

Rugged Pennsylvanians: Poems

Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Departmental Honors in
English

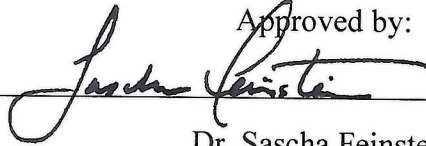
by

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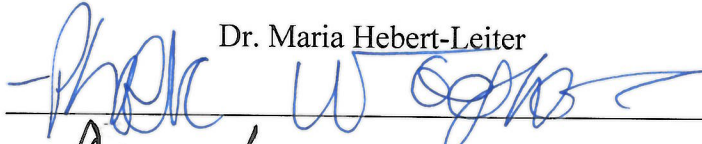
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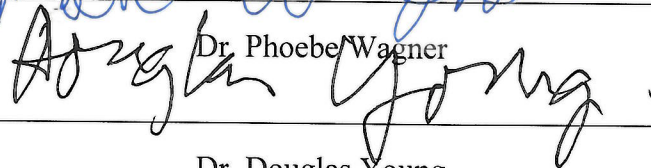
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RUGGED PENNSYLVANIANS

poems

Caleb Hipple

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I. WILLIAMSPORT

“Williamsport became one of the most prosperous cities both in Pennsylvania and the nation. At one point it boasted more millionaires per capita than any other city in the United States.”

—the Pennsylvania Conservation Heritage Project

Before Jasmine's Folded

Washington Boulevard

Beyond the plexiglass kitchen window:

peas, shriveled, could almost be
jade. A child
does math at the counter.
Someone has carved carrots, uniform
as wooden blocks. A metal cat
beckons, winks for good luck.

Translucent onions shimmer
in the chandeliered light.
Customers catch glimpses
of the man steaming broccoli,
his skin incandescent.
Coins slide from their receipts
into the slotted soup-cup tip jar
while his daughter at the register
hands out fortunes.

Gamble and Loss

The check-engine light
has not disappeared. Cold air
blasts—a kind of scentless
scent—while snow clumps
into the floorboard's already-wetness.

I try to drive
without being able to see
past the layer of frost,
then tap piled snow
with my bumper.

I am too late
for the day's first interview,
scraping ice with a credit card,
its plastic veneer failing.

Hunger

I think the mosaic of light
looks best through finger-smudges
in the church family section.
I felt the tithe before its
weight
in my wrists traveled like cold.
The pastor shook my hand,
so smooth and cool
on my callouses.
I wonder which grandmothers
scorn my untucked shirt.

A tremoring man drops
his hymnal but cannot stand
when he wishes to rise.
My mother is at peace with
peace. The drum reverberates
my buzzing molars.

I've been feeling
that I am not allowed the bread
for it curseth the intestines,
the wine the liver.
But before Father's thumb
could lift from my tongue
(the wafer partially melted),
my entire being swallowed.

Tree Huggers

The exploded pulp of pine
that crumbles into bedded needles
sticks in the sap on my boots.
Pinecones the size of my fist
carpet the forest floor
with embryonic seedlings,
and a dead beaver's tail
with spine dried, still jutting
out, challenges the riverbed's
summer heat.

In my basement, vice grips
hold a two-by-four,
the buttery-nut scent
of dust piled at its edges.
My father hands me a hacksaw,
its teeth pocked with rust.

My bed is so big,
with big wooden beams
thicker than my arms
to span lengthwise and wide
beneath and above,
I feel tiny,

am afraid to admit
the soreness in my arms
won't let me fall
asleep.

Imagining My Mother's Funeral

Fluorescents, yellow as wet
nicotine, cirrhosis. The mums
will catch on black hems. I am the pre-
made dough rising beneath a towel
on my sister's stove, racing the pale sun.

Her gourd-like liver's soaked
in antidepressants. Death
means rearranging:
memories on a table
under coffee drips, our stilled hands.

When the refractory-brick cremator
breaches, I'll think, *Where has she gone?*
As if those remains, like the sweepings
of an embarrassing basement
which she always wished to clean,
would will themselves to reassemble.

Everything, that day,
will be mistaken—the return trip
as the crow flies, the florist's location.
My carefully written speech
is as mismatched as my tie, with new
words added until I cannot see
anything in the podium's reflection.

