The Furthest Thing from Sanctuary

by

Austin Farrell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts degree
Department of English Language and Literature
The University of Michigan
2022

__________________________________________
Tung Hui-Hu,
Supervising Faculty Member

__________________________________________
Laura Kasischke,
Supervising Faculty Member
Table of Contents

Setting my Grandfather's Shed on Fire (I Wanted to See a Small Flame Triumph) 1
I 2
Missed Exit in Osceola, Arkansas 3
A Brief History 4
History of Baseball 5
Possession 6
II 7
Shotgun Sonnet 8
Diagnosis 9
Here 10
III 12
Home is a Dead Possum 13
IV 14
The King of Pool 15
My Grandma at Dialysis 18
V 19
Shy Guy Love Poem 20
VI 21
Southern Love Sonnet 22
VII 23
Sunday with a Guitar 24
VIII 25
The Delta 26
In a Small Town 27
Rigor Mortis 28
Angel 29
Study of My Father after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X 30
My Father’s Revolver 32
A True Story of Hunger 34
IX. Interlude 36
X 37
The Beggar Man of Ann Arbor 38
XI 39
Friendship Sonnet 40
XII 41
Self-Portrait 42
The Picture 43
XIII 44
Walking to Virginia Park in Late Fall 45
Potential 46
Setting my Grandfather's Shed on Fire (I Wanted to See a Small Flame Triumph)

I did it with a lighter, of course.
A cluster of dry vines like a dead hand after a burst of anger hung from a hole. I lit a dangling finger, watched the wind extinguish it.
I kept doing it, wondering where it had gone, what it wanted.

What I wanted was to see a small flame triumph. I didn't want to see its life shrink to embers, let another burn brighter all over their sad, glowing promises.
And so, I held the small flame there, let it become dangerous.
I realized I couldn't stop it.
I realized my grandparent's shed would burn again and again each time I saw a fire. Around the corner, my grandfather walked with a bucket to go water his garden. I ran to him.
All I could do was cry and point.
That day, I learned everything changes in the mouth of a flame.
I still think about what would've happened had I stood there, fully aware of fire, what happens when it climbs up a wall and begins to laugh at this world, and watch a part of myself inside it fume away.
I

How strange to be here a bruised advent of
Myself in the silver shades of Michigan.
Everything changes: janitor turned teacher,
Hair a little thinner, kill yourself winters.
What am I to give if not my word, my
Wonderful and frightening love as lost
As Arkansas townships, my parents? Lonely
Mother and swelling father, divorced world.
I unbury an old poet’s staff, restore
My airy charm. I swallow the shit
I feed myself these past few years.
It is 7:46pm. Something about snow says
It doesn’t have to be this way, my friend.
Missed Exit in Osceola, Arkansas

You are driving on a very rough road. The child is not buckled up. Neither the distance traveled nor the age and size of the traveler change the need for protection.

Check the location. You approach things faster: The black soil of the Delta, bottomland hardwoods, long stretches of humid air.

The facts are clear. You must use caution. You must go as fast as it goes. It burns violently. Burns like litter and carcasses behind a nearby mobile home. A kind of people. You don’t knock on their doors.

Your exhaust system sounds strange. Repairs weren’t done correctly. The child is screaming. Keep your eyes moving. Make sure you’re ready. Turn off the engine.

A porch fixture lights up. A man and his dog step out. He stares. His dog gnashes The darkness. They fill the distance between. You could be seriously injured. It is dangerous to get out of your vehicle.
A Brief History

Summers in Moro, the children were found wandering past stop signs to the Kountry Kitchen, the sky-blue panels not yet rusting, candy hauls in plastic bags. We lived in the park beside the water tower that begged for help reaching higher than we ever could and still it would change nothing. We played basketball. I got into a scuffle with a younger boy. I forget why he was so nasty towards me. Our friends egged on the two of us, their faces curling, and like deathly gaze that tilt the body, he pushed me down. That's all that happened. I didn't want to fight. There had been enough of that in this life, my life approximated by a firehouse and crape myrtles, houses never manifesting a home but questions and loud scraping of my father's voice against my mother drunk beside the porch telling me to go with her. I wanted to. I didn't. What would you have done? During the day, I'd stroll behind my house with a machete into the woods. The blade was black. The grip felt good as paths fell before me, bundles of briar I had to crawl under. I'd stay out there for hours. A baseball field slept behind the woods, tree lines obscuring the teeth tractoring surrounding fields. You never found anyone out there, only key scratched "FUCKS" and "JAKE LOVES SALLY" on a yellow, metal duck. Doesn't that say it all? No baseballs, empty bleachers. Tomorrow they'll raze another house, burn another trailer before the morning notices, before I notice it's time to leave my family there again.
A strange future grew from that baseball field behind our childhood home. Ask my brother. Our neighbor had been diagnosed with cancer. Mom would take us on rides in her blue Lincoln listening to “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper.” My brother played little league baseball.

