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University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Steven Paul Sparks entitled "Glass-blue Days: A Collection of Poetry." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Arthur Smith, Amy Billone

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

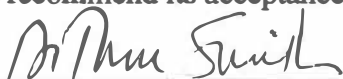
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Amy Billone

Accepted for the Council:


Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

Thesis
2005
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GLASS-BLUE DAYS: A COLLECTION OF POETRY

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Steven Paul Sparks
May 2005

The glass-blue days are those
When every colour glows,
Each shape and shadow shows.

Gerard Manley Hopkins
“The Blessed Virgin Compared to
the Air We Breathe”

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Without the sage advice and wise counsel of Dr. Marilyn Kallet and Dr. Arthur Smith, this collection would in no way exist. It is as much a fruit of their labors as it is mine. I thank them both dearly for taking an interest in my writing and for becoming my friends.

I also wish to acknowledge the influence and input of a group of talented poetic and literary friends that I have been incredibly fortunate to find here in East Tennessee: Dr. Amy Billone, Shannon Burke, Jesse Graves, Ashley VanDoorn, Brad Tice, and Kristi Maxwell. Each one of these great friends has in some way or another made me a better poet.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the following journals and anthologies where several of these poems—sometimes in other versions—originally appeared: *North American Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Now & Then*, *Appalachian Life*, *Number One*, *Metro Pulse*, *Literary Lunch*, *Migrants and Stowaways*, and *Knoxville Bound*.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the Sparkes, both living and dead, as well as the Evaness, the Rainwater's, the Stone's, the Luna's, the Leach's, the Grisham's, and every other faction of my far-flung family. Specifically, I wish to thank my parents and my sister, Felicia.

My one regret is that my mother Ramona never had a chance to read any of these poems, especially since she inspired every key stroke within this collection.

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1. Introduction

Life is interpretation. Whether reading the clouds to see if an umbrella is needed or deciphering the facial expressions of a person to gauge sincerity, everyone, thousands of times every day, interprets his world and all of its components. The question becomes does anyone ever come to the same understanding as anyone else? Does the lift of an eyebrow mean one thing to one person and something completely different to another? No one sees the same things in the same way. This fact became apparent to me early due to my family experiences.

Probably the most influential aspect in my life, and subsequently on my poetry, is my familial lore. I come from a family of storytellers, great uncles and aunts, grandparents, cousins who blew stories from their mouths like soap bubbles. These were fragile tales that would likely burst if examined too closely. When the Sparkses came over from England, they settled in north Alabama and established a town named Boaz. According to family tradition, after a decade or so the family divided into two separate factions: the holy and the not so holy. Apparently the not so holy enjoyed drinking, lying, and pretty much any other bad behavior. Much like the Puritans did to Thomas Morton and the colonists at Merrymount, the pious soon grew intolerant of the freewheeling Sparkses and cast them out of Boaz, which now, by the way, is a well-known outlet center. My Sparkses were forced to take refuge on Goat Mountain where they built stills, bow-hunted wild turkeys and treated truth like taffy, stretching stories to the breaking point. These stories became my family's heirlooms, growing more ornate as each generation passed them down. However, one's true measure of being a Sparkses relied not

so much on one's ability to attach new baubles to the old tales, but more so on one's ability to sort through the fabrications to learn exactly what the truth was.

While the reputation of the Sparkses in southern Marshall County persisted for some time, it had diminished quite a bit the first time I encountered the phenomenon. On my first day of class in the first grade, my ancient teacher, Mrs. Katherine Duncan, asked me to stay after the bell rang at the start of my first recess. "Are you a good Sparks or a bad Sparks?" she asked me. I remembered she smelled strongly of the powdered make-up that whitened her face to spectral proportions. I didn't know what she meant. When I didn't answer, she said "I've taught both kinds and I hope you're a little boy who wants to go to heaven." Later that day when I spoke of this curious exchange with my mother, she shook her head and told me of the problems she'd had when she first moved to Alabama. She and my father had been married in Missouri where she was from and my father was temporarily employed. "I couldn't get credit anywhere," she said. "It took us forever to find our first apartment. Everyone immediately asked which side of the Sparkses I was related to. You should have seen the looks on their faces when I told them." I asked her if it was true that the Sparkses naturally lie.

Her answer opened the world of writing to me. I decided that writing stories was an acceptable way to tell lies. My grandmother Mittie Belle, a woman inordinately proud of being a Sparks by marriage only, had already drummed into me how Jesus cried every time someone lied. Naturally I was a little confused about this particular aspect of my heritage. My first attempts at writing were stories I acted out from the space between my bed and the wall with the small brown paper bags my Uncle Snooks used for penny candy in his general store. I would color the bags to resemble the characters I created and

force my poor sister to listen to my endless dramas involving missing dogs and courageous boys trapped by tornadoes or smugglers. I even mounted a mammoth production of the Last Supper complete with a Judas Iscariot bag sporting inverted V eyebrow to demonstrate his duplicitous nature. My sister soon rebelled, and it became nearly impossible to find anyone willing to be my audience. I gave up the writing life at the age of nine and decided that a life of dishonesty was inevitable. I did not seriously attempt to write until I was in my early twenties.