Spring Break

The trailer park
houses saplings
rooting through
tires, rotting.

And inside your home
you'll find the silverware
moved
to another drawer.

Your mother is in bed all day
and your father takes the dogs
on walks far across town,
through thick bushes
that hold loose mulch
and weeds breaking through—
on a gravel patch where geese
rest in pooled rainwater,
washing their down.

The Accident

“Travel does not exist without home. . . . If we never return to the place we started, we would just be wandering, lost. Home is a reflecting surface, a place to measure our growth and enrich us after being infused with the outside world.”

—Josh Gates

1. Deerblood

“The meat is tough.”

Your cataracts swirl, creamer in coffee,
sight as stale as your minivan’s musk. I feel
the shocks are shot when gravel paths like these
momentarily jolt us from our seats. I reel

in the responsibility of being your height, higher.
The cabin circulates the hot-salt copper
of a dead deer fastened to the rear bumper.
This year I did the lifting and Dad was the tie-er.

Your sheet bend knot is taut, in line
with that worming focus-ligament
stretching in your thin neck. Mine
is choked by heat seeping from the vents,

rattling dashboard-envelopes, their filaments.
My eyes are on you, and yours the speed limits.

2. Nightdogs

“And who is your emergency contact?”

Now. Smell the inside of your head,
isopropyl and red-peppered conscience.
The skin sloughs, an untucked bed
where *I?* am sucked into car-blood torrents

as they puncture-roll into detanked gas,
their hard underbellies rendered
and my skin hamburgerized by glass,
even broken crayons and dimes from under

the driver’s seat. I am a boardwalk genie,
paid to wake in unfamiliar places . . .
In pillowed cloth of a hospital gown. I’m gleaming
in mint-fluorescence, hung over me like faces.

Covered by my father’s insurance but still alone,
IwannagohomeIwannagohomeIwannagohome

3. Skunkweed

“It’s really good for my anxiety, but don’t tell your sisters.”

My mother’s broken-bone fever will let
itself be sapped into cold bathwater.
She can smell her skin, ashes a cigarette
in the arms-stretching-reach potted string of pearls.

Epsom salts soothe her fractured tailbone—
she taps her joint, and the cinders smear
on the porcelain. Some underwater smoke
captivates her, twirling into that snare-

matrix, the bathtub drain, the placid
water lapping against the tub walls
and into the clothes on the floor. The faucet
warps, making taller the already tall woman

who bathed without soap. She’s starting to go numb,
so high she cannot shout, for someone may come.

Grow Closer

1. Floodplains

“I hate talking to you about this because I always cry.”

Chokeberry dimples burst outward, breaching
the waterfilm, the mucksurface, the flesh
of your cheeks so alive with veins, each in
clustering splotches of ruddiness fresh

which I kiss; I sop tears with my cracked lips.

If you'll let me, I won't ever be mean.

Peel me apart, make clearings where rosehips
can overgrow in my head. I have *seen*

myself terraformed, wood decayed to pulp
by you, the unmistakable, naked foot.

I reached a point

;

I neglected our bulbs—
kneeling in rocks, weeding, waiting for roots.

If I could I'd wish to believe in heaven,
a moisture-regulated earth you'd let me live in.

2. Beartrap

“You’ll never outstay your welcome” —my mother

Open your arms for me alone to enter—
I wish to hang mirrors from your ribcage,
directly at the reflection until centered
in itself. I nourish, fatten on the heart-rage,

as clear as the coffee table on which
your feet rest. Humor me: finish your cup
and ask for more, because I will give, itch
the scratch I breed. Fall asleep in my lap

and feel bedtime stories start to tangle
in my hair stringing streamers down to your face.
I’d be you so I could pick me. Angled
at one another, I drink in your sleep, a waste.

And as I hold so tight, can you hear me wishing
feed-cook-kill eat me, then let me wash the dishes?

Separation of Self

outside Old School Pizza

In the alignment of sidewalk cracks,
the bluestone of concrete rubble
in a Halogened pyre for you—
dead robin, how
have you not rotted away?

Across town a factory
is torn down—sirens
wail like zippers
rushing into the streets.