It was strange. We’d spend hours slugging a ball into the backstop, our backs against the field, our blood racing like the motor of a reaper roaring in the distance. I’d tire out, but my brother would stay, knock them till the field turned blue. I’d come home, our parents silent like a cancer still hidden, like the joys of our cancer-ridden neighbor and his newly donned baseball cap. Our father would soon shatter it and blue tones would cover our home. In the field, the cry of yarn splitting against steel, my brother exhausting his swing like a desperate reaper.

I began to dress as the grim reaper around the house. Our neighbor died of cancer. Our parents divorced. My brother began picking on me more. He even quit baseball, his nights brooding new darkness in the field. Confused, I’d hold my breath till my face turned blue.

Our father got the house. Mom got the blues. Her tone became sharp like reaper teeth that decimate each stalk in the wheat field, my insides shrinking and turning like cancer cells and nerves in the last pitch of baseball. One time, she clutched a hammer, chased my brother telling him she only wanted his hands. My brother went to live with our father, our old house, blue and sacred. When we saw each other, baseball wasn’t mentioned. I’d ask him why the reaper took lives, why our neighbor shriveled away with cancer, why he spent those long nights in the field.

My brother said “I don’t fear the reaper.” Those blue nights, our parents were the cancer, and hitting balls eased that harrowing field.
Possession

On the ground are rotten pears, soft and easy like skinned squirrels. Old refrigerators, dryers, butts and beer cans. He stands within it all. He hasn’t fed his dogs. They wag their tails and bark at him, flies slurping their fleshy ears. Hungry. Not even the clouds listen. He stomps a couple of pears. He snatches one from the tree and takes a bite. Bitter. He throws it. Bursting through the chain link kennels, they try to get a taste, their tongues only lapping the rust of cold wire—

It’s becoming too much. He goes inside and grabs his .22. His hands are suddenly tiny again. He is walking down the highway. He finds a hungry stray someone dropped off, its ribs protruding, mapping out a field he is too familiar with. He doesn’t think twice. It’ll eat whatever it can reach. And so he shoots and returns to his yard back to his chickens—

A shell clicks into the chamber and he steps back out. The clouds have gathered. The moon begins to instigate the night. He walks toward them. He stomps another pear. He stares into them from the barrel. They wag their tails and bark. He can’t do it. They belong to him. Maybe he sees me in each of their little eyes, sees a son he tried to cage my whole life, and so my father feeds his dogs and falls into his dreams.
II

Stand a little less between me and the sun
You nosy prick. We’re taught not to spit
On faces yet quiet as I am, I should.
We’d both learn a lesson: there is harmony
In sadness. You’ll get over it. I’ll teach you
To live on lentils, three chords on guitar.
You’ll even start to think about others
As songs, poems, or diverse fecal structures.
A small declining town in Arkansas,
I walked those streets. Grace to be born
And live, even there. They sing the tunes
No one could call happy. They say things
You wish you could, but never should.
Shotgun Sonnet

I wrote this poem using a shotgun. Notice the holes, how beautiful buckshot can be when you point the barrel enable chance. How rain takes years before it falls again here like grazing a stranger’s shoulder and becoming eternally apart as it was when each hole remained filled with cruelty every puddle reflecting muddled reality. Blackbirds flocked and sang terrible songs. When my grandfather caught the tune his foot began to tap out violence. He stood up and loaded the single chamber and opened the door. Several fell like rotten pears several flew higher until nothing was left of our imagination.
Diagnosis

The first time my grandfather visited the doctor, they asked him to write a sentence. Any sentence. For five minutes, his pen waltzed across a line. He wrote “I love the St. Louis Cardinals.” He smiled. They all laughed there in the exam room.

The next time my grandfather visited the doctor, he couldn’t write a straight line. They asked him what day it was, what he did the day before. He stared at the quartz floor of his memory, flecked and hard. His hands shook irritably. The doctor told him he would never drive again.

That was the day my grandfather died. Quiet in the back seat of my mother’s car, he’d never see Memphis again, till the plot across the street where Vinnie Ligon let him plant his garden. The home would be without squash and eggplant, his broad shoulders inside his navy jumpsuit.

None of it. He told my mother to pull over. Some random dirt road on highway one bisecting a field of soybeans. He got out, looked down the divide of the green sea. Something buckled inside him as if he saw the shriveled man in his hospice cradle, his arms dangling like a mantis while a nurse cleaned him up and changed his diaper.

