

NOT HERE, NOT DEAD

By

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

In this collection of poems, my concern is with patriarchy and story telling, specifically of stories passed from father to son, and the failure of hyper masculinity (cyclical violence, impotence, addiction, &c). The book is comprised of three narrative modes: the mythic or allegorical, the historical, and the confessional. The subject matter moves from the grit of contemporary bar life, to magical allegories of loves failed, to the dramatic monologues of a late 1800s hangman and his son, to bucolic scenery inhabited by an archetypal patriarch and his boys. Each type of poem flexes varying formal elements – the prose poem, sonnet variations and free verse – and the poems juxtapose the beauty of form and white space with their often ribald, coarse language. I wish to create beauty from deterioration and I imagine the project as if Whitman’s celebration were to be confronted with Eliot’s bleak Wasteland. Each shattered voice sings in chorus and creates a singular persona whose primary want is to both celebrate and damn the dead.

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This book is dedicated to the loving memory of Jimmy Gauntt, who left this party a little too early.

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The Executioner's Sons

And we all sing,

We all know what we know what we know
And

We all do what we do what we do,
And

We all do what we know what we know we do.

Then there hing, hang, hung.

My mother sends me pictures of herself. At first, I thought this odd. I know what she looks like. My father says that people do this when they think they are dying, send things out – knick knacks from the attic, baby pictures, ephemera. My father says most people think they are dying. I too have started to send pictures of myself out.

Backyard, A Photo

A rusty wheelbarrow turned
on its side in brown knee-high weeds & dead
grass. It looks like it grows here
and the rotting carcass
of the raised redwood pool sits,
collects rain water, stagnates a fertile ground
for breeding. I have never seen a mosquito
just the welts grown fat from harvest.

Oldman sits in his gray chair
locked in the solarium sun pouring through
the blinds and the thick dust motes mingle
with the dead air of cigar-smoke.
He watches his stables rust, the wood rot,
and his hands gnarl like the branches of the dying
persimmon tree. Hands too fat too sore to swat
at the feeders anymore.

Through his window he watches.
Out back we throw rotting fruits
at each other and laugh.

There was a time when my father was dying. He never sent out any pictures to anyone, though. I did live with him & I guess it wouldn't have made sense to pay for the postage.

How to Hold the Light

My father always has something in his mouth
A screwdriver a socket extension a bit of hosing
Under the fiat on a piece of board with wheels on it

He strips a bolt curses slides round
Y'se my fngrr?
Standing in standing water

I'm above the hood holding
The spot, a light bulb encased in orange plastic
Its frayed wires drape from the garage door

Snake across the cement through boxes of old playboys
And penny savers advertising get-rich-quick schemes
And work at home opportunities my mother the avon lady

No *I'm wrggling't* Can't see it *Gddmmnt'nk*
Removes the piece of plastic from his mouth
Can you see it now? Gd he says bit back in

Wait Dad wait *GDMDIT'NK*—no I've found it
Hld/thlghtrght A face in flashes covered
With oil.

When my father was dying, I used to imagine his funeral every night before I went to sleep. He started dying when I was eight & stopped dying when I was twelve. I imagined his funeral 1460 times.

On Abbot Finding the Body of His Father, The Hangman

Wake, man. Take this from my palm: pulse, a beat.
And put this blade to this pulse, and hear, man:
This murmur of heart to metal. This blade,

This metal, this song. I will kiss your mouth.
Your sanguinolent sputum, this blood spit
On my lips, man. Please, man. Light, man. I will

Take this rope from this hand, man, splice this line (to lengthen this line)
To coil this rope around this rope. Friction,
Fiction, man. Please, man. Wake, man. Wrapped in line.

Take this thing from my hand, this coarsened horse
Hair rope to stand atop this stool this drop
But you do not wake, man, I ask again.

And Abbot cups his father's jaw in hands --
Only choke this body this cage of this bone
With this I will find you this death, this stone.

