the city,
met a young navy sailor
who took her across the sea to America,
settling in a small Midwestern city.
After the divorce she punched two
time clocks at Zenith and Kraft, refusing
to lose the three bedroom house
on Western Avenue. And though
I didn't see her much, every morning
I woke to find clean school clothes
laid out on the loveseat,
breakfast on the table.

Learning Chess

For my grandfather

His hand picks up the black knight to move
in L's— a cavalry's flanking maneuver
around the checkered board. “This do this,”
he says in his best English, a green tattoo
between thumb and index— smeared by time,
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He walks to the restroom again—
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he shows me the importance of the middle,
how to open attacking lanes, set up defense.
His finger tip touches the queen, then pawn,
“This eat this.” I laugh, say “Not eat,
take.” He laughs, “Oh sorry take— take.”
And as I learn my moves, he points out
the hidden traps, teaching me to pick battles.

Building Snowmen

Like always I tackled
the snowman
my grandfather looking on
shaking his head,
as his freshly rolled snow
exploded like dandelion confetti
left to melt, evaporate
and fall again
flowing around rocks
to feed a tree, find our toilet,
a barrel to be locked away
for the apocalypse,
or to be rebuilt every winter
into a man.

Bread

Over dinner my mother tells me,
never work at a factory. Tonight, is the first time
she has cooked in two weeks, her right arm
bandaged from surgery after 20 years on the line.
In between bites of spaghetti, garlic bread,
and salad— I remember a morning
as a child, when she slept off a third-shift
in my father's leftover recliner.
I watched cartoons, ate an egg and cheese sandwich
prepared by my grandfather, but it tasted wrong.
When I woke her, she had him make it over—
only to discover moldy bread. I was late to school
while she told me for the first time how good
I have it, how when she grew up in the Philippines,
they were happy just to have something to eat.

Working at the Call Center

I stand on the outdoor patio, the smoking
side of the blue spray-painted line, avoiding
the view of the trailer park, between the spaces

of an iron rail fencing—mobile homes missing
panels from their skirts, teasing rusted wheels,
and cinder blocks.

It's afternoon and the October day is dark,
the clouds slide fast enough to see, over
a double telephone pole. Seven crows

chat along its wooden crossbar. I take a drag.
This job was supposed to be temporary.
That was four years ago, I still need a paycheck.

The man next to me is talking on his cellphone,
explaining to his "baby" why his last customer
was stupid, but "baby" doesn't understand

computers. So the man says, "no, it's funny
because they didn't know how to left click,"
but I can't understand why anyone would want

to talk about work on break, and wonder
how long it will take before he realizes
that "baby" is just like all the other customers

we hate for eight hours a day. Although, perhaps
he has it right, a woman could help me accept
this kind of job, and the crows cackle, requiem
rhythms riding on the beats of their wings.

Sometimes I pretend she's my lady,

when I need to feel like there's still something left
that could be worth enduring those nights,
when the last paranoid thought lingers like a movie,
everyone knows the script but you.

We sit across the table, the booth's cracked leather
strains to hold in the stuffing. In the open kitchen,
once a bar, its liquor wall replaced by grills,
the steam billows a fog matching the gray afternoon.
Overhead water drips roughly every seven seconds,
tapping me on the shoulder, a ghost reminding me
to turn,
        hear its
                secret.

                But I'm too focused
on her dark eyes.

She listens to my ramblings,
how a doctor might say I was schizophrenic,
that I'm getting closer, but I'm still not whole,
and I can't seem to shake the reality of death
I don't fully believe in.

And maybe what I need the most is someone
to take my hand before it's offered to know
the secret of healing.

After lunch we smoke under a loft's landing, a canopy
against the rain, silent, as we watch the drops
pooling in the downtown street, puddles to rivulets,
flowing where they must.