I came to poetry late. I was in my early thirties before I ever wrote down a poem. However, unbeknown to me, I had been constructing verse in my head since the halt of the paper-bag plays. Lines filled my head each night in the twilight minutes before sleep. Some nights I could not wait to go to bed to tumble words around in my head like raw gemstones. I continued this practice until well into my teens. These proto-poems were short snippets of an extremely narrative nature, mostly reinterpretations of the day's events, epics where I always said the right things at the right times and always won the fights. The few encounters I had with poetry had all been negative. The few poems I had read in my English classes had contained set rhyme schemes, convoluted syntax, and strict form. It was no wonder I misread my mutterings as some form of fiction. It wasn't until I came to The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, at the end of the twentieth century and read examples of contemporary poets—Sharon Olds, Galway Kinnell and Billy Collins were a few of the first—that I realized that the lines I spun at night to lull myself to sleep were in fact poems, or at least fragments of poetry.

While I deduced that the words in my head were fiction, I instinctively knew that I was not creating conventional short stories. My creations lacked much detail and bulged

with similes and metaphors, and when I tried to correct this and make my stories more like the ones I read, I would quickly become lost, filling pages with inconsequential descriptions of faces and haircuts, bookshelves and drapery. Tangents became the demons that plagued my fiction. I decided I needed instruction.

By this time I was living and working in Knoxville, Tennessee, and I decided to go back to school to finish my bachelor's degree and learn to write fiction. It felt like I had no choice. The words kept filling my head at all times, not just at night. In the car or at work, I would absentmindedly compose lines of poetry. It invaded every aspect of my life. I had to find a satisfactory way to get what saturated my mind out and onto the page. So I quit my job and entered UTK. During my second semester in a 300-level fiction writing class, Dr. Bill Larsen suggested that I might learn preciseness of language better in a poetry class. In the subsequent fall, I took his advice, and entered my first poetry-writing class. My first assignment became the first poem I wrote down on paper. I titled it "Kudzu." When Dr. Marilyn Kallet singled it out during my first workshop day, I knew that I was on to something.

Soon I was reading other poets. I would go to Hodges Library and wander the stacks on the fifth floor pulling out collection after collection to take home and devour. I also discovered canonical poets in the classes I was taking. Two such masters who proved to be influential in my writing were Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Frost.

One of the primary things I admired in their work was their ability to utilize nature imagery in a profound and revealing manner and how this imagery worked the initial avenue into the poem. I was astonished to realize that this practice allowed their works to be read on dual levels: firstly on a immediate level that revels in the beauty and

sublime savagery in nature and then on a more complex level where a philosophical truth can lie in wait to be discovered. I began to incorporate natural scenarios into my work as well. I found it to be an intriguing way to approach my overall interest in interpretation. It was my intention to invite the reader to examine my poems with their similes and metaphors forged in nature the same way she might read the landscape to determine the season or the weather and hopefully, to layer my work with multi-levels of meaning.

A classic example of this layering technique can be found in Bishop's poem "The Fish," where the reader literally has to fillet away lines of descriptions about the appearance of a legendary fish to decode Bishop's ultimate meaning. In this poem and others such as "The Armadillo" and "Sandpiper," Bishop firmly plants her ruminations on humanity in the natural world to invite comparisons and stimulate deeper understanding within her poetic forms. In a matter of speaking, by forcing her readers to interpret her seemingly dispassionate descriptions, Bishop's poems work as both exercises in interpretation and reflections *on* interpretation.

A great deal of Robert Frost's canonical works function on the same plane as Bishop's—no surprise since he was evidentially a major inspiration upon her work, but Frost took duality of meaning one step further by addressing in several works the hazard of misinterpretation. Frost spent the early part of his career misread as minor poet of idyllic verse before the darkness entangling every line was pointed out by astute critics. Unsurprisingly, his poem "The Wood-Pile," one of my favorites, directly comments on this topic. In the poem the speaker is taking a winter's walk in a snow-covered swamp. Frost's descriptions of the land conjure the image of a blank sheet of notebook paper: "The view was all in lines/Straight up and down of tall slim trees/ Too much alike to

mark or name a place by.” Then the things—the small cautious bird, the wood-pile—the speaker encounters in the swamp represent lines of poetry, each with equal potential to be read or misread, and the speaker allows multiple interpretations of all he sees. The bird symbolizes one who misunderstands what he sees as he mistakes the speaker for some sort of threat and retreats without ever knowing the speaker’s true intentions. However, the poem ends with the speaker admitting that the only recourse to avoiding misinterpretation is to place one’s work in a position where it wouldn’t be read at all. This would render poetry pointless.

Even more prevalent in my poetry than the nature imagery is a narrative, lyrical structure. I cannot say that any poets influenced this feature in my work because as mentioned above this aspect was innate. However, I do find myself drawn to poets with a similar propensity to my own style, such as William Stafford, B.H. Fairchild, Marie Howe, and James Wright. Part of my poetic intention is to allow my poems are to represent a sort of allegory, but the lesson to be gleaned is up to the reader himself. This Reader-Response approach is my way to dodge the misinterpretation question. My poems will always mean one thing to me, but they are designed to be slippery enough and packed with enough simile and metaphor to be interpreted differently by various readers.