Forgiveness, Arkansas 1895

A dusty fort, gallows.

The rain kicks up
the worms to surface,
rolling in on themselves, the hot
smell of horse urine, dust.

Maledon takes a thumbnail
to remove the clay from his boot's
eyelet. If only it hadn't rained.
The man next to me asks,

why them worms come up
with rains? They would
drown in their holes, shitbird.
Sometimes, things are this simple –

there are six of us. The worms do
not want to drown. This is undeniable.
A single lever. Death. *Now Maledon's
boys are in the woods, stringing*

*up Delilah's girl. When they come to
trial, he'll say, this is what boys do,
string up gourds from the garden
on the laundry line. The little woman hates*

that-- bruised fruit is only good for stews.
Grackles peck the ground and beak
the survivors.

52 Girls Sing, Texas

Your white frock
The hair pinned back

A woman is a humble servant – child
In your belly fourteen

Years old and your schoolmates
Pregnant too

And you sing
Praise of God

The white light coming
Into your body seminal

Girl do not cry humble
Child raise the frock

So you may raise the flock
To the thigh the sun

Has not seen
The fabric the color of skin

This is the way
It has always been we

Do so we must
So we may

Serve Him
My child.

Around the 1193rd time,
the third year, I stopped
crying. Writing “Do not bend:
Photographs enclosed” is
redundant.

“Fragile” is much shorter.

A Problem in Words

A white Ford Econoline Passenger van travels eastbound on 1-10 from Los Angeles to New Orleans at 85 MPH. Wait, the color is unimportant. Say, black. The driver Jim, a young man with a heavy foot, bounds up to 105 when traffic is clear, but is often bogged down, and then travels closer to 56 MPH. The van is full of penguins. However, the mean speed is 85. This is all you have to worry about, penguins and velocity. If the total mileage between LA to LA is 1899 miles, how long will it take Jim if we sit on the highway, a red gingham blanket sprawled out for picnic that spans between breakdown lane and median? Do you remember when that man killed himself during afternoon cartoons? Corn cobs wedged in the grill of the van, like kernels in your teeth, will slow airflow if Jim doesn't yield to our schoolyard games, hopping from scotch to scotch and chewed up bar napkins. Elmer's glue on our stuck together finger tips, our construction paper hearts. *Var*: Maybe he stops if I lay myself down before his front tires at Exit 31b [*Var*: *Childhood prayers* -now I lay me down to sleep], Lake Charles, and you steal his back rims, metal sparks flying from the gravel, his rotors grinding into the asphalt, the penguins squawking in the back. Do Penguins squawk? If the van can be black, let Jim be Kim, the other woman I'm in love with. The birds are gone, and you are in the passenger seat. I'm hitching. Would you stop? She won't. I wouldn't and you never had control of this vehicle. I am sharpening a knife on wolf hide to pick penguin from my teeth. The road is clear. Roll down the windows – the loss of penguins removed the cool. This is the problem of loose associations. Remove a term, and you must remove another term to balance the equation. Here, your comfort suffers. I say I love you; you say elephant shoes. If X then Y. You say I love you; I say Pert Plus Shampoo. If X then Y. Pad your brow with gingham handkerchief. Things have contracted. If not the heat then the humidity. The other woman is gone; it is only you. Jim and I are laying in the kudzu ditch along the highway, our limp bodies covered with foliage and you forgot your glasses. If I say I love you then you can't say ditto. Here, balance the equation: if you say I love you then I say didgeridoo. If Jim, Kim, and I are drowning in Lake Charles then you are the only one with floaties. Differentiate and solve for time of arrival, reduced to its simplest term.

Hint: The penguins were never important.

I teach freshman composition.
Every time the class
concludes, I am upset that I
am alone in the room, packing
my bag with papers, books.

A part of me wishes my
students would stay afterward
to bask in afterglow, to cuddle.

Regular

There's a woman at the bar who tells me
I look like her dear dead friend

who used to sit in this same place. It makes me
happy to see you, she says, to see where you sit, every time.

