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## Parts of a man

Timothy J, Sisk  
*University of Tennessee*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Timothy J, Sisk entitled "Parts of a man." 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:

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Marilyn Kallet

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Arthur Smith

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Stanton B. Garner, Jr.

Accepted for the Council:

---

Carolyn R. Hodges  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# **PARTS OF A MAN**

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

Timothy J. Sisk  
May 2009

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## **Abstract**

This collection of poems explores intersections of identities and societies in the construction of a man's understanding of himself. Issues tackled include gender and sexuality, class and regional identities, and place in a family. Poetry is used to express these intersections because of the genre's ability to address complex emotional and metaphorical issues concerning the topics addressed, as well as poetry's power to construct history through song, image, and narrative. Indeed, narrative is key in the making of the individual poems as well as the collection itself, as the piece is organized so that each poem builds with those surrounding it, using small portions of identity to create a whole narrative.

## Table of Contents

Subject, Rhythm, and Revolutionary Poetics .....	1
Learning to Talk.....	7
The Problem of Evil.....	8
By Any Other Name .....	9
Love Lessons .....	10
Ceremony of Hormone Replacement.....	11
Mother’s Nipples .....	135
Tracing Damage.....	14
Laying Tile.....	16
Spiritual Gifts.....	17
The Quiet Work of Changing Administrations.....	18
Greatest Virtue.....	19
What I Cannot Imagine.....	20
When Boys Discovered Flowers Would Get Them Into Girls' Pants.....	21
Parts of a Man.....	22
Waiting.....	24
Same as Cash.....	25
The Osmosis of Desire.....	26
Cells.....	27
Demonstration of Affection.....	28
Longing After the Sleepover.....	29

Gravel.....	30
Quick Fix.....	31
My Father's Working Man Blues.....	32
Small Portions.....	33
From Somewhere.....	34
References.....	35
Vita.....	37



## Subject, Rhythm, and Revolutionary Poetics

David Orr writes in his February 22, 2009 New Yorker article, “The Great(ness) Game,” that contemporary poets are no longer striving to write the next great American poem. Orr maintains that “the concept of “greatness” has a special significance in the poetry world that it often lacks elsewhere” (14). What he means is that there is an assumption in poetry that all poems should strive towards greatness, that a poet cannot be a poet unless she is a *great* poet. There are drawbacks to this assumption, however, and Orr points out that “over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, greatness has turned out to be an increasingly blurry business” (14). Unlike the Romantics (Byron especially) who viewed their work as delivered from a higher power, and therefore imbued with great truth, beauty, and justice, contemporary poets are mired in a stew of poetry’s political implications—What should poetry do? Who is poetry for? How can poetry change the world?—so that, Orr maintains, these poets are unsure themselves of what greatness entails:

Does being a “great” poet simply mean writing poems that are “great”? If so, how many? Or, does “greatness” mean having a sufficiently “great” project”? If you have such a project, can you be “great” while writing poems that are only “good” (and maybe a little “boring”)? (14)

This business of poetry, then, is tricky, and despite the stereotypes of pretentious poets emotionally bereft in anachronistic berets, where one situates one’s work on the greatness continuum is important, if not angst-inspiring.

Orr's article hits on a timely and important argument for a young poet entering the publishing world seriously for the first time. How great will I allow myself to be? Moreover, how great will the world (to use a broad, general term) allow me to be? Orr says that "our largely unconscious assumptions work like a velvet rope: if a poet looks the way we think a great poet ought to, we let him or her into the club quickly" (15). That is, if a poet is a rebel whose work makes grand, sweeping pronouncements (in the tradition of Walt Whitman), is overtly rhetorical and unapologetically authoritative, and deals in "great" images and themes, the poetry community decides his or her greatness, though sometimes we later wish to recant these declarations. Orr gives the example of contemporaries and friends Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, the former of whom was touted as great and the latter as merely "good":

Since "greatness implies scale [...] it's risky, then, to write poems about the tiny objects on your desk. But that's exactly what Bishop did—and that choice helps explain why she was for a long time considered considerably less great than her close friend Robert Lowell." (15)

One must also remember that Lowell, the heavy-drinking, womanizing, straight man, looked the part of the great poet. Bishop, the lesbian, woman, common-object poet, did not. Yet, Orr maintains, and I agree with him, that for poets reading and writing now, Bishop's work is fundamentally "greater" and more inspirational than Lowell's because of the ways in which she treats her subjects. Poems that begin "I caught a tremendous fish," then proceed to expand upon the meaning of such a small act instruct poets how to make something seemingly mundane and

ordinary interesting and lyrical. Lines like that do something for poetry: they make poetry more impactful for a broader audience.

