Folkspeak

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Folkspeak

by

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B.A., University of Colorado, 2009

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
Department of English
2012
This thesis entitled: 
*Folkspeak*
written by Marc William Laughton
has been approved for the Department of English

Professor Ruth Ellen Kocher

Professor Eric White

Date:

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
The progression of poetry within Folkspeak is first and foremost a deliberate attempt at defining the construction of self in the midst of the invading influence of place, family, loss, and—even more so—intimacy. It is the aim of the text to create dialogue between traditional narrative poetics and the presence of the disruptive or experimental. Concerns of form, voice, and image coalesce to create a work that follows from the legacy of poets Frank Stanford and C.D. Wright, ultimately presenting itself as a text rooted in hybrid lyricism and wholly engaged with the complications arising from the mythos of Southern identity. Furthermore, as the collection traverses the experience of a malleable, expressive / changing and developing among the harsh rural landscape, the framing device of relationship (specifically, love lost and love found) provides the reader with the necessary affirmation that through tragedy there remains the desire, at least, to want intimate connection outside of self.
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The Exposition of Pleasure

The reddened cheek
wanes into a month-long bruise
on the side of a pear.

If I’d only shut my mouth
she’d

*blush*

think of the Chealsea Hotel
or lights cascading the terrace

and pivot round the serrated,
fractal sine wave of my hand—
we spiral, and crumple into a

*blush*

slow-waltz.
Consider a plural of mosquito hawks poisoned,
this evening, which is poplar anatomy and common
wheat laced round the approximate dimensions
of a nest you’ve built in my absence,
feral colony of stitched plaid finches
remake the low sound I thread

[into my mouth]

occupied, as is often the case, light
replacing marrow, hollow bone for bone
until only hymn and smoke,
a hardened suture of gospel dissolving
in the Muscogee river at dusk. When at last,
you are not the sewn thing

[of my mouth]
Infidelity

Say that all lovers
are equine and dying—
the sternoccephalic and brachiocephalicus
splayed by the dividing fracture of a bullet—
and you

are always gathering light
in cupped hands to patch the wound,
you of consolation and constellated
grief,

say that I’ve only just begun to mistake
the crush of lips against scapula
for affection.
La Grange, Texas is the Worst Place to Admit an Affair

I have not yet learned to disregard
the spiked scent of lavender
by my childhood home. Nor have I

ceased to shake my father from his sleep,
which is a sort of love
for inanimate things and of piano wire

rearranged—flocked metal, weighted
sequence of dissonance, oh, bird unravel—
in my steady hands. Imitations coalesce

in the absence of touch, as if touch alone
were the bruise of larkspur and rumor
nascent beneath your right breast

that the tongue learns of only in deviation
from the rote trajectory of your body
geometric, calculable, devastating thing that it is.
Foxyarn Elegiacs
- after C.D. Wright

Late-May dreams an Antebellum window sill,
   its lilac clasp,

nothing of an affair
   for shoals before dawn,

inland love braiding a hollyhock appliqué
   around cypress, or
   bent iron tracks

wrought from dry ground—

~
dreams of leaving my father at the dinner table,

his mouth and its word,

rain, a well-lit room in which to die,

a song sung in the Hill Country is allegory,
   cleaved body of walleye
   cast in tall grass, kudzu vine and chestnut,

stillborn siblings adored

as flintlock ballasts from breath, wax and smoke,
when the Maybelline factory fissured
outside of Little Rock,

thirteen tons of mascara into the wet sky
fell erratic on the wide cut of cotton field
suspended above the horizon,
frost-crust of flattened metal,

Albucasis’ love for jasmine, lime, and fluorescence
in the season of turbulence and Catawba rot—

