

2015

Northeasterners

Alexandria Kathleen Hall
University of Vermont, akhall@uvm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/castheses>

Recommended Citation

Hall, Alexandria Kathleen, "Northeasterners" (2015). *UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses*. Paper 13.

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

NORTHEASTERNERS



poems

ALEXANDRIA HALL

NORTHEASTERNS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Professor Major Jackson for his guidance over the past few years and particularly during the completion of this project. Thanks also to Professors Dennis Mahoney and Eric Lindstrom for their excellent teaching and for taking the time to be on my thesis committee.

*For my family,
with love and apologies*

Contents

HERE

Cowbird	8
Bad Dog	9
Fire	10

THERE

Aussprache	12
My Kathleen	13

HERE

The Lake House	15
Slumber Party	16
Filling Station	17
A Mistake	19
Night Weight	20
The First Time	21

THERE

La Peña	23
On Beauty	24
On Art	25

Babysitting with Jacques Lacan 26

HERE

Tame 28

Spring Cleaning 29

HERE

COWBIRD

All of this damage is already done:
the meadows inflamed and gone blonde
 with rash goldenrod. Nothing ever stays
where it ought: runoff dragged into the river
by summer rains from shit-covered fields—
 my thickly-perfumed Vermont. The morning

glories creep up the shaft of the garden
vegetables, their seductive curls choking
 out my small plot. Sometimes we can't see
the dangers we feed, that we nurture,
like the warbler who cares for the cowbird
 planted in her nest, a deep and doubling

hunger fed as the nestlings starve
in their crowded bowl. I know
 I'm not invited. I want
to love something. Not to open my mouth
like the long, smooth flower
 of a ravenous weed.

BAD DOG

Sasha is a bad dog with a thick chain around a beam.
My cousins and I tumble around the top floor
of the barn and the hay bales scratch our backs

until we're not allowed up there anymore. My dad says
there's structural damage, and sure enough, it caves.
Sasha's in there, chained up. Bad dogs don't start

bad. It's easier to get into bed than it is to get out.
Sometimes you never get better. My dad's a projectionist
on the weekends and he takes my cousins and I to the movies.

They let me be the bad guy. I'm good at it, but I'm afraid I'll fall
out of bed. A bad dog needs a thick chain. I play the villain
and I never get better. I've seen this one

before. From the projection booth I watch
the people taking in the movies, my head tipping
out the little black window where the light leaks,

unseen. In the fields, my cousins and I make up the rules
as we go. I'm the bad guy because I've got rot in the beams,
knee deep in standing water. Might have started as a trickle.

A thick dribble, then a stream. Dad doesn't cry
when Sasha dies. He didn't start bad either. Mom says,
a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome.

But, I'm a bad thing. I know the thick dark covers
everything but the movie screen,
but the tops of their heads, but the thread
of dusty light from the loud, little window
twisting the bad guy, the top of his head, the dog crushed
among the hay bales and the damp wood: a bed.

FIRE

When my daughter couldn't sleep I told her,
feel each part of your body one by one relaxing,

filling up with air. Sad, little balloon, so unnerved
by wakefulness, she slept. When my truck broke down

I left it by the side of the road. My daughter ran
behind me, so small, whipped around by the tall grass

and the cattails, while my head slammed against
the brazen cloudlessness of July. That night, I taught

her how to build a fire, taught her, once you light
the kindling you've got to blow on it, don't throw

another log on too soon or you'll stamp it out.

Then all the commotion

when my wife and daughter curled backward, started
screeching a sharp hiss like a pile of pine needles

thrown on the flame, my wife rattling like pots fallen
out of the cupboard.

I says to her, Stop this racket.

I am a reasonable man. I keep a job. I even love you

from this worn out armchair where I watch the world bend
away like an acrobat in a slow game. I'm too tired for this.

Feel each part of my body filling with air, filling
with smoke, taken up by the fire's low growl

blanketing everything, pops of sap, the poor rage
like a scared animal running limitless under the clear sky.

THERE

AUSSPRACHE

Learning this new language, I feel
the separateness of my body:
The mouth trying to form

the right shape to sound
the difference between *Hölle*
and *Höhle*—one hell, one

hole—the mouth itself
a pit, a void contorted,
through which we voice,

fumble over, vowels. The palate
learning a posture, the mouth
given a mouth, given a cup

to be filled, to be poured,
given a wind blown through
a scrap of lace. The mouth

like the moon curling
into a small crater—*Mond*
or *Mund*—the vowels

confused again, the tongue
quivering naked in the gorge.
The mouth: a pang.

Press the hand
like a roll of gauze
to the wound.

