

WHERE MY OWN GRAVE IS

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The preface to this collection, "Against Expectation: The Lyric Narrative," highlights the ways James Wright, Stephen Dunn, and C.K. Williams use narrative to strengthen their poems. *Where My Own Grave Is* is a collection of poems that uses narrative to engage our historical fascination with death.

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PART I

AGAINST EXPECTATION: THE LYRIC NARRATIVE

I have always enjoyed reading narrative poems. Story provides a window into the poem, and without some kind of window, I never would have understood that a poem could be more than an incomprehensible puzzle. When I began writing poems, narrative expression was instinctive. Psychoanalysts might claim that I have some fixation with imposing structure and order, but I view narrative possibilities as limitless. I make no claim that a poem is a guaranteed success simply because it contains narrative elements; rather, I see the successful poem using narrative as a structural element, working in coordination with the lyric's attention to poetic image, music and compression, and its potential for meditation. Thus, the lyric narrative.

In Tony Hoagland's essay, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment," he points out that, "Our vision of narrative possibilities has been narrowed by so many first-person autobiographical stories" (177). Hoagland also bundles the narrative to the confessional poem, claiming their "inadvertent sentimentality and narcissism" imparts "the odor of indulgence to narrative" (177), but is it fair to group every first person narrative into the category of confessionalism? What about persona poems? And even if a poem is confessional, should we not evaluate it on an individual basis rather than the shortcomings of other poems in the genre? I argue that the use of narrative in a first person poem does not limit the poem to the confessional genre, and more importantly, narrative techniques in first person poems can actually breathe realism into multiple characters and reduce the risk of narcissism and sentimentality.

The first person narrative poetry that I am concerned with focuses heavily on representations of the real. In his essay, "Reflections on Narrative Poetry," Louis

Simpson writes, "Let us admit that there are kinds of poetry that are not representations of life. This does not concern us: we are speaking of narrative poetry. This has to do with actions and scenes. The action may be subtle, the scene barely sketched, but the aim is to move the reader, and to increase understanding, by touching the springs of nature" (408). Narrative is a valuable tool that we can use to imitate reality and reconstruct memory, but the poem must move beyond mere imitation or representation of the past. If the poem is purely a snapshot from someone's life, it must contain an element of mystery to intrigue the reader. How can the poem attract readers if the poet cannot escape him or herself?

For an example of a poem that fails to reach beyond the poet's self, let us look to a writer who achieved undeniable success with the narrative in the twentieth century—Raymond Carver. While Carver's influence and impact on the world of fiction is undeniable, Carver also wrote a number of books of poetry. Though his fiction stands out as well-constructed and intriguing, most of his poems fail to achieve that same level of quality. Take for example the poem:

DRINKING WHILE DRIVING

It's August and I have not
read a book in six months
except something called *The Retreat from Moscow*
by Caulaincourt.
Nevertheless, I am happy
riding in a car with my brother

and drinking from a pint of Old Crow.

We do not have any place in mind to go,
we are just driving.

If I closed my eyes for a minute

I would be lost, yet

I could gladly lie down and sleep forever
beside this road.

My brother nudges me.

Any minute now, something will happen. (3)

Carver sets this poem up almost exactly like a short story. The beginning provides us with a literal setting and situation—driving aimlessly with his brother, drinking a pint of whiskey. The poem fails to deliver on its attempted meditation, which ultimately makes it feel narcissistic. The poem takes a meditative turn at the line, "If I closed my eyes for a minute." Carver seems to be making a gesture very similar to Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" with the line "I could gladly lie down and sleep forever," but the narrative emerges and disrupts the move toward meditation—"My brother nudges me." Because the narrative interrupts the meditative move, it jerks the reader out of the speaker's internal thought process, thereby making the meditation seem underdeveloped and inauthentic.

The final line of the poem reads like the last sentence of one of Carver's short stories, leaving us with a feeling of anticipation and encouraging us to project possibilities on the poem. The gesture points back to the title of the poem. If you are

drinking while driving, a terrible accident is very possible. So in that connection, Carver's final line is somewhat successful. However, much of the poem lacks the music to carry the lyric intensity that this poem needs. Would it not be more interesting to end the first sentence after the word "months"? The detail of the Caulaincourt book is not interesting enough to stand on its own, and it negates the stronger first two lines. And the lines, "We do not have any place in mind to go, / we are just driving," could they not use trimming? "With no place in mind to go, / we're just driving." Also, the line, "With no place in mind to go," would create a stronger transition to the speculative move that follows, since it literally suggests that there is no place in the mind that the speaker can visit. Another aspect of this poem that is ringing false is the "if" construct that sets up that speculative move. When the brother nudges the speaker later in the poem, I see him trying to wake the speaker because the speaker's eyes are actually closed. So, could we not change the lines to "I close my eyes, and for a moment, / I am lost, yet"? Adding the caesuras creates pauses that help the musical pacing of the sentence.