~
dreaming the tin-penny weight on the chest,
indentation of a jar on fire, burning

ash into leaf at the base,
ash again wakes the body to the oak,

like the body grieves for itself:

    ash  nerve  sidereal deaths,

a cartographer, dismayed,
thinks of death as a woman’s backside
drawn miniature, names of cities and their light

obscured by a single breath, at first,
then a pattern
deep and melodic, flesh and lung
sink miles of land into an arch,
arc back like a fish,
    the body and the tiny dots of seven towns halved,

as happens when a woman comes,

cannot bear the sight of a lover’s face and turns

to a certain, small light,
    flanked and flickering,

water passing over lips
bent to reach the whorl and whir in an eddy,

sixteen hours down from the mouth of Big Sugar Creek,

~
it’s said that boys drown dreaming

foxes whole again,
pearled maggot out the gash,

again into fur and eye,

steady apparition, tongued totem
to summon when lost, to identify

swift belly of a stone turned in hands,
which are not your own,

a beetle scars a florid bone into house,

yet again, a house to want, to live in,

~
not the abundant rain,
    nor the month of drinking alone,

in which I come to remember not ever having loved you here.
Dallas to Houston, Flight 7221

I.
Suppose we’ve been waiting
for the reflexive lens’ shudder

and you leave

open flame  Iranian sea salt  detuned gut string

hung slack on the violin,
my brother standing on the lowest chair—
    fills the body with turpentine and ash

Suppose I’ve done nothing substantial
razing the wrong field
    that is, to set fire, watch copperfleck light
    off the wing of a killdeer scatter

II.
A dream consists of reenactment :: animation,
a stumbling out of water toward our house

III.
We awake to find your grandfather paces round and round,
grosser orbit of the earth pinning his ghost
at the pane, he gives us land deeds, silver, pocket-watch, and a blessing
    as we are married, desirous of touch, fall asleep late
    and, by morning, forget we have held one another

Forgetting occurs when one lies with a lover long enough to remember they were lonely

IV.
*Before I loved you, I loved, nonetheless—*
    fireflies’ glow in unison for a week in June, in Elkmont, Tennessee
    cattle rise in reeds after the soy fields flooded the Suwanne basin
    even through vinyl distortion, Sam Cooke’s tenor pitches far in a Baptist revival.
On New Year's Eve 1975, 15-year-old Raul Meza walks into a convenience store five miles from his house—

Austin, Texas on fire before dawn, a shelled sagebrush and deer rifle: in Austin, houses are built dead; until, of cement heat shot dead

in the back of a dumpster in southeast Austin, Kendra Page withers evenly for a week of purpled vetch, foxglove alive in the small crescent bruise—

seven times for four years, Meza denies none of this—

under Texas law, he must be led into a clearing to swallow dirt, dismember a cactus with bare hands— I have never felt sorry for his cracked lip, rib against shade or wide light tracing staggered footfall two guards smoke, ash the barrel in the back, they aim for the back—

back like a rabbit, Meza is crying and no one cares that he’s pissed himself, rubbed pebbles in the wounds above solar plexus, bled for six hours—

he might enter quiet/anonymous from Huntsville, a newspaper editor makes him famous— I have nine words for this man, for this man, I have sadness for many months:

Meza populates Austin with candles after parole, their painted saints watch over each division

and this is not a blessing— this is not a blessing I am not blessed not a blessing.
Brother, Carolina Is A Conditional

If we say *chrysanthemum* when we mean to say *ragweed,*
then I am not accountable to call you by your right name;

and if we are in a thicket, where we have been before,
I will know no other way to care for you, than as Castor for Pollux.

If the Nantahala sweats day into night and our presence
spooks the white-tail deer, I already told the girl

who loves you what a fool I must have been
distracting muzzle, trigger, and gaze.

If wild mayapple refuses to yield under foot,
and the whole of the sun arrived

late for a funeral, our father’s, then I am not sadness
thickening *your* heart and which *you* will forget in the city.

If we stand apart, for some time, bees will come
multiplying air between us until lungs, cataract and heavy

cracked residue of wings, reduce breath to natural arithmetic.
To the sorghum overgrown and dominating,
shucking the paint from the walls,
and to a rooster tail pinned
on a fencepost between the deep
of the wheat and my morning meditation—

Come in from the acrid sun,
arms tightly coiled in red clay filament,
undress the sweat glistened breasts
from the sturdier weight of a loaned shirt.