The Park in Summer

We sat together on a paint chipped wooden bench,
under a tree, in front of several abandoned horseshoe stakes,
wondering if competitions were held here, when we heard
the screams of a boy and girl, their bicycles stopped.
She had a shoelace wrapped around her peddle,
wanted the boy to wait. When he turned to leave, she hit him
with her pink open backpack, yelling, *I don't need you*,
her papers scattering with the oven breeze. I wanted to help,
but you explained how a stranger could be seen the wrong way.
So we watched as the girl cried, gathering up the sheets,
managing to get them all, except for one. When she was
out of sight, we walked to the lone page, read the words
dog, cat, brother, and mother in practiced sentences, the curvy
letters struggling to stay in the ruled lines, like lose threads,
weaving, to create more crossings.

On Her Own, 1941

For my grandmother

Lona was fifteen, lived in a clay house
on the outskirts of Nikolaev, Ukraine—
her German mother already passed,
and the Polish man she called father

rarely spoke to her. One night he left
to play cards, never came home. In the morning,
Lona walked by the house her father gambled
evenings, found neighbors around the crater

of a stray artillery shell. Her father's remains
near the rubble. As they dragged out another,
the rescued woman spilled intestines.

I fainted, Lona laughs. *I didn't know what
to do. I just went to work, cried later.*

Daydreamers

From across the table, I watch my father
stare at the menu, his rough hands struggling
for a second to turn the page.
His delivery driver uniform with stitched
name tag is dirty, his matching hat wrinkled.

I suggest a fajitas lunch, and he's relieved
to not contemplate all the choices
with graveyard-shift eyes.

He talks of New York, what it's like living
in a big city, how he may go back for a third time.
When I don't say much, he asks “How's school?”

I explain on my best days I’m a writer,
but it feels awkward calling myself one.

“You can’t worry about what others think of you.
Someday you’ll have a book, be famous.”

I remind him I write poetry.
He says, “Yeah, but when you write the screenplay,
sell the movie rights, you’ll be driving a Porsche.

Maybe, I should go back to school.
I always wanted to do film editing.”

He tells me how he lost his job,
needs to write a letter for unemployment.
So I imagine the west coast, talk about
what it might be like to work in the movies,
live in L.A.

American Spirit

After the phone call, I followed her invitation,
driving west at a stoned 30 miles per hour.
The night's slow drizzle beaded on the windshield,
blurring passing whites, fading reds, between
wiper swipes.

At her apartment, she handed me a loaded pipe,
and we traded hits, skunk smells wafting
from decorated glass, smoke threads weaving—
in the multi colored shades of her lamp.

We talked of finding what we wanted to see,
what it's like to aspire past entry level jobs,
how traveling from point, A to B is tiring,
even sad, watching others take different roads,
or none at all.

When she made soup, I split time, looking
at a painting of a burning city by the sea,
and her legs in black tights, climbing
on the counter-top, a yoga acrobat reaching
into cabinets, shadowed caves along a cliff-side.

After the meal we smoked cigarettes, cherries
unfurled paper to ash, as she said “balance
was the best flavor,” then tossed the box, a wheel
on a straight line, hitting me with her brand.

Made Up Stories

Luckie had a tattoo, a four-leaf clover
on her left ankle, the same leg she pulled up
between mine, her toes gently sweeping
my testicles to ask— *What's your fantasy?*

British accents from a film she'd brought over
came from the television, somewhere between
softcore and porno, a plot too confusing to follow.

She kissed my chest lightly, the stud from her
pierced tongue sliding up my neck to my mouth
as she bit my lip.

Paralyzed I could only mumble, “I don't know.”

At work we sent private messages, everyday chat
escalating into double entendres, made up stories
with role-played characters.

When I said no to moving in and becoming
a family with her and a kid that wasn't mine,
she broke it off, found someone else to tell her
everything she wanted.

Then one night she calls, picks me up to drive a lap
around the old neighborhood, the same circle
we took during work to smoke joints.

She tells me she's pregnant again,
and it's not mine, hasn't seen the father in two weeks.