While, on the one hand, Lowell looked the part of the great poet, on the other, time has tested Bishop's poems and shown them to be great in their simplicity and sensibility. But to what effect? Bishop's work is still lumped in a unit on "women's writing" in undergraduate literature classes; she's still largely reserved for special topics courses in "lesbian feminist poetics" at the graduate creative writing workshops. Her gender and sexual identities often preclude her greatness, maintaining her status as a "niche" poet, while Lowell may perhaps be considered one of the recent greats. Where does the critical tendency to read poetry as a sum total of the author's identity leave greatness? And where does this tendency leave my work?

I might easily classify my poetic sensibility as "queer white trash." I use neither of those terms pejoratively. What I mean by "queer" is not only the obvious sexual implication, but also what Adrienne Rich might call "resisting amnesia." I am concerned with memory—with not forgetting my lower-middle class identity, the rural back roads of my Deep South youth, the eccentric people (some might term "white trash") who populate my history as a poet and a man. Poetry is a place for the histories of these queer people and places to receive a voice. For Rich, poetry's ultimate aim is politically charged to reify the maligned histories of silenced voices in order for social understanding and acceptance of the Other to progress:

As a woman, as a feminist, as a Jew, as a lesbian, I am pursued by questions of historical process, of historical responsibility, questions of historical power. And, as a poet, I would be unfaithful to my own trade if I did not recognize the debt that poetry owes to the historical impulse of oral tradition. ("Resisting Amnesia" 137)

In my work, I attempt to resist amnesia by allowing these people, places, and voices room to sing, about love and pain, meager meals, desire. Like Rich, I feel poetry intersects with politics, and in my work the personal is political. I want to invite a reader into a history she may be unfamiliar with in order to instruct her about the Other's small portion of the world. In this regard, my poetry "queers" history and identity; it instructs the reader as to how people who have systematically been denied legitimized voices due to socio-political and sexual factors, and proceeds to voice these histories.

In this queering of history, my poetry is revolutionary. I don't claim to have invented a new way of making words dance with meaning, but I affirm that what I write is political. Poetry should have far-reaching implications, and my poems imply so much about a specific culture and various identities within that culture. I write about the South, about being poor and making do. My work explores the terrible beauty of at-first-glimpse ugly places, a double wide trailer, a dinner table's meager offerings, the kudzu-covered bluffs of the Mississippi Delta. Within these spaces I find voices whose bare honesty makes what seems pedestrian epiphanic: buying things on credit, learning to be satisfied with not enough, scraping the bowl clean. My goal is to convey the realness of working mothers, the love of emotionally distant fathers, the suffering of queer boys down South searching for affection. The poems in this collection demonstrate these themes and give voice to these identities, without affectation. They avoid sentimentality and go straight to the heart of the issues honestly. For me, this is revolutionary.

However, the subject matter of my poems does not make my work intrinsically revolutionary. Lots of people grew up as I did. They find small places familiar; they hear great

meaning in tiny voices. Subject matter in and of itself does not make poems political. Rhythm has a great deal to do with revolutionary poetics. According to Robert Hass, “because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is a power. And power is political” (“On Listening and Making” 108). The power of my work comes from the rhythmical language I deploy in order to penetrate the reader’s consciousness. Identification with subject matter is important, but not enough to sustain a poem’s revolutionary effect; it has to get beneath the skin, and I attempt to do this through patterns of stressed phrases that resonate psychologically for the reader.

For example, in “Same as Cash,” I use two- and three-beat lines throughout the poem, situating my work in an oral tradition and using form to follow content—the poem is intended to be off the cuff and conversational:

I can get anything I want  
as long as I can get it on credit,  
six months, same as cash,                    2/2  
the world is my 7-11.  
I can buy a yacht if I want to,  
name it *Serendipity*,  
Go on extended vacations,  
South America, Napa Valley,                2/2  
anywhere  
so long as I can make  
minimum monthly payments,  
little reminders from my paycheck of  
past transactions like,  
school day pictures, chicken pox scars,    3/3  
you in boxer shorts, wrapped in bed sheets. 3/3  
I wanted you the most.