My poetry attempts to analyze of all of the components of an individual’s life and to convert them in to a palpable amalgamation, as layered as a French pastry and as complicated as a bouillabaisse. However, simply to create something tasty is not my intent. From a personal perspective, my poems are my endeavors to make sense out of chaos. On a grander scale, they meant to reveal moments of truth, to create instances of thunder.

2. Poems

Paradise

where there are
25 distinct definitions
for the word love,
and each one is
colored its own
distinct color,
and they fly from the lips
like dragonflies
off lotus petals,
and never are they
harbingers of snakes.

Glass-blue Days

What if I told you about the morning sunlight,
how it kaleidoscopes through the hibiscus bush
where the jeweled hummingbirds sip from blooms purple as blood,
how my calico cat sits all morning staring up
as if at zeppelins, how the light spills across the floor
like topaz and citrine?

Or maybe the face of the lake,
how still it is late summer afternoons when you can see
everything in it, and how it only takes the wind's slightest breath
to wrinkle the water and change it all.

Family Cemetery

1.

Blunt and abrupt as a dropped hymnal,
it is a clear spot among shaggy pines
at the foot of Goat Mountain.
To the left of the oldest graves
through a mesh of briars and underbrush
slumps a vast, abandoned apple orchard.
At the end of summer when the fruit
rots on the ground, the air shimmers
with the smell of cloying decay and the hum
of a thousand wasps and yellow jackets.
The noise is like the roar of some giant engine.
Almost loud enough to make you believe
that if you could make it through the scrub,
you would find a rent in the earth
and the true machinations of how it turns.

People from within the city limits don't know it
by my family's name. They call it the Bishop
after a gravestone shaped like a chess piece.
Legend says if you back your car up just right
and shine your lights on the ecclesiastical stone,
the face of the Devil appears. Then your lights die,
and you're left in the dark with the knowledge
that all those stories you were told are terrible and true.
I went on foot with a flashlight to see for myself.
The gravestone, one of the oldest in the cemetery,
was nameless and dateless—worn blank and shiny
by decades of wind and grit. All I saw reflected there
was my own light and the top of my hornless head.
Walking away through a December night as cold
as the stars above me, I still thought I could hear
the great engine of the world— grinding, grinding.

2.

Why do I return here?

Where the pines grow thick and tall
and empty their pockets of cones,
I can hear the whistles as they fall,
cover the graves. When the wind is up,
the trees creak like wooden ships on high seas.
This world I work in, this world I walk in
buzzes and vibrates. Green drips from the leaves,
brown leeches out of the dirt, and when I reach
into the sky, blue smudges my fingers
like newspaper print. When I'm here,
I wish I'd remembered to bring a blanket.
I would throw it out across my family,
lay with a book sprawled over my chest,
and drift into the dreams of the dead beneath me—
scenes of lives unextraordinary: lunchtime
debate on a tailgate in the parking lot
of the chicken plant; or a summer dusk's sit
on the front porch telling tales and watching
the fireflies shame the stars.

3.

this place looks the same
winter as in summer,
evergreens everywhere.
I walk grave to grave:

beloved father
littlest angel
not forgotten
in heaven now

through my fogged breath
I see this cold world.
the ghostly vapor
does not
form the images
of those I read.
I walk through
this chill veil and it freezes
in my lashes and brows,
thaws in the car,
trickles down my face.

4.

I remember my aunt at Noccalula Falls Park
wading across a koi pond on a Sunday
after church. We were there for a picnic
of cold chicken and deviled eggs when suddenly
my stoic aunt was knee deep in pond water,
daintily holding up her dress hem,
still wearing her shoes and stockings,
while pursuing an exotic sprig
blooming in the middle of an islet.

This is where she lays.

The speckled fish waved their fins like silk underwater
and didn't flee my aunt's big feet. They seemed
enraptured by such an unexpected intrusion.
Next to her, my Uncle Red who died three months
to the day after my aunt drowned in pneumonia.
"He just stopped living," the doctors said, "We can't explain it."
I don't remember ever seeing them display one moment
of affection, one look or slight brush of a hand.

5.

I return though I've taken as much as I want from this place,
inhaled it like sandalwood incense or clove smoke—
sweet sting in the nostrils, ethereal tendrils sprouting in the lungs.
Maybe I could learn more but I refuse to feed the ghosts,
the ones who demand blood, stand akimbo
with their transparent mouths swirling with murder ballads.
Uncle Farrell who killed a man in prison
over a boiled potato,
or G.W. Rainwater, cousin never known shot dead
by a heartbroken secretary in a honky-tonk
called the Do Drop Inn, or the bruised and furious children
of second cousin twice removed Eddy.
Their need to sing hangs in the air like a stench,
and they are patient. They know I'll be back.