She wipes her face with the back of her hand,
manages a “how are you?”

I say I'm still putting the pieces
together, that I may go back to school,
maybe English. And she says I should,
that she always liked our stories.

The Scribe

We sit on plastic chairs, or tree stumps,
around a homemade bonfire, the flame's seducing
flicker creating shadows in the November night.
The man we call Sage feeds logs to a burning
pit with lighter fluid, then smokes his hand rolled
marijuana DMT concoction, and passes left.

“There's purpose in process,” he says
with an enlightenment from traveling outside
the Midwest, where he learned to expand
his craft of mind alchemy next to the ocean,
on the beaches of Florida, California.

The comedian with the gift of speech, commands
the conversation by telling funny stories about
whatever is relevant, and we all laugh, reminded
of the common thread that has brought us together.

The entrepreneur talks about the gold standard,
how our dollar will be worthless, and we should
invest in commodities, work for ourselves—
he's starting a hauling company.

And I'm silent, watching the dark shapes dance
by the orange light, the fire slowly climbing
to four feet, crackling and snaking into the shape
of an Egyptian goddess, as she gently sways
back and forth, her face a cat.

The musician leans over and whispers to me
“You’re in it right now.” And I nod in agreement.
“Don't forget the details, there's meaning
in everything,” he says, then picks up his guitar,
plays a new song.

Destroying Fences

We struck matches, the flames
eating down
till we were forced
to save our fingers—

black dust smeared in the garage,
where we found the hatchet,
its rusted blade

sharp enough
for the tree
behind our house.

We hacked,
over an hour—

until one of us missed,
chopped the neighbor's picket fence.

Or perhaps,

we wanted to see what would happen.
A single hit on top, smooth and easy,
right in two.

We split the planks instead.

Post Modernism

For Elliott Kastner

I found the old pickup truck in a field,
surrounded by overgrown weeds, the land
threatening to reclaim its dull rusted
metal. Inside the cab the seat replaced
by a rotting tree stump, the windows
still solid. And since nobody cared, I set about
to fixing that. I picked up a barbed-wire fence post,
threw it like javelin at the windshield,
thrust a spear through the headlights,
then bat swung, smashing the mirrors,
driver-side and passenger-side,
till all the glass was shattered, reflecting
in the setting sun, crunching under boots.

New St Louis Revelations

In one of the few buildings with enough structure
left to be considered livable, we're ten to a room,
on the twelfth floor. From the window I can see
the Arch being rebuilt, its gray brown scrape metal
glinting in the autumn sun, the middle missing
from our man-made rainbow of hope and humility.
While on the streets below, cars are strewn across
the cracked and cratered asphalt, as if the drivers
had suddenly abandoned their getaway vehicles,
long since stripped clean by scavengers,
leaving only the remains of skeletal frames.
Nobody talks to me except for that guy
who goes by his middle name, he says the people
that feed us, wear those dirty lab coats to disguise
their purity, but he knows an angel when he sees one.
I hold up my camera toward the arch when Daniel
taps me on the shoulder, points to a man on the corner
waving a book, tells me if you listen close enough
you can hear him yelling 9:12, 9:12, it’s always 9:12.

PART II.

Fugue for Tom Wingfield

The smoke swirls, rising, a Lucky Strike's orange glow
illuminates that face— younger than its years. He's out
the window, on the fire escape landing, where there's time.

The clouds are in a yellow ring around a half-moon—
hub and wheel among darkness, reserved for pulsing beacons
waiting to explode into stardust— fallout
over a vast black sea— expanding the universe.

In his pocket, blue inked lines on warehouse cardboard,
words that seemed more intelligent while on lunch.
He's in his own world—
images flash from wandering thoughts

and I can only imagine that night with his first
girl in five years, as the two rolled around newly acquainted—
a broken unicorn.

One bullet in the revolver, spin and click
drunken barrel to his head— just squeeze to end
the spectral whispers from the Shadow.