The echo of the two and three beats resonates within the reader. “Six months, same as cash” sticks with someone, the two beats ingrain themselves on the memory and the seemingly pedestrian language simultaneously becomes a memory and an experience—the experience of investing in the poem. This line is reinforced by “South America, Napa Valley,” which offers specificity and exoticism while maintaining the poem’s oracular rhythm. These elements—specificity, subject matter, and rhythm—make the work included in this collection the most revolutionary I’ve written to date, because I am more invested in my work, more aware of how listening affects making in poetry. There is something to these poems, something about them that spirals towards greatness. They make a statement about the world, sometimes quietly, sometimes humorously, but always proudly and poignantly in their rhythm and rhetoric.

## Learning To Talk

I met my mother the summer I graduated from college.  
We sat on her patio at dusk passing a joint &  
She told me she wished she'd never divorced my father.  
The sun glowed hot pink over the clothesline,  
my legbacks sweat-glued to a lawn chair.  
She sparked her lighter, said she was stupid  
not to listen to her mother, glared at me.  
*Your Daddy, he's a good man*, she said  
voice suppressed by smoke in her lungs.  
*He never did cuss me like that one.*  
Nodding toward my stepfather's hunched silhouette  
In the kitchen window,  
She passed to me, then exhaled.  
*Half of life is knowing how to talk to people*, she said.  
*Remember this.*

## **The Problem of Evil**

Unlike other avian,  
the male emu neither eats nor drinks  
nor defecates for eight weeks as  
he incubates greenblack eggs.

The Father  
is easy to overlook in child-rearing,  
is easy to blame  
when a hatched egg goes bad  
scrapes deep marks in forearm skin  
with the force of filed nails.

I do not believe in God every day.  
I won't blame him nor  
My father for desire,  
deep water, evil.

My father is not evil.  
He takes my mother back  
each time she squanders his  
affection on another.

God forgives most things:  
Bloodlust, doubt,  
sins of the flesh.  
My father forgives all.

The male,  
in order to feel adequately masculine,  
must distinguish and differentiate  
himself from others.

My father is not to blame  
for the unforgivable.  
He is not evil: he  
is troubled with  
the problem of love.



## **By Any Other Name**

I'd be perfectly free from misgivings.  
Thick hair, slender build, eyes  
Green like exquisite jewelry.  
You would love me more.

I was almost called Evan Blaine,  
A name so hip it dripped jean jackets and fast cars.  
My father thought I'd be queer with a name like that.  
*Then, Timothy* she said and he agreed.

Timothy, the dead boy, my mother's first love,  
Always young, never changing,  
Lost to illness in middle school,  
Mother's tragic hero, my namesake.

All my life I've personified portions of her heart,  
Electricity of knowing another's body at thirteen  
Without touching, but memorizing,  
Like multiplication tables, legends.

Her Timothy may have had slim thighs  
Green eyes and gymnast balance,  
Things she wished for herself in me.  
I do not embody that kind of desire.

I cannot take the place of a dead boy.  
His name is his, mine is mine.  
By another name I am what my father feared,  
The Timothy my mother didn't dream of.

## Love Lessons

Loving is something we learn to do,  
father talking football and the forecast,  
repeating himself and everything is a son of a bitch  
even his son, twelve years old, uncooperative,  
a boy who refuses to play boy games,  
scared little shit  
how his father drives him places he needs to go,  
the tan family sedan pattering around the county,  
stores and schools,  
never ball park but recitals,  
father in the crowd watching  
the boy sings, how he dances  
father nods, boy smiles.  
How his father loves him.

## **Ceremony of Hormone Replacement**

Science solves God's problems:  
Needles surging estrogen,  
Woman shot through silver  
Like a bullet into her hip.  
Never supposed to give birth,  
My broken mother  
With a toxic womb.

Two painful procedures  
She calls blowing out her tubes  
As if she were an old car,  
Two boy babies,  
One uterus inflamed,  
In flames, incinerated,  
Pink patches of synthetic skin  
In the bathroom trash.

My mother is not a woman.  
Just a hole, she says  
As if she were a moon crater,  
A body  
Celestial.

## Mother's Nipples

### I.

*Let me see yours*, she says, Thanksgiving, kitchen table abounding  
Turkey, potato salad, congealed cranberry sauce my father calls blood,  
My mother in blue jeans, when she wore blue jeans, Jamie, a cousin,  
Lifting her shirt, facing my mother who stands blocking the refrigerator, poised to  
pounce.