MY KATHLEEN

In the kitchen, my mother sang
Terence's Farewell to Kathleen
because she liked the melody,
but more because some distant
relative was Irish until he left,
and my mother, who knew about leaving,
wailed while washing dishes:
So, my Kathleen, you're going to leave me.
I played it on the piano, learned the words,
slowly learned the pain in it, when my mother,
wanting the best, wanting
better than the cigarette burnt carpet,
the shabby walls, the piled up scrap
of the house I grew up in, left.
Taught me, also, to leave. Taught
me: it's not *suh'in* it's *something*.
Don't sound like a hick. Don't sound
like your father. *And when you come back
to me, Kathleen, none the better shall I be off then.*
When I come back now, not *suh'in*, see her face,
distant, changed, like Terence when he knows
what the language does. How it turns her:
*you'll be speaking such beautiful English
that I won't know my Kathleen again.*
And she, too, sees her deficit,
forgets *twixt the grief and the flurry*
every word, reaches her eyes out—
not *ain't*, but *isn't*, not *crick*, but *creek*—
forgets the final verse, dries
her hands, waves me off.

HERE

THE LAKE HOUSE

Ferrisburgh keeps nothing but the smell of skunk and lilacs
and the two lines of the headlights swimming
over the dirt road like sturgeon under the water.

I tried to dive in once, up on Satterly Road
where I wrecked the Chevy, threw it over
like a breaching whale in a swell of broken glass,
then landed belly-up in the ditch, dirt holding
the tire marks like a child holding her breath.
Smells like skunk tonight, doesn't it? And lilacs.

At night, when the neighbors' cows get loose and sashay
around the yard, this trailer's just a small dinghy slapped
in their waves. Once the lilacs dragged me down
that narrow dirt road to a lake house, the scent
like thousands of little, purple fingers pulling
and waving, always moving. But skunk smell—
the animal either dead or scared—just hangs there,
still. Pummeled by high beams and tires, it stays.
At the lake house I was strange, surrounded

by nice things, trying on fancy clothes or posing
nude before the grand bay windows. Things don't unrot
just become more rotten. Those windows made the lake
between the hills into a mouth, opened wide to swallow
them. To swallow the lilac, too. Sometimes I get so small,
but the sound I make is as big as a shrew caught
in a mouse trap, thrashing around the cupboard
like frantic knocking at the door. No one ever knocks
at the door. Occasionally, though, the cows float by.

SLUMBER PARTY

The string of lights by the shade gives
two silhouettes away: two bodies,
or the bodies are two shadow puppets
at a junior high school slumber party.
When the girls snap their fingers,
the shadows are dancing. When they clap,
it means they're fighting. When they pull

back my hair and say I'd make the prettiest boy,
I feel pride like the meat of a peach with a cold pit.
One girl points down the night at Hospital Creek
where the ghosts are. One girl knows how to walk
in heels. I know the American Goldfinch
has a contact call birders liken to singing
po-ta-to chip. I'm here, where are you? I've become

pretty well acquainted with the firmness of a grip,
at least how I imagine it from the image on the blinds.
When the two shadows touch, a clinking sound.
When one girl steps away, all the other girls hide
and, returning, I'm as soft as a dropped apple rolled
into the center of the empty room. Test one, two.
Testing one, two. Are you there? *Potato chip?*

They're twisted up laughing. I don't laugh. I watch
one last shadow: this one looks like a tree being felled.
When the girls shake with laughter, a rainy breeze
slaps through the leaves. When they sleep, the tree
is chopped down into firewood. When they leave
in the morning, branches scrape the window,
two pale fingers part the blinds.

FILLING STATION

Oh, but it is dirty!
We lean over the Gulf
pumps, filling with fumes,
filling the tanks. What a luxury
to fill.

Never my legs, never my hands,
never my hair. The vulgarity
of the begonia or the leggy girl
with her plaid barrette. Never
the thick knuckles of the gearheads,
never, not once, to be extraneous
as lipstick, to be beautiful.

At night, the older boys in trucks
chuckle and rattle and spit dip.

Look, I found elegance
in a grease pit.

Filling our bras, our mouths,
our slender hands.

Say it.
They're dirty.

An oily, back-pocket rag
provides a pop of color
to wipe our fingers on,
little more than a gesture.

Imagine! (Could you?)
That head under the hood.

A head with lips to kiss
under the slick slip.

To fill, to soak,
to brim, but never spill.

And yet, to fill one thing
implies an emptying.

Out of the greasy radio slips
Never My Love. Never the hand
that turned it on. Only the notion
that that hand, that oily hand,
would do it – when it seems meant
only to fill

And fill and fill
unlike that highfalutin chisel
that gives a giggle. A giddy snort.
An Oh, so adorable, the poor,
and their deplorable décor!