Then the shot into the night sky.
As heavy steps stagger between dashed lines down an empty
road, the start of a forced march for deliverance, or love.

Neighborhood Friends

After Aaron Smith

In the bathroom— they've
removed their clothes.

Before they touch, before
they hump each other

on a stiff foldout bed, they bathe
their eight-year-old bodies

together in bubble bath
so they can talk about,

do you practice for girls?
Yes, with a pillow.

The mother and father are gone
to their Friday night dinner.

They're two boys in a living room
off Western Avenue and it's winter.

They're in their superhero underwear,
touch and hump, that is his penis.

That is *his* erection. They are chest
to chest, stomach to stomach,

his hands on the bed, then him
on his back, then him on top

his cock rubbing his cock
practicing together,

up and down, thinking of her, then
him, then her, him, her, him again.

She Can Be Anyone She Wants

It had to do with her dark painted toes, long,
made to grip— one toe dangling her vinyl flat,
popping it against her heel, as if peeling

back his chest layer by layer, a lost freefalling
rhythm of something he couldn't name
saying— *come here*.

Who is she anyway? Those slender crossed
legs, making it hard for him not to peek.

But would she understand the truth—
how he desired nothing more

than to face her clean sole,
be relieved of his power—
told we meant something?

Belladonna

She sang the songs of a traveler,
going wherever

the tracks led,
attempting to avoid

too many bad notes along the way—
stopping, every so often,
to pick dandelions.

Her jazz changed gears like a snake
head stick-shift,
begging to be the one

I've always pictured,
only to step off stage.

Those legs—
that black dress—
walking away

could make any man, or woman,
take a dive.

Both of us high
enough,

for our smeared glass view
from the skybridge

to be magic.

The Space Between

The midnight rain cracks against the window,
waves of pebbles across glass, lightning's
blue flicker in a dark room, lingering flashes

of that last time I saw you at your gig. We stood
outside the *Highlife* late spring evening, smoking
Camels between rounds of cheap beer, under

the sodium glow of downtown streetlight stars.
You in that black 80's dress to your knees, matching
boots, makeup, war-paint for taking on the world.

On stage you sang, your music's electronic bass
rhythms pumping to iridescent neon lights, lyrics
floating out over the crowd, like a lighthouse

beacon signaling through night's fog, and I'm sailing
these rough seas with a new-found hope saying fuck
death. But tonight, I haven't heard from you in weeks.

The clairvoyance gone. My thoughts are jagged rocks,
home to a whispering ghost telling me *I'll always be alone*.
I wrap myself in a gray black blanket, that never

satisfied flame in the center of the chest, a guiding
warmth, like faith, waiting for this storm to pass.

Chemical Moon

At a secluded table in the back of the bar,
pulsing neon lights dance with shadows
across her face— *the heroin*

was the reason she disappeared last week.
Her short brown hair tied back with her
grandmother's pink silk scarf, the one who

in old age ran screaming through the house
naked. *There's crazy in my DNA,* she repeats.
I glance down at her crossed legs,

brush her thigh with the back of my hand, skin
smoother than that scarf, or a fresh bed sheet,
and I know I'd accept any consequence.

We talk of *Sandman issue 23*,
the forgotten murderer who demands torture
after he's freed by Lucifer. We choose Hell.

Following her music performance,
I step over the scarf now lying on stage,
hold her in my arms.

Perhaps, it's the alcohol that has me believing
we could make it, as if I still had a choice,
napalm in our hearts.

Middle Car, 1943

Lona and Rose stood on the railway platform,
17 years old, and on their own, ready to escape
the Ukraine and a Soviet invasion. When Rose
said, “No, not the front. I have a feeling.

Let’s take the middle.” Two weeks later, three
days without food, the train clinked in darkness
across the winter plains when the tracks
failed to switch. The train smashed into another,

the front cars exploding. Lona hit her head,
screamed as the wetness dripped down her face.
When the train settled, a man lit a match, found
the broken coffee pot. *Just coffee, you’ll live.*

Then laughter, and for a moment everyone
forgot about their uncertain destination.