The Bee Charmer

Honey wouldn't ooze from his mouth,
his lips pressed together so tight.
No fear buzzed in the jars of his eyes
as hundreds, thousands of bees
radiated around him, landing on
his shoulders, his naked throat.
There was no attempt at defense.
This was a welcoming, an invitation
to an old friend to come and
share in the hospitality of the hive.

Aunt Dorothy and I stood clear,
fearful behind the raspberry trellises,
watched for the hundredth time as
Uncle Houston extracted honey
from the white box hives
without the use of the bee suit.
He said the bees were more
afraid of us than we were of them
as they crawled around his mouth,
floated on the weight of his words.
Aunt Dorothy said this is a magic
one is born with; it can't be learned.
I wanted to be my uncle, do what he did,
be melodious with the bees,
but I shared blood with his wife
who swatted at a wayward worker
that floated over on my uncle's
solicitation to join him in the swarm.
She ducked behind the barbed vines,
pulling me down with her. I peeked
around her butt at the golden veil
swelling around my uncle like an aura.

The Witch

She walks past the ancient oak trees that guard her yard
to the voluptuous iris beds.

She wears her floppy hat and the grey smock
with the extra large pockets she sewed on herself
with jagged Frankenstein stitches.

Rusty shears poke out from one pocket.

Pausing to evaluate the damage that the night has done,
she finishes an Eskimo Pie and slides the wooden stick behind her ear.

Her rough hands pinch deadheads, snatch new weeds, grasp
a perfect purple bloom—she shoves the popsicle stick down its throat,
until its tip is sullied with yellow power.

Holding it like a child with an egg in a spoon,
she floats over to the bed where the pink irises nod,
meticulously administers powder into the open face of a new blossom.
Nature doesn't produce a red iris, but she will.

The stick goes back behind her ear,
she glides across the grass towards the impatiens.

Drunk in the Orchard

We bob under
apple branches,
dodge woozy bees.

Gobs in our pockets,
half-zipped jackets—
make-shift sacks,

we don't even wash them,
the red globes snatched
from the air the earth,

desire unlatched.
If we don't steal them,
they'll fall fallow

too close to the source
force the culling.
A quick wipe

we bite into sensation
so crisp it cuts.
We spin and stagger,

our dagger laughter
slices the chickadees
from the trees,

throws them
against the sky
like bottlerockets.

We're getting away with something,
and we know it.
No reprimands,

only the ignored command
of the *No Trespassing* sign—
rusted and buckshot

on barbed wire
strung too loose
to hold back anything.

Naming Paradise

So God put Adam to work in the garden
naming the things that grew there:

wisteria, hibiscus, lisianthus.

syllables perfuming the air
the second they left the mouth,

hyacinth, zinnia, salvia.

His christening was a gathering,
an assemblage of things,
a bouquet held close to his heart.

I name the parts of you anonymous:

the hedge behind your ears, just beyond
the timberland of your hair, where flesh
is blue tinged, like inner petals of white irises;

the territory at the back of your neck
where strands grow in a V-shape, pale,
tender as new sprouts beneath pine needles;

those bumps that grow in a fairy circle
around the hummocks of your nipples.

Your heart against my heart,

I imagine syncopation, accept transgression,
grassplot, peasblossom, chanterelle.

Artifice

Two streets over and three streets down,
is the Methodist church that's made from stone blocks
all cut from the same quarry, some place over near Rome, Georgia.
The stone's are greenish gray.
They might be limestone. I don't exactly remember.
It could be mold for all I know.

Sometimes, especially in the summer,
retired quarrymen will visit the church,
dragging along wives or grandchildren.
On more than one occasion I've seen
a couple of those tired old men sitting on the
monumental front steps crying, like the place is a memorial,

and their wives, or whoever, act all confused and fluttery,
the way I imagine bees and butterflies
must act when they come across a cemetery
on Decoration Day and get a load of all those plastic flowers.

Blackberries

John and I, raised five counties apart,
Share the same childhood memories
Of grandmothers, great aunts, packs of cousins
Congregating on dew dampened July mornings
To pick blackberries in impassable patches.
Purple-pulped adventures, the only occasions
In the barefoot days between May and September
We'd be caught wearing shirtsleeves and pants,
Our defense against brambles and chiggers—
Red pepper spilt on an open windowsill.
Laden with cobbler visions, daintily plucking,
Each sun-warmed berry a pinched earlobe,
One eye searching for treasures, the other, poison
Wrapped sinuously among berries and briars.
An aunt's molasses voice making us sticky
With stories of Moses in the bulrushes,
Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness,
And the ingratiating plop of one berry
Dropping into a bucket of brethren.

A Sunday decision to drive towards Sweetwater
Out of the scrappy city, John and I searched for
Overgrown thickets along roadsides.
Instead we found a barb-wire fence
Feebly wrapped by a vine with yellow leaves.
We picked the half-green, half-red
Berries along with the few puny black ones.
We talked of the cold heavy cream we planned
To pour over our heaping bowls of blackberries,
Spoonfuls of autobiographical text
Brought up to our grateful mouths.
But we were startled out of our dreams
By fevered needle jabs in our bare legs.
We slapped at the demoniac fire ants
Rising up from the beds we were standing in.
We raced to the car and headed back to Knoxville,
Spraying discontented gravel on what we left behind.