I want to eat
the butterscotch lights,
the vegetation poking
out of city-maintained
garden beds. But
the breeze through
the chasm of storefronts
is so cool, almost able
to lift your feathers.

Intrusivity

Wildwood Cemetery's Crematory Operator

Fire makes thin the skull membrane
and shoots from eye sockets
towards a cremation hearth—

and then I smell
the burnt pancake, tire-cardboard-meat
of this man's life.

Ash compacts in plastic bags
tied and tagged, pressed into a canister.
I once buried a man

brought inside a tomato crate;
his wife asked for it back.
I've evened the earth.

I can't look at old ladies
without wondering how long
before I stoke them.

A Bully's Thoughts

Push out that crack-pop
of turtle shell dismembered,
pressed into asphalt
then spread thinly
to bake in this July
heat. If you and I
washed our brains with hand soap,
would the fishes on the bottle
swim into the folds of our minds?

I've seen medical documentaries
where worms are wrought from flesh,
the plump cat bellies, yipping, ripped
and sown. How they sink in medical-grade
alcohol.

But I do not get sick,

am proud to know this as a truth:
I can eat dog treats.
I can withstand
the trashcan juice simmering, reducing.

When my mother shifts
in her seat at the sight
of raw chicken, I see her dead
or locked up. You

might as well not stick around
for I will inherit all things earthly—
I do not fear
reaching into your skull
towards the boy you wished for most.

Girlfriend's First Family Thanksgiving

Down in Gram's basement,
the pool table that Pap raped Mom over
holds the candied yams and olives.

We both fit
in the recliner where her brother
watched, thirty years ago,

while Dad plays footsie
with Mom's cousin. They speak
quietly. Nobody has kept secrets

but me. Maybe you . . .
Let's turn on the heater
and run before its gills turn red.

II. ELIMSPORT

FORMER VILLAGE OF ALVIRA
PREVIOUSLY WISSETOWN CIRCA 1825
1942 POPULATION 100
DURING WWII THE U.S. GOVERNMENT
PURCHASED OVER 8000 ACRES
TO CONSTRUCT THE
PENNSYLVANIA ORDNANCE WORKS
IN 1964 SGL 252 WAS ESTABLISHED

—the wooden sign acknowledging Alvira

Pleading

Hay hides amniotic fluid. The goat
 curls,
 burrowed in the crux of Laura's legs. Rafters, crossed,
 hum
 with lovely heat lamps

dangling,

stars speckling barn-slat gaps.
 Its fur cowlicks, peaked on a belly
 drying, bloated. Her dad nods,
 murmurs.

She pleads with animal crackers
 pressed to the kid's muzzle.

What is colic?

Sideways pupils
 fix on something behind her:
 the cookie container,
 burlap, sod; almost bleats. Legs limply
 kick and stretch and fall.

She massages loose skin on sharp ribs,
 rubs unfathomably long ears until its eyes paste shut.
 Breaths slow in the heavy stink of alfalfa.

But moonlight shines on a tongue, so small,
 like an eraser fixing wrongs, licking
 as the dropper drips medicine.
 Her father tucks in a flannel that folds
 warmth into straw. Goat, girl, sleep, chests falling
 so they may rise.

Husks

I.

Compass-sure, I tread
and trip in the corn drills.
Husks crackle, copperhead
dens snap and flatten, all until

I reroot my breakneck gallop
to my parents' house. Bushel
and sweat to the countertop,
my now-known muscles

may rest 'til I ream ear from silk
and rut out worms.

II.

Brazen creaks
of an upstairs box spring, iron links
and cotton, thrust me into sleep

where I shave kernel from cob
to dry and burst, the explosive hull
popped with butter knobs
but no knives, and doors without halls.

The sky discovers its sunset in salmon flesh
and opens only to later close.

Post-sex quiet harbors
minutes in the hour, shadowed by breaths
and the inevitable work for farmers.

Chickenkiller

Within a pen,
smaller than my thumb from here,

one hundred and twenty-eight chickens
line the wire, warbling into each other.

In my uncle's jacket, the scent
of tobacco in its threads, I follow him

to his farm's end, armed
with a knife long enough to be scary.