That summer, an entire nest of crows
descended on the banks of the pews at the
Mineral Springs Church of Christ:

an arsonist ablaze sought refuge from the heat,
kneeled at the alter bringing the roof down to his head;
afterwards, the repairs—they figured—would cost
more than the congregation could afford that year;
and so, let the sky creep in.

Weeks later, a pitstop argument in rain
near Ashville, North Carolina, screamed
sore until my torso shed skin, bared oak bark lungs.
You turned dogwood-flowered eyes, asked
to be left here, that you’d catch the next plane out.

Let’s swear now that our faces are our own,
and that all things in the past are turning to soil,
leavening into the prick of rusted iron on a long evening walk,
the flush of alcohol on the wound;

no different than sleeping at the foot of pines
under stars
one by one across night.

For this, let us sit and wait because
our bodies will be glass, jar stomachs and handle backs and all, filled to the throat with grapes and mint—
a harvest of spoiled fruit sweet with our treble moans.
Love Beneath the Mason-Dixon Line

In this, the season of failure, we walk heads low
after meals of snow pears, wrapped in prosciutto;
we do this every evening for a month, you and I.
Watching the homes of our neighbors fill with cinder, smoke,
and maple leaves blown in from the eastern-bound storm,
I ask if we should turn back and make love without speaking—

a moment of incineration, a single
exhaustible heave of our lives careening
into one another as if sadness were not
dying, but instead the sight of our clothes falling to the floor
arms akimbo and then taught again,
the pant of flesh and lull rhythm of lips tracing the
known topography:
    breasts to thighs
She and the havoc sky are acquainted
with sorrow: jonquil in a field overtaken in June
by the melodic thrush of flame azaleas,
in mid-July only wilted monuments
towering over New Caledonia,

light of the sun,

eextinguished. Earlier, coring a pear
she beds blade to skin
while her lover traces a series of fractals
eck to spine, tasting salt and vinegar

and dirt. New Caledonia is impossibility:
of stone and dirt, she, pistil and stem
towering over unseasonable love for azaleas,
ginger root, and thistles

undone from a horse’s mane. Undone the rope
she tied to it, affixed to a claw-foot iron tub
in the yard, only gone to the creek to wash
blood from her thighs, welling

rib cracked in seven parts, the animal
without her overtaken by some gradual fear
pulled rope and tub with its embroidered lip
hard enough to force a fragment of bone

loose, careening into heart.
Excaváre

I.

a city builds itself
bleached vertebrae eye socket dorsal structure

of the young whale
unearthed when the city bank
is built, a city
sweetens to its bones,

where you and I stand with strangers,
watching fourteen men hoist the animal
up and out of slick mud

by the railroad tracks
when we collect our ghosts
in mason jars, their small lights
shine arcs over your eyes

II.

here, I love you
here, if I can pull off loving you, that would be enough

—but at least I am haunted—

as when she said:

Shouldn’t you know the names of the saints?
No.

Being from New Orleans and all…
I’m not actually from New Orleans—it’s California in winter

Arkansas in the driest months
Childhood Is Jealousy

At dusk, he burns a tender of gulls in the yard
to light the sinew of the underwing
by measured amounts, unraveling a map of bone.
For hours, it is you—course rivulet of muscle
arcing the wood—I behind, stumbling
at the mast. You've never loved him,
he is small, awkward, easily displaces
capitals of Eastern European principalities,
but I, I carry wood well, do not squint
as feathers and smoke blot the harbor.
Balance

Had it not been for the foraging cormorants
nesting in your heart, taking shelter from the rain—
were it not for speaking only of boughs laden
with the weight of water and their needles woven into knots,

I would not have known the kind of man you are.

And here, we care only for the ecstatic rhythm of love
which renders this light unforgiveable, our bones into clay
and an eighteen-mile stretch of Buffalo grass the living prayer
we’d forgotten how to recite.