Along the French Broad

Always I return to water,
mussel shells in my pocket,
gull feathers to my lips.

A search for something
woven in the cattails and reeds,
or thrown on bank grass to dry.

Silhouetted herons and egrets
are strokes of Buson's pen
along the shoreline,

rotted knots of
cedars and alders
belched onto the beach

conjure a summer me,
a child on a lake,
running wildly,

slipping off a slick dock
into too shallow water.
My head smacked the

mud bottom, soft
as bedtime kisses,
water warm as spit.

And for a moment,
I thought I could breathe.

Cold hands yanked me
to the pier where I
flopped and gasped,

a stunned carp,
pulled from one world,
flung into another.

O, rippled water,
lapping at my ankles
like a kicked dog,

no definition of your own,
the color of whatever
looms over you.

Today I am lost, finding
only a cawing crow
feasting on some bloated

thing washed ashore.

Map of You

You sleep on your stomach
in the spotlight of early morning,
and I paint the veins that cross your skin
blue with a brush made from eyelashes,
unleashing rivers, creeks, and branches
to flood down the slope of your back.
Next I connect moles and freckles,
straight and curvy lines in black and red—
interstates, highways, blacktop backroads
that rush toward the badlands of your legs.

I keep this map handy when we're together,
and still I don't know my way around you.
And who knew there could be such a stretch of
uncharted territory between point A and point B?
Now that I've opened you up, flattened you out,
I'm too fumble-fingered to re-fold you properly.
You'll never be the same now that you've met me.

Too Late

Not until the first time
you lay your hand
across the top of my thigh—
not as some sort of signal
but simply as a place of rest—
did I understand that beneath your skin
lay a network of interconnected bones,
white and delicate as a spider's web
strung between two limbs of a locust tree,
poised for the hour of the moth.

Cleavage

In my childhood, there were innumerable beliefs I was unsure of, Santa Claus,
angels on high,
the tooth fairy, but the one thing I was absolutely certain of was the
indisputable beauty
of my mother. In my rational brain, I know my favorite photograph of her is in
black and white,
but in my heart, I see it in the old-quilt familiarity of hand-tinted hues, with a
rosy flesh color
the most pronounced: my mother's publicity shot from 1961 when she was a
radio singer
in Kansas City, right after Chuck Berry and Elvis made it unfashionable to stand
in blue-silver dress,
the indescribable color of the sky reflected in ice, displaying a thawing hint
of cleavage,
perched, like a masthead, in front of the tuxedoed brass of Barclay's Big Band in a
Ricky Ricardo
nightclub, and torching out "Someone to Watch Over Me." She kept that picture
secreted away
in a dresser drawer along with photos of me brandishing new gaps in my smile, my sister
parading annual Easter
dresses, and my father posing with dead animals. At about age 12, I swirled into the
uncomfortable chaos
of finding the photo, tucked away like a Tijuana postcard, and momentarily, feeling the
itch of attraction
before the complex slap of recognition awakened me to find myself mid-soliloquy in
Oedipus Rex.

After the operation, my mother tried to ease our discomfort with ghastly attempts
at gallows humor,
tasteless jokes about grapefruit prosthetics and a part-time carnny job in
the freak show
as a hermaphrodite. One in particular sticks out, one that I can't quite make
myself remember,
something to do with her truly having cleavage now, making reference,
I think,
to aspects of her surgical disfigurement that she had no reasonable choice
but to laugh at.

There was one garish Polaroid, my mother in hospital bed, giving the camera
the finger,
wearing clown make-up—red nose, rainbow wig—but at the top of the
hospital gown,
a silver glint of surgical staples shines from the top of the blue antiseptic
bandage.
I threw that picture into the fireplace on the day I packed up my mother's
memorabilia
in cardboard boxes, and stored them away. Now it's either the sexpot photo with
the guilty cleavage
that I think of when I conjure up mother's image; that, or her in paint-lichened jeans,
formless sweatshirt,
standing in front of a sink full of dishes, suds on her yellow latex gloves, belting out,
in satin tones,
how September's days have dwindled down to a precious few.

Burning to the Ground

Smoke brings my tears for no good reason.
I'm thinking of all those people in movies and T.V.—
the ones who look into the eyes of the protagonist,
say they have no regrets, and that if they could do it
all over again, they wouldn't change a thing.

In my house the drawers and closets doors
bulge with regrets. The ceiling is marred
by the piss-colored stain of swallowed words,
and hordes of missed chances scatter
whenever I enter a room, flick on the lights.

Let them burn. Let them all burn.

Let their embers fly away, scorch the roofs
of my neighbors' houses, their flaky ashes
drift into the eyes of everyone I've wronged.
Let them cry for me, because of me, one last time
without knowing why, without good reason.

Things Turned Out

We slip down dew-soaked lawn;
cut grass sticks to our bare feet.
We must swallow carbonated laughs
to keep them from floating into the house
where my father sprawls in his recliner,
weather flickering on a blue screen.