Carver's poem is a good example of why many poets are skeptical of narrative. The prosy language makes the poem read like a lined short story, and though there seems to be some play with enjambment—"I could gladly lie down and sleep forever / beside this road"—the poem lacks the lyric qualities it needs to be successful. Even with the edits I have suggested, the poem still seems unfinished—abrupt for the sake of being abrupt. Where are the images? Where is the figurative language? Where is the word play that elevates the poem's level of thought, leading to the meditative move? The sequence of events arrives at the conclusion that something will happen, but that is too

broad, and aside from connecting to the title, the only resonance it has with the poem is that not much has happened yet. Though the poem stands as a representation of the real, it lacks the mystery to fully intrigue the reader. A poem cannot be a success merely based upon its realistic traits; the poem needs more. As Stephen Dunn points out, "We need to be interested in more than ourselves. We need to enlarge our sense of what can constitute the personal so that it includes the kindred and alien experiences of our fellow humans" (188). Carver is a writer who garnered much success with narrative, but his poems stand as proof that success in prose does not necessarily translate into success in poetry. Narrative in poetry can be successful, but it must illuminate our perspective on the world. Who reads poetry merely to confirm their own suspicions?

Often times, successful narrative poems not only challenge our perspective, but our notions of traditional narrative structures. James Wright's poem, "A Blessing," maintains the intensity and precision of the lyric, but establishes itself within a narrative frame. The poem is an autobiographical first person narrative, but should we consider it a confessional poem? Wright's poem uses the scene to reach the epiphany at the end of the poem, but the drama seems very much within the poem, so I do not consider it confessional. From the outset of the poem, Wright highlights the speaker's struggle with containment, using that struggle to question the mutability of self and also of narrative:

A BLESSING

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,

Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.

And the eyes of those two Indian ponies

Darken with kindness.

They have come gladly out of the willows

To welcome my friend and me.

We step over the barbed wire into the pasture

Where they have been grazing all day, alone.

They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their
happiness

That we have come.

They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.

There is no loneliness like theirs.

At home once more

They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the
darkness.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,

For she has walked over to me

And nuzzled my left hand.

She is black and white,

Her mane falls wild on her forehead,

And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear

That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

Suddenly I realize

That if I stepped out of my body I would break

Into blossom. (57)

The opening lines are fairly straightforward, so what prevents us from immediately dismissing the poem as merely narrative? The music on the level of each line. Take for example the second line: the consonance of the soft "f" and "s" sounds creates a rhythm that carries the music of the line. Each line contains that same intensity on the level of music—listen to the repeated harsh "g" sound contrasting the softer "n" sound in the line, "They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness." Every line satisfies the ear; Wright leaves no room for slack, dull language. Even though the lines are in free verse, the music in the language is clear, which coordinates well with image to gain lyric intensity. Also, from the beginning, we see strong figurative energy. Instead of the sky darkening, the eyes of Indian ponies darken, which suggests that they are holding something back; there is some mystery to them.

As Wright's poem continues, we see narrative carrying the poem, but also, in combination with the poem's strong music, we see the speaker paying close attention to image. For example, the lines, "They rippled tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness / That we have come. / They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other," use image to focus on the behavior of the horses. Earlier, the poem provides the image of their eyes darkening, but here we see a stronger image in the verb "ripple." Not only can we visualize a tense ripple, but the verb suggests containment. Then we see an image through the simile, the comparison to swans. At first these images might seem ordinary, not overwhelmingly revelatory to the poem. However, as Natasha Sajé highlights in her

essay "Narrative and Poetry": "Narrative depends on teleology (the end)...what the story leads up to determines the appropriateness of what is included at the beginning" (68). In the final lines of the poem, we see a connection to the earlier images. Earlier, we see the horse's beauty compared to another animal, a swan, but at the end, as the speaker caresses the horse's ear, he ties the horse to human beauty with the textural image—"delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist." Once the speaker compares the animal beauty to human beauty, he realizes that he too can "hardly contain" his happiness, but instead of rippling like the horses, he leaps to an epiphany that is both liberating and terrifying. The leap is absolutely essential to the poem's success, and though the final movement is not narrative, the epiphany would have been extremely narcissistic and/or sentimental without the narrative carrying the lyric elements. In her essay, "The Flexible Lyric," Ellen Bryant Voigt highlights, "Compression and song, of course, are the characteristics most firmly assigned to the lyric and they release a poem for 'excursion into particularity'" (122). This particularity—the images of the horses, the detail of how they can hardly contain themselves—is essential to the poem. The poem's end is obviously its strongest point—the leap not only thwarts expectation, but the enjambment at the word "break" emphasizes the rupture at the point of transformation. The line break also delays the epiphany slightly, just enough to strengthen the impact on the reader. Most importantly, however, is the way the end of the poem uses the strength of the line to highlight the narrative skin that holds the poem together and ruptures at the moment of epiphany, imitating the speaker's emotional realization of breakage upon transformation.

The poem's successful culmination depends on the effectiveness of weaving the

lyric elements of music and image within a narrative. Without the attention to music and image, the poem would have been flat and prosy, but without the narrative, where would we be? The poem needs the narrative framework as a formal element to work against. The chronology of the poem builds to the conclusion, and though the poem's narrative structure is very traditional and straightforward, the narrative breaks down at the end, placing emphasis on the leap at the end. The narrative within the poem does not require a straightforward structure in order to be successful; a poem can work discursively and still maintain or even create a narrative.