For some time, we stand just a few feet apart, like this
waiting for the silence to break between us:
*What if I was a king?*, you ask. *And, what if you were?* I say.
because I'm not going anywhere
I'll just bleed so the stars can have something dark
to shine in

—F. Stanford, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*

I. what moves through you, *slake*
*rudiment*
course *elegy* in the uppermost
*ligament*
II.

Tess and I tell each other
at age twelve
we
never been engulfed in the deluge
during the same touch we see his face—
uproot
in the ashflake   Tess and I at age twelve
tell each other we’ve never been dead
like the body of a boy from the Eastside
staggers
from his head   nine miles to rest
at our feet   Tess/I   have never been dead
III.

: *eternity is more like the ruffle of a dress than anything else*
  
  let what moves be foliage asunder
  
  earthward glance to hemlock, or else
  
  our mother might move through you

as I through middle dark in Wheeling, West Virginia

sick of little light
  
  carry the deer to brush beyond mile marker 36
IV.

I ask you
in the worst—
Appalachia country

I won’t stay

ice, cluster of house
sparrows hung locked-foot

I am sure you would’ve answered
V.

in the company of others
speak of low-lying stars over Memphis
        doubt       absolution       bonerattle

origin of blindness
overtake horse in rain
at the closest edge of the field;
    where, presently, you call my name:

I—hesitant and drunk—

        a body falling
away from us—
    the closer edge of a field
        rain       a horse       alight, as a tipped coffin
VI.

I am doing this wrong
not the written thing
before this moment, this moment/splitting
stem ledge

we’ve been doing this,
for some time, had we strung water
under soft stone turned dove
in the axial wellbody of division, this dry season from the one in which the crops died—

delta parched from Baton Rouge to Mobile
its alluvium breath a tin-type photograph of our mothers’
incantatory hands, slaughtered hog hung awkward against the rail,
a prayer we learn as children to distinguish the spotted spurge
among the chickweed overgrown in the Pryor lot, still hearing him
speak of Job on a Sunday morning in Searcy, still speaking through smoke
that this is the best fucking idea we’ve ever had:

to love what cannot love us in return
VII.

flush skin on concrete,
   arms press  bud of magnolia  deep through your chest—

I suppose you deserve it

6’ 4”, 300 lb body
   dislocated rib splicing fan of tendon and muscle
we are in awe
   when the darkest side of his arms makes a bruise the shape of Sugarloaf

against your throat—

after you approach him,
compare the bone white sclera to the night sky complexion

of this man from Eureka Springs, who—at twenty—had mapped the woods’
claustrophobic topography
   nests of six species of lark

loved a white woman and the seeding stars bloomed below her waist

—you, boy, cried hard into my grandmother’s heart
until she couldn’t pull the soft crown of your head above pooling water
boy, ignorant boy, who shot the .22 target pistol, small hands held wood and steel wrong; so, you,
little white boy stung by the nettle
spend an entire summer with an old black man, remembering

forty years later, pressed into parking lot pavement

his arms over yours  forefinger and thumb cast firm over your grip  the chicory

scent of his breath
VIII.

whole-bodied chickens lose their heads

an old woman kneels
to pluck stiff feet
from mud

feathers fall soiled,
gardenias under tongue,

a promise to keep them wet
until they could yoke the children from the well—
IX.

Frenchman loves
taste of plantain on lip
gives you name

bijou,

in Philadelphia:

his arms wed,

you a Daguerreotype of Creole,

word for absence an abscess

clouds lens, eye

chickenblood scrawl in iris—
X.

the neighbor boy after supper—
     my mother quatering quilt on the porch—

coupled in size by the hen caw,
     learns the weight of fists

his bony frame yields

you and I together
on a rock with the boy

who says, I ain’ white like his Pa—

he takes back slur all—until you
     mend Haitian cloth, a splint to bone,
its black musk lullaby—

stalks illuminated
by the Gulf Coast
XI.

II.
For Virginia

1977-2008

I.
Tonight, the Oakland Hills grieve,
and I cannot make you love me
more than you loved twine
or buckled weight—
your body,
subtraction of bow from fiddle,
a young sapling, bent the rafter slightly.