We move beyond the plot my father gives
to the purple-haloed thistles he praises
then mows down the moment they burst
into blathering dander. Just underneath
the yolk-yellow trapezoid of kitchen light
shining from the window where my father fetches
his last beer of the night, we sink to our knees,
crush our hot mouths out on each other's stubbled faces.

He brings his bottle out to the dark back steps,
stares at the swollen summer moon as my hand
ripens on the skin above your fluttering heart.
Does he search the constellations for a glimpse
of the first girl he loved, the one who seemed
fashioned from July things? Not the one
softly snoring in the cavern of his bed,
the one he made a son and life with,

but the one that made him drunk with yard
dew, bottle rockets and the faint blue fuzz
of the aurora borealis on the crease of the horizon.
Does he picture her stretching across picnic blankets
or beckoning from a backseat? Does he see himself
paunchy, balding, arm around her? Or does he have
the clouded face, the half-expectant, half-disappointed
one that floats in the window for a second whenever I
drive up with you? Maybe he sees her with me,
whirling on a dance floor the way planets spin
across the heavens, giddy, oblivious
and pleased with how things turned out.

Elegy for Felicia

My sister and I told each other we were proud to do it, but the truth was no one else was willing to maintain the family gravesites—raking tree debris and hauling away flower arrangements, crumbly like ashes. Usually we chatted about the dead as we tidied their beds, reminisced about good things, but one Sunday my sister announced that our elementary school principal had molested her, called for her over the intercom, requested she report to his office where he asked her to shut the door. He had also been my sixth-grade science teacher, with his beakers of potions and elixirs that would spark and fume, gallon jars of two-headed wonders floating in formaldehyde. Once he splayed a frog on a board, deftly sliced open its belly. I had watched intently, half expecting to find gears, springs, and rubber bands when he spread the wound open with his two fingers. She said there'd been no real sex, he had just groped her smallish breasts with his nicotined hands, scraped razor rash onto her face with hard kisses. She said she hadn't told anyone at the time because it had made her feel special, singled-out, and she didn't know why she was telling me now, because it had never given her one sleepless night, never really bothered her at all.

Bliss

In one of the freshman classes I taught, I said
that Plath died by sticking her head in an oven,
and one boy cried *She baked herself to death?*

And earlier in the semester a girl with a face
like a rose answered breast cancer awareness
when I asked what might young Goodman Brown's
wife's pink ribbons be a symbol for.

When I was their age, I stacked quarters
on the sides of pool tables
and peeled the label off every beer I drank,
and I told myself just make it to 36.
Surely by then, you will have lived enough.

Tragedy Plus Distance

After we finished, our table
was so littered with chicken bones
it resembled an excavation site.

D___ told us about an ancient uncle
who fell asleep at his own wife funeral
and snored loud enough to disrupt

the services—*twice*. I told about attending
a friend's father's funeral, about standing
at the lip of a grave torn open in the crumbly

red clay, and a gaunt preacher in a oversized
blue suit who leaned over to toss in the first
rusty fistful and how his upper dental plates—

pink as a baby's casket—slipped out
of his mouth, and clattered onto the top
of the coffin like a hockey puck.

Then R___ told us of his wife's funeral,
how on the way to the cemetery
in the black limousine there was a minor

traffic accident. The procession stalled
across from a McDonald's drive-thru at lunchtime.
He said he watched people for about fifteen minutes,

waiting in line patiently, bobbing their heads
to the radio, eventually collecting
their white-sacked lunches without ever noticing.

R___ said he remembered wishing that he'd
had a Quarter Pounder, or at least a large fry.
He laughed and licked chicken grease

off his fingers, and later during the long
drive home, I couldn't recall knowing
that R___ had ever been married.

Cold Charlotte

An old mountain song I've never heard:
A vain girl, a pretty dress,
A coat she wouldn't
Wear in the wagon
To the harvest dance,

And on the way she freezes to death.
Cold, cold Charlotte, I know that
Hot desire for some
Small part of yourself
Perfect for one time—

A comet on an October's night,
A turn of phrase to move trees,
Even that is too much to ask for
Once in a life time.

The price of eternity is steep
And chill as a tune blown down
From the cold lips
Of the old moon hung
In the black black sky.

Prayer for Constancy

At least wait till I'm asleep.
Then release your sneakthief heart,
let it slide under our bedroom window,
drop like a sigh into soft summer night.

Let your heart prowl the back alley
of the pine thicket, flirt with the nightbirds,
gather up the silver fallen from the pocket
of the moon, that pockmarked drunk.

Let it slip into the womb of a magnolia,
each blossom a ingénue's bedroom,
white and innocent, yet liver-spotted
from the touch of fevered fingers.

Make sure I'm still tangled in ignorant dreams,
well before the revealing spotlight of morning,
let your soiled heart return to the cage
of your chest pressed close to mine.

Morning Prayer

In the concrete heart of this town,
a commercial bakery squats across the street
from a coffee roasting house. First shifts
start early, and if the wind is right

(and it usually is)

the combined aromas
of fresh baked bread and newly roasted coffee
slink in through your window, wrap around
you like an extra blanket. So when you wake up,
for the briefest instance, you think someone loves
you, has gotten up before you and made breakfast.