The Better Side of Uncertainty, 1943

Somewhere between Germany and the Ukraine,
miles from any town, the refugees wandered
across the frozen river. What started out as a line,
staggered into a snake of the still-alive.

The sky began to growl as two Russian P-39's
pounced from the clouds— came in low to better
see the rain of their rounds.
We knew the country by the sound of their engines.

On the last pass the fighters emptied their guns
the ice breaking apart like plates, swallowing
those who led the way. Lona and Rose
laid on the ice,

Lona covering her head with a burlap sack, Rose
laughing at her saying, *That sack won't save you.*

Middle Car, 1943

Lona laughed as she dragged the burlap sack
across frozen ground, back to the boxcar
where Rose and the other refugees huddled,
faces hollow from days without food.

The train had made an unexpected stop
after midnight, the sky clear, crescent moon
and stars on a black quilt enveloping
a distant farmhouse.

Without knowing how long the train would wait,
Lona took off running, knocked on the door.
The farmer woke, heard her plea, and donated
a sack of potatoes. In the boxcar they cheered,

boiled them on a makeshift stove, someone
passing a saltshaker from their pocket.

September Leaves

Today I was afraid you would become a ghost
like the rest of them, but the back door opened—
you sat next to me, ordered tea.

After lunch, down neighborhood streets,
you ran into someone's yard—
picked seed pods from a flowerbed of impatiens.

Showed me how a gentle pinch could make
them burst apart. When you clapped your hands
the cloud covered sky filled with blackbirds,

who gathered in formation, then flew away.
Your bare feet crushing gooseberries—
as we walked through in the park. Goodbye hug—

my face in your new bleached hair,
clinging to shampoo and chemicals— before
letting go, like the leaves already on the ground.

Midwestern Blackbirds

At the top of the parking garage we overlooked
the skyline of our Midwestern city.

January's chilled breath swept streets
of locally owned coffee shops, restaurants, bars,

and graffiti, pushing back your scarf to reveal
your new shaved head—then away, around the silos

long since abandoned after the trains stopped.
You adjusted, smiled, a moon visible in the day sky.

Both of us silent. Unable to hear the wind
whirring past us, or the vehicles driving below.

Two blackbirds flying side by side,
into the sky's limitless blue.

Lola

Every time it rains I find your face
in a busy sidewalk— or peek from a car

driving the opposite direction.

Sometimes, you look as you might today,
different hair, but the same gaze I've seen

spark for fleeting moments in others,

like when that girl pick-pocketed
my cigarettes, gave me a train ticket.

I know it was you—

The same as that October night,
when we threw pebbles across the creek,

at an empty beer bucket, we never hit.

The Road Taken

is a midnight dirt trail that belly-dances— cutting through
the woods— overhanging branches, a canopy of ghost

shadows outlined by what's left of the moon's hope—
reflecting on similar rocks and roots I always

stumble over. As it so happens I'm sick of being a traveler,
sick of stopping at crossroad taverns, tired, thirsty,

like a dog made of chocolate chip cookies,
wagging his way toward that woman

with the right legs and feet to keep him walking.
The smell of her hair breaking my curse of an unknown

destination. The only thing I want is to fly
like dragons, or clouds. The only thing I want

is to not wake up without your morning forehead kiss—
not know the release of your hand

when our paths diverge.

Cultivating Fire

On the Northfork of the White River
we sit on the rocky bank, around a bonfire,
passing whiskey, joints, and Wheat Thins.

I watch the girl across from me, who's not
bothered by the daddy long legs that appear
more frequent than I would like, and stares

into the flames, as if reading its prophesy,
her bare soles kissed by the flickering glow.

Tonight, I believe she is you, the one I hear—
a river's whisper urging me to steal another
moment—reinforcing my religion.