II.
I learn to distinguish
between fire and incineration
after the mortician undresses you,
does not ask about the nine black cherries,
residue of Pacific rain and pine,
or the copper, rosin, and birch branch
plucked from your stomach.

III.
My brother forgets your name,
reciting a gruesome anecdote:
in the Blue Ridge, a three-mile
clearing of Box Elder and Eastern Red Cedar
known best for its lacquer stench—
discordant troupe of concert violinists in 1926
strung the trees, alternating body and sound.

IV.
Honey, the only known substance
which does not spoil or decay
if gathered, sweetens the pit
wood and its note—
sustain the open eyes,
you’ve taught me to refrain
closing them while making love.
V.
Without you, I exhume
an instrument from its source
in mineral, dogfennel and ash,
levy the strings round
as bone seeks tendon, its name, direction—
in departure, Shostakovitch falls for Gastonia
in the same month you return, alight, inconsolable dream.
After Rembrandt Bugatti
1884-1916

inhaled the fumes. After he sunk low into the figurine
posed nude for fear. Of all things sweet on the tongue
he said, yes. And to Milan, her supple crest of brick eyes,

and swallows, nesting in rivets above Christ fashioned
out of clay, out of the tomb—posed.
After he couldn’t stand, carve his arms
into the difference between rising stars
and the hands’ dance macabre.

Or, even when a lover’s face meant
nothing after he made love. Even an artist
makes love in a world all his own.

Rise, chant and repeat the motion: all rise
and fall when the iron-clad weaponry collides
renders, consumes in flames

those animals in the Antwerp Zoo. You cried
and sat for days sifting through bones, and the ash,
it was December and the geese had begun to wander
wreckage in small overlapping circles.

After you lay soft against the warm and ever inviting
cradle of the stove, declared death a friend,
a solitary hand still moist with your mother’s
tears. Even then, after the city slept, you were beautiful.

After they found you, motionless, a silhouette, une petite alouette, they buried you
an open graced gaze, a low body, broken by the weight of sighs gathered on your lips—
they shine in this light.
On This, the Occasion of Your Death, Victoria

1937-2008

we watch as you become beautiful again.
My father kneels before you, a boy yet again.

In this room there is relentless hum—
air pushed violently past your chapped lips,
into your mouth—it distorts anything
and everything you say.

With this oxygen mask crowding
your sunken cheeks, I focus on something
I know from my childhood—
your eyes

well again and again; as a painter I’d
admired, let me draw your tears out of
the canvas onto the knuckle of my right hand.
A brush stroke, make you beautiful

again. In this moment we’ve committed to,
furls of silver roses decorate your lungs
only to emerge lilies, bouquet’ed at the
edge of your lips—a steady inhalation
of petals and stems

rams close the wavering beat of your heart,
on this, the occasion of your death, Victoria.
For R.
I have never known the four Japanese words for house — written with ashed underside of valerianella radiata across the concave ridge of spine, as if soft built structures in halflight, the oblong frame of a pear conspired to divide in five rooms at your touch.

Lost for days in the city of plums and cedar, 
I will recall lovers separated by the Watauga River, 
their mouths mimicking the dulcet tenor of pine siskin, 
a call to which, it is said, the Southern heart wilts —

and six thousand miles away the children in Otaru clamor the tide before dawn, a mother carries her ill son with her arms crossed over his chest so he might feel the meter of waves. 
Here, you have risen early, anatomy of violin — curve of your body outlined by light, canvas, corridors of wood, image of a house in four parts — indigo, cerulean, rose, alabaster — sparrow with granite-eyed glance, fur against bone, suspended cluster of peonies welling in the doorway.
Rome burns steadily under its moth wing sky,
somewhere the weight of smoke abandons
lovers caught still and my father, too—

somewhere mouths are full.
If this were a dream, I’d see a face swollen,
cheeks, flesh inundated with tides of wine,
grin soured of cloves for teeth,
orange peel, the pocked tongue.

