

Ferry This Light

Robert Jacob Shapiro
Wayland, Massachusetts

B.A. English, Elon University, 2013

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

University of Virginia
May 2017

Table of Contents

North

Photograph: Massachusetts, 1994	5
Boys Sitting Outside Texaco	6
Family, Sitting Shiva	7
Running the Trap	8
Before My Mother Moves South	11
Pitcher, Game Day	12
To the Brother of the Anorexic	13
Punk (La Vie Antérieure)	14
Returning to the Animal Cemetery	15
Massachusetts Psalm	16
A Dream of Boyhood	18

South

Venison	20
On Easter	21
Photograph: North Carolina, 2005	22
Mississippi Gamblers After Dusk	24
After Reading <i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	26
Fawn	28
Driving Home From Raleigh-Durham International Airport	29
On First Attending Mass	30
Goats	31
Kudzu	32
November Pastoral	33
My Stepbrother Shows Me	34
Elegy While Walking the Property Line	35
Abandoned Shacks in North Carolina	36
North Carolina Psalm	37
Yonder	39

West

Reno	41
Major Arcana: How My Father Got to Reno	42
Northern Cardinal in Winter	48
Ram's Head with Hollyhock, 1935	49
Ulysses Erasure: Finding My Father in <i>Hades</i>	50
To Yorick, In the Garden	51
Three Scenes From Dorothea Lange's Dust Bowl Series	52
Reunion: Crossing the Bay Bridge to San Francisco	54
Shapiro Psalm	55
After Exodus	56

Marco Polo imagined answering (or Kublai Khan imagined his answer) that the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there; and he retraced the stages of his journeys, and he came to know the port from which he had set sail, and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home...

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

—Seamus Heaney, “Postscript”

North

Photograph: Massachusetts, 1994

It's still spring there. Elms fill the backwoods,
black-capped chickadees nest and feed.
Pants cuffed to his knees, my father
wades deeper into the pond, catching bullfrogs
the way he did as a boy on Long Island.
My grandfather is still alive and takes
my small hand in his at the water's lip,
the pond's skin thick and glinting,
olive and gold scum gathering at the surface.
His shirt is pressed, his arms
tan and strong, and I want to remember
what happens next, why we're turning around
to walk back up that hill, head home—
I want to piece those hours back together,
watch the afternoon break: bluebells
waving in the tall grass, my father's
waterlogged steps following us, leaving
the schools of tadpoles to scatter
beneath plumes of silt and algae.
My grandfather lifts me to his chest
and a breeze picks up from the east;
maybe a fawn bolts through brush at the field's edge,
its young body disappearing into the deep
thicket just behind us, just now beginning to bloom.

Boys Sitting Outside Texaco

You once said you were going to miss all of this
as if you had somewhere else to go. You spread

your arms to put it in perspective, to show me
how lucky we were: bundled up in the jackets

our mothers bought us, eyes following the thin
winter-light spill over glazed sheets of ice and through

those days of first freedom. I remember believing
you were right, even if you didn't believe it yourself—

I remember how the sky was small, competing
with steeples and power lines and pines

while traffic rolled in and out, sounding like a tide
against the slick street. We stayed for hours:

Pepsi on our lips, smelling gasoline, dreaming
of where we'd disappear, though neither of us would.

Bells rang for gas station attendants
or for late mass. The birds had all flown south.

And when the sun dipped behind the clouds, we folded
our arms as if the cold could break us, as if letting go

we would unwind, lose everything we thought we had.

Family, Sitting Shiva

I didn't know it would be the last Christmas
we were all together: before my father
boxed up his books, separated them from the rest,
and before the house was divided up, emptied out,
my mother claimed her old mirror with the chipping
frame and peeling paint, and covered it with a sheet
so my sister and I couldn't find a reflection—
couldn't look into the glass and see what was waiting
for us under the tree on the other side of the wall.

We grew restless sitting on the stairs.
We were told to be patient, to stay,
though nothing could settle us: not our mother
singing carols from the kitchen, nor the sound
of our father shoveling outside, finishing
what he started, scraping snow and spreading salt
beneath a sky solid and grey as the ice
he worked the blade against. He came in once
his hands were numb and his breathing hoarse
and sat between us on the steps, told us as he often did
that Christmas was a difficult holiday for a Jew.

My mother's voice sounded distant, as though
it came from a different house altogether,
the carols ricocheting through the hall, ringing.
My father didn't move, only cleared his throat
as though he had more to say about a family split
along fault lines of faith. On those stairs,
it was as if the three of us were sitting shiva
on Christmas morning, staring into that draped
sheet as though it could tell our futures or hide
them away. As if looking behind it, we would discover
a vacancy, a sleight of hand—as if removing it,
we'd uncover a world unrecognizable to our own.