I tell her to stick a flashlight in my ass
and call me a lighthouse, throw

plates at me like the other man. Have them skipper
across the air like unmanned catamarans.

She must have loved him.
No shores, nothing soft, white, no sand

just bony crags for cheekbones and a mouth
full of golden whatever. I spend

too much time there, too much mercy,
not moving from that seat. Prop us up

with chicken bones, call her
baba yaga, and me, anything but

a dead man. Yes, give us that
pistol, yes the mortars, to fly around with and maybe blow

this foundation out, but only after we beg
of them to raise another draught to honor the dead.

In the glasshouse,

my gut blossoms: my stomach into my stomach
into my mouth; my esophagus, my stamen, its filament

of bile. My head the heavy head of the heliotrope
after the sun has stained pink across the eyes'

strata. There was a sunflower party yesterday.
Scrawled below the postage stamp: *Wish you were here.*

I figure out odd reasons to call my parents, late at night while in bed. Last night, I called my mother about moths.

Not here, not dead.

That summer was wheat colored,
rattler skins hanging paper thin

on the corral. Smoking hot luckys, sandpaper filled
my young lungs. Watching him make'em heave,

like the dead baby snake he'd kill
again and again because you can't kill'em once.

No—the nerves keep'em shaking, and so
if you take a shovel and split the body, bi-

furcate him, trifurcate him, his little teeth still spit
hot wet and his rattler still

dances in the tall grass.

Fortunately, there is
a time difference.

I ask them questions I
know the answers to. I ask
them questions that I
know they know the
answers to.

Hanged Lovers in The Tower

It's easy for you to say, darling –
in this place, a tower of dried nettles,
bougainvillea straps around our ankles,
we upside down in a carnival tank
with the catfish whiskers, hard to tell what
is hair, and what is membrane. It is too
easy for you to say.

A man outside, juggling, I can see
his image through the water-- fire sticks.
The glow around your head is diffused by
the chartreuse of his collar, and the grin
of the fishes gurgling prophetic
niceties to us both – So, how is the weather?
You say, It's wet.

This is not the time for posits, darling –
He will not fumble the juggle, will not
drop the match, our kindling; why these fishes
talk? It's not important. Our ankles bound?
Who knows? Roots from your fingers? Say it has
begun to grow through you, us, it, this tree.

And, no, I don't know how it is we breathe.

I do the same with students

Cubes

It is a simple construct:

a box, really. No,

a cube—four walls, a roof,
a floor. In the middle: a boy,

a garden, matchbooks and bees.

Yellowjackets. The boy is sitting

Indian-style on the matchbooks:
they make a smaller cube.

There are many. He has a bowl.

In the bowl, bees. Yellowjackets.

Surrounding, bougainvillea petals that have fallen
from the vine. The vines, tendrils

through his toes, around him. Leaves in his teeth. All over
the floor, petals. All have withered.

They are like pink tissue paper, delicate
to touch, insect wings crumbling.

He is an unwrapper. He has unwrapped
most of the bees of their jackets.

He has unwrapped the bees
of their stripes, peeling them

from their fluttering bodies like removing the glue
from an TV Guide address label, delicately.

Once removed they curl into cursive O's
and are put into the matchbook box he sits on.

You could stuff a Christmas present in a bag
with them if you are not a wrapper.

The boy is not a wrapper, either.
You are in good company.

It's like leaving your wallet
at a lover's house, a reason
to return.

Of a Woman and a Man

I

The house sits atop a small hill. The whole hill green, and the house painted to match the hue of the hill. In the house, a small woman lives. She has lived there since the house was built when the hill was pushed up by mighty moles. The whole world was flat before that.

II

She is always small and she is always a woman. Inside the house, there are many exotic things: fine china, pots forged from silver for cooking, dolls porcelain with goldenrod hair, silken dresses and gold leafed fineries. She knows not where it comes from, but knows that it has been in the house since the house was built when the hill was pushed up by mighty moles.