Missing Heaven

Some say dinosaurs
changed into birds
and flew away.
Bones turned hollow as reeds,
scales from stone
to papery ash.
What jump started such a drastic
metamorphosis?

I dream of this.
Aren't we all expecting
the flutter of wet wings,
the balm of the drying air?
But we get distracted, our skins
thicken into hides, nothing
can break through.
We walk the earth, we visit
the dead, we carry inside
this additional burden
of discontented flight
tucked behind ribs and hearts,
waiting for extinction,
sensing all along
that we were meant
for higher ground.

Seeds

Midnight
beside the graveyard—
I'm digging in dirt
darker than a moonless sky
in a search for seeds said
to be phosphorous, blood-red.

The Greeks believed
woodpeckers protected
these blessed kernels,
blinded those that sought them,
plucked their eyes
like over-ripe figs.
They were harvested
at night while the protectors slept.
Surely some precedent
for myth exists—
or are all words
ether-filled,
foam on a creekbed?

My grandmother had
no use for such nonsense.
She sowed peonies in the
spotlight of the sun—
thick beds of blooms
flanking the gate.
She said, "People will see these
and won't be so sad to be here."
She didn't see how all summer
the peonies slouched
like lechers on street corners.
nodding lasciviously
at tear-blinded mourners.

I want to take what's said—
the words, the stories —
plant them in me.
Let them grow wild,
like the threat of swallowed
watermelon seeds.
I have found nothing
glowing or crimson

in this bleak dirt,
and yet I keep digging,
I keep digging.

The Pearl's Orient

There's a low blood moon
caught in the stark black branches,
a baroque pearl like the one I once
found in the head of a crawfish.
When I reach to touch the moon,
it disappears into the folds
of the night sky.

What did man do
the first time he found a pearl?

What I feel for you—
this desire, this irritation—
speck-formed and nacreous.
What should I do with it?

Walking Across Goat Mountain

I realize it's likely I'm
taking the same path as
my Grandpa Buster's sister Sarah
took when she happened upon
a writhing bed of copperheads.
Sarah, so frightened by the snakes,
gave birth to a daughter, Alva,
who was born marred with
hexagonal birthmarks the size
and shine of new pennies, bezels
on her moon-colored skin.
Or so goes the family myth.

We all thought Alva
would never marry, but then
she met a man at a revival
interested more in the scripture
of her soul than of any on her flesh.
Alva believed their marriage
happy up until the day
she came home from the Lee plant
and found him sitting at the kitchen table,
eating pork rinds and crying.
"I don't love you anymore."
Seven months later,
she gave birth to a baby girl
the spitting image of him
but marked like her.

The clouds seem so close to me now
I can almost pat the scaly bellies
of the winged serpents
the ancient Chinese believed lived there—
haughty gods who fought
until they bled revered pearls—
opalescence from battle wounds.
How they ever explained
the presence of the gemstones
in the oysters of Boso,

the mussels of Lake Biwa,
I don't know. Were they
swallowed out of reverence?

Or were the mollusks like monks
hiding the shame of the incessant warring
beneath silent tongues?

In these ticking April woods,
I lope along, think of when you
stopped loving me, how,
like Alva, I say I don't know
the reasons why it happened.
Thin high grass hisses
in the breeze as I tramp through it,
step over mossy fallen logs,
plunge my hand into shadowed
rocky chinks. What is hiding
ankle-high and coiled, waiting to
rise up and strike? And what
jewels will bleed from the wounds?

The Moon Is Purple

for KM

I don't know whether or not this is true,
but this damaged girl told me of a poison
that transforms the blood and heart to purple.
Shards of amethyst in veins, one large stone
in the breast. Ancient peoples thought the gem
a powerful talisman for the lovelorn.
Stitched into their garments, they wore them
secretly over their crotches and hearts,
slept with them under their pillows all night.
She said unrequited hopes and wishes
cool and harden into amethyst, and
magpies ferry them to the moon's dark side.
Soon, she says, the whole place will blush purple.
She could not say whether this change
would be ornamental or ruinous.

Stung

Barefoot, chasing the swallowtail—
yellow lemon rimmed in rotted black—
idyllic romp through humming pasture,
then a footfall on honest barb, the prick
you are you left just as sleep with you
became a nightly chrysalis—
gone the jarring starts at your every turn—
away, toward—
the fling of your arm, your leg, your touch
on wings—feathered velvet—
impedes the flight, kills the beauty. Stinger
wrenches life free, yet the pump
of poison luxuriates, continues
to corrupt. I can't read your
face anymore, no longer practiced
your native tongue
swells from excess of toxin,
throat closes in grief,
words beat against the inside of mouth
like bees in a jar.

The Peony

Right before the BOOM,
you and I danced
sock-footed,
dizzy, sweaty,
the mirrored hardwood floor,
red Valentine's balloons—
heliumed hearts—
circling your bed,
endlessly
captured in the current
of the ceiling fan.

Today
I watch black ants
eating away the
honeyed unction
sealing the mouths
of peonies buds,
unable to bloom
before the flower, the fruit
lay consumed.