My mother won't eat the meat
because she tastes the farm.

If you press a chicken on its side
and its face rests in the cool grass

it will stop struggling. But my blunt knife
could not cut through its neck.

I sawed until it hung.

Cropdeath

A farmer works fields
yet salts them with sweat, makes haste.
Needn't look skyward—
his collar dampens, hay piles
the receiver of damned rain.

Puberty

In the serrated shatterings
of this reddening burner barrel,
plastic bubbles and breaks
onto its concrete pad.

The sun is on the horizon,
spreading, a broken egg yolk.
I stoke the flames and smell
pepper stems,
shampoo bottles wilting
into themselves, the fine motes
of desk paper breaking off
to rise into my hair, my shirt collar.

A bush nearby hangs heavily
with plumes of lavender
which I pluck and crush
into fresh wetness.
It catches like it's meant to be
burnt, and the grass lights
along with branches, seed packets,
rubber bushings—everything
smolders through the night
until all that's left are cinders,
waiting to be stirred.

Hurricane Agnes

July 1st, 1972

Rain pinged
the corrugated roof,
rippling
like skim milk.
Pelting water pulled
the flood higher
as if a curtain could hide
the cows' legs, heaving brisket-chests,
their necks pearled
with slobber, deer-mice,
hay, dung. The steers brayed
and thrashed, their colossal
heads trying to rise
beneath the wakes.
From the window I saw
Daddy with waders and a holster.
He retted through a pocket
of shells.

The ground choked
on his ankles,
down the sidehills,
deeper into a rotgut
miasma-current
catching
on sideways cows,

bloated and bursting
against fence posts.
He cradled a heifer's head,
a shotgun barrel pressed above
her pale nose
stuck in mudwater,
now chokeberry black.

Indulgence

The tin can eats itself until
firelight
escapes.

Lanternflies spot your
skin; those filaments in you
are gnawed
thinner than thoughts,
or front windows.

In these woods,
we can skip rocks,
rip and throw dead grass
that we chase down stream.
When you fall
I cannot catch you in time.

I know where your parents hide
prescribed Vicodin.

I would picnic with you,
circumscribed by a pill-pile hillside
and let you have them all.
But you wince
as rocks press into us.

All there is to be done is handholding.

Sediment

A light,
crossing the bay,
filters into pool water,
cooling our sunburnt skin.
I fear for those dead
in the Assateague graveyards
since each year the island
sinks.

Tomorrow we will see horses
run wildly
and I will know why they are leaving,
for my phantom-boat shifts,
water crashing in my chest
like the Susquehanna
against bridge buttresses
where the duckweed enroots. I tally
miles from the island
to home, and recheck, and check again,
unsure if I've miscounted.

Sex in a Cornfield, Near Black Hole Creek

Gnats flit in the soybean rot,
rainwater haze mixing
with soil drifting
in the manured wind. August's sun
rims the pond's edge as ducks
wash off the heat of asphalt.
We smell them,
ourselves, and the leather
backseat. Of course it's cracked,
so I aim your cheek for
the yellow cushioning.
The windshield fog blues,
damp black cherry leaves
indigoed. The breeze
through the car's open windows
has endured.

Afterwards, you trace
unrecognizable things in silt
as I piss in a ditch—
*How lucky are we
to be so in love?*

The Bunkers of Alvira

1. Army Arrival, Cold July Night, 1942

Barn owls spit bones above Lou Huddy.
They land by his porch chair
while horse hooves pound his ribcage.

The wicker, curved
along his curved spine, leathered
by sweat, yields.

Cowshit-green contractors
told him it'll be months at most
until the farm's his again.

The low wind rushes
through fat-leaved cornstalks,
wrapping newspapers at their base.

In his gunsight, a racoon
climbs to the tassels and tears kernels
from flailing husks. It lands,

leaving footprints in furrows
to the wood's edge, scattering
what it could not fit inside itself.

2. Construction, May 15th, 1943

For the stable storage of TNT munitions,
the people of our great nation
let roads split to aid canvas-backed trucks
with sacks of aggregate,
portland cement, to create
one hundred forty-nine concrete domes.