And she will say: *There's not enough time*,
choose a river rock worn perfectly smooth,
drive back to Tennessee.

But on this night, she runs off into the dark
gathers more drift wood, returns to stoke the fire.

After Midnight

On the balcony of the resort,
the last few voices leave the bar—
steps stagger across gravel
back to shared rooms.
I sit next to a rose in a paper cup.

The night is concealing its stars.

The wind plays an overture,
rustling leaves accompanied by static
from the river below, its black waters
rushing in overtones. It will rain.

Will you remember the night we found
those rapids— they caressed rocks,
its foam whitelike a cloud
we could find shapes in— we agreed
to call this one a giraffe, or a unicorn?

Rose says anytime I need distracted
she'll dose me with her legs
and high heels.

We smoke Camels between rounds
of merlot. My blue lighter almost gone.

In the morning I find your half empty
wine glass, put your full red lighter
in my pocket.

PART III.

Romance

is a town in Missouri, just two miles off
the main highway, a gravel road or dried

up creek bed— its familiar ruts lined by trees
in purple tape. *Warning No Trespassing*.

The way will not show up on your I-Phone.
You will need intuition to choose your direction,

steadily moving that blue GPS dot to the letter R.
If you're lucky it will take 45 minutes.

You'll pass a man on a riding lawnmower
who will smile, wave, happy to see someone,

anyone. When you reach the middle of the word,
arrive at the crossroads marked by a blue street sign,

on your left will be a barn, its wood rotted,
crumbling, standing only by the will of hope.

A barking dog guards the entrance, unchained—
the protector of the dark desires hidden inside.

To your right you'll see the church, rebuilt in 1954,
out front, a swing— painted scriptures on the frame,

and a few dozen purple irises, missing four flowers,
picked by those who got lost— then found the way.

Obsessive

Outside my apartment
the snow falls

like cotton in the parking lot.

Winter's
last few inches,
a whispered

reminder of life before fire.
I want to be in my blankets,
write

a letter to that girl I tried transforming

into hope— apologize
again.

But I can't get past the words:
Hey lady.

Because she knows if I wasn't stoned
I'd probably step out in front
of an 18

wheeler on the highway.

Because I'm guilty of believing her
love could save me, and I feel it still.

Still Life

From her third story apartment she sketches
on canvas, the wooded landscape below—

littered with snack trash, a few milk jugs,
a tossed out Christmas tree, and plucked
love me, love me not, white rose petals
on frosted grass and great dane dog shit.

You can draw something too, she says,
and I can add it to the painting.

But I'm no sketcher, or painter. In fact, every
art class I drew the same picture, crayoned
hills, a house, trees, clouds, and sun. The edges
of each outlined dark, the insides shaded light.

So how draw Mr. Poopers?
We talk of oranges. Observe,

last night's rain hang suspended on January
branches— refusing to drop like heroes.
The sky reflected in the creek, ripples quivering
through the negative space left by the fallen

leaves, like morning through a sliding glass door.

Blue puddles of bliss

is what she calls the leftover water,
the swirls of soap that haunts the dish
after I return the bar to its rightful
place by the sink.

I wash my hands before playing video games,
a habit instilled by my best friend's father,
to protect the controllers,
keep the buttons from sticking.

How amazing it was to watch his father
beat *Mike Tyson's Punch Out* dropping
every fighter, explaining to us it was about
observing and adapting to the patterns.

As kids we went to bed content
with the order of reality, confident
that any game, no matter the difficulty,
could be won.

As I watch the soap mix with water—
I remember how our paths intersected one
Valentine's Day, both of us alone. I smiled
and she curtsied without knowing my name,

an unexpected friction, washing away
the residue of all we lost.

First World Stretch Marks

From my balcony I can hear them
speaking in the parking lot, but only see
the woman, fifty something, who'll talk
to anyone, overstay her welcome.