According to Tony Hoagland, the discursive is often bundled with narrative poetry (174). Stephen Dunn's poem, "That Saturday Without a Car," uses discursive moves to develop a narrative that functions within the looser narrative frame. Dunn's poem is also an autobiographical first person narrative, yet it carefully avoids the most imminent threat of sentimentality through its narrative inventiveness:

THAT SATURDAY WITHOUT A CAR

for Ellen Dunn (1910 - 1969)

Five miles to my mother's house,

a distance I'd never run.

"I *think* she's dead"

my brother said, and hung up

as if with death

language should be mercifully approximate,

should keep the fact
that would forever be fact

at bay. I understood,
and as I ran wondered what words
I might say, and to whom.
I saw myself opening the door—

my brother, both of us, embarrassed
by the sudden intimacy we'd feel.
We had expected it
but we'd expected it every year

for ten: her heart was the best
and worst of her—every kindness
fought its way through damage,
her breasts disappeared

as if the heart itself, for comfort,
had sucked them in.

And I was running better
than I ever had. How different it was

from driving, the way I'd gone
to other deaths—
my body fighting it all off, my heart,
this adequate heart, getting me there. (106)

The narrative structure of Dunn's poem is barer and less straightforward than Wright's poem, but the narrative is still no less essential to the poem's success. The opening lines of the poem not only provide the details of what the speaker's brother says on the phone, but they also make a claim against which the rest of the poem can work. We can conclude from the title and the first stanza, that the speaker will make an exception to the statement in the second line. Dunn provides us with narrative detail, but later, the poem moves toward meditation, where the speaker begins wondering and questioning the future. M.H. Abrams, in his essay, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," tells us that meditation creates room for the "integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene" (201). The move toward meditation itself is not the narrative element we should focus on; however, the speaker's thoughts move from one subject to another, and the chronology of the discursive thought process is crucial—it suggests another narrative altogether. The speaker's preoccupation with what words he will speak shows the emphasis on language we see in what his brother says on the phone, but he moves from that to the feeling of intimacy he knows he and his brother will share. This meditative shift at first suggests a

distance from the realization of his mother's death. The repetition of "expected it" highlights how death, even when expected, is startling, always a surprise—even when we learn that they had been expecting her death for a decade. Now the speaker's mind turns to his mother's heart. However, the speaker does not even mention his mother until the third from the last stanza, which suggests that he is trying to avoid thinking directly about her—the chronology of the meditation highlights this hesitancy. The move here emphasizes how the speaker cannot help but think of his mother, and the connection to her heart creates room for the closure of the poem.

In Dunn's poem, the narrative interrupts the speaker's internal thought process at the line "And I was running better," pulling together opposite psychological impulses. The end of the poem addresses the fight or flight impulse. The speaker is literally running in the poem, but also, in the last stanza, "my body fighting it all off, my heart, / this adequate heart, getting me there," Dunn weaves two opposite responses together—yes, the speaker is running, and though he is not running away from his fears, he is still also fighting off emotion, the heart, so that he can continue to run. We can only see him fighting off the emotion through the narrative that the discursive meditation creates. The way the penultimate line reads, Dunn seems to be suggesting that his body is working in opposition to his heart. However, his heart is the only reason he is able to run—it is adequate, emphasizing that it is sufficient to get him to his destination, but ignoring its emotional capabilities. The heart also points back to the fifth and sixth stanzas because his heart is literally from the same heart that failed his mother. So the poem ultimately focuses on the connection between the speaker and his mother by highlighting the

failures and successes of the heart. Though Dunn's poem rises to a higher level of thought by questioning the human psychological impulse and highlighting the different functions of the heart, he frames all of these successes with a narrative. Without the narrative, even if Dunn can yoke together these opposing psychological impulses, the poem's emotional weight weakens. Though Dunn's spare narrative elements highlight the meditative movement of the poem, the chronology of his thought process forms the essential narrative, which corresponds to the literal situation, keeping the poem from slipping into sentimentality. An argument could be made that Dunn's poem maintains some elements of confessionalism, but the poem focuses more on meditation than overwhelming pathos.

Poets are aware of the pitfalls of the genres in which they write, so even undeniably confessional poems may use a narrative complexity to play against the expectation of sentimentality and narcissism. C.K. Williams approaches the confessional poem with a hesitancy that emanates from the syntax, a hesitancy that pushes the poem forward so that we can arrive at the narrative:

THE GAS STATION

This is before I'd read Nietzsche. Before Kant or Kierkegaard, even before
Whitman and Yeats.

I don't think there were three words in my head yet. I knew, perhaps, that I
should suffer,

I can remember I almost cried for this or for that, nothing special, nothing to
speak of.

Probably I was mad with grief for the loss of my childhood, but I wouldn't have
known that.

It's dawn. A gas station. Route twenty-two. I remember exactly: route twenty-
two curved,

there was a squat, striped concrete divider they'd put in after a plague of
collisions.

The gas station? Texaco, Esso—I don't know. They were just words anyway
then, just what their signs said.

I wouldn't have understood the first thing about monopoly or imperialist or
oppression.

It's dawn. It's so late. Even then, when I was never tired, I'm just holding on.