There, down a dirt road, my grandfather bolted into the rest of his life. Full sprint, kicking up dirt, a quake in his gait as my mother and grandmother watched him shrink along the power lines.
Here

There I was, a young polo shirt boy
brushing my teeth while my mother
sprayed and combed my hair. We’d
walk across our yard into the gravel lot
of the Moro Baptist Church. I’d turn and look
at our blue house, our happy porch swing
inviting me back like a lonesome friend.

“Here.” I wanted to stay there, not Moro
surrounded by fields where doves shattered,
but in my room, walking down a line of poetry.

But there I was, walking down the promenade
in Historic Hot Springs, a beautifully lit evening
with boarding school friends. We danced
around town, back to our rooms, into
the hills of Fayetteville for college. In Moro,
my mother’s father was slowing down. Our yard
began to spring pigweed and bull thistle, occasionally
haunted by my mother who hung pink umbrellas
in the tree beside my room. The roof was falling in.

Now, I am here, writing poems in Ann Arbor,
grateful for the long arm of Highway 78
that waved me away to Hot Springs and Fayetteville.
Here until it grabs me by my collar, drags me
across the Midwest, back to my blue house,
a no trespassing sign taped to the front door.
All the walls are torn out. In the bathroom,
a pentagram is spray-painted on the wall
by a schizophrenic junkie younger than me
dressed in my mother’s bikini she found
in the closet where she sleeps some nights.
Down the street, my mother is on the porch
screaming “Rhiannon” with the strays till midnight.

Here, I am worried. She is chain-smoking
without a job, drinking as a séance to contact
my deceased grandfather. He is silent. It is
his last lesson to her in the afterlife. I hear
her say, “Here. I am not there.” I hear
a piece of ceiling fall down the street, crumble
and pile within her heart. I have to leave her
here, there where she calls me every hour
I’m on the road, every day that I’m away
telling me she misses me. She wants to see her baby Tinky-Tink, but I am not there.

I am here, a full-grown man, brushing my plagued teeth, disappointed when my gums bleed.
III

Geez! The city closed down and I can't
Catch a fucking break. Bird song taunts me,
Trees shake their asses at me, city traffic
Tries to kill me. Even the fuckers on the scooters.
Mother calls to hear my endless complaining
And though nothing she says can't fix any of this
I'm grateful when she says “I want to see your face.”
I know we both could benefit from that.
Dark rooms and their hollow wombs
I regress to infantile delights: beat music,
Babble song, blight the mind and bang the gong.
The sun declares another damn doodily day:
Faint breaths, bad business, lungs gray.
Home is a Dead Possum

It is 10:15pm in Ann Arbor and 11:15am in Taipei. I watch Michigan’s cold clouds spread a slow white winter across Elizabeth street, stacks of books forming like fungus upon the surfaces of my room. A light slants a world of shadow across my wall drenched in my accent: the phlegm that coats my throat.

Aaron is on his break. He feels the wind stroke his cheeks, rustle autumn leaves in a spiral sweep across the Taiwanese streets. He walks to the park where two businessmen place a table and have their lunch. He calls me. He tells me a story about raccoons and trash cans, his brother looming by the dark hedges with his crossbow ready to scream arrows at the problem.

I see my own brother, stomping a possum in moonlight at the church down the gravel road. He is laughing. A pack of coyotes nearby watch him like a switchblade. He is solving his own problems. We start laughing over the phone. We both know that’s how they do it in the south. It’s funny we were able to get out, me north and Aaron east, away from the wheat fields and blood trickled fur that surrounded our Arkansas childhoods.

Aaron’s break ends. We hang up. I go to the window. The cold air is creeping in. A killing moon hovers over the clouds. Tonight, a possum will play dead over and over again. It’s easier to leave than to go back.
April sucks! Fucking lilacs all over
Littered grounds. Into the big world
Full speed, a faint asteroid strikes
A prairie filled with soft loosestrife.
My ears eat the echoes like stubborn children.
Love patted me on the back, “So long, pal,”
And hitchhiked into someone else’s eyes.
Bury the past in poetry, watch it rise
To splash into the sky and scatter.
I hear the last voice of a wind moan by
As an unseen clock turns vaguely
And remember love holds us prisoner.
The flowers begin to blow my direction.
Hallelujah for May’s unruly redemption!
The King of Pool

I remember him
A tall stark shadow
Leaning over
The green baize
This was in Moro, Arkansas
This was back when
My brother taught me
What a hustle is
This was back when
The Jones’s bought the cafe
In the center of town
Where Alpha Tucker cooked me
Macaroni and cheese

My brother and I would go after school
Our grandma lived right around the corner
We’d play pool with the other kids
Where there used to be tables
With duck-patterned tablecloths
My brother and I love pool
He knows English and I know Poetry
The last time we played
He would tell me where to strike
I always followed through
We talked about going to Memphis sometime