Running the Trap

Football pads strapped on, the two of us trucked
into each other all through summer. We ran three miles

before breakfast, muddied our cleats in the rain,
found islands of bruises floating on our biceps.

We were on the same offensive line—
both undersized but quick—and when we ran

a trap up the gut, I'd pull away from the boy
I lined up against to block whoever bull-rushed you.

I remember how your hair fell over your eyes beneath
your helmet, how we were both still growing into our bodies—

this was before we left for college; before you were stripped
of your scholarship and sentenced without parole.

This was the summer we each broke a finger
and drove the sled with free-weights chained to our hips—

the summer we learned how to listen
for footsteps racing toward us, how to never flinch.

*

In the dream, a woman
jumps off a building, slips

through the breeze
and comes apart like a comet

entering the atmosphere.
The crowd is pointing up

and I'm running out
trying to catch her

though I know I won't.
When she hits pavement

I can't see her face,
can only wake up

That same summer, one by one,
I hauled stones, set them on top of each other.

I brushed away the ivy and leaves,
stacked the heap high, a new wall in my mother's garden.

Bleeding hearts and phlox in beds, I jammed
rocks that didn't belong together

together, packed them as tight as I could,
building with pieces I could never precisely fit.

*

By fall, we ended practice each night with Oklahomas.
The team circled around two boys who were told
not to hold back, to lower their chins and shoulders

and really plow into each other, hurt each other.
In those circles we yelled until we were lightheaded,
roses of smoke rising from our helmets where our

mouths would be. Sometimes, you and I were matched up—
hands dug in the trench, stadium lights lit, bodies aligned—
forced to collide, to hold each other for that instant

of contact before pushing back, one of us dropping.
Afterwards, we took off our helmets and our pads;
we felt the sweat run down our backs, the veins climbing

our forearms like small vines. And how small
we looked then: huddled beneath the November stars
sprayed like shrapnel, perfect in the violet sky.

Before My Mother Moves South

Another week of flurries and frozen rain.
You let the sheltie out into the stiff
winter dawn, still thick with stars and fog
while upstairs, my sister and I sleep—
the three of us living together
for the last time. Snow-chained trucks
sand the street, rattle through the dark
past the *For Sale* sign pinned
between our bulldozed banks.

Come spring, you'll be out by the road
kneeling in the flooded front yard, white statuettes
of Saint Joseph held to your chest,
your desperation another kind of fuel.
Too superstitious not to try prayer
to sell the house, you'll break open
the half-thawed earth and imagine
leaving your children in this town;
you'll push the figurines deeper inside
the tangled dirt, speaking to them, bargaining.

Mother, I want to keep you in that house
a little longer, standing by the window
to watch the sheltie pace the yard,
sink through the melting drifts.
The radiator clinks its cast iron heart;
you stir your coffee, spoon rattling rim,
and look out at the linden trees
cradling abandoned nests like palms
cupping water—you wait there for the sky
to brighten, to disappear behind the rush
of snow that falls, clings to nothing.

Pitcher, Game Day

I avoided mirrors, my mother packing
her china, the summer rain outside.

I laced my cleats and watched film,
practiced my slide step in the basement.

Blood blisters ran like wax
along my fingernails, red welts

from the ball's rough seams,
and I thought of coach telling me

to piss in my palm, toughen the skin—
to burn a safety pin clean

and dig it down beneath the flesh, drain
that awful ache. I listened for thunder,

plates rattling, a pulse in my ears.
I listened for my own voice saying,

Paint the corners. Change speeds.
Saying, *Nothing hurts* until nothing did.

To the Brother of the Anorexic

Naïve boy, can't you see your sister
is trying to disappear? It's mid-winter
and there's barely enough of her

for the cold to catch or cling to.
Snow flutters outside your windows.
The flares of birds you love are gone.

Each night, she wears layers—
shirts and scarves and sweaters—
jagged bones at the ends of sleeves.

Again the garden fills with snow
and again you both stare out.
Do you believe your neighborhood looks

like heaven, the way it gleams
so soft and white? Try to recognize
those coated hills, the easy beauty

of night. Try to find the tug
in her voice when she describes
what's left of your world.

Punk (La Vie Antérieure)

Small, kept in basements, our voices
are hard to hear over the cassette's soft whir,

guitar notes bleeding out, riot of cymbals
crashing. All summer we practiced, sweat

through our shirts until we stripped; we tore
the knees out of our Levis to look

like Johnny Ramone and spent nights
getting lit downtown. The sound of nothing

on the tape is a low drone, rain on water—
laughter unravels like smoke and is gone.

Someone's parents weren't home.
We could feel ourselves changing

into something bright and sinister and starry;
we relearned our bodies' furious constellations.