And I'm guilty of turning my back,
not responding when she hollered,
“Well, good mornin,”
at 6am from surely too far away
to be talking to me.

She says to the man I can't see,
“You stop being mad at him.
He had some bad days,
and I've been sick for two weeks.”

I'm mad at him cause he's mad at me.

“Well you've been mad for too long.”

Then the man says, *I want Red Lobster.*

And though that is not the restaurant
I'd choose, I know too well how easy
it is to find happiness in a buffet
of Springfield cashew chicken, rice,
and extra green onions.

Weekly Meeting

Wednesday sat at the head of the table.

In the other seats were Tuesday, Friday, Sunday,
Thursday and Saturday.

“We need to decide when to start the work week,”
said Wednesday.

“What's a job again?” asked Saturday.

“It's how they'll make money. Then they trade
it for things they need to survive,” said Tuesday.

“Sounds like a more advanced form of slavery,”
said Friday.

“What are we talking about?
I dozed off,” said Thursday.

“Well, Ol' Macdonald wants to ramp up production,
and thinks it will help people become more efficient,”
said Wednesday.

In walks Monday.

“Sorry I'm late, number 13 had a party last night,
all the months showed up with dates for everyone.”

Sunday pushes up his shirtsleeves to show off
his new arm tattoos, and says “I've already taken care
of religion, perhaps, Monday can do something,
and start the work week.”

Monday hits Sunday in the face, *Pow*,
then spits on him, *Pitooie*

“People don’t want jobs!”

For Martin

As a child I played G.I. Joes,
and named them all Martin.

I hated sharing them,
watching the other kids
hold them up in the air to fight,
without plane or helicopter.

If anyone was looking for me,
I was in my bedroom,
making gun noises.

And now I'm here,
getting drunk on lunch
with a Vietnam vet—
who knows about Martin.

The vet wears an old black duster, his gray hair
marine high and tight, downing whiskey after
whiskey under a handle bar mustache.

"If I had'a tank I'd drive it right through that house,
you know how't drive a tank, you can drive anything."

I look at my bottle of Tank 7— and agree
because I know you don't challenge
someone on that much whiskey.
"I know nothing of war," I say.

He says he wishes he didn't, and clinks
the silver bracelet on the table. It reads
Captain Russel Martin, 6-3-66.

He tells me Martin was a helicopter pilot,
the date was when he was shot down—
he bought the bracelet for five dollars
after his second tour, still wears it everyday

though they've never met,
and if someone ever finds the body—
he'll mail it to Martin's family.

Monopoly, 1945

In Lehrte, Germany Lona and Rose found shelter
with an elderly couple whose sons were still at war.
Every night after dinner, the two girls, the couple,
and two neighbor boys recently discharged

wounded— selected their favorite wooden token,
included to conserve metal for the war effort.
And every night the loaded Allied bombers grumbled
overhead on their way to Hanover, buzzed back

empty. But this night, as the planes returned, Lona
stopped, dice in hand— heard the heavy sounds
of those that still carried bombs. Then cargo bays,
the whistling, the drop of the dice, as everyone goes

for the basement leaving behind money and property,
their pieces on the board left to chance.

Daily Gamble

I stand in line at the gas station while some lady
has the only clerk scanning her scratcher tickets.

Missouri ranks 15th in ticket sales with over 200 million
sold every year, and as the lady takes her time deciding
how best to replay her $20 winnings, more customers walk up
to buy soda, snacks, or tobacco, the line now blocking
the doors, and I wonder how better the odds

of becoming a CEO, a successful artist, or that random conversation
turning into a kiss.

Yet, here I am waiting behind this lady
who having already purchased her *Powerballs,*
can't decide between *Red Hot 7's* and *Makin Bacon.*

In my mind I've already allocated the jackpot
to family and friends, maybe a house and car for myself—
as if being born in America with food and shelter is not enough.

I take my turn at the counter, buy my doughnut, and two tickets.