He would usually show up around 6
I think he worked for Jeff Hill
Pulling corn out on 259
Beside the house my father grew up in
His skin was always red
Speckled head to toe in mud
His boots were always clean
They even had chrome spurs
He’d clink before every game
He had a perpetual grin

Every evening we were toe-to-toe
With the King of Pool until supper
My brother and I would take turns
I would look around the room
We were in the room
That wasn’t part of the cafe
The room where Alpha Tucker did laundry
She would be ironing shirts and such
While my brother and I played basketball
With our neighborhood friends across the street
I remember going over there sometimes
And just watching her
Sometimes she would make a special bowl
Of macaroni and cheese for me

And now there is a small jukebox
Tucked in the corner
Where Alpha Tucker stored
Her ironing board

We never beat the King of Pool
We lost our chance
One night the building caught fire
I followed my grandfather outside
The fire trucks were there
The flames were still there
We watched it burn to the ground
And then went back to sleep
I'd hear people talk about it
How the Jones's burned it down
To claim insurance
There had been talk of Lenard buying the lot

It remains empty next to the town gazebo
And Kim's Hairdressing the only business
Along Front street under the water tower

Alpha Tucker sold food
Out of a little shack in front of her house
After she sold the cafe
She did not make macaroni and cheese anymore
She died a few years after the fire
I'm not sure if it was natural causes
But I always remember it as a tragedy
That it was complications from a blow to the head
From her own son
She saved me one time
My brother had duct taped my hands together
And kept me prisoner while his friends were over
and our father was at work
I managed to slip out the front door
While my brother was reloading staples
I ran through our father's yard
Past the firehouse and the crape myrtles
Bordering the gazebo
My brother and his friends behind me
I ran into the cafe and Alpha Tucker
Asked me what had happened

The last time I saw my brother
I asked him if he’d seen the King of Pool
-He’s still working for Jeff Hill
Does he still wear the boots?
-I don’t know
My brother didn’t seem very happy
He’s with Kadie and her kids
His belongings being thrown onto the front lawn
I know he cries more than he lets on
He doesn’t duct tape my hands together anymore
We don’t do much of anything anymore

The last time I visited Moro
I met a tractor on the road when I left
I pulled to the side to give him space
And as he passed me
All I could see was the grin
Dripping off his red skin
My Grandma at Dialysis

The old porch and its dust
Crevicing through the floor panels
Let up by an eager corn broom
That whirls it into the air
Together with a hint of wood
And the wisps of cheap coffee
Steaming from the white cup
One can already imagine
The line of trees that separate
Blue from green
Surrounding the sharecropper’s shack
The blonde fields of wheat
She’d scuttle through as a child
Her sisters not far behind
“Wait up” she hears them
But listens instead to the wind
The crops brushing her bare shoulders
She can see it The little heads
Poking out a couple inches
Edging closer to the end of the line
What her mother must have thought
All those years ago and who now
To remember it all as dust lays down
On memories and their inhabitants
She is not sad focused
Upon that eternal forest
The one true constant of her life
And for a moment it is happening
Again
When you speak, the innocence of children
Fills our oddly mangled hearts, littered by
Fathers and histrionic behavior: the fool.
I'm heavy for you. I ring up God for tips,
But no answer. He's too busy deciding to
Exist. I used to have a therapist. He said
I restored his faith in straight white men
Although I never tried to. Maybe that's it?
When I speak, that charming wisdom is me.
We party in our language, send strange love
Letters called breathing. This voice you hear
Holds tightly upon yours. This body aches
Like a bottle washed ashore, never received.
When we speak, a world again conceived.
Shy Guy Love Poem

Hot cup of coffee, the morning thaw of dreams and business buildings calling our names like children games, merry-go-rounding into new world dramas, into the evening romance where stars signal to each other in animal shapes and murmur this side of the planet into repetition.

Except me. I'm thinking of you, a longing to sing nekked as a jay bee bird my days punking around into new discoveries to grace your ear, down into your heart where stars glitter into action.

They take you places. When you speak, they reveal a slow history. The image of your laughter is enough to send me jumping around my room like a child who wants nothing else.

I take my bike out and trace your name endlessly around the city. No one will catch me. That keeps me healthy, to live nekked as a jay bee bird for you.