III

She has many ivory combs. They are of all shapes and sizes. The teeth are brittle and when she combs her hair or the goldenrod hair of the dolls the teeth break and crumble. She collects the broken teeth and with pestle grinds the teeth to a fine dust in the mortar. At dawn and dusk she opens the window of her house and blows the ivory dust from her palm across the green hill. She has been doing this since the house was built when the hill was pushed up by mighty moles.

IV

The dust covers the hillside only to be taken up again by the gusts of the west winds and the east winds and the north winds and the south winds that are always blowing. The ivory dust spins in small cyclones across the hill and around the green house. It has been doing this since the house was built, pushed up from the earth by mighty moles.

V

A small house: only a living room with a single bed and wooden frame in the middle and the many exotic things clutter the wooden floors. The house next door on the hill that was pushed up by the mighty moles is the color of ivory dust. Oh, yes, there is a house next to it, and hundreds behind and around it. Do not think the house is alone because the woman is alone combing the goldenrod hair out of the scalps of porcelain dolls and breaking the teeth off combs. The house and the woman were never alone.

VI

The ivory dust colored house was painted yellow. Inside it a small man lives. He has always been small and always a man. He paints paste on the side of his house every morning and every night to collect the dust blown by the small woman in the green house. He never liked his house and this is why he collects the small woman's dust like pollen, because he cannot change the color of his house. It has been this way since the houses were built when the hill was pushed up by mighty moles before the world was hilly, when the world was flat.

VII

During the days, when the small woman makes her dust, the small man makes his paste. Cartloads of horse hooves, bones, and rabbit hides are brought to the house. Of these, the small man makes his paste. Even then there are things left over. Before nightfall he lights a

pyre to incinerate the remains in his back lot. It burns all night. The small woman watches while grinding her teeth to dust. Embers float and dance through the night air with the ivory dust. They have never spoken since the houses were built when the hills arose from the earth.

VIII

It seems there are always more combs for dust and more hides for glue. They never know where these things come from, though the small man thinks the small woman has them delivered to his ivory colored house in carts because she likes the flecks of dust on the house in the goldenrod sun and the small woman thinks the combs appear when she sleeps because the small man has left them in her living room because he likes the sound the dust makes when it spins in the wind around their yards, the whirs and clinks.

IX

The delivery men never ask for money. They understand these things as they have houses on hills of their own, though none green or yellow or ivory dust bespeckled. They hold their hats to their chests and bow in deference to the small man and the small woman even while she sleeps. It is true, he lusts for her and she pines for him but they are trapped in their colored houses and the routines dictated: the small man and his stewing of robins that he catches with clap traps in the birch and the making of paste; the small woman chewing on the gristle and bones the small man leaves for her and the making of her ivory dust.

X

Every night the embers from the pyre dance in the air and find the small woman's wicker roof. Every night the wicker catches and the house goes up in flames while she sleeps. Every night the wind carries the flames to the ivory-colored house and it too burns. Every night the small woman and the small man burn while they sleep and every morning there are houses new built in the sun, and every morning there is a small woman and a small man to do it all again, hills and earth.

Simple Marie

*...He said, Marie,
Marie, Hold on tight. And down we went.*

-Eliot

Things are too easy here,
darling; my mouth is always
dry. There is too much wine.
There is too much rain. We never know
when a storm is coming; humid
and it'll rain. Warm
and it'll rain. Cold, rain.
Rainy looking, no rain. A cruel season:
the boys who work the tables, bringing water
and teas are too easy, darling.
Tan and too beautiful, they're hands
together, if just two in tandem,
but never too many, sliding down my body
like smoothed glass, or better
yet, worked clay on a wheel, spun
over lip, finger, and easy; the many
of one; such a fortunate machine.

Will Lavender ward away
these pestilent little things?
They put holes in my
wool. *Yes, & Rosemary!*
Moths hate Rosemary!