Slumped on my friend's shoulder, I watch the relentless, wordless misery of the
route twenty-two sky

that seems to be filming my face with a grainy oil I keep trying to rub off or in.

Why are we here? Because one of my friends, in the men's room over there, has
blue balls.

He has to jerk off. I don't know what that means, "blue balls," or why he has to
do that—

it must be important to have to stop here after this long night, but I don't ask.

I'm just trying, I think, to keep my head as empty as I can for as long as I can.

One of my other friends is asleep. He's so ugly, his mouth hanging, slack and
wet.

Another—I'll never see this one again—stares from the window as though he
were frightened.

Here's what we've done. We were in Times Square, a pimp found us, corralled us,
led us somewhere,
down a dark street, another dark street, up dark stairs, dark hall, dark apartment,
where his whore, his girl or his wife or his mother for all I know, dragged herself
from her sleep,
propped herself on an elbow, gazed into the dark hall, and agreed, for two dollars
each, to take care of us.

Take care of us. Some of the words that come through me now seem to stay, to
hook in.

My friend in the bathroom is taking so long. The filthy sky must be starting to
lighten.

It took me a long time, too, with the woman, I mean. Did I mention that she, the
woman, the whore or mother,
was having her time and all she would deign do was to blow us? Did I say that?
Deign? Blow?

What a joy, though, the idea was in those days. Blown! What a thing to tell the
next day.

She only deigned, though, no more. She was like a machine. When I lift her back
to me now,
there's nothing there but that dark, curly head, working, a machine, up and down,

and now,
Freud, Marx, Fathers, tell me, what am I, doing this, telling this, on her, on
myself,
hammering it down, cementing it, sealing it in, but a machine, too? *Why am I
doing this?*

I still haven't read Augustine. I don't understand Chomsky that well. Should I?
My friend at last comes back. Maybe the right words were there all along.

Complicity. Wonder.

How pure we were then, before Rimbaud, before Blake. *Grace. Love. Take care
of us. Please.* (195-6)

Two narratives exist within the poem: the story of sitting in the car at the gas station and the story of visiting a prostitute in the city. Williams opens the poem with what seems like a disclaimer. These lines serve as a form of back-story, a way for the speaker to exculpate himself by saying, "This happened before I was educated, before I knew any better." However, it also is a way to link the poem's narrative to a heightened level of thought. It begs us to ask: how could knowledge of Nietzsche, Kant, or Kierkegaard have prevented the events from taking place? These four long lines delay our entrance into the narrative, but they also establish a hesitant tone that Williams manipulates throughout the poem by means of syntax, questions, and the narrative structure of the story within the story.

The narrative structure stems from memory, and since narrative is a means to reconstruct and impose order on past events, the two narratives use the questions to

suggest a struggle with the subject matter of the memory itself. The title of the poem refers to the first narrative situation we see—"It's dawn. A gas station. Route twenty-two." However, the most captivating narrative does not take place at the gas station—the gas station is the second part of the story, and Williams subverts the more gruesome story until more than halfway through the poem at the line, "Here's what we've done. We were in Times Square, a pimp found us, corralled us, led us somewhere." Notice here how the speaker and his friends are in the position of the direct object. Everything that is happening is because of the pimp, not because of their choices. The poem freely moves from narrative to meditation, which is one of its greatest strengths, in the lines, "propped herself on an elbow, gazed into the dark hall, and agreed, for two dollars each, to take care of us. / *Take care of us*. Some of the words that come through me now seem to stay, to hook in." Here we see the speaker break the narrative with a surprise at the language choice he has just used. This move is absolutely crucial to the ending of the poem because we hear those words echoing, but more importantly it emphasizes the speaker's unease with telling the story, not only strengthening the hesitant tone, but using it to raise the level of credibility and realism.

The hesitancy of the poem allows Williams to interject the narrative with questions. These questions not only offer some relief from the disturbing details of the speaker's interaction with the prostitute, but they also push the poem forward. We see a good example in the lines, " Did I mention that she, the woman, the whore or mother, / was having her time and all she would deign do was to blow us? Did I say that? Deign? Blow?" Once again we see the speaker's unease, not only with the narrative detail, but

with the words he uses to describe the events. Williams continues to use questions to set up the ending. By returning to philosophical figures, Williams ties the end back to the beginning, but this time, he directly addresses those figures, seeking advice like a confessional—as if to say that he still does not know any better, that perhaps being uneducated a poor excuse for what his actions. The poem begins and ends with details that are not part of either narrative; however, that does not lift the ending from the scrutiny of the narrative—it must be resonant with the rest of the poem. Williams masterfully uses an earlier moment of distance imbedded in the inner narrative to end the poem—*Take care of us. Please.*

What makes this poem so successful? Without a doubt the narrative carries the emotional weight—even if that emotion is utter self-disgust. However, Williams, recognizing the shortcomings and traps of narrative structures, plays against narrative conventions by imbedding narrative within a narrative and using questions and speculative interjections. The poem is more about the speaker's response to the story than the story itself. Just as a poem fails without lyric intensity, C.K. Williams's poem highlights how a poem with meditative strength can gain momentum and intensity by inserting a narrative. Though Williams's poem cannot help but seem somewhat narcissistic, he plays against that with the questions, and the subject matter of both narratives prevents the poem from seeming overly sentimental in any fashion. In fact, it works against the feeling by emphasizing that the woman was like a machine. “The Gas Station” is undeniably confessional, but in using a unique and challenging narrative

structure, Williams steps outside of himself and addresses larger questions about pimps, prostitutes, and the men who visit them and speak of it later.