When we count off again, listen to how big
we try to make ourselves, how we never

quite fill the room. Listen to what remains of that day—
power chords feeding back, the kick drum's

beaten skin—while outside: birdsong, the heat breaking;
a mute sky turning over until it broke too.

Returning to the Animal Cemetery

I sweep the stones of brush to read the names,
the prayers, to imagine these hounds
chasing rabbits along the muddy bank

and through some ancient dusk. From here
the sky surrounds everything—
wedged between the bare branches of maples

whose shadows fall into the dark marsh, plunge.
Some nights, I dream I still live back here—
packs of goldenrod trampled in fields,

chickadees chirping, my sweat the sweat of a boy
still learning how to follow orders, settle down.
I'll dream myself back to this spot

surrounded by dead wet leaves left over
from fall, turning to dirt, entering the open earth
where they fell and still fall. Wind rakes the river,

endless in its bed, leads me down this path
towards the flurry-hidden furrows and slip-
covered cold, the foothills still fixed behind me.

Again I wait for snow to sift down and brighten
the graves; I watch the slough carry all it can,
hauling even the sky downstream.

Massachusetts Psalm

Praise your sleet, your hail, your venous branches
sleeved in ice; your snow suffusing

the Charles' broad body, blurring farms,
soft and blue through freezing nights.

Your Kennedys, Vanzettis, Yastrzemskis
are my ghosts, too,

marathon-bombed and massacred. Tell me
how stones packed in snowballs sound

colliding with bone. Tell me how your soldiers stood
on that footbridge, held their fire

in the whites of your enemies' eyes.
Filled with this solemn light

I am your rimed floor, your glass-top lakes—
your coyotes and dark aqueducts.

Bless your liquor store cashier who tells me
to fuck myself—grinning, all gums

for teeth—handing me my receipt, my change.
Bless your strip of trembling waters:

minnow-filled, half-thawed, numbing even in August.
Behind my eyelids, your hills—

beyond your cobblestones and synagogues,
your mayflowers blooming, a mercy.

Your city busses and brawls, Boston,
harbor hushed, trying to let us sleep.

Praise Salem, taste of blood, smell of iron,
wind wading through your low, grey skies

like grief: each gust rushing the tops of trees
as clouds roll off the bay like a fleet.

Praise morning plows, the spray of salt,
the accent I lost years ago.

When I am old, my friends will die inside of you;
when I am old, your sparrows will wake and sing.

You lie behind me, yet you follow me still.
You cradle the coast, you end in a field.

A Dream of Boyhood

Waxwings lift out of briars—
stars fall back into some bright
not yet barren heaven. All night, I try
to retrace my steps, remember
where this wooded clearing opened;
I try to stay down in the world
of daylilies, my sister's hands
pulling me back from poison oak
and toward some forgotten home.
Over and over, this small body,
this dream I can't stop dreaming:
house with a garden, soft footsteps in the hall—
a light in each window, lit.

South

Venison

for my stepfather

You tell me to hold the dog by his collar
so he gets a good look, nose-to-nose with the upturned deer.
You nick the ankles with your knife and fold
the doe's fur back, peel away the skin
in a single strip to reveal meat and bone,
dark corona spreading from the clot.
You could do this with your eyes closed,
I think, as you make the next cut,
call it a gut shot, tell me it'll be messy.
Steam rises through the night from the slice
of the pelt as moonlight falls into the barn
beside us; I can smell the innards, the musk and iron
still fresh, still warm. Blood rushes
into the tin you've set down at your feet
while light punches through the holes left by the shot—
one in, two out—big ribs broken, your bullet fragmented
into buckshot scrap. Sharp knife, hacksaw,
cold hands I'm learning to admire,
you hose down what's left and let the dog lap
at the rosy water running back into the night
where the dirt, too frozen to turn, will not breathe.
You remove the shoulders, the cutlets, the backstraps—
the blood beneath your nails so red it's black.
I make myself stay until you say you're through,
until I've memorized how the veins fan out, the heart-
shaped hips splay—how your hands move gently
inside that deep chest to strip the deer clean,
to show me what's tough and what's tender.

On Easter

By now, the days are getting long—
damp white skies rowing over the hills,
over the dim sun and starlings
that circle neighbors' chimneys, rise.
My stepfather piles the limbs and logs
in the front yard, timber torn
down during last month's ice storm
that forced families to sleep
in cars along the interstate, huddle together
for warmth. I come home to fire,
to smoke lifting up in dark spirals.
My stepfather paces the lawn—
red gas jug snug against his hip—
before tossing streams of diesel fuel
on the flames, the billow leaping up
above his head, spitting cinders, turning black.
He keeps the fire alive through nights
so quiet there is only the rustling
of wet wood being scorched.
The dogs hide all day, return late
to be fed or find a place to sleep
as thick fog lies across the lawn,
conceals the silt of early spring,
the eddy climbing into the clouds.
For three days the fire burns until
nothing is left but roots and ash
and rust-colored clay. Tonight
my stepfather and I open the windows,
let the house fill with smoke and soot.
We wait for rain, the pond to overflow.
We look out into the darkness,
into the charred plot of earth still glowing
hot with embers, half-expecting
life to grow back before us, renew.

beneath a sky
pale as linen,
the cicadas
surging,
fog gathering
around his boots.
As she turns
her head to speak,
I want her
to imagine
she's alone again
—just for a minute—
just long enough
to consider
where this man
came from
and how suddenly
the heart can fill;
how sometimes
the day turns
so bright
it almost hurts
to look.