*Yours are prettier than mine* she says, bending in,  
Scrutinizing Jamie's sixteen-year-old nipples so closely she might suck them.  
*Mine are darker*, lifting her shirt, *they point down*, removing breast from bra.  
*Yours are young*, she says, *pink and firm*, she tucks her breast back in.  
*Mine never looked like that*.

### II.

One hundred years ago, no.  
Fifty-years ago, close.  
Forty-eight years ago mama was a baby  
too poor for formula, too little for cow's milk.  
Sucked her mama's nipple,  
Life stuff from wellspring,  
Shame mixed with mother's milk,  
Familiar taste, unending connection.

Twenty-three years ago I sucked a bottle.  
Parmalait at body temperature through hole in rubber.  
Mama nursed her baby on WIC powder and water,  
shame minus breast milk, a familiar taste.  
That's what they did then.  
I grew, not knowing the taste of my mother's nipples.

### III.

Unlike most men, I don't dream  
I, too, will be strong like my father.  
I worry that I will be my mother,  
the originator of mythologies,  
inventor of an imaginary man  
the only one who loves the right way.

You know him, the sleek one  
in blue denim with craggy voice and gentle hands,  
masculine, sensitive,  
lovely and unreal like our mothers' dreams.  
enters me like putting on a glove.  
When my mother meets him, she knows him  
in moonlight atop the delta bluff or  
the parking lot of Comfort Inn on Stateline  
because she bore him and  
he has licked her nipples.

## Tracing Damage

I.

My hands are not my father's.  
They are not pocked, blistered  
under car hoods,  
through deer guts,  
mired in streams to catch a fish.  
They do not bleed from that work.

Unlike God, my father forgives  
No questions  
Tender as a small girl's scalp,  
He loves in a way I don't know how  
    Oil changes, tune ups  
Grease caked fingers around a spark plug wrench  
He handles what he loves like a poet.  
Like a man at work.

II.

If she dies tonight, I will remember  
Her handwriting, the slant, the whorls,  
The way my mother scripts Ws like a grade school primer.  
I have tried to sign her name, taken great care to make  
Precise Elaines on dotted lines  
    Report cards, detention slips  
Close, never as precise.

III.

I learned to write through feeling  
pressing too hard on paper,  
digging trenches with pens,  
tracing the damage with my fingers  
Man poised, hands raised.  
I am magnificent.

IV.

I would fix carburetors if I knew how.  
I would read palms if I weren't raised better.

Grandmother says men make things with their hands,  
    Flowerbeds and sheet metal  
I make sense with mine,  
writing like my mother.

## Laying Tile

*Twenty-five years ago, you didn't have Mexicans everywhere*  
my stepfather grumbling,  
Now about the Guatemalan boys who work his job  
for half the pay and none of the excuses.  
He lays tile in hotel lobbies.  
glistening white ceramic squares jammed close as comfort,  
rivulets of snowy grout between.  
He likes the work, but the grout destroys him.  
*I don't have a goddamned pair of pants with no holes in the knees*  
He groans. I have seen the holes.  
*I tell them don't white grout public areas,*  
it blackens underfoot, like so many dirty lies.  
My stepfather opens another can,  
crushes his cigarette in an ashtray  
not littered with lipstick smeared butts.  
*I suppose you wonder why she left*  
my mother, like a tea kettle boiled dry  
Quit trying to change him and left  
scorched from the inside out.  
*But it's not like I drink every day.*

He is drinking today like yesterday.  
Empty blue cans line the dining table  
around the basket of three-day clean laundry.  
He is not a violent drunk,  
A thirsty one,  
Each swig, like grime on grout,  
Dirtying what should be clean.



## Spiritual Gifts

Daddy gets nervous when I'm behind the wheel.  
*Watch your speed* he says  
*Olive Branch PD is running radar all up and down Highway 305.*  
He calls to remind me my car is due for an oil change  
as if I were his daughter,  
a fragile, forgetful thing  
who does not appreciate the motor's wheeze and hum.

I do not know how to figure MPGs ,  
change a fan belt,  
how to describe the lagging lull a car makes in frost,  
and I don't know what it takes to be a man.  
No sooner can I isolate a mysterious squeak  
than I can install an exhaust system.  
A cost-risk in a flagging economy,  
sometimes I think I'm out of alignment.