Yes, the complaints that many critics have against narrative poetry are real. Prosy language steeped with sentimentality and narcissism can plague narrative poems, but narrative can also give life to a poem. Unfortunately, many people avoid poetry for its difficulty, but if more poems maintained a narrative, it would be easier to persuade people to read them. At the very least, new readers would be able to understand what is happening in the poem, even if they cannot see the power of the lyric elements at first. We can take a lesson from Stephen Dunn, “We should have nothing against...any narrative tactics per se. We should feel free to employ whatever we need in order to approximate our sense of the real”(191). Understanding the complaints against narrative allows us to not only avoid the problems that arise with the genre, but, like many poets, we can use those conventions or expectations to our advantage by playing against them.

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PART II
WHERE MY OWN GRAVE IS

Oh all around us,
The hobo jungles of America grow wild again.
The pick handles bloom like your skinned spine.
I don't even know where
My own grave is.

—James Wright

I.

I Was Afraid Of Dying

After James Wright

Once—
why dwell on that loneliness
while I'm here, with you? Now,
at twilight, the grasses in the field are so green
 I smell them.
White-tailed jackrabbits dodging to the tree line.
Their ears remind us we are not alone.
Hiding in the shadows of fallen-branch shelters,
 they are the most patient.
Perhaps now they fold their narrow ears down
 because they know we are here.
When I die will you hide me
in a bed of upturned oak leaves and the softest dirt
 you can find?

Names Not Too Far Off

I heard about the accident on the local news,
and I heard a name not quite yours—
off by one letter. But it *was* you,
you grabbed the live wire,
jolts winding through your arteries.

You were in the ICU, and everyone
made predictions, everyone with the power
of prayer. After ten days
you died in a room without flowers.
How could I have put so much trust
in one letter?

Not knowing what to do, your parents
skipped the church service when they buried you.
Your mom's worn face, her few remaining tears
told me God had broken her.
They played *Yellow Submarine* at your grave.

Visiting your parents in a memory
the next year reminded them what you wanted.
So they exhumed you, cremated you.
And when the wind gathers your ashes
in the evenings, it lifts only to let them fall.

The Last Thanksgiving

During dinner my uncle's behind the house
helping a heifer through her first delivery.

Inside, dry turkey, hot dinner rolls.
The heifer's cries bellowing through the house.

Green beans, sweet potatoes, and cornbread
stuffing. All with the tang of

this might be the last Thanksgiving.
And who even remembers?

I'm staring out the back window
at the heifer's uterus prolapsed

on the muddy grass.
The vet and my uncle hose it

with peroxide and shove it back
inside like a beating heart into a wine bottle.

The trees haven't even begun to turn,
and my grandfather can still speak.

Knowing we will soon be gone,
he's telling every dirty joke he can remember.

Semper Fi

It doesn't seem right, cousin,
that you're over there, nineteen, fresh
out of boot, and lugging around
a forty pound fully automatic machine
gun—Uncle Sam's strong arm

of death. I feel, sometimes, since I'm older,
I should be the one over there.
But I have no excuses; excuses
are weakest defending inaction, so I'll do
the only thing I can:

mail a care package stuffed with cigarettes,
Twizzlers, Playboys, and snuff
as if that makes up for the holidays.

What does proud mean
from someone whose wars exist

only in books? I've never watched my friends,
the marines you call brothers, with navy corpsmen
peering into their gaping chests, bandages in hand,
scrambling to forget their training for fatal wounds.

I've never been scared
enough to call my dad daddy.

On the River

After Schubert

In the creaking pines along the river,
a doe nuzzles her spotted fawn
and grunts softly into the frozen air.
Her language knows only its limits.

As you carve your name on the river
with a sharp stone, you spot antlers
sprouting downstream, as if the waters
had suddenly hardened
between the gasps of a drowning buck.
Kneeling before the rack of points,
you swipe away the snow
and see his open eyes above the ice, fixed
quick in panic.

His ghost stands in the tall grass of a summer field,
raising its head to hear the bleats of his lost fawn
through the distant thunder of an unnamed river.
How lonely the living must be.

My Photo

My sister, looking puzzled, showed me
some photo she'd found in a drawer and said,
I don't remember this. I eyed the photo,
saw my twelve-year-old face,
puffy cheeks, but my glasses were missing,
and I couldn't recall that light blue
t-shirt in the photo.
Examining the yellowed photo closer,
with its dingy corners,
I saw my green eyes gone,
replaced by deep-sunken blues.
It couldn't have been me;
or was it? My dad
asked why we were looking at his
school photo. I saw myself,
tracing his forty-year-old life
as mine. I could think of nothing more
frightening, except that moment when
I thought I'd forgotten being alive.