Did I tell you I bought a
new coat?

Twelve Legged Oldman

The biggest spider I ever seen
covered the top of a trash can
each leg twelve of em I swear perched
on the rim of the thing me

& the white dog stared a good while
when sheba the dog say

we throw a pop can slowly
we stalked up & sighted that thing creep sheba said
at the trunk of his belly sheba said stalk
but we missed & the can fell

between his long long legs
& clanked around in the hollow base
like the cam in the buick the cool
wind off that purple dead hill shook
his body like the top of the mothhawk pond
spooked the dog ran into that dead hill the wheat
colored burs covered our socks
to plant somewhere else anywhere
else oldman

woulda said we pearl harbored him
but now he don't say much he's gone
slow now like the way
of them leaves on trees got all white
& sticky from that thing in the tree's marrow

because that's what oldman said & we cried
when they cut that tree from crotch
to chin to find out what made him so
sick arms curled up tight the tree rotting

yet somehow still standing in the morning
to make teaspooned coffee & smoke nickel cigars
the tattooed navy anchor carved
in the trunk gettin all wrinkly & the ink fallin

a thousand pigmented leaves arms once like spider's quick
to climb the ship's rigging
like spider's perched
up top twelve legged oldman

we told oldman me & dog about the pop

can & spider
oldman said jesus don't have enough pop
cans to knock him from the top of no trashcan

next morning I found that can knocked over
pop can rolling on the eucalyptus grown
cement sheba eating spider

6am & that ahab sun already crawling
allover her white fur.

Two years ago, my step
brother killed himself.

Boy

Dance around her body with ribbons;
wait for Santa Maria to appear

in a shadow the shade of body.
So Momma works the dandelions down

to the nubs, makes tea, and brushes powder
across your cheeks. Pink with sometimes yellow.

Something has seized in the motor of things.
A piston stuck. It grinds down the slick walls

until the buds open up into a field
of oil. Want visions of patron saints

airbrushed on the hood of your Chevrolet?
Gold rims, a hundred spoke spectacle

alright. Finger paint circles on cement
with lye. Your bone, chalk—

bathroom graffiti, signs you were here
but now elsewhere.

That is not true. It was
two years ago they found
him -

Momma's Gift

She left that damn white dog
to eat orchids and cry
at Oldman's death window.

Sheba, short for Bathsheba, we chase
that damn white dog around the yard
with sticks of fire, squealing when she yelps.

Oldman's smarter—
he tosses her chicken bones
from his bed. He has no time
for orchid eaters and dying.

in the woods. He'd driven
out into the Pacific
Northwest & drank a
bottle of Gatorade & anti-
freeze. Time of departure
becomes less important
than time of arrival.

A plane ahead of schedule.

A Poem about Nine-Eleven

--for Erik Wennermark

The traffic is light today unusually.
Usually it cries through the windows by morning

slouching along Sunset toward Beverly Hills.
My roommate is hung over, usual. Ok,

we're both hung over: too much Jack Daniel's
and the bottle of Tylenol PM we split to kill the hang

over from the too much Jack Daniel's, usual.
And it didn't work; it never does.

My roommate's girl calls, a fat chick
from the valley with betty page bangs

and thick black glasses, prepackaged walking cliché,
and tells us to turn on the TV.

We are in loose shorts and stained t-shirts,
the collars stretched out, loose nooses.

We haven't done laundry in a while
and we've run out of toilet paper

- three weeks now –
and we smell vaguely of shit

and we used to shower after every time
we shit but... It's Orson Welles

on the TV, so we both call work
to see if we have to go in to Kinko's

and we do because we're in California
and the traffic is clear

and we don't know anyone else
anywhere else because we are from California

and it's a big state. But we decide, collectively,
not to go in today. We go to the Pic N' Save instead

and smoke in the back bed of his pickup truck

in the parking lot and put together paper gliders

we'd bought on my credit card because we'd blown
through our checks already that month,

talking about how he should leave his fat girlfriend
and I should leave mine while inserting panel A into slot B,

working the thick pieces into each other until they fit.
We speak in the language of pornography: cum-shots and Nikes.