And yet none of this seems to go anywhere besides a poem, some claim of inspiration I feel in your face, the stars demanding a move. All this I say is true, only told in poems or small walks. No sense is made of it except when an axe appears nekked as a jay bee bird, splitting up these golden, lonely days.
VI

The wind begins to pick up again. Fast,
Thoughts compete for verbification.
They beat each other. Then nothing
Comes out. Sitting at my desk, years
Flash across a minute. I brood terrible
New mixtures of silent fixtures: love you,
Idiot, what temple is this I worship?
Mother calls so histrionic I become
Her father. I have to hold her up.
Everything changes nothing. The sky
Is the same sky. The people still terrible.
Fear unable to release its thick roots.
Warning: may cause explosions. I think
So. I know. This too shall pass.
Southern Love Sonnet

Speckled head to toe in mud and starlight
I investigate constellations of a clear night
Prophesizing the brightest truth in your eyes
Our hearts and truth begin to swing open
like an orange, each pulpy possibility sparkly
With sweet juice, we toast our bodies and drink
Here whole pastures become ballrooms, the only
Company a scatter of hay bales, dirt. This is
Our country: coyotes laugh like birthday parties,
Spectres pirouette across their forgotten bodies.
This is a slow burn. You understand me
Truly when we have left the city, this long
Delta fraught with dead and crying babies.
I never knew I could love like this: you.
I find myself in the bean fields
A young man terribly driven
I investigate an orchestra of stars
This music begins to make sense
Salvation comes easily if you say
“yes” but no promise is kept
The years carry a hero nowhere
Never been before, seen pictures
Where one belongs, a swan song
To the former land. Crazy love,
Simple idea, small walks expand.
I didn’t have to. I could’ve stayed.
Mother still there, calls everyday.
Sunday with a Guitar

My finger bends the note
further than shadows
of boughs stalking
my evening shaded kitchen
the sun finally appearing
dozing
it’s big baby head detached and singing
the snow into city drains

I decide to write songs
for the dead leaves,
my mother who
never became a singer. I
hear her drunken voice
dozing
into questions and then popular songs
drown her into memories.

The rhythm isn’t blues or
even lamenting. It’s her
body barreling down
a long scabbing roadside ditch
in a long June memory
dozing
me back into Moro, Arkansas.
I break all the strings.
I need, I need, I needle another
Slow day into night. My friends:
Thank you. My enemies: Where
Are you? Overcoming the linear
Logic of what is my life, I golfclub
The fiend of my heart into ocean.
I stop pleasing, I stop listening. I
Start undermining the arrangement.
It’s what’s happening, baby!
I don’t need a mirror to see myself
But you, friends and foes, “you”
The love I most desire, the you
Of you’s who never use others.
I shatter the mirror. I dig a hole.
The Delta

Truck goes down road
And kills my dog
Fur spread like face
Stomped in and so
I dig a hole
And shove her in
A rose laughs hard
The beauty of it
The pain not felt
But spread like face
When dog is dead
And years pass fast
Long hours in heat
Catch fire the grass
I turn my head
And look at dead
Snake I kill with
Dull knife and stone
I do not pray
I walk this way
Toward trees and dark
Years pass and you
Have no idea
In a Small Town

The car broke down on the curve into town. Two little old ladies dressed for a funeral got out and stood in the snarling silence. It was winter. Blackbirds filed on the power line like old men on soda cases. Grey skies choked out the sun. The cold dirt, long and empty, moaned for Death to feed it another. Death raised his chicken bones and bowed an odd hush across the air. The ladies trembled not knowing the weather was the least of their worries. A pack of needle-haired dogs came barreling towards them. Death alighted the hood of the car and prepared an elegy: a ring of dark mutts, two ladies centered. The town stared from its glazed windows, gnashing in harmony with Death’s dogs, that unfortunate music that slows into the days, then years. A shot sounds off like a hit in Stravinsky. The scene disperses and an ambulance is summoned. The ladies become a conversation over supper as children watch their dogs gnawing on deer limbs in the yard. They felt bad, then went to bed. The next morning, Death rings a chicken’s neck in the sun’s first rays and everyone goes to work.
Rigor Mortis

He threw a glass I liked to drink from
A glass I liked to drink from
Towards the door for they had begun
Shouting at each other the way children
can't settle an argument with silence
It put a small dent in the hard wood
Where you can still hear his patience
Shattering. You can still see his prints
All over the house, smell the chopped oak
From his jumpsuit. But you can't see
His plastic-pursed lips, rotten by now.
We forget we are a frame, a dance
Always offering our hands another chance.
We learn how bones stubborn like cranks
crumble from a skin of thick decisions.
I remember a bicycle and a slick chain
My grandfather racing all of us children.

And now, when you look down those streets
You'll see Angel Parson carrying five sacks
Of clothing or Paul Norton pedaling with
A window frame under his arm. You'll see
Another empty lot. You'll see a water tower
Unable to kneel, its shadow trying to hide
In a nearby field. You'll see. You'll
Keep driving.
Angel  
*After Frank Stanford*

In the evenings you hear copper  
getting gutted from houses. The sun  
sets and nothing changes. Somebody  
always walks the streets. The dogs sing  
from their cages while ghosts climb up  
the water tower without fear  
once more…

It is night.  
Under an orange streetlamp at the corner  
of my mother’s house a tormented woman  
my age pauses and says to everyone holding  
up her bags of dirty laundry as long as I live  
this town knows my name my friends
Study of My Father after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X
After Francis Bacon after francine j harris

My father would never

let anyone see him like this

the influence of stepfathers
The mother’s head under a drawing faucet
the son learning aim and trigger

the mouth opens and inside

a heap of cornbread

day in the chair a curtain of mother

behind cigarette smoke

a red darkness floods the ears

he’d sit there with beer and numbers:
dimensions of wood, insurance. The mouth opens.