Resthaven

At the top of a hill,
where the end of everything
begins, a man in an overcoat
gnaws at his cigar
and sells black umbrellas.

Next Tuesday, the man
will return with a bucket
of ash, offering handfuls
to your mourners.

They will chew it slowly.
After several months,
they'll still find gritty pieces
of you in their mouths.

II.

Spring Begins in Denton, Texas

Some nights an elderly man with quick eyes
shoots up in a green Honda outside

and masturbates. The four kids next door play
pawnshop songs and smoke Marlboros

but nothing else. The drummer coughs
his kidneys up, jokes about lung cancer.

The skeletons below me smoke ice
and cartons of Camels to cover the smell.

My walls reek of their chemicals
and the dogshit on the floor.

The girls across the breezeway leave the blinds open
and walk around in their underwear.

My kidneys are in full blossom. I'm told
there's no cure.

The school is closer to the graveyard
than the church.

Conservare Te

Perhaps you're less overwhelmed
since you drowned the five of us
one at a time, youngest
to oldest, in your bathwater.

In the absence of a father,
we huddled on the carpet
in the corner of my room,
clinging to each others'

sweaty palms until only
my eyes kept you grounded.
And I gave you a wild chase,
but you drew me in with your smile,

making me believe the bathtub
was the only place I could lose you.

My Dad Taught Me Never to Say Nigger

In front of the little white fireworks stand just outside of Cross Plains, Texas, my uncle points at the Bottle Rockets and the Black Cats, lined up on the shelf below the neon green tanks, and the guy working the stand stuffs them in a brown paper bag and asks, *What about some Roman Candles?* I nod like I know what he's talking about, so he grabs a couple of long, sky-blue sticks and tosses them in with the rest.

The smell of gunpowder intoxicating, my uncle asks what else is good. Ducking his head out from the stand, The guy looks both ways before asking, *How about some nigger chasers?* With a grin he holds up a package of white cylinders, each about four inches long, red and blue stars dotting the sides. *All you gotta do is put it on the ground and light the end.* My uncle nods and the guy throws a package in the bag.

Later, just when the stars are showing themselves, my grandparents, two aunts, and three uncles gather with lawn chairs and my squeaky, blue-eyed cousins to watch the fireworks in a patch of dirt. After the Bottle Rockets, which seemed to cheat the moon, my uncle pulls his chasers from the brown bag. Setting one on the ground, he lights the paper at the tip, and as the flame begins its crawl, he says, *Let's see who's the nigger.* The end shoots sparks so bright it lights up our hollow cheeks, our deep-sunk eyes reflecting the glow. The thing shrieks and launches itself towards me—even keeps up for a good ten seconds, while I sprint and dodge to get away—fire gushing out from behind, all those familiar faces laughing at mine.

Ant Beds

My cousin and I spotted
two warring ant colonies, and, determined
to save the weaker, we put Black Cats
in the entrance of the strong.
We sparked the fuses, stood back,
and gawked at the tiny explosions,
amazed at the ants rushing
together to gather their dead.
Then we stepped up our involvement,
switched to M-80s, but soon tired of that too.
Still searching for more efficient
ways to stamp them out, we improvised,
used aerosol cans and lighters to flame-throw
their tiny colony. We laughed.
They scattered away from the ones we charred
into crispy balls. To us it was a game,
but it made us gods of destruction.
I went to scour the shed for gasoline—
Napalm without the Styrofoam—
while Joel shovel-sliced their underground
networks. Returning, I tilted the gas can,
about to pour, but my uncle, seeing us
as little Lieutenant Calleys, interrupted,
told us to quit it, to cut it out.
So we wandered off and built a fire
with dead mesquite and dry grass,
and as we scratched and picked at the ant bites
covering our bodies, we griped about the war
we weren't allowed to win, about our fathers
who objected to their sons and nephews playing
god, those gods of war, forever unfinished,
only briefly abandoned.

Taking Aim

*If you're holding it
like this
it'll get him.*

—Walt McDonald

Pull the barrel down
and to the left
when you touch
the trigger.

Sixteens
always shoot high
and to the right.
The sappers know

and so they
crouch leaning
left. And you
have to get

those sorry
bastards before
they hit
the wire,

before the AKs
rake lead
through your
chest.

Kneel
closer, here,

listen
to my voice:

the black body
bag they will
put you in
is suffocating.

Heretic

*I would clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show,
for one can not be responsible for the madness of others.*

—Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu

Oh, Saigon, when you imagined
your crowded streets had already
opened themselves to every delight,
you never dreamt of monks
self-immolating.

And Saigon, they do not want your applause.
Thich Quang Duc needed only to singe
your citizens' eyes. Knowing his calm
reserve requited something more
than love or disdain, their hollow faces
could not turn away as his robe coiled
into flame.

Those to come also transformed
their buried screams
to maddened cinders,
yet their hearts refused to burn.

Brief Questions for American Warhorses

Kidron

Looking back at your thirty six years,
do you miss the rush of combat,
the whiz of bullets, the satisfactory
feeling at the day's end
when Pershing would feed you
and pat your neck, knowing you
were the reason he came home?

Or do you prefer the days,
parading through cities,
when children's eyes would lift
in anticipation as you
maneuvered gracefully
through the cobblestone streets?