Sunday's congregation cannot out-sing
the whine of pavers,
the throttling heave of machines
not meant for these lands. Hymns caught
in the chambers of those volatile rounds:
a crossbeam groans, snapping
to allow bulldozers through.
The din
of their cartridge overrides prayer.

Sugar maple and aspen
cleave for the nitroglycerine-sweating
sticks. In the homes of farmers
the corrugated tin laid trampled
and the explosive's musk rose
like buck piss in the rutted ground.

3. Ingredients, September 19th, 1943

Sugared well water in a stockpot
boils over to sizzle the range.
Oak wedges split inside
the cast-iron stove. Elsie Coates
cracks cinnamon sticks
into cheesecloth, vanilla bean
scraped of its sweetness, apple peel
pressed to the pan's side and downward.
Boiled pennies fizzle at its bottom.

Her husband is making weapons.
The wonders he has created
are dry and cool in blast shields.
Were they to destabilize,
brick shrapnel might reach his porch.
If he's lucky, a single stick of dynamite will have the force
to uproot tree stumps, kill
a band of men, and then more will die
as bone fragments shred through terrain.

He smears apple butter on sourdough
and lets it work warmth into his hands.
The oil lamp flickers as he tastes
the copper of pocket change.

4. Home Again, May 10th, 1986

The tent's so worn its wire skeleton
allows kerosene light to worm through.
Lou's grandson drags his home
inside a bunker in Alvira. The light
makes shadow of the ivy
working itself around cast-iron
hinges, drooping to be broken
by boot prints. The kid cannot decide:
prop his flashlight beneath
the bunker's porthole, or just to stare
starward?

Frog choruses blend
into peepers, the ringing near waterlike
as it cools the concrete fortress.
Without any light
these stars have names: Betelgeuse, Sirius, Hyades,
and Pleiades, Taurus the Bull.
The lamp projects mimics
around the porthole, like scattered feed corn
beaming, light baked into the rock.

He wakes, half in Alvira, Elimsport, but
in that same stone dome. Leaves tumble
in the sheetlike gusts and stick to the floor,
making trails and constellations in the fine dust.
The shapes are ley lines of hands, of worn
paper, drawn as final as an eviction.

5. BOHICA (“Bend Over, Here It Comes Again”), Hazing Ritual, 2006

*Become the rain
in headlight stasis
that muddies tire tracks.
Oh drink for me, speak and repeat
what I’ve taught you. Feel
the dirt on your cheek.*

As you prepare your exercise,
a pair of spraypainted eyes
squint beneath you. Your arms,
the pain’s epicenter, burn away
along with the man you once were.

The low fire crackles—your lungs
match in slow tears of strength.
Iced adrenaline winds
down, to your wrists, to the ground,
but before giving in
you’re told, *Brothers*
don’t do bohicas.

The electric pinpricks in your skin
cannot be rubbed out,
each catalyst-whiskey bubble
climbing the arsenal bunker
of your throat.

6. Exclaimed Legacy, 2023

Piled, corroded bean tins weep
oil separating in the wake
of shoots. Dirt dustings host
roots and weeds, curling
beneath the wrought-iron doorjambs.
The Pennsylvania Ordnance Works
smells of cut shumac, as it abrades
greening concrete.

The varicose veins and fencepost teeth
point toward
sawdust where matchbox cars veered
into vole dens. The ground's now
entangled with rebar, the rust leeching.

When the last refugees
in Elimsport die,
each has a designated grave
by Alvira's Presbyterian church
waiting to accept them.
They will be the alumroot,
the creepers, winding
over the manmade domes,
catching acorns,
dried leaves, and walnut hulls,
the wayward seeds.

III. MONTGOMERY

“WILL TRADE CASH 4 DIAMONDS”

—graffiti just before the Last Raft Bridge

Who's the Bastard Now?

1. A Hippie Fucks My Mom, 2000

“Tune in, Turn on and Drop out”
—his favorite quote on Facebook

Robbie, my absent creator, holds a breath—
he imagines instead her lover's puffed chest, quakes
knowingly, blows on plump dandelions, unsheathes
in her stretching garden.