Daddy keeps cars running,  
his spiritual gift:  
A knowhow that makes parts move,  
makes progress happen.  
I see what he cannot, making sense with mine.

## The Quiet Work of Changing Administrations

Men in white jumpsuits move  
one presidential piano from the White House  
replace it with another.

Another President, all his stuff:  
upholstered armchairs, tennis rackets.  
Cigar-rolled throw rugs, taupe and brown.  
With spackle and spatulas they repair  
nail holes in old sheet rock,  
new pictures to be hung, damage to be done.

I remember my stepfather the same way:  
White tshirt and cigarette smoke,  
filling fist-sized holes in the hallway,  
joint compound and putty knife,  
sanding down, painting the patch  
that marked his first layoff,  
Cracking a beer, admiring his work.  
My mother's rage.

She made him live in hotels when he was down, drinking.  
Couldn't find a job, she told him to go,  
all his stuff, sweatshirts and vinyl albums,  
packed in the truck bed, out of the driveway.  
Sole bread winner, his unemployment benefits done,  
She said she didn't need his dead weight.

He left quietly, probably knowing  
Hard times make power shift.  
Loving is harder when faults are apparent  
Loneliness is worse.  
He knew she'd have him back.

## **Greatest Virtue**

A man stares from a second-floor window.  
A track is below, white lines fresh in rain.  
He considers his latest dream, a series  
Of missed phone calls and orders given  
In a language he does not interpret,  
Spanish maybe, or made-up dream language  
From a warm country he has never been.

His eyes follow the track, concentric  
ovals connected by lines like crosshairs.  
He ponders disconnection:  
dead zones, dropped calls.  
The way friends lose touch,  
fall away like leaves from trees &  
his mother who at fifty divorced  
for the second time not to find herself  
but to live alone.

He thinks loneliness is perhaps the greatest virtue,  
to stand one's own company amidst Whirlpool  
hum, electric white noise &  
find pleasure muscle-deep like runner after sprint,  
his mother entering quiet  
house at work day's end, deeply sighing,  
dreamy language of exquisite calm.  
Pleasure is never that intense.

## What I Cannot Imagine

My mother was young and did not know where to find love.

Nineteen and married  
twenty-three and a mother.  
A baby born blue who should have died.  
Twenty-five, another baby, hysterectomy.  
No longer a woman.  
No hormones to feel.

Mother, I understand why you tried to give us away.  
I understand why you looked for love from  
truck drivers and train men,  
masculine types who stubbed out cigarettes  
on plate rims at restaurants where you worked.

Forty-eight, twice divorced,  
forty-nine, gall bladder surgery,  
not alone, still not loved like you need to be.

Mother, I would not have you  
another way than this.  
I would not love you more than you are,  
held together with stitches and glue.  
Now you are ill, and I cannot comfort you,  
cannot speak love that heals  
any way other than you taught me how.

## When Boys Discovered Flowers Would Get Them Into Girls' Pants

I.

I wanted to be a girl,  
to be treated like a delicate thing,  
and rough like bones, china.  
A cup of spilled honey.

I always imagined myself entered,  
bottomed out,  
top heavy and tilt-a-whirled  
for a blue-jeaned boy with a dozen pink roses.

Gabby gave me half a dozen red roses when I turned 18.  
She loved in a different way than I knew how,  
like the thing in coal that makes it burn.  
I love things that don't last forever.

II.

Ian and I never lasted longer than a summer.  
The day we had meatballs and spaghetti,  
burned brush behind his grandmother's barn,  
We were quiet like men at work.  
He broke the bushy head off a purplish zinnia,  
kissed the thin petals.  
I thought I'd love the thing forever.

III.

Chris died getting fucked up.  
I was away at school.  
Ian got leave to pall bear.

Weeks later I bought twelve carnations  
maroon and white.  
Petals browning, they were half-price.

The flowers did not go easily into the ground.  
Hard dirt, like caskets built to keep light out,  
To keep out stems, water supple.  
He died in October.  
I peppered the dirt with petals.

## Parts of a Man

Old men asked a young boy  
*Do you have a girlfriend?*  
*What's your favorite football team?*  
the tough questions.  
*I don't like girls yet*  
only sufficed when he was little.