How do you define glory?

Little Texas

No one said Kettle Hill would be a cakewalk,
but how often does a cavalry unit lead a charge,
dismounted, with their commander,
the future president, still on his horse?
At Teddy's beckoning, who wouldn't tire out?

Do you regret living
through combat?

Are your nightmares filled with never-ending

lengths of coiled barbed wire?

Comanche

How can we know?
Perhaps you were just one of the lucky horses
that slipped away before a soldier could
send a bullet through your temple
and hide behind your lumpy corpse.

They say you stand patiently in your glass case
in Kansas. Don't they see the bit clenched
between your teeth? When they're alone
in the afternoon, studying themselves in the glass,
do they not sense the tinge in your jaw,
that faint sound of chomping, chomping?

Lexington

Did you take joy from the sight
of scorched farmlands, skinny babies,
the smell of Atlanta smoldering,
mixed with hands and feet,
rotting in a wheelbarrow?

Was Sherman as grave as the beard suggests?

Did he take pleasure as he cleared his path?

Is speed really everything?

Little Sorrel

On the farm they called you Old Fancy
for letting yourself out of the stable
and lifting the latches to all the other stalls,
setting your brethren free.

At Chancellorsville, when Stonewall fell,
did he pull your dumpy body down
with him?

After being captured and recaptured
several times, were your loyalties confused?

Do you mind being mounted
at the VMI Museum indefinitely?

Sorry for so many questions.
Will you ever learn to buckle?

Traveller

Before Lee took notice of your tall, iron frame,
your tail's impressive swoosh,
you were known as Jeff Davis, then Greenbrier.
When he saw the determined rise and crash
of your grey mane in a gallop,
he gave you your lasting name.

Do you feel guilty about being better fed
than the common soldiers? And the other horses?

Did you ever imagine outlasting him?

How does it feel having your bones retrieved
from the earth so someone can earn a nickel
each time someone else wants to see?

Saracen

It is as if you welcomed that bullet
as part of your job description.
Who can think of Sam Houston
without seeing him crawling
out from under you?

Dying for someone else's cause—
what's that like?

Nelson

Not a horse in Yorktown matched your looks
that day in October, not even Lafayette's.

You understood humiliation
blanketing the face of Cornwallis,
you, who served the ivory-toothed man,

the honest slave-holder, the one who,
two hundred twenty-six years later,
can do no wrong.

Do you remember any of his white lies?

Mutilations

1.

They were not the ones who named him
Son of the Morning Star,
yet upon discovering his body,

their grieving women left him—
head, feet, hands, genitalia, even
his curly yellow hair—untouched.

They passed over
the chance to crush his skull,
to carve shallow gashes

in his pink, limp flesh, to consume
him like buffalo. They knew he needed
a reminder for the afterlife,

so they plunged awls in his ears,
hollowed them out,
so he might better hear his name.

2.

Without the gated monument
you might never find Custer's Last
Stand, buried in that ocean

of Montana grass, little white
headstones dotting its calm, marking
spots where bodies, if you want

to call them that, were discovered.
The headstones massed around his
narrow that day's blistering chaos:

they cannot echo the simple
sounds of last-minute suicides—
that cowardly hill where brutes

became martyrs, men became
boys, and boys returned
to the earth with flint-tipped shafts

barbed in their lungs. Pairs of headstones
flee that hill—forgotten pages of death,
which seem almost as if scattered by the wind.

Osvětim

I picture them with eyes
peeking through boxcar cracks,
no room to sit or breathe; their fingers
feel each other's hair
in the dark and carefully twist
the strands into braids, then slowly
untie and retie the knots,
keeping themselves from so many questions.
Upon arriving they transform
into livestock, gawking at the camp's only gate.
My vision of them I cannot simplify:
not the mounds of shoes, or false teeth,
the eyeglasses, suitcases, names
and hometowns scrawled on the sides.
What haunts me most are the heaps of hair,
piled proud, the braids still neatly knotted
to keep their hair out of our eyes.

III.

When He Knocks

The neighbors all warned you
though you didn't really believe,
chalked it up to gossip,
until you saw him yourself

on the sex-offender list—his name
emboldened on the page, his crimes
in print, no longer whispers
in kitchens over cups of tea.

You were always polite, always
waved back, but now you
force smiles, so he won't know
you know.

What do you say to him,
your neighbor
who molested his own sons,
when he knocks on your door

and asks to borrow
a cup of sugar? If you let him,
will he come back? Will he
walk over to you

at the yearly block-party or at church
and try to strike up conversation,
leaving others wondering,
whispering about you? You lie,

tell him no, you're out of sugar too.
He trudges across the yard, back

to his truck and leaves
for the grocery store.

That night you're locking up
the house before bed, as you've grown
accustomed to doing, and you see
a fresh bag of sugar on your doorstep.

Easter Sunday at Bacon Heights Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas

The crowds shuffle inside, the earliest plopping into seats
at the back, the starched suits and florid dresses
seem to glow—the mark of the Creaster.

The regulars have keen eyes for their kind, making a point
of introducing themselves to the unfamiliar
faces during congregational greeting,
the kind of eyes that poke your chest,
revealing the heavy-handed absence of God.