Mississippi Gamblers After Dusk

Gathered on the lawn between the chicken coop
and the pond, still high from spring's thaw,
we watch my stepbrother

kneel on the jetty beside the thicket of cattails,
loading tube-launched fireworks.
Across the water, rows of barbed wire

border the pastures, fence us in
as gunpowder cracks like a sheet
of ice, sends a Mississippi Gambler

streaking across the swath of summer sky
until it bursts into light, familiar constellations
that drift down, disappear.

We grip cans of beer and call to each other
through the dark; all evening, we've taken
turns with my stepbrother and his wife,

a baby due, touching her stomach, restless
as the moon we're firing rockets toward.
From the yard, the night looks torn open:

Roman Candles, Raging Bulls, Neutron Splitters,
each one reinventing light and sound
as in our dreams where the world begins

over and over. Bats roam the sky between bursts,
scatter beyond the basins and farmlands
unfolding below. Tomorrow will be quiet.

The couple will leave, drive back
towards the delta and the Yazoo
to settle into their lives as we all

must settle. They'll learn to hold the world
together or pull it apart as our parents did.
But tonight, my stepbrother's laugh

fills the thick July air as it must have
when he was a boy— watching flares
drift out over the water, illuminating

faces and fields before falling
back down towards the pond
and into their own reflections

blooming across the shallows like rings cast
from a stone, growing bigger
even as they're gone.

After Reading *The Sound and the Fury*

*He said time is dead as long as it's being
clicked off by little wheels; only when
the clock stops does time come to life.*

i.

My stepbrother pinned a shotgun shell
to his breast pocket when he got married,

wore aviators even though dark pastures
of clouds brushed above the delta

and turned, suddenly, to rain.

He planted his footprints deep
in the black dirt to see
how much the land could hold,

how quickly it committed us to memory.

And because Mississippi's future
is Mississippi's past, he named his son

for himself—the same way his father named him.

ii.

Framed and gawking, the dead
decorate my family's walls—

local ghosts looking out, captured
in crops of cotton, the white fields ripe
as if blooming with snow.

Always, a bloodshot sky just out of reach—

always, they refuse to smile
for the camera aimed like a pistol
at their hearts, the aperture

drawing in their sweat-drenched collars

and rolled-up sleeves—
 their work-boots muddied
 in the same soil tilled

year after year.

iii.

When I visited Faulkner's grave,
 grazed my hand on the granite stone

lined with empty flasks and whiskey fifths,

I could have walked the mile down to the house
 where my stepbrother was raised.

And I've read of doom, the lord
 marching his angels out of Mississippi.
 I've read of generations held

in the rough arms of countryside—
 the bluffs and fields and sky.

iv.

He sends photographs to Carolina,
 prints taken with his father's old Kodak.
 I imagine my stepbrother working

 the darkroom until dawn: lightheaded

from fixer fumes, his fingers
 uncoiling loose spools of film.
 Tin sink. Safelight. His son

 bursting into focus

from the shallow darkness—
 already looking back.

Fawn

for my mother

One of the dogs discovered the small,
stiff frame and dragged it through the yard
the way you haul hay every spring.
It's July and the sun is fierce: burnt shards

of light cut through the canopy
of firs while the dog guards the body, proud
of his find. You're still in heels when I show
you—when I say I bet it drowned

in the creek behind our fields, the one
so quick to rise and flood in the wet
months. You just ask for a trash bag, then
for two when the body won't give, won't fit

in the glossy plastic stretching over
the spotted spine, the matted fur;
over eyes, dull as diesel fuel—
as pools of light trapped in pools of tar.

Driving Home From Raleigh-Durham International Airport

Alex tells me Manhattan isn't all it's cracked up to be
But Jesus, he says looking out the windshield
at the roadside trenches, *North Carolina still feels dull*.
I say, *It feels more like rust*, as a junkyard rolls by.
And it's true the sky here is raw and stifling
and the land warm and scarred, but maybe
that's because it's June and the air is starting to throb
in lungs, collapse the weeks under its weight.