I am not there to see it

widen.

My father says

and eyes pierce heavy.

He is honest. He is resilient. He is hurt. He is wrong.

If it is him and I together in chairs

mouth closed.
shrinking star, dead dogs.
the coldness of a black barrel.

In the chair,

we are states, even
galaxies apart.

My father’s going to die.

his heart coughs that to me

and so I grab my phone,

and dial his number and listen to the mouth open
My Father's Revolver

I went home during April that year
And sat with my brother
In our father's den that used to be
Our Grandma Louise's carport
He built it after we found her
In a ditch on Highway 78 towards Wheatley
The day my mother held me
And didn't let go

Our father likes to hunt and never misses a season
There is a VHS recording of my first birthday
My mother jutting back and forth to the kitchen
Cursing my father's name who was absent
Hunting deer at the White River Wildlife Refuge
And there was me with my cushioned toy train
Rolling it to the Blue Danube
My uncle had edited over the VHS audio

For Father's Day my brother bought our father
A revolver as well as
One for himself
My brother asked me
"You wanna go shoot'em?"
Blasting just about anything in sight
Had been his father-son ritual
I remember a Thanksgiving
The two of them and my cousins
Turning over loose scrap metal in the yard
Annihilating several families of rats
"Yeah"

We started out in the backyard
Behind the old pear tree
Around the DIY dog kennels
Our father made all cooled by
Box fans and $300 electric bills
We shot at some cans in the yard
Most of which I missed
My brother kept telling me
"You wanna drop your crosshairs a little"
We set up some skeets on the levee
My father built around his fetching pond

My brother was pretty good
He rarely missed
Holding the revolver as direct
As Miles Davis his trumpet  
After some time I could tell  
I was starting to get the hang of it  
How to handle it  
How to breathe  

At one point he shot a sparrow  
Laughing as he shot at many more  
I didn't say anything just stared  
At what seemed like a teardrop  
Still springing from the bird's eye  
I put my father's revolver back  
Between the driver's seat and the console  
We went back inside and there was our father  
Stretched out in the den half asleep  
We found our places and sat down  
To watch a fight on the television  
Watched by the two bucks mounted  
On each side of my father's gun cabinet
A True Story of Hunger

I.
When my brother learned how to breathe, he shot a sparrow expecting its small body to fall at the quivering pace of his heart into the earth. It slung down like a cold hand, the fingers still reaching. It never fell, clung to the branch like tears pooled in the eye forever until all that sang us along the pink dance of crape myrtles and dilapidating walls of houses is realized, then buried. So now, my brother and I are men. We slowly recognize what that means until we are nothing. As we are stretched farther apart, the wind begins collecting scraps of speech, the strange music orchestrated alone with our bodies, carries it across the warm humming of high windows long nights, the morning flush reducing us to the silent focus of an infant, and finally, the sweeping hush of a whisper that passes by on the way home and reminds me how confused we have become.

II.
Now a shadow hangs over this entire landscape, the long droop of the sparrow. When the sun hits, it hits hard. It melts the compassion of men and sends them to earn their wages in a field. My brother’s skin bubbled one time after a long day of slinging sacks on the levee. He was quiet when we sat in the living room. He would look at me and grin. I could feel his bubbles swelling like maggots in a dead sparrow. Maggots only know how to feed. Starving, they violently wiggle around until they are found and sprayed like a field. They can’t love, at least, like a sparrow that can fly all over the delta, every flutter hope, not instinct. When my brother’s blisters pop, maggots wiggle towards him. Tomorrow, the levee will break.

III.
One night, my brother gets cocky and bucks up. My father vices his neck against the wall, a painful history in his eyes. I stopped going to church after that. Everyone else already had.

IV.
My brother has a fetish for skulls: engraved on his shoulder, spinning under his palm when he drives me to school. He graduates then draws them for his infantry platoon in Fort Benning, Georgia. My grandpa’s empty skull skin still intact makes him nervous of his own. The reflection of coffins. My brother, I love him. He’d crush another’s skull and walk away like buying soda pop. He used to paint the eyes of Sylvester Stallone accentuating the skull, black and white. He flies a rebel flag. He has a fetish.