Eyes that slump in disappointment when the sermon passes over
weathered hymnals and funds for mission trips, vacation bible school
and the poor

sound system, the dim lighting. Those eyes that refuse to believe
heaven holds a place for the likes of anyone
who only comes to church on Easter,
eyes that would remind us Easter eggs are what it's about
because rabbits are more believable than ghosts.

The Latin Professor

The safety of the people is the highest law.

—Cicero

I saw the professor every day that semester,
heard lectures about whether Cicero's final words were—
*there is nothing proper about what you are doing, soldier,
but do try to kill me properly—*

or—*with me dies the republic*. Then, one cold afternoon
when the professor's hands were entwined
with *amabam* and *amabo*, I saw his left
middle finger missing its dactyl's second short.

Afraid I might embarrass him, or worse,
that he might reveal a gruesome story
about a radial saw or a lawnmower,
I never asked what happened to his hand.

I pictured him as a boy, scurrying on the tiles
of a grocery store. He cries out, *salus populi suprema lex*,
just before a stranger's cart runs over his fingers,
slicing the tip of that middle one clean off—

like the head of Cicero, which they propped
so neatly on his severed hands.

Lubbock

1.

At first Lubbock was angry—
Columbine outweighed their tragedy.
Churchcamp bus accidents aren't exciting.

No one speaks of the six Greenlawn girls.
They get younger ever year.

2.

Sgt. Kevin Cox dies of a gunshot wound
to the back of the head (friendly fire).
They name an obstacle course after him.

3.

Who's heard of the bone thin Joanna Rogers?

Raped, diced, zippered into a Wal-Mart suitcase.
Two years later they found her in the landfill
only after a confession.

4.

Their native son, the one who wrote so many songs
about love,
his plastic glasses cast narrow shadows
on the cotton fields.

February, 1959 always ringing in our ears.

Your Own

She pawns her kid off on the neighbors,
as if you aren't busy with your own
disappointments. Sure, she explains
the cancer, the nausea, how she fears
each night her son will cringe at sight of her.
You never mind watching him;
you feel she trusts you, knows you.
Then the day comes when you have too much:
the difficult balance of laundry and gymnastics.
The phone rings and it's her son, wanting
to play. He proves easier to turn down,
and you sigh when you hang up.
He does not call back, neither does his mother.
At every PTA meeting she's wearing
a new wig: blonde, dark brown, red, light brown, grey.
No matter the color, her face declines
even the slightest smile, her dull eyes
scouring the room's corners to avoid contact.
You go up to her and apologize
for being busy the day her son called,
you even ask if she needs you
to watch him later. She blinks,
says nothing, just stares ahead.
Those unforgetting eyes.
In your dreams she spares you—
she has everything in the world to say.

Neighborhood Watch

I heard the neighbor's kids playing,
unattended, alone for hours.
I spotted the grease stain in the deserted
driveway—their mother
obviously at work. So I toyed
with who to tell—it was, after all, my duty,
my responsibility to those children, even
to the neighborhood. Anonymous,
I called Protective Services. How was I
to know they'd wind up separate, each
to a different foster home?
It's not my fault
the system's flawed—is it? Maybe
if they hadn't been so loud, maybe
if those kids hadn't trampled through
my flowerbeds, those kids,
and crushed my poor bougainvillea, maybe then
they wouldn't have even existed.

Between May and Cisco, Texas

Just after the rollover, your mother slumps
against her seatbelt. Blood on her lips.

In the road a buzzard plucks the innards of a raccoon.
Three flattened skunks wait in the distance.

The Big Dipper bending up out of the tree line.
Stars your eyes get glimpses of but cannot focus.

Female coyotes yipping over the squeals of a jackrabbit.
Then the sound of nothing.

Like waking before dawn in a locked closet.
Out here the road signs are lonely for cemeteries.

A box of Goldfish crackers spilled and crushed
into the maroon carpet. Peanut butter in your hair.

The wheels of the overturned minivan spin
in the light drizzle. Your foot lodged against the accelerator.

Leaving Lubbock

You haven't died. You've moved.
Left the rest of us in a Lubbock-linger:
brown skies, the stench of the feed lot,
nothing to do.
Do you visit to relive
the nights driving around
for hours? (Or the times
we gave up, went home, and ate cereal
straight from the bag).
I knew it frustrated you to see us
in your old routine,
trying to kill ourselves with pills—
anything to forget we were still here.
You were decked out
(the night before you left)
in your trendy sport coat.
Your warm clothes ready, preparing
to go home to your claustrophobic closet
in the city. That night we caught death,
screaming to a bass line, then drove off—
our last moment to live,
two timid Lubbock kids
dirt gritting in our gums, my rasped voice
scrambling for anything memorable to say
(I don't remember a word).

In a Goat Pasture Just Outside of Cross Cut, Texas

The time we found those three dead kids,
tucked away in a cluster of oaks.
How, as I held them in my arms—
so white so small so soft—
the wind raking their fur,
their eyelids never opened.
The finality of death
 surprises me still,
the way I never notice prickly pear
 until I'm in it,
how, even tonight, I find needles
 sticking through my shoe.