Alex gestures his hand like he's wafting perfume,
trying to find the right words for how walking down
Broadway at night makes him feel. I could tell him
how the last time I was in New York I walked
across the Brooklyn Bridge, watched the traffic
of tourists taking pictures of the sun
sinking beneath the East River. How I felt
warm looking down at the rippling light
trapped in the dirty water, the wind cutting
into me, the metal body keeping me suspended.
How standing there on the edge, I felt the world
would move on without me—leave me
to hide my hands in my pockets fishing
for that warmth too big to fit in any jacket,
too heavy to carry home. Instead
I say, *We're almost there*, as the day shifts, settles—
the steering wheel goes back to rattling with the road
and the engine returns to its one-note chorus.
The horizon, once more, splits the world in two.

On First Attending Mass

My stepfather and I sit in a pew, knees knocking,
needing room to stretch as sunlight falls though
stained glass, combs across the hall.

It's almost summer. I don't know why we came—
not forgiveness or salvation—to hear
the priest's voice, long-drawn and full

of smoke; to sit in silence, feel the breaths
in our chests grow still.
A leather bible on my lap, a hymn

I mouth but cannot sing—prayers rising up
to the ceiling beams above. When my stepfather leaves
to take communion, I stay in the pew—

dig dirt from my nails, watch him wait
in line, the slim aisle choking-up like stalks
of reeds in a dry brook's bed. Alone, I wonder

how many times he's received Eucharist
with his own sons
and if I'm expected to follow. No one

in our family goes to church anymore—
always soil to spread, fences to move into place;
always a spade sunk, an anchored body lifting.

Most nights, it's enough to keep a person righteous:
the dark settling at the edge of town, locust's dirge,
a mother calling her boys home, their names

lifting off the street. But when he returns,
I try to understand: head bowed, eyes sealed shut,
fingers laced like a braided river whose current

runs one way, catches what light it can.

Goats

The newborn kid cries for my mother,
comes running when he hears her voice

carry across the brightening fields.
He slips through the barbed wire—

tufts of soft fur torn—and bounds
toward us, his small body still unsteady.

The day opens: rainwater pools
in the pasture, holds a corner of lit sky;

the sheepdog growls like he might spring.
My mother catches the bleating kid

and brings him back to flock and field,
asking again, *Where did you leave your mother?*

as she lifts him up to her chest
so he'll trust her touch, her breath,

her strong hands that delivered him—
hands he recognizes, smelling of mulch

and dried sweat, that now tend
the damp patches of ripped skin

along his back and belly; that will reach
for an iron crook when he does not come.

Kudzu

Are you never satisfied, dear vine?
You crawl through ditches
and into branches thick with flowers,
hold birds to sky and my mother
to the land drinking country water
and putting catfish lures on lines.
Since returning south, she looks
younger and I wonder if it's because you
remind her of being a girl, of summers spent
smoking cigarettes and cheerleading,
casting reels off a dock with her father
—dead some twenty years now—
who'd drink Falstaff and tell jokes,
wrap his bony fingers around hers
when something nibbled, got away.
Sometimes, I think she must feel your leaves
when she dreams him back to life;
I think she must recognize how you
grow around bodies, won't let go.
Afternoons, she rows into the bright pond
to net her catch—oar lapping, small wake
on water, arms pulling her deeper—
while beneath your green, you hold the hills,
your purple blooms still climbing, rising out of reach.

November Pastoral

And even though I don't care about horses, I say, *I like how they stand side-by-side*, because it's true. I like how they graze those big pastures, swatting flies out of each other's eyes with their knotted tails, flanks quivering and covered in frost. Each time we drive past, my sister slows to watch them, and I wonder if she remembers those winter nights, driving from one parent's house to the other—radio low, snow falling around us—our need for each other that quiet, that easy. Here, the grasses are dying, but they still flicker when the wind gets going and sunlight sifts down through the trees. The horses never turn around to leave, to gallop into that wingspan of bramble at the bottom of the hill; no, they just stand there—kicking up sod and shaking their muzzles—waiting for someone else to appear, call their names, usher them in and away from the road.

My Stepbrother Shows Me

how to grip the knife,
the neck, when cleaning fish—
how to take an angle
with the cut, to carve
along the gills and through
the gullet and through
the even stronger spine.
He shows me how to empty
out the hollow and how
to scale the sucker clean—
expose the silver skin,
metallic in the afternoon's
sunken glow. Soon, our hands

are stained red, our prints
bold topographic maps
lifting off our fingers.
The color lingers on our skin
as the pond lies stock-still
and smoky behind us,
the thick, black water
cradling the lowlands
like a murky mirror.
The sky is sound and the sun
filters through the fields,
its crooked light falling
soft on our steady hands
while we pass the blade
back and forth, leading
each other through death
the way brothers are meant to—
sharing blood the only way we can.

Elegy While Walking the Property Line
for C.