V.
When I was a teenager, I was in love with Robyn Mulloy. She found an orphaned fledgling in her stable. She asked me if I would care for it while she went to a barrel-racing competition.
In a small shoebox, it kept opening its mouth, but no sound came out. It wanted to feed. I plucked soft wet cat food with tweezers and watched its feathers grow. It began to chirp after a few days. It started eating bigger portions. The wings eagerly flapped, flightless. I was so tickled, I’d let it perch on my finger and teeter it up and down until it finally decided to grow bold. It flew right into the high-speed ceiling fan and smacked into the wall beside a portrait of a man in prayer. I buried the young sparrow in the back yard. I told Robyn it flew off. That night, I dreamed maggots squirmed all over me, feeding.

VI.
My brother joined the military. My brother trained dogs. My brother used the shock collar. My brother gets angry. He gets so angry that one time, when he came in bruised and beaten, we thought he did it to himself. As a child he sang a song. He wrapped his arms around his legs, he teetered like a rocking chair. He sang “everybody hates me.” That song, that medicine, became his own fists pummeling his face. I’d watch him do it. He looked confused as if trying to recall that first sparrow he killed.

VII.
My brother must now receive his punishment. Every bird he’s ever dropped tattoos across his skin. His eyes glaze over from the bloody ink. When they send him into combat, they know he will be successful. They know a man covered in birds hungers. Now when he pulls the trigger, the bird’s eyes become our father’s. Our father becomes the long shadow of the sparrow.

VIII.
If you saw my father’s stomach, you’d thought he ate several nests of sparrows. It never retracts, only swells. Some days he lives, and some days he dies. It’s hard to say if he’s ever been happy. He hungers. He wants to eat another woman. One night, coming home from a bar, a woman jumped out of his truck. He chased her through a graveyard until she embraced herself against a tombstone. Her scream woke up the dead who later watched my father from his window, the woman gone, a history repeated. They crawled back into their beds and let maggots fill their eyes.

IX.
I haven’t killed anything in years. That’s a lie: spiders, ants, sympathy. When I think of triggers, I think of silence. I think about how silent that sparrow became across my childhood. A man, I have to accept it. This whole life, I’ve hungered in the footprints of my father, my brother, us men so alike and apart. We are all scared of the same thing. When I see love’s laughter, it’s gentle pecking, I’m reminded of my brother’s blisters. I’m reminded how eager my father becomes even when he kills a doe.
IX. Interlude

It is 10:27pm. The day is swept into the poems. How strange to feel neither here nor there. Like light, our closest conception of the soul. People are falling into their dreams, others awakening to their long nightmares, some simply existing. I am burning my textbooks. I am sweeping my temple. How honest to be something you can never dream, but are. Dear mother, I stopped disappointing the sun. They call that progress. I believe you when you say this means everything is new like leaves swirling in little gusts the day I was born, nameless, my features sharing yours. The greatest day of our lives. I believe you.
In honest red city traffic tries to kill me
A big dead tree waved goodbye and became
Boundless and acoustic in an instant
While scaffolds sing hammers in the distance
Hello Nice To See You: annoying
Buzzing along like bees disappearing
I’m tired of required readings, prescriptions,
Small kitchens, closed bookstores, cell phones.
This life hasn’t been abusive, but stern.
Father was lonely unloved, mother squirmed.
There’s a part of me that will never be.
Desperately, I turned myself out into the city.
And free, never free, I wait upon a traffic light
And when it signals green, I think I might…
The Beggar Man of Ann Arbor
*After Max Jacob*

The world breaks
Us down. I pass
By the intersection
Of Liberty and Main
Everyday. I see
In my peripheral
A man holding
Newspapers.
He isn’t afraid.
He will ask you
What the fuck is
Wrong with you.

One day, I decide
Something is wrong
With me. I walk to
The intersection
Of Liberty and Main
And when I say hello
I realize the man is
A cluster of scooters
Draped with sweatshirts
Begging for change.
XI

“Let night come on bells end the day
The days go by me still I stay”
And rise again in the room that I room in
Writing these poems, cramped and awkwardly thin
533 Elizabeth Street: my sands blank again
In moonlight, discrete beauty of the chair
Ritualed to the lamp light, furniture, future
Happy to hit me like a big dead tree
I’ll toot my horn and live as variously as possible:
Love friends hone horizon unravel spiral
And though I know to love is paradox
I’ll love and love until broken clocks
Until flocks of geese let night to prey
Terror announced in pleasure still I stay
Friendship Sonnet