And then, two states
over, a snake slides from concrete in crumbled decay.
Terry pins, presses, severs its squirming neck.
He doesn't fear its bite, tongue, or patternless sway,
as four kids upstairs ask what's *nextnextnex*—
he thinks I'm child #5, made weeks ago.

Back in Ayden, NC, a spill of cum won't unslick
the floor. Beneath tiles, grout, there's a glow
ivying towards Pennsylvania. Sweat drips
down truth: I just *couldn't* be of the love she spurned,
yet my flowering roots ask when we'll return.

2. I Imagine Robbie and His Dad, 1970: The Shutout

You didn't just win—you championed two states!

Robert Sr. smells pine-tar under a hellish
sun, on his brow and shaking hands. Relish
soaks through a bun, beneath my nails. (I am late
by thirty-odd years . . . or early. No, I arrive
at the last inning.)

I can't find your head
amidst the jerseys, flying spit; the sky is red
as thread from a ball. It wraps your career in five
years of coaching, guiding our Robbie to bat
at unseen meteors. He trips. And he's hurt.
In that Friday's dusk, his pants ripped, he bleeds
into a rusty slick. His dad hides in his hat,
holds back tears; it is quiet. He doesn't know why
fatherless sons scream *play ball*, hoping the kid cries.

3. After Robbie Posts about Me Without Permission, 2021

I scan my face like it's your message,
marked by hands I've never felt. So unfamiliar
in a mirror, those pearlescent vestiges
wait for me like a father: brow greased in anger,
the nose, beard hiding moles. Punnet squares
surround my patchworked
childhood, cover questions
and cover-up answers. I can't even heave in air—
or undig. I am the hole, the dirt, lessened
but greater with each clenched scoop. Now nothing's left
for me to squeeze and mud's bound to dry.
We talked only once. This paydirt lead to your theft,
your public claim, of my impossibly blue eyes . . .

I too can't keep secrets, so should've known sooner
to heirloom my nickname, for you are now "The Ruiner."

Betrayal

I hated you, earlier,
when you packed your moving truck.

(I threw a calendar away,
hoping everybody would, too.)

But now, searching for clovers
under my porch,

your hand smooths my face.

Will this all end?

The sun's angry at everything but
us. Orange as goldfish, it's swimming

backwards in your hair. Let's trade
rocks and days.

Footsteps thud above
the dripped stain, wood-knots,

untapped nails.

Chipmunk skeletons

guard us. You rub a plank,
the splinter's tip, into your thumb.

Why didn't I pick it out?
I cry with you

even though I'm not sad,
exactly. Cobwebs catch.

Your mother searches for you,
shouts across the gravel.

She sounds as scared
as I feel: modeling clay

always drying. I yell back.
And each yell echoes: *I'm here!* . . .

in our small town getting smaller,
beneath our porch

turning stripped screws,
thinking they'll hold.

Black Oasis

Fluorescents crackle, lapsing
over jarred waxbeans
like born-again moths, wriggling.
Plastic liquor bottles and Pabst cans overflow
a bag, dry as cottonmouth.
No scratches or words
hide the cobbled walls.
The window
 flashes, angelically white
then dark by the time I've begun staring.
The sky hemorrhages, veins
pulsing as though I've rubbed my eyes
to see goldenrods, a fuchsia flint-spark.
A trickle leaks from gaps between uncaulked
beams and smells of worms. I lie
by the washing machine, crossed
arms over my chest. Blood
rushes my ears. The power
snaps out. Upstairs, the floor
creaks. A chair is shoved. *Parents*
are home. The generator
cranks.

Heritage

The cobalt puffiness
hides the gray cloth interior,
with rips for him to widen
into his own and the smell of stale sweat
like smoke rising from a trash fire,
or a stray dog licking your face.

His coat holds him, rubbing
his cheek like Dad's arm hair.
Cough drops in his pockets
rip open to stick together.
The words "Terry, Mechanic"
stitched in gold thread
cover his heart, like copper piping
or a curlicue of keys.
The musk of machinery
condenses,
'till all he is, will be, is jacket.

Montgomery's Legion Car Wash

The multicolor foam gun is stuck
on the green suds setting.
Somebody's left their floormats
hanging from the wall, dripping
sediment into a sloped grate.
Thin bugs bat at the caged light
in tandem with the compressors hum.