\*

Grandmother's mauve lipstick  
tasted like wax and strawberry jam.  
He smeared it on his lips,  
blotted on toilet paper like he'd seen her do,  
kissed the full-length mirror  
on the locked bathroom door.  
Then he was magnificent.

\*

When do boys recognize their power?  
His brother could shoot a rifle, clean a fish.  
He knew his power to do harm,  
make machines move.  
When will this boy recognize his?

\*

He was a priapic boy long before  
he knew what priapic meant.  
Watched bulges shift in men's jeans  
as they slid down church pews.  
Guilty, he prayed.  
Sometimes God answers with silence.

\*

We are not alike, God's children.  
We are loved differently by our creators.  
He never believed God would love boys  
like him, stained with shame  
red as Christ's blood.

\*

Love set me spinning like a tree in spring,  
sap in my veins, dizzy with verdant newness.  
Everything was love and love was everything.  
Like when butterflies emerge from shells,  
teenagers kiss on porch swings.  
This love was no different,  
deliriously secret.

\*

What the poets don't tell you is how to feel  
When love cast out does not come back  
With intensity to match the caster's desire.  
I tell you to hurt and pine,  
Feel emptied of your heart's blood,  
Play hide and seek with no search party.  
Eventually you'll be found.

\*

Perhaps persistence is man's power after all.  
To love without harm or mercy,  
by whatever means necessary  
to join with another regardless.

\*

I've loved the soft parts of a man.  
Clavicle and perineum,  
Fatty flesh of earlobe.  
Vulnerable parts other men  
Don't notice in their brothers.  
This is my ode.

## Waiting

I wait months sometimes for a good long piss,  
    river flooding from behind the pelvis rapturous  
Tearing serene surface molecules in the toilet bowl,  
    water poured from an ice cream bucket.

And the tiny screech of tires moving red to green after stop  
    nudge and rumble down the road &  
Satisfaction of stomach grumble,  
    inside tickle of gastro juices bubbling eruptions like incantations.  
This American is singing.

I wait longer to hear from you, love,  
    Full-lipped blue-eyed boy,  
Something about care, demonstrated affection—  
    not even love—  
A head nod or handshake, pet name,  
    buddy, say it, I'll be it:  
The sound at the end of waiting,  
    sung out deep from the kidneys.



## Same as Cash

I can get anything I want  
as long as I can get it on credit,  
six months, same as cash,  
the world is my 7-11.  
I can buy a yacht if I want to,  
name it *Serendipity*,  
Go on extended vacations,  
South America, Napa Valley, anywhere  
so long as I can make  
minimum monthly payments,  
little reminders from my paycheck of  
past transactions like,  
school day pictures, chicken pox scars,  
you in boxer shorts wrapped in bed sheets.  
I wanted you the most.

Bills come,  
each month remind why  
mail is no fun when you're grown,  
requires giving up oneself,  
like donating blood.

I will pay them each month, I'll send them in  
postage stamps, personalized address labels.  
I will have you.

## **The Osmosis of Desire**

My body contains a trailer truckload of mythos.

Language sung out in eruptions,  
pit sweat, stomach growls,  
bustle of blood platelets through heart valves  
longing at the molecular level.

I admit everything—

I bathed with a lover's soap for weeks after he left,

Kept another's poem folded up in shirt pocket.

I lie to you, my love, tell stories that make you laugh.

You are penetrated.

I know how to make a man smile,

face muscles maneuver beneath skin,

inside him a piece of me.

I pretend I can make a man love me.

Love is parts united,

cell walls suctioned.

Strand of his hair in my mouth.

## Cells

*For Chris*

Disease pollutes what sustains him,  
surges in his veins, weakens him  
like the cracked foundations of gentrified houses.  
What can be done about bad blood?

Or desire—  
That moves between us  
even as we are transcontinental.  
Bodies apart  
    my body  
has longed destructively for his,  
even as he is rent from pink skin's scaffolding.  
We are both broken from the inside.

Longing is violence,  
bone melting absence  
Of a body: connectivity:  
Current strong.  
Eros electrocutes his body.

## **Demonstration of Affection**

*for A.*

Arms reach out,  
two bodies collide,  
men in moonlight.

Image of friendship,  
or approbation  
or longing.

(We know: we are the ones  
rewriting love, you're the one  
practicing politics, I'm the one  
smart enough to let go.)