I stayed up late watching Nelson Sullivan:
New York, eighties, friends. I’ve never been
there and will never breathe that fresher air
when I get there—soft winds, friendly stares,
that age of history caught in grainy film
of club kids, synth pop, indelible whims.
I watched ubiquitous Nelson and Tish Gervais.
East Village. Talking to strangers outside cafes.
I thought I’d never get to have a life like that,
left it back in Northwest Arkansas chewing the fat.
Instead I met Abby, Caro, Matt, and Dave,
Robert, Olivia, Bridgette, and Hui Hui.
Many others, many days under Ann Arbor’s sky
in tiny illuminated boxes rolling our friendly eyes.
I’ll always remember those nights: soft rain,
Writing these poems, old notebooks, free jazz.
I left my window open to listen and bugs
Ritualed to the light. Though they are harmless,
Fuck them bugs! But those nights, I loved.
Never let the disaster thoughts take root.
Bugs were friends. Nouns were friends. We sat.
The elephant in the room waved goodbye.
Something strange is happening: “The room is
No longer the room” The riddle proposes.
Bananas brown, furniture turned around, future
Became old shirts and sudden guts.
Those nights were the only religion I believed in
Those nights: I remembered my name was Austin.
Self-Portrait
_ALternate Charles Wright_

Austin running the morning moon, the long
Infinity of each step taking years to trace.
Austin walking beside orange-lit river, doomed
To repeat a landscape, holding his troubled
Muscle like hot honey in the veins, strident,
A hard relief in the nightfall of air. He will
Never notice himself this way. The pleasant tones
Gently echoed forgotten, but stay close
Above his glass harp. Tonight, they pluck
Him. His mouth returns. Motions warble
Then still, regaining patience. He explains his
Silence. Young glows return to the breezes.
Studying the slashes of horizon, Austin becomes
Austin, Michigan, Arkansas, the only myth.
The Picture

The picture was taken long ago.  
So long, it felt like yesterday.  
That was when they got the band together on Hubbard Lake.  
Austin "Boston Barrel" Farrell 
climbed upon his guitar saddle 
and chugged the chords for 
Robert Paradiddle who kept it all together.  
Bouncing Bridgette Brados boomed 
the bass about our glorious faces.  
Brave Dave nodded. He knew this moment was crucial. A new sound was forming.  
Cooing Caro New counted countless colors bending off the walls, watched them thread their way into the world.  
"What wonderful windows we create" moosed Moo-Moo Matt musing the moonlit choir, harmonies of Hippy Happy Abby McFee and Big Bad Bolivia Brown.  
They all danced. They all lanced their pens to a single point where the music lived on.  
Yo ho ho and a bottle of eggnog!
XIII

Lying in bed, jumpy from coffee
And the possibility of elephants in the city,
I dream a clementine sweet, a golden
Screen where sky men and women gave me
A good life, honest like blazing fists
That strike villains into the unreleased seasons.
Five thousand towns and five thousand cities
Five thousand years and five thousand theories
And I ended up here, a bruised advent of myself
Trickling like pennies into cold tin, deaf
To the music that sustained my spiritual health.
But now, a bow lightly graces a heavenly string:
It’s time to say a prayer, it’s time to clean up,
It’s time to play and dance and sing. Giddyup!
Walking to Virginia Park in Late Fall

Each tree stands in stillness
lining the streets to Virginia Park,
tapering fingers reaching in curious
proximity. After many years, still
nothing, their roots buried whispers.
The tree’s wish is the wind’s command
to brush against another and fleck
light through every shimmer of leaves.

For this, they yellow and orange
into large piles, a gift to scampering
children to one another in splashes
of dry foliage as the wind continues
scanning the longs selves of neighborhoods.
The children forget everything. Their laughter
pleases the trees. Each leaf rustles away
from the green, empty face of the park.

There is no such thing as loneliness.
Dust sings silently through the air around me unsure where this day will carry it. There is a music for this, the quietest love, shifting around waists and branches. I open my breath to speak, to ask the dust and myself where we are going. It begins to dance: the wiry tangle of winter wood, offering a memory. My mother would say this means everything is new like the leaves swirling in little gusts beside the hospital the day I was born. She stood there smoking having not even named me yet while my face began to glow its own features. She tells me it was the greatest day of her life and I believe her. Sometimes, I stare intensely into a landscape and listen to my mother within the clacking of footsteps, the wind beating some flag fasteners into a metal pole, a broken man yelling the same two phrases in such a perfect rhythm you'd believe there is still hope for him. My mother sounds jealous when she tells me Janis Joplin lived an entire life by her death at 27. She tells me how she wanted to move to LA, but instead married my father. I wonder if Stevie Nicks or Linda Ronstadt would've been my mother had they been born in this town where women even my age have already lost their lives to drugs or the men that supply them, to love fuming in the air after the harvest season. Today, I wonder if I can change my life like a palm sweeping dust from old letters. I look at photographs, their only duty to jog a memory into a landscape, remind me it's always been a little rough. I've never known any better. The dust looks lovely today.