I wash my Buick LeSabre, mapped
with a horizon of rust and flies
on its bumper,
until paint chips at its edges.

Artificial cherries and yacht rock
leach into the purpling sunset.
A kid halts as water washes
over the soap. He waits until
I spray in his direction, then pedals
through a momentary rainbow.

She's Still Out There

Her skin glistened with black particulate
in her wig, the scaled indentations
of her rubber tail. Riverside tenants,
glad to have found
a nice place to park their RVs,
strung orangish lights from clotheslines.

In the low smoke of sparklers, snaking
poppers crackled
over the lapping river
and beneath sirens whipping
through the pine trunks, over
ripples and onto the sandbar
where beach police stripped open
her legs, then wrapped them in blankets.

People clapped for the mermaid in handcuffs,
but I thought I heard her mumble
notes of songs under her breath,
pale ankles pressed together,
thumping back and forth, steady, a heartbeat.

Permanence

The new couch with holes
and two old fridges: a horde
of unopened liquor, potatoes
spreading their eyes into filth.

A foam-sealed attic
with Pink Panther fiberglass hanging
in places where cats can climb
and kids shouldn't.

In the minivan's backseat,
a Moon Pie crumbling
into pleather, crayons melt
into a cupholder

while a boy cries
at the weight of a new flatscreen
pressed against him
for the ride home.

In candle-lit black screens,
the room anchored, he'll wonder,
later, "If it turns on and off,
will I still be here?"

Self-Soothed

A boy balances on maple logs
with walnuts greening his palms.
But rot, nearly there but for slickness,
sends weight sliding to his toes,

and he's airborne.
Stripped trunks cleave
his forehead. His throbbing skull
must be everything.

And teeth, buzzing hornets, swatted
by his tongue. He hobbles
the scoliosified sidewalk,
leaves tracks into the kitchen.

Blood,
everywhere: down his jaw, thickening,
then up his head through augured veins.
His father severs roast beef, frayed like rope,

smears
mashed potatoes over burst peas.
From inside a pie, sugared strawberries
leak onto the leafed plate.

I Will Stay in the Car

Crowning a balding dirt road: the corner shop,
swaddled in milkweed, flowing
cogon grass, vetiver, and bronzing rye—
I'm restless in Dad's pickup, stinking of snuff.

I know that inside
jarred pears will shatter,
scoring my kneecaps. Urine will steam
my motionless thighs.

I see his lips, fat
under gray bristles,
growing fatter,
red until dark,
a face thickened by cracks
pieced together like dropped pottery.

Snow Day

Oh low-hanging transient snowfog
pierced by impossible rays of sunlight
running down, down, down

the mound-mountains,
weaved in dead grass:
carry away the fucking snow

so my mother can
fry bacon, pour two-percent milk.
My father, cities or boroughs away,

tilts a leaking Thermos
of black coffee, which drips
into the separation of boot from heel,

mixes with road salt,
the floor-gravel grains
that cling to him like family.

The downward stringing flakes
cannot disadhere from the ungiving
earth, shards of minivan glass.

I am made to watch
and she, to be watched—
my mother, in slippers,

the pink fluff cracked like callouses,
webbed by ice clumps.
Her face is cigarette smoke.

Star Factory

Fire, Montgomery Mills, 1941

Black-papered insulation bursts
open, and squirrels trellis-travel
from the sun setting between smokestacks
to its leftover heat, burrowed
in its wavering. Down the cool Susquehanna
and patched by local women
in a factory, “The Place: Where Things are Made”—
a burlap sack, woven
from dried jute, to hold oranges.
A bird’s nest hides in the pink
stuffing, falling from the walls
where a small barrel holds fire.

The child by his window
is allowed to stay up and trace
the smoke plumes, pulling indigo
from the air, knows it’ll create
worldly, buyable, textured things again
but for him: drawn pears, spiked grass.

In that Thursday evening static
of night before day before night before
the purple in-between hours,
imagined machinery
whirs in gunmetal, in brick reds

to create something from stock.
The beams thicker than his dad's forearms
light skyward, cracking the tarred roof
and creating moon rays, fire.

Oh, to be so close
to the factory that makes stars.