## **Longing After the Sleepover**

As if I needed evidence of your sincerity,  
I wake to find you in t shirt and boxer shorts,  
gulping water from a plastic tumbler in the kitchen next morning, &  
I'll be damned, you catch me playing possum on the couch,  
smile at me quick before my eyes close, and I can't do anything.

I lie there, you refill your cup,  
place it beside me, return to bed.  
I drink, root deeper into the cushions.  
*Jesus, I say, let this be enough.*

## Gravel

My heart is only the gravel driveway to his house,  
dilapidated, dogs everywhere,  
my father in camouflage  
waiting in the doorway  
for me to come home and stay.

I forget whole parts of his life have nothing to do with me.  
He was young when he left home for Viet Nam,  
came back mid-conflict to bury his father,  
came home for good in '72  
broken in ways no one ever thought he could be:  
Afraid of bed sheets and overhead planes,  
everything real but love.

My mother was the only could reassemble him,  
but, too jagged, his fear cut her up inside.  
She left in '88, car crunching gravel.

Sometimes I think he falls apart  
behind the flapping screen door when I go.  
That he thinks I will leave him forever  
when he hears wheels on gravel:  
My freedom serenade.  
The sound of my father's loneliness.

## Quick Fix

Comfort is knowing shortcuts in a new city,  
that Taking West Fifth to University to Middlebrook  
almost without thinking  
avoids traffic on the main drag,  
knowing by sensation,  
feeling out like insects do.

Comfort is also correction, stopping  
noisy talk for a moment to read the next chapter  
in bed beside a man you love  
In a undetermined way,  
confessing to nothing but admitting everything,  
like a deft tongued lawyer clearing the criminal record,  
a three point over correction,  
quick fix to a wrong turn.

## **My Father's Working Man Blues**

He changes oil in the tiller.  
From the tailgate sludge  
spills on the driveway,  
blackens the gravel deep in  
the same spot he's drained its life for years.

How many times has he  
pulled a dead beagle  
Or squashed orange cat  
from muck of blood and gravel  
to roadside mornings before work,  
cursing some bat-out-of-hell driver?  
An agile pallbearer, he carries dead weight,  
like the heft of an American dream.

He improvises:  
Vise grips as a hot water knob  
because it gets the job done in a pinch,  
like tiger lilies growing wild orange  
on the bank of a drainage ditch.  
A rough sort of beauty.



## Small Portions

My mother was forever on a diet during the first Bush administration.  
I remember her small portions:  
half a ladle of pinto beans, a sliver of cornbread,  
ham hock floating in pot liquor.  
She heaped food on my plate.  
I was never hungry.

She might have spent hungry nights watching *Knott's Landing*,  
lied about wanting to lose weight, fit into that blue dress,  
so she knew I had enough food to eat.  
So my body could continue growing from hers.

## From Somewhere

I go to Mississippi to be from Mississippi,  
where people are not proud  
and know how to make do.  
The state bird is the mosquito.  
The tree is a *piss elm* limb that you  
cut yourself, thick enough to leave whelps  
or, bless God, you have to cut another.  
School starts in August there.  
Each child knows the sound her legbacks make  
sweat sealed to the bus seat.  
Everywhere is air conditioned.  
Mississippians do what they have to,  
leave work at work, home at home,  
drink beer on tailgates Friday nights.  
The state motto is “play the hand you’re dealt”  
which is what they learn on riverboat casinos,  
white rock back roads, and the delta bluffs  
at seventeen, fighting lonely with boys  
they won’t always love but will always know.  
Mississippi folks talk in conditionals,  
they *might could* and *don’t guess*,  
always end up doing what you need them to,  
finding the money somehow.  
They are magicians with coupons and canned soup,  
make littlest nothings taste like the biggest something,  
ditch-grown polk salad with scrambled eggs and onions.  
The state smell is sulfur like our grandmothers’ kitchens,  
state feeling is fear of not having enough.

Mississippi will always have enough,  
will share when asked nicely,  
a singsong unison of tender voices drawling,  
*Why sure you can have more,*  
as long as you don’t waste it.  
As long as you know it’s from somewhere.

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**Vita**

Tim Sisk was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1985. He grew up in Horn Lake, Mississippi, never leaving home until he moved to Conway, Arkansas, at age eighteen to attend the University of Central Arkansas, where he received his B.A. in English and Writing. After completing in M. A. in English at the University of Tennessee in May 2009, Tim plans to teach literature and composition courses and continue publishing his poetry.