Late light kneels over
the rigid winter floor,

bones cast in brush,
antlers strung up from posts—

proof that decay
is incandescent,

that, some days,
every remainder of life

is lit. When you died
I understood death

had not taken you apart,
but rather ignited you—

left the rest of us
to wait out this worn light

while the sky draws tighter
and winter's runoff sings

across those far hills
our voices cannot reach.

Abandoned Shacks in North Carolina

Tucked beside the freeway, behind wings
of barbed wire and stockless fields,

they shoulder into dusk and fade.

Spigots frozen. Stone-hard hills.
Sometimes, I want to disappear

that simply—growing into dim pastures

with deer ticks and snakeskins,
wing beats above.

I want to be filled with wind

and winter's slow thaw, a hibernating light.
Collapsing inside themselves

they're almost beautiful, glittering

like forgotten temples out in the snow,
cross-beams broken, doors unlatched.

Like a bright hoof, the moon

stamps down through their missing slats
and at last the night surrounds.

Every star is sown; every field is blue.

North Carolina Psalm

Unhinge my jaw so I might sound
like I was raised here:

among the copperheads
and tobacco fields, the families of deer

bathed in drifts of red dust rearing,
in warm spits of rain.

You keep the summers long, the sweat on my neck.
Let the sun stray behind your steep bluffs

as Orion's belt fastens the night sky together;
let your tireless arms carry

the Lumbee who was shot in the head
and found bobbing downstream.

To free the fishhook from the dog's jowl
is to find your blood dried on the barb.

Show me your teeth, show me
where your billy clubs left bruises

and your unmarked graves open,
where my mother was born and baptized.

Tell me: am I still a Yankee in your eyes?
I have caught your catfish and dug up your clay;

I have learned your history, reconstruction.
My mother's blood in my blood,

and what does that make me?
Your magnolias refuse to bend for light

and your tar-heeled troops were struck dead for the south—
you plant *sir* and *ma'am* in mouths

and wait for hurricanes to strip you down
in surrender: dark waves tumbling in,

gutting homes, burying us beneath the tide-line.
Do you wake up early, do you guide the plow?

Are your hands like mine: callused
from hauling stones and chopping oak,

from labor that works lines across
the landscape of your boundless palms?

Tell me how you tear steam up off my shoulders,
how you stuck that call in the cardinal's throat.

Yonder

When the last rifle-shots of the season ring out
across the river—swollen thick with rain and mud,
moving forward as everything must—
snow glistens along the bank's dark crown
and you understand nothing changes in these parts:
not the smell of wood smoke or January's damp air,
the top-heavy sky working its way overhead.
It's a new year, and by now you know better
than to make resolutions, though you wish
you could move like those gold-rimmed clouds, your body
half-a-heaven, drifting someplace easier.
It's almost enough to linger on the porch this evening
imagining the wind up there, the rafters of stars
hidden above. You would wheel over
earth's edge, wade across the blushed horizon.
You would ferry this light from one place to the next.

West

Reno

When the day retreats beneath the cool
sheet of night, unraveling against chained
mutts' cries and casino lights, we're sitting—
my father and I—on the restaurant patio,
cold coffee cups resting between us.
The shadows of mountain peaks
sink into the city, weigh down
the deserted plains and Virginia Street—
that drag stocked with pawn shops
and dusty men talking to themselves,
toothpicks snug between their teeth,
nowhere to be. I'm watching my father
watching the city, and I'm worried
living here is killing him. His eyes
look washed out, older maybe,
since we last sat across from each other.
We keep talking baseball or work
while he figures the bill the pretty,
tattooed waitress dropped off, the distant
moon filling up the barren sky behind him,
melting in a vast neon haze. Still,
he says he's fine, good even,
though I have my doubts. Somewhere
there are sirens. There is a man
being handcuffed across the street, chest
stretched across a cop cruiser
and there are kids skateboarding
on the sidewalk, their throats splitting
with laughter at the world they push
their feet against. There is snow
on the mountain tops and a big sky
stretching, wrapping around the city
like the tattoo around the waitress' bicep—
that band of ink scarring her like stitches,
like maybe she's been torn apart and sewn
back up, her body being held together,
but just barely.

Major Arcana: How My Father Got to Reno

The Fool

Father of second and third chances,
you are no homemaker.

The basement is damp with mildew
and mosquitoes thrash

through the open door, bite our legs
when we try to sleep.

The yard is overgrown and wasps
saw rings around their paper hives.

Winter mornings, you take out the trash
and boil a pot of water—

leave our house to hack
through strips of thin black ice.

My mother is not coming back
for you—by now it's clear she's gone.

But the sun is still rising over us.
You watch your step out the door.

The High Priestess

You stay downstairs when we play chess:
folding laundry, calling out your moves,

never once looking at your position.
I sit at your rosewood board

in the seat where, nightly, you sit
to take your meals or watch TV.