Filling our beds, our bellies,
our backseats. Filling even this –
who'd believe it? Look,
somebody loves us all.

A MISTAKE

A man holds his barn upright. It is late and the barn was served too much champagne at the wedding. He wraps his arm around the small of its clapboard back as it sways. He wants to take it to bed, take its shoes off, lie with it, feeling the wind through its skin, the rumble of its little animals, but it wouldn't be right. He has a strong back and a sense of duty.

I just want to lie down a minute, says the barn.

But you're full of sheep and goats and pigs, says the man.

I will let you sleep with me, says the barn.

And the man slowly lets go and enters it, and when it collapses, he is pinned beside a sheep's head with its eyes wide open.

NIGHT WEIGHT

A girl awakes in the middle of the night. She doesn't feel right. It's my braids, she thinks, they're too tight. So she begins to unravel them. She stabs her fingers through the woven locks of hair and untangles, sets the hair ties on the nightstand, and, feeling still worse, begins to panic.

Now with her left hand, she unravels the thread of her nightgown, pulling faster and faster because there is no time to waste. With her right-hand fingernails she picks off the ribbon detailing.

Only the lace collar of the nightgown remains when she begins to unravel the thread of her thighs, take out the meat, lay it atop the nightstand. She unravels and unpacks belly and breast and buttock and cheek, and the bed, no longer burdened by the weight, lets out a sigh.

THE FIRST TIME

It was boring—in a field
under the stars, wrapped
in sleeping bags he'd taken
from his parents' house.
Nearby the imposing silhouette
of a farm tractor, the wind slipping
through the rust spots of the drowsy
pick-up, and the thick cricket music.
Every so often, the soft interference
of a pair of far off headlights gliding
North in silence along Route 7.

Nice guy, sure. Romantic, I guess.
I didn't want romantic. I wanted
him to suck my lips off my face,
spit them out, change shape, turn
ugly, wanted him to toss his head
back and never roll it up,
evaporating like a tired dandelion.

Amid the stirring of field mice
and garter snakes, longed for
the jolt of a hand caught in the thresher.
I wanted the night like a spider
to lift one arm after another
and climb into me while he washed
out into the long, wet sky, which was blue.

THERE

LA PEÑA

From the concrete terrace in Valle at the very top of the town, we watch paper lanterns rise to meet us in the cooler night air like a bunch of glowing pails pulled upward. We could be looking down at the deepest part of the ocean and all its bioluminescent fish diving below us. Each light from the party below is so saturated we emerge wet with them. Down by the docks, the music's still playing and the dogs bark louder than the blossoms of the jacaranda, which will soon dress and then undress the city leaving its violent debris. But tonight the big, red crag to our left, which at sunset traps the heat and glows deep, now seems to lie down beside us in an act of release as the heat lifts and we weigh down the night like a stone.

ON BEAUTY

He run out of propane and the cold licked the trailer like a dog with a hurt paw. *Pa*, my brother would have called him, if I'd had a brother, if I'd a been him, had he been at all.

All night the whimpering hills. Transmission on the truck's broke. Winter pushes my father and his home and his froze-up pipes and piles of scrap to a grater and grates. These gift-basket ideas solve little. *Awful nice a ya*, wheezes Pa. Sometimes my brother speaks for me.

How's the new beau, he coughs. He took me to the city, I says, and we went to the Met and I loved the Picassos and Degas and when he watched me stumble over a Cézanne, he says it's *challenging*. So I stood there all night trying to meet that messy landscape's glance, massaging its junk, snapping its bra, growling lowly in its ear, baring my teeth.

I will not back down from the challenge of "the Beautiful," but like my brother, I study it like a battlefield. Learn its ins and outs until I feel it like the rough, brown wool of my grandmother's hideous crochet owl that still hangs on my father's wall amidst the howling, where winter is a tunnel and what's beautiful is as easy as spotting the light. Spotting the deer in the field.

ON ART

Art is nice. It is very, very nice. In her lifetime, my grandmother painted dozens of pictures—copies of scenic postcards or images of yawning puppies in boots. These boots are made for walking. These shit-kickers. Oh these? Just a little, old something I had lying around.

My grandmother was a little, old something too. She had a scary scarcely. A very crispy woman on account of her tanning bed and her many packs of Winstons. Her lips opened like a chicken with a broken beak when she sold her pictures to the folks at the Country Kitchen diner. Why oh why. Was it art for Pete's sake?

Art is pretty. It is only just or it is almost not. Because it is old like my grandmother and valiant like these boots it has a must. I mean it is an odor and an ought. It has a little pink tongue.

What's the difference between a big blunder and a little diddle? I did a very bad thing. Verily I say underwear.