Black Umbrella

for Jack Gilbert

A flagrant risk
to open indoors,
it gapes on the desk
dispassionately,
an outward bulge
from its burden
of nothingness.
This is bad luck.

Thompson Falls, Marshall County, Alabama

Your laugh—
a slick rock to the back
of my head.
I return
because here
you hurt me.
Right here—
the one place on earth
where this meek creek roars
through a scant gorge
with ferocious velocity
enough to change
into some great beast,
maybe the tail
of an albino dragon
or the giant white serpent
that swallowed the world,
then disgorged it,
sickened by the taste.
I'm like the pearl diver
who straps on a belt of stones,
so that when he goes down
he stays down.

Preserves

Spring nights we listened to bluegrass,
notes like whirly-birding maple seeds,
Comfort and Coke, and toast
lavished with blueberry preserves
bought from the mustached lady
at the farmers' market. Her meager
booth festooned with jeweled jars
of tomatoes, relishes, and jellies.
Black marker on masking tape
like X's on calender days—
Blackberry '00, Pear & Pepper '01.

*You said: Preserves-- that's
a funny thing to call them when
there's nothing of real blueberries
preserved at all. Too much sugar.*

You were my sticky-sweet
savior— the one who plucked
me from the thicket of empty nights.
I tell no one of the dingy foam
skimmed off the top and discarded;
how in our last season your
kisses were like quinces—
prickly and so bitter they burned
the back of my throat;
how the last three months
your flesh rippled in hesitation
at the approach of my cool touch.

I preserve you with indigo ink,
across bread-white paper, these notes
of tempered sweetness mark
our sour seasons together. Displayed
on shelves of memory, I hope
there's enough to last the cold.
Because now it's October and fat deer wander
through corn stalks in wood smoke,
gorging on forgotten ears of Indian corn,
anticipating the hoarfrost of hunger
winter scatters on the drowsing land.

To Icarus, Still Here in the Labyrinth

I imagined your flight.
Not with dove wings
But veined bee wings,
Capable of lifting
Ten times their weight.
Folded, tuxedo tailed,
Aligned down your back,
Rustling in the wind
Like onion skins. Or
Opened, light illumining
Iridescence that blinds
Me as we lift up.
But I never thought
Of wax wings,
So fragile
The silver fire
Of the cold cold moon
Could quietly drop you
Like a blue curtain
Against the heat of June.

Narcissus in Retirement

Though still handsome in a pond's mirror,
cobwebs drape the sides of my head.

Sometimes I see myself again, a young boy galloping through
a familiar gulf of tall grasses,
grasshoppers skipping weedtop to weedtop
like dolphins flanking a schooner.

This boy could harmonize with the throaty tree frogs,
and wore sunlight like a prismatic coat.
He knew more than I know now.

But I can still recline on a creek bed for hours,
feel the membranes of my body grow porous,

and the world seep into me like spilt wine on an altar cloth
until all I see reflected in silver pools is some
thistledown system.

Everything is both holy and pagan, and wears crowns made of
cattail floss, nest straw, and worm silk. O the marvel of it.
Can you still see it?

Late August

The low pond churns,
the pasture blisters,
the exhausted leaves
surrender and droop
beneath the bare bulb sun,
the dry rattle of
cicadas pluck
the stagnant air.

You no longer
have a use for me
and I've waited too long.
I lay down in the orchard
atop fallen fruit,
where I too bloat and split,
a feast for wasps
and beetles,
take one last breath before
the smothering pillow
of late summer descends,
before the sickle frost
of fall slices open
the belly of harvest.

Autumn Postcard

I know this sounds odd but my yard is filled
with trees that only blaze crimson—
no golds or rusts or common browns,
just red maples, black gums, and dogwoods
and a semi-circle of sumacs out back.
You'd have to go all the way over
to the Lattimores' lawn to find yellow.
But the really odd thing is
I've been here for years,
and I'm seeing this for the first time right now.

Funny Thing about the Dead

You can sew shut their eyes,
plant them in a box of cherrywood or mahogany
beneath feet of red Alabama dirt,
and still they find you,
step into your dreams like someone getting into a shower.

If you're lucky, they've come to help you do outlandish things,
silly dream things you know are impossible.
If you're not so lucky, they come as tricksters,
tell you that your waking life is the dream,
that they are not dead,
that they've never been sick a day in their lives.
Now sit down. Have some breakfast.

Then you awake, and for the rest of the day
they follow you around like a lost child
who mistakes you for someone
who might be able to tell where he needs to be.

Vita

Steve Sparks was born in Guntersville, Alabama, on March 5, 1969. He moved to East Tennessee in 1994. He received his B.A. in English from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2001. In 2000 he was the recipient of the Margaret A. Woodruff Award for Creative Writing and the John Knickerbocker Prize for Poetry. He has had work published in such literary journals as *North American Review*, *Potpourri*, and *New Millennium Writings*, as well as in the anthologies *Breathing the Same Air*, *Literary Lunch*, *Migrants and Stowaways*, and *Knoxville Bound*.