On the outskirts of roads,
where men come home to wives with sweat
of parched market olives lingering on their throats,
there is only blood filling lungs,

fingers spooling hair at the deathbed;
slow hands, Iranian cloth from the funeral
of a friend’s mother in August—torn
from the shawl at her breast, and in my palm
I crush cyan fabric,
thinking only of being a young boy, and her
kiss on my forehead meaning everything.
Country Wake

On the third day of your passing,
I enter the room where you lay with an anxious grin.

Barring sliver of enamel and sordid tongue,
I recite a verse from Corinthians, pray
six acres of wormwood rises to your hips,
razed at your touch in the plough field
where my grandmother hopes you haunt her,
love her relentlessly.

It’s Sunday, mother in the washroom,
breathing heavy, wet hiss of iron
burning through the silk tie she’ll fix to your
swollen neck before burial.

And now, I take your right hand in mine, palm to palm;
from increasing heights, let it fall against down,
mute meeting of flesh to fabric.
Over your eyes, two dimes, first:
  *Out of the preacher’s satchel, with a carved cross
dividing Roosevelt’s face in unequal parts.*
and the second:
  *Pried from my fist when your body returned.*
III.
My mother won’t turn left at the doorway, 
recede into a gathering of larks;

she will grow old with rain, preferring a star’s ember burn,  
chipped porcelain, lemon rind on my father’s lips—

her hands’ move in slow orbits: pulling needles through a dress 
she makes on the anniversary of her mother’s burial.
II.

I have written the body of Saul Clempson, whole-again,
write him back to the trellis where he sits twelve seconds
above the tracks of the Missouri and North Arkansas

back to where he imagines himself whole, again,
a white-tipped sparrow, Saul Clempson, gets away
with the kiss of the preacher’s daughter behind the rectory

in the same day he tells me we gonna be famous,
you’ll see, they’ll thank us and we’ll never have to say Amen, again—

slick parchment and leather in our arms,
we cast the Bibles into the waters of Tanyard Creek,
their white pages feathered from the bindings like ash.
III.

The Landers Theater plays a double-booked show,
where my mother’s brother rises on the screen
wet with saltwater from the marina—two-thousand miles
from Batesville, Arkansas—his chest glistens, black

opal weighs him to the left corner, almost off-screen,
until the projectionist extinguishes his cigarette,

adjusts the film slightly, light tracing across
hair and linen, a couple of country boys and girls

holler, moan the part where my mother’s brother drowns.
IV.

_In the South_ let’s say—
I am of two minds:
You ask me to say *clavicle* followed by *pygidium* recanting
the swooped sound of my jaw against yours, long vowel drawl,
    scar grows into the upper-lung
    horsetooth weed from underneath the porch
    recalling six inches of water from your throat
Savannah, at night even owls ignite and rush to the sea
    commend me on pronouncing the vowels of your name in error
VI.

I am visited by Frank Stanford’s ghost,  
his wounds sick with smoke, three begonias  
flowering on the backside of his body.
VII.
To forgive trespassing—it was about never salvaging
my father’s car from the lake-water, stench of gasoline—
on my body, when I embrace my wife, I burn as one engulfed by flames.
VIII.

If the tawhee and its rust-red maw don’t surrender inside my palm, spread like a wide-mouth avulsion, our wash basin will overflow plumage in the night while we sleep and dream of nine verses, snake lolling in the swing tire and its hatcheted body scored six times through, and we prayed together

Mother might cradle the bird in her apron as we’d seen her do with tape reels her brother—the audiophile—left us in November, still hum and dissonant in her hands, smoothed between her wet fingers until the black lashed tape spun back onto itself, sung the evening call of young tawhees scattering against light parsed by branches in the Ouachita.
IX.

We are our compass built from mothwing, ivory, particulate amber
colony of bees in aerial declination, rain
in projector and reel, then signal to noise
in the static image, fallen apart
as surely as reversing a film where a sonogram
starling heartbeat stutters and distorts.
I.
Of course the ventricle constricts, appetitive
berm which is not so much a hollowed out
tributary or scar, but the receiving end
of a semi’s bent grill and the armadillo
carcass withering into the wet soil
of the Arkansas-67. Certainly not a preacher’s
spun tire ricocheted into a guardrail
or the seen—where we’ve driven for miles
to reach Fayetteville by dawn
and found algae on lace
panties in the trout’s awkward mouth.