We never mention the dead and we drive back to our apartment complex,
The Hollywood Arms, two tall buildings that share a courtyard, and smoke

Camels in the cul de sac, and float our paper gliders up
toward the roof of the buildings and watch as they turn and turn in

on themselves and finally we decide to light them up
too and then there's nothing left except soft ash

falling from the pink sky. We wipe ourselves off and walk
down the street and night has already loosed into the day,

and people are sitting on their stoops. Drowsing,
I know it was a sunny day, and I imagine

a sky full of glass, glinting. I know
the beauty of the dead.

He left his suicide note on
a floppy disk.

I wondered why not a
flash-drive?

Email?

Without Title

Destruction with Destruction to Destroy?
-Johnny Milton, Owner of Paradise's Pub; Tuscaloosa, Al

To woo a drunk, tell him
he looks like a bartender - we have all been in love
with a bartender. Poor town,
too much water, he says. He invites me
over to his house by the Wal-Mart. We listen
to Le Tigre and the sound of the creek.
It rushes behind his canines, a whiskey-river three fingers deep
and bigger than a creek, I guess. The tornado siren sounds.

Maybe this poem
is histrionic: maybe the freight that rolled on down past the railhead
behind the Wal-Mart and the creek and Steven's ramshackle dive
that shook on the rural route to the Conway trucks cackle with hot-shot loads
out of Albuquerque routed by logistic brokers in Tai Pei – the driver
on his CB, we're here, we hear:
*We're laying a strip for the jersey shore – that's a big
ten-four – maybe we didn't hear it, maybe
it didn't roll, maybe we never drowsed on bales in a warehouse
of cotton, listening to soft southern truck talk.*

Maybe there was no freight shaking.
He thinks he got an email today: The Toltecs say
there is a drought coming. The Nigerians need their money.
Something about Nostradamus. He wonders
what's on the radio; he says I enjoy
pornography too much, internet Brazilian ladyboys or the Thai,
phet thee sam, Kathoey-Saloey. The third sex.
So after talks, we fuck and issue forth,
the next day, after our people approve it, a press release:
*The respective companies will focus on
leveraging their respective strengths
across the combined entity.*

My brother & I were pall-
bearers; my other brother
locked away 500 miles
south in a half-way house
in Korea Town.

Yesterday,

Like pygmies we fight with cranes...

-Thoreau

my brother was arrested for stripping himself naked to dance in the fountain in front of the burly spanish boys putting up scaffolding as they gripped their thousand pound riveters and laughed /crazy gringo/ pointing at him and his midnight moon ass. Then, he fucked a crane. When I picked him up I asked him why he had done it- /Seemed like something to do/. Seemed like something to do I thought and saw him dancing in the fountain naked with the pigeons and the coins. I knew he wished they were prettier because they were so many and in the back of his throat he trilled his tongue, my tongue to coo back at them, the birds and the glint of sun. And he saw hanging in the sky a large crane yellow with large black letters on it and he thought /Progress/ I think because the large black letters on the large yellow crane said /Progress/. My brother who was defined to us by his 'not here's.' /Christmas?/ /Not here./ /Dinner?/ /Not here./ Not there, he walked from the fountain on to the cement leaving wet black footprints like he'd been birthed from a great boat and borne to shore by a smaller one forced to make his few first steps in the thick naked water like mud pulling on his legs, the rip-tide—but it was just madness that shattered his calves. His feet sandy with dirt, he stared back at the fountain but wanted to touch the base of the crane. He didn't think it but I would have been thinking about that passage: /commensurate with his capacity to wonder/. /Crane/ he said I say /I wish you were prettier - there are so many of you/. He hugged his soft body around the metal while holding himself hard and I think he laughed at the construction workers and their hats. The burly spanish boys cried /crazy gringo/. He came, the policeman, maybe, and took my brother away, again.