Poetry is unsafe. I commit this violence to shape it with words. If I say it wrong, it might be better. I apologize for all my gross ejaculations. Shame. Shame, shame.

Rilke says to a young poet that things aren't so sayable. happens where words haven't. It is very virginal. *Betreten* meaning to enter. *Betreten* meaning embarrassed. Abashedly I push these words into. Words like marshmallows, words like clogged pores. Oh my mom, I am heartily sorry for having this tendency.

I would like to show you something other than this sick deformity. Unfortunately you'll have to look under this cover, here. Stick your head in the casket. Fine, just put your hand out. It was a terrible thing to do. Oh my head, I am heartily sorry. Oh my heart, my achy, breaky heart.

Art is beautiful. What is beautiful is true. When the imagination seizes it, you should never put a spoon in its mouth. It is nice to be stirred, but alarming to be shaken. You shook me all night long. I said shake, rattle, and roll. This is a test of the emergency broadcast system. This is a false alarm. This is a downright lie.

BABYSITTING WITH JACQUES LACAN

Each time I cover my face with my hands,
the muscles of the baby's fat, little face slacken
and the squids of her big, black eyes darken.
Each time I pull them away, the room turns
from rushing water into warm breasts in sweaters.
Each time I cover my face, her cheeks drop
cold like the slap of a deadbolt.
Each time I pull them away, her legs and arms
bounce and reach away from her soft, putty belly.
Each time I cover my face, more water rushing in,
the sound of chisels on a hard block of ice.
Each time I pull them away, she gurgles
and splashes her feet in the dark puddles.
Each time, *fort*. Each time, *da*.
I'm here, where are you?
Each time I cover my face with my hands,
a tumbleweed rolls across the screen of my palms.
Each time I pull them away, I coo, *I see you*.
Each time, here. Each time, there.
Each time, I am sure the light
through the cracks of my fingers glows
pink-orange as if I were still here.

HERE

TAME

It was tame, the dog, so it followed
me. I had a cow bone in my hand.
My voice softened. It was warm.

I lay at the end of the bed, tame,
swathed in the humid afternoon.
Outside my window, birds. No,

only the sound of the drab roman
shade chafing the wall. I am insatiable.
It was tame. I let it lie at the foot-end,

one matted leg atop the other, moving
only its eyes, expectantly. I had a bone
in my hand. No, in my mouth. I licked

the scraps of meat between my teeth.
The bone, no, a bird, fell. Only the slightest
sound upon impact. I was accustomed

to the rapping of its tail against the floor.
I was tame. We lay heavy, matted, one
atop the other, swaddled in the thick

humidity. I was mild. My voice softened. I lay
at the end of the bed. Someone determines
the difference between a nip and a bite.

It was only playing. No, it was scared.
I'm sorry, I was listening so closely to the bird,
to every feeble bone, to every soft break.

SPRING CLEANING

In March, fog rinses
out the summit
of Snake Mountain, draining
the remains of The Grand View
after seven minutes
of saturated browns and greens.
One moment, the drizzled vista,
the next, high gray nothing.
Once a hotel, soaked with smoke,
now, clouds shifting
over a slab of foundation.

There's a pile
of empty beetle bodies
between the screen
and the storm window.
When I clean them out
their dust hides
under my fingernails.
Sometimes I wonder
what it's like to be
the one to stumble
upon the dead body
in the woods.

Would the face look
lifelike discarded
in the wet leaves?
In the movies,
to make the sounds
of onscreen fighting,
Foley artists punch slabs
of meat, and sometimes
it feels good. I only touch
myself when I'm angry.

I ought to haul out all
this junk I called winter
and lose it somewhere.

The body loses itself
between slabs of glass
or trail markers.
I like a realistic ending.
Learning is not a smooth insertion
nor a brisk switch,
but a slow and painful, then
comforting, then painful rub.
When the lights turned on
they illuminated nothing.

NOTES

The cover photo is of my great-grandfather, Allen "Sam" McKinnon, at the gas station he owned in Vergennes.

"Bad Dog" quotes John 1:5, "A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

"My Kathleen" quotes "Terence's Farewell to Kathleen" by Helen Selina, Lady Dufferin Sheridan, as sung by John McCormack.

"Filling Station" takes its first and last lines from the Elizabeth Bishop poem of the same name.

"On Art" references Rilke's *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*.

BIO

Alexandria Hall is a graduating senior at the University of Vermont and an electronic musician. She is a recipient of the Beinecke Scholarship, the Willard B. Pope award in Romanticism, and the Benjamin B. Wainwright award in poetry. In the fall she will begin working on her MFA in Creative Writing at New York University. She currently resides in Burlington, VT.