II.
Bear’s jaw no wider than a fist
stretched in the back pocket
crowded by Testament, loose-leaf tobacco
and a Polaroid—lower half of a fox

with breasts and a gag ring,
she begs and forgets to stop
a smile before its begun, tell her
nothing of matted hair, wounds soured in heat,
amateur surgical procedure you’ll botch
removing a bullet from her spleen.
In fairness, you counted 10 to 1, slowly, giving her time to flee.

III.
Penitentiary boys balance peaches
ridged between *Hiac crest* and *sacrospinalis*,
the youngest among them devoured:
tastes tongue edging lip, cowers the cock,

*O, little blackbird,* muscles the arms
of his Master thinking love might be
Crape myrtle rasping the panes,
his mother ignoring the candescent whine—

last psalm tethered to sycamore and softening
evenly, to its rightful place, peaches on flesh,
as one voice praises another’s apologetic hush.
my brother and I pin one another into dry dirt, 
stern film of dust, the underside of my throat and his contorted grin. 
It’s been six—seven—hours driving east 
into cotton fields our grandmother worked in—at maybe nine or ten, 
she and her sister, bent orchids in heat, small backs made of wood, 
latticed muscle, and splinters. The girls, they say, were quiet— 
years later, my grandmother would suffer from seizures brought on from silence:
fits of locked jaw round clenched tongue, plump pink with the lace of veins slow throb (a pig’s heart torn at the dinner table, cleaved into two indistinguishable parts)
The girls, they said, stood hand-in-hand in field, defiant—refusing to speak, save to one another.
Just up the road, well past escaped, blistered feet and all, toward the Oklahoma border, they slept in half-crescent culverts that dot this landscape with scars.
And now, sitting up with his elbows resting on the ridges of his knees, my brother breathes deep
without seeming to notice at the far end of the acre, some boys are wandering near-naked through the thicket, in a ritual where the tops of their fathers’ rusted lighters snap shut and open again, in time to the shudder of a collective waking dream
in which the memory of birds confuses itself for the nauseating glide of water at the
meeting place of the Eleven Point and Black Rivers; in which they mistake the sight of
hair swayed at the surface for something else, repeated methodical dance, currents
splitting strands like tendril lines of rope undone—

the boy had been holding his breath,
trying to catch a fish with bare, soaked hands

Only here, we don’t dream.
If you close your eyes, the heat from soil and sky meet, engulf you in flame. In this humidity, our ears flood with honey, we hear laughing only slowly turning against its pitch, then screams because

finding the body of the child stuck by his ankle in the shallow rocks, drowned for days now;
this makes boys become men
Reaching over to my brother’s fist—he doesn’t attempt to stop me—I take a cigarette and eat it whole.
It will be many years later until he will realize that in that moment, I ceased to love him.
Heels, rouge, and the whitenoise
signal of topographic love affairs.

Sometimes, I am disillusioned; my
brother speaks on my behalf, he does it well.

A dizzying and moving darkness crowding
throat, word, and the whole damn scene.

Reconsider the water breaking into sand,
birds diving out of jealousy, and my father—

his guilty look slapped, torn across his mother’s
face in the winter of ’67.

—

Increasingly, I am sketching only stairwells.

This autumn is irrational and sightless.

There is nothing of the Fibonacci sequence
between your shoulders

—

Observe wood grain losing its pattern,
How it wanders away from itself.

Think of falling right here,

Faces might blur or divide; accordingly.

You say, *I’m dreaming in Aramaic*—
but even then, as when the funeral procession

had become lost, only vagrant wanderers,

the cavity of your mouth was saltwater, light, and winged flutter.

You liar.
and in the morning a stranger would stop to mourn with us
watching embers scatter and constellate the lawn,
and there would soot on your cheek; and I, I would tell the stranger
we made love in the flames.