We didn't know my step-brother
well. It was just that we were
the only ones who'd carry him

The Hangman Recalls a Dream to His Son, Abbot.

Arkansas, 1875

Listen:

A room of Geissler tubes: there's a mulatto girl bent over the green
felt of the uptown bunco parlor, manned
by me and a northwand'ring Mex'can
woman; out the mullatta's body, tubes. The Mex'can
works a lever system, so my seed
runs through the elbow joints out the mule's knees to
a basin - a furnace below heats white.

None of this bothers me: the syphilis
rot around her thighs; the worms once
in her mind, I see squirm through the glass vein
works that glow, phosphorize the room. She
being purged, vindicated by God
and His love; by my hand, the Hang Man's,
courses water and lye. Cleanse.

Then, odd thing, Abbot, I ask Him why?

And what did He say, oldman?
He said, nothing, but in the dream –
the works collapse. Glass breaks, shreds our faces,
our hands, my member wriggles on the floor. I, eunuch,
ask why? *And what did He say, oldman--?*
I told you boy, *he says* nothing.
But we are all—
we are enveloped all
in white, white heat.

At the wake, his two sons,
too small to carry the
casket, kicked a soccer ball
against the church wall,
shaking the structure, the
congregation's casseroles
vibrating on the fold out
card tables.

A Lesson

When the boy was very very young the father placed a penny on the boy's tongue. Bite down the father said. What does it taste like the father asked. The boy said lithe a thennie. The father did this every day the boy came home from school. The answer was always the same: lithe a thennie. Isth tasthe lithe a thennie. One day the boy came home from school and the father was drunk asleep in the rust brown barkalounger in the living room. The boy tried to rouse the father but was only met with murmurs. The boy asked the father to put a penny in his mouth but the father only mumbled that he didn't have any. The boy took the cigarillo still smoldering from the ashtray and pushed it into the father's open hand and poured the glass of copper liquor over the burn, raising the wound like the impression of a coin grasped. Father now roused backhanded the boy. What does it taste like the father asked. With fat lips lithe a thennie. Isth tasthe lithe a thennie. The fountain of blood from the boy's nose left tiny brown coins all over the floor, each a different wish.

They couldn't scrounge up any recent photos for the In Memoriam Pamphlet they handed out at the service.

Oldman Wants a Copper Plaque

He grabs at us by our hands, *When I die*
I want one of them copper plaques they give to generals
and felled bridges put right here in the grass. He pads
the grass with his bare toe, a little worm. *Here,*
sat Oldman with his dogs and boys
in the sun after the rain.

We say,
Oldman, but you aint done nothing!

Not true, boys; There, he points
to the tall grass, I killed twelve baby rattlers
with a club, they wrapped around my legs
like the doctor's pin, and there, he points
to the bay of the shade of the poplar, I buried
Sheba in the hot, wet night, skeeters dense
like Germans in my Normandy nooks, and, he points
to the shed, there hangs the damndest,
if I do say, the damndest model
of the Red Baron's triplane built
from balsa and toothpicks; now, its rudders
clogged with spider webs, it hangs flightless
from fishing line. Oh, and, I built
that damn shed, too! Don't underestimate
your Oldman, boys.

Oldman, we say,
that sure aint much-- the shed, she's falling
apart; that plane's missing a wing, paint chipped
like your rotting teeth; the critters done pulled up
Sheba's bones, made toothpicks out her
ribs; and the snakes, they is back
angry, hissing and all.

The dogs bark and circle around us.

I guess it aint much. Don't matter none. Soon
enough, this grass will gobble all it up,
you boys, the dogs, even that plaque
that aint here yet. Then, he spit
on us. Little shits.

The sick are not
photographed.

Pacific Northwest, A Photo

The woods
grow around the tires.

The radio was on
but the battery long dead.