Summer chokes your potted plants;
daylight clings like sweat.

When you win, you show me
how I could have forced your hand—

how, like Bobby Fischer as a boy,
I could have sacrificed my queen

if only I knew what to give up,
what was standing in my way.

The Empress

Eight years younger than you,
bad divorce and no kids.

She smiles when she speaks
and stocks our kitchen with fruit—

strawberries, grapes, pomegranates—
all bright and sweet.

She's from the opposite coast
and sleeps at our house each night.

When you look at her
your eyes are blind as stars.

The Emperor

You do not punish me
when I start fires in the yard,

when I get high across the street
in the cemetery-dark.

You thaw chicken and shuck corn,
wrap a thick forearm

around her neck and shoulders,
tough muscles braided like rope.

I watch west-coast baseball, scrub
grass-stains and mud off my Nikes.

I watch you: pulling her into your hip
like she'll grow around you—

shoots lifting through black soil,
corkscrewing, rooting down.

The Hierophant

Between heaven and earth, snowfall.
We wake in the dark

and dress in flannel, lamb's wool.
Winter feels deepest now

though soon the cold will break—
soon it will be warm enough

for rain to shower the harbor
and soften the earth, for gutters

to overflow, spill back into the street.
The days will grow long enough

for me to stay outside
with the neighborhood boys—

biking to the corner store
to buy soda and smoke cigarillos—

long enough for me to leave the house
the two of you fill.

The Lovers

Early summer. The champagne
is bright and dry. No honeymoon,

but you move into a Cambridge loft
with steep steps and ivy

draped off the brick face;
tall windows that frame the Charles'

trick of light, bank and run.
White sails blow past. The city buries

its stars each night. Evenings, I memorize
which streets reach the river's mouth

as we walk there together—the three of us—
you leading as if you can't turn back.

The Wheel of Fortune

The fevered southern sky
bleeds into distant farmlands.

Goldenrod lines the interstate on either side.
It's almost autumn when I move down

to North Carolina, drive myself
past Chapel Hill's shops and spires.

Father, I know this is where you married
my mother, built that brief life;

this is where you imagined
a home you would never leave.

The Hanged Man

What does it matter that you don't cry
when you tell me about the split?

You pick me up from Logan
and we walk together into the city

talking the nuts and bolts:
she changed her mind

in those few months, wants to be a mother—
not mine, but somebody's.

You still live together, sleep
in the same bed. Your hair is strewn

with more grey than I remember
and you lock your hands behind your back.

All week I listen, mistake the loft settling
for footsteps climbing up to us.

Death

It's not as bad as it sounds—
break up the house and leave

quietly so no one sees you go.
Brief goodbye and you're gone.

Don't look away from the night
closing in above you;

don't forget to lock the door.
The earth remembers how to grieve:

frost tints your windows, rhododendrons
curl around the cold.

The river water freezes on top
but still keeps pushing out to sea.

The Tower

Dry heat. Neon wash. You, a stranger,
driving three-thousand miles west.

You, starting from scratch. Shot in the dark.
All of a sudden, gone.

The Moon

See the coyote limp across the road
towards you, how his eyes flash

in the dark and his dirty fur catches
what light lingers in the desert.

He's hungry. He's not afraid.
You've already found scorpions

in the new house, heard snakes
rattle out in your yard.

Your neighbors say they're happy here.
A fat moon pulls back on the plains.

The World

The mountains nearly brush the sky
set deep and blue and bright.

You tell me about the woman
who cuts your hair, the track marks

dotting her arms, how lucky
she feels to be alive,

the *snip snip snip*
curling around your ears.

Telephone wires race back east
but you're taking your time.

You're almost lucky yourself
you say, with the western winds

and the long spring, the high sun
that falls everywhere.

Each night, you slice California tomatoes
careful not to cut your thumb—

you crack the windows open an inch
then bolt the door shut.

Northern Cardinal in Winter

My father is not the feather
nor the red crest, but the song
sung from the canopies—
the slender trill
needling through frost
and slanted light, weaving
through the hills outside
my bedroom window.

And you might think
by this I mean my father
is beautiful or that he feels
far away, a small echo
of himself. Truth is
I find him each morning
like that strutted voice lifting
over fresh snow, some fragment
I've known my whole life.

Ram's Head with Hollyhock, 1935

to DS, after Georgia O'Keefe

Because the oily sky spills over dark knots
of hills, I'm picturing you in Reno again,

thinking you must be that ram above
the reddened earth, almost looking back at me,

lingering like some starved omen
beside the hollyhock's yellow heart.

The horns are dulled: crimson strokes
over western skies, torn bone. I'm trying

to find the white scar above your brow,
those deep set eyes and handsome cheeks—

I'm trying to understand what your being there
has to do with a lit skull, a flower crushed

against clouds. Father, the desert fills with nothing
but weather. Here, it looks like rain:

junipers thicken and the landscape runs.
You move closer, persistent, unmade.