Origins

Now that scientists can clone consciousness, the mind
nothing more than data to be replicated in mice—
where do we go from here?

All I know for sure is Star Wars is a lie. Forget human
bodies. We'll explore space by shooting mind data
at light-speed— to be downloaded and installed
into our robot mech-suits, no oxygen required.

But that's not true either.

The real story is we'll beam our consciousness toward
another planet like Earth, our seeded thoughts in the life
that evolves— they'll erect relay stations,
like Stonehenge,
or the Pyramids,
for us to travel through.

We'll keep the good parts of our minds with the bad parts,
because we'll understand to build something great
requires volcanoes, black-silt, exploding stars, and time—
for a Garden to have any hope growing the best oranges.

Donkey Ranch

Somonka with Allys Page

I was born a mule
rancher's daughter, here where all
things kick, bite, and pull
against the bit. But after
the dust calms, I can see home.

The fields reaching out,
hay bales dot the horizon,
wide open spaces
under a blue sky, wispy
clouds slowly dissipating.

Traveling to Tecumseh, Missouri

The road curves with the contour of the land,
going up over hills and sometimes through
rock walls streaked black by dynamite—
because it's easier to destroy than find
another way—until there is just the one road,
passing rundown middle of nowhere Z highway
homes—scattered toys in the yard, an empty
sandbox, action figures, a big wheel,
next to a rusted swing-set, and some kind
of stove with smoke coming out, and I wonder
what about this land makes people settle?
Maybe it's the beauty of the surroundings
that gives this meaning, or maybe it's the lives
struggling to survive splitting their own
firewood. What else is there?
Only happiness in the experience it seems,
making it easier to accept the seclusion
of the woods, nobody to tell you different,
a reason to get up in the morning,
like a sunrise on the river.

River Pretty

For Eliott Kastner

The river sweeps through the hills
of Tecumsah. Two people on the shore
talk poetry, unsure if they know
what poetry is.

Scooter McDoogal skips rocks,
his John Lennon Jesus hair
waves rockstar freedom in the wind.

Mike Chun Lao catches metaphors
like the current, against the current,
or all the stones at the bottom.

“But that's too easy,” said Chun Lao.
“Sometimes I need the familiar,” said Scooter.

And so it was, as Scooter skipped
another rock, the two fur trappers
watched as the stone kissed off the water's
mirrored surface, praying to see something,
anything, reach the other side.

The Gardener

For Jane Hoogestraat

I'm with Elliott on his couch,
take my first whiskey at 10am.
Our poetry professor is dead.
And we wonder

Who now will care for her flowers?

Louise, the crop-tailed rescue cat
meows low in the living room.

My friend says, "It's easier to wake up
when another depends on you."

He passes me the glass pipe. Our smoke
questioning if art is ever really finished,
or just merrily abandoned?

We talk of our professor, how she weeded
out our clichés, pruned our lines to help blossom
what had germinated.

Told us, we were in the right place
when the uncertainty became too much to handle alone.
It's a keeper, she'd say.

How she always tended her garden,
made sure her hyacinths survived.

Time in a Midwestern Town

A sudden patch of sunlight in the dark.

--Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*

Her long legs in denim shorts, dangle
cowboy boots, sometimes she kicks
them back and forth as if the tailgate
were a porch swing.

The afternoon haze a glittered sea
across the parking lot, vehicles lost
in the ripples of past and future.

There's only the present, she says,
talks of savoring little things,
the smell of a new pair of shoes,
eating pineapple whips, or reading

Dandelion Wine every year in June.

And I uncover a forgotten moment,
rescuing faith from the depths
of a shadowed ravine,

when years ago, from a store shelf
that book fell to the floor
in an empty aisle.

And maybe it's true, that we're meeting
in another life to measure our alignment,
to see if we've finally solved the mystery,
two lone travelers, now in harmonic adagio.

We bottle the moment with the date of creation,
to be opened when there's no other remedy.