My stepfather's son
sits with a plastic bag

for his wife and kids
in his lap.

She is at church;
they, in the field behind, kick

around a soccer ball.
The police stop

looking & it is forestry who finally
finds it:

the rusting Jeep Grand Cherokee,
tires flat in the thistle.

The only photograph, the cover photograph, was a photo of Steve when he was nineteen, a soccer ball underneath his left cleat & Umbro shorts kissing his thighs.

Priapism

In the capacity of chamber maid
a colored girl a free girl the boy drives

a dray a bull necked fellow sensual
countenance a young lady ravished to

suffer the highest penalty bugg'ry
cutting and maiming chattel housebreaking

murder forgery uttering coining
verily abuse these are why we do

the things we must so slip knot pinion hands
pressure to the apple for we are all

Adam why draw the distinction commenced
split by the knife of rope quartered and cored

damn your eyes and member as you drop through
the trapdoor and they point only heavenward

I call my father to tell him
I have a new coat, a wool
jobby like he had in the
navy-- a pea-coat, like the
one in the photos of him
on Oahu's craggy shore.

I ask him if he still has his, a
question I know the answer
to.

*Moths, a long time ago. Too bad,
it was a good coat.*

Boy

Boy,
grab at the grass in chunkfuls, fists
full of grass, dirt, and let mealbugs drip
from the finger curls. Eat
the clots of clay, smile. Show grass
from the seams between baby teeth
and adult teeth and the gaps
of teeth absentia. Spit black.
Take off the shirt, the pants, rub
the soil on torso, on body, across
the face, and like the pretty girls. Chase
the schoolyard with your little pecker
in hand, muddied with earth. Yell,
Boy:

We are this dirt.

The Final Arit

The grass is high. High, up to our thighs and wheat colored, dried out. We're in the backyard with 9 Irons, looking for rattlers. We look for soft, cool spots, where the stalks have begun to grow in on themselves and curl over, creating dark shade.

It's hot summer and our lips are dry. The sun is high and the grass is high. So high it comes up to our waists, and we're looking for rattlesnakes in the tall wet grasses.

The sprinkler comes on, and we're wet and with irons in the tall grasses looking for snakes.

We look for the babies. The babies are the ones we want to kill. The baby snakes kill our dogs. The black dog, just last week, got killed by a snake. The babies are mean.

The babies can't control their teeth. They just let loose spray on the tall, tall wet grasses.

My brother gets bit. His club held high above his head before he drops it. The snake's quicker. The breeze bends the reed grass around us and shhhhs.

Bites his ankle, and he beats the bite off. Someone calls from inside, dinner, and he beats the bite off. It's an old snake.

We can tell because we've collected its slough before. We've got three or four of its skins hung by carpenter's nails beside the Crüe poster in the bedroom.

They are dry, long, the color of wheat now.

We kill the snake. Dance around it. Bring the clubs down on its body, hard. It begins to separate in parts, like a face you hit and hit. You can't distinguish the thing from the thing.

Each piece writhes and swells.

It all becomes wet, wet grass.

He moans. I tell him to quit, that it's an old snake. Take an Asprin. People don't die from snake bites. He hobbles inside.

We eat the spaghetti. Wheat and wet. Someday I'll know what goes into this, these things we consume when we are young. Now I just eat. My brother grins at me and winks. There is still

light outside and we have grass to slouch through. We hurry to eat and we hurry back out. We want to find the things that kill our dogs.

My brother is in a fever, slim and wet in his shorts, sheets, writhing. Father brings a cool, wet rag to his forehead. He dreams of snakes.

It's hot summer and our lips are dry. The grass is thin, wheat colored.

He is so weak that a hard breeze would bend him like the reed grass when it whispers.

The Executioner's Sons Refrain

And we all sung,

We all known what we known what we known
And

We all done what we done what we done,
And

We all done what we known what we known we done

Then there theirs, tongues pushed to teeth,
this our hiss us rattlers in the weeds.