Ulysses Erasure: Finding My Father in Hades

Hard to imagine

burying him

a fellow

lonesome all his life

First thing strikes anybody

O, poor Rob

inventing a
holy land

a father

I see him

nice soft tinge of purple

not married

eased down

suddenly somebody else
far away

someone else

I wanted

To Yorick, In the Garden

Shear back
the thorns, the thistles, the body

of rosebushes growing along the fence line.
Summer will not give

and the dog is digging-up
rows of beds,

drought-driven and bare.

We have it backwards: tragedy
plus time is just as tragic still

and presses down
with the weight of heaven.

Blades glow like wings
cut from iron;

stillness grows in trees, in blood.

Each afternoon is a grave
so we do what we can to fill them:

hoe back the brush and rake the furrows clean,
watch the dog bury what's his—

dead bird or antler tip—

and see how easily the earth takes
what it's given.

Three Scenes From Dorothea Lange's Dust Bowl Series

1. *On the Road*

The man's eyes are hidden
beneath his hat's black rim.
Out in front, he pulls a wagon
packed with blankets and clothes,
small child in the bed. His shirt,
dull as everything they pass:
the trees, the weeds, the road
underfoot. His family walks
behind him, wife and daughters
shoeless; a boy in back trying
to keep up. So far from home,
who can say if they're getting close
to wherever they're going.
The camera alone points back.

2. *Migrant Cotton Picker*

Look again: the man stares
down through the lens
covering his mouth
with the back of his hand.
Here's his open palm,
jagged lines that run deeper
and wishbone at the wrist.
Here are the rills of veins,
white sack flung over
his shoulder. This close,
you can see his toughened skin
and dirt-coated fingers—
the shadows his eyelashes cast
across each cheek.

3. *Migrant Children*

Why the harsh light collapsing
against them, the stretch of fields
they cannot leave? So young,
brother and sister turned away
from each other, their shadows tossed
atop muscled dirt. She places
a hand on her hip, uses the other
to keep the sun out of her eyes.
The boy's blonde curls almost blend
into clouds, and from here, the fields
could be a coast, bright gulf
glinting in morning light.
I want to ask them to turn
around and face each other,
name the place they're from;
I want to ask them why they're alone,
which direction they're moving.

Reunion: Crossing the Bay Bridge to San Francisco
for my father

Crashing light and foam: we cut
across the golden coast. Too cold
to slip into the surf, gulls swarm,
sweep clean the water's top
as streetcars click along their tracks
and run uphill away from us.
Let's drive down the city's throat.
Let's watch panhandlers undress
their corners and croon like doves.
How long since we last met, since you
said you wouldn't come back home?
The sun here skips, bright stone
pitched over ocean light; the tide
steadies itself against the bay
and, looking down, I remember the pull
of you, belonging to some spent past—
lilac in the garden, sweet evening air,
summer's edge worn down—your voice
still there, calling me back through fog.

Shapiro Psalm

Forget the pogroms, your sons and daughters,
why your hands are tired and raw.

Set the table and pull back the blinds—
search me for your bloodline.

Remember your Hebrew root,
old punch-line on your lips.

Remember my grandfather, how he changed you
to *Shaw* for a year thinking it safer to lose

the Jewish name that lost him
every relative back in Europe.

No mirrors covered, no doors unlocked.
No way to lay you to rest.

After all you've endured
tell me how you still believe in God—

how you kept warm during German winters
marching barefoot through snow,

your short days burning down to nothing.
I find you on Manhattan streets, in stitches

of wind raising crests across the Hudson—
I carry you forever and into my grave.

Already carved into my grandfather's headstone,
are you eager for eternity to arrive?

Star of David, small stones set, frostbitten grass
where kaddish was performed—

Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam
ul'al'mei al'maya— your voice

growing deeper, sounding out the words,
learning once more how to speak.

After Exodus

Wingless. Marrow-spent. The sun
a white flame pinned to sky. Imagine how it felt
to die there:

paradise so close
you could cover it with your thumb
and make it vanish.

Before the angel
claimed his corpse,
did gulls flock there,
float over his rough body?

Did a breeze bury his tracks
in those dunes, unmake each step he took?

Maybe he saw the river
laying down before him
like a mirage cradled between banks.
Maybe he looked away

from the city, bright jewel
planted at the Jordan's lip—
sun-bleached, walled-off—
impossible to enter.

It must have hurt
to see such light from the mountain's top—
to smell salt

and overhear the voices
of fishermen, bells ringing
inside the desert's tiny heart.

Dying there must have felt
familiar: bull rushes
rippling, heaven outstretched—
a sound like a sea, parting.