

Abstract

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The poems in this collection revolve primarily around two subjects: the twenty-something speaker and his unlikely muse: a crippled Vietnam War veteran named Freddy, who struggles with deep-seated psychological problems. Though traces of formal elements exist as a sort of structural cohesion, the connection between these poems is largely a thematic and narrative one, weaving several threads together to reveal the relationship between these two figures, as well as their relationships with the people and places they choose to surround themselves with. Place is especially important in these poems, not only as a source of pride, but also as a sort of kinship—after all, at the core of this collection is an intersection of two lives in the same place at the same time, both of which seem to have stalled in some way. The tension born out of this aimlessness is what both drives and connects these poems.

THE EMPIRE OF MERE SURVIVAL

by

Glenn Hollar

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*Freddie brings the paper in,
hangs around, goes back out.
Nothing from the poolshooters,
faces of camels
working their gums
among the smoke rings.*

—William Matthews

Orogeny

Hilling down from the ridgeline,
the young mountains kneel to take a drink

from this swift, clear, devastating river.
They cannot stop themselves. They prostrate

into flood plains. Those that know better
have wrapped themselves in fir

and withdrawn, huddling in high clusters,
arranging. They build and build their empire

of mere survival. Lightning-calloused,
rain-scarred—where the air thins

the skin's thickest. If they could be crosscut
like a pine, they would show in tight

concentric rings of stone, precisely
what it takes to live forever.

In the deep caves: digestion. Slow
growth. The necessary endurance.

The Poolshooters

We, who work our gums
for a living among
the smoke rings,
the second-hand scotch—
we who can sell a bad joke
quick as a mixed drink,
to anyone who's buying, we
real cool.

We, who have the afternoon off
and money enough
for the moment,
we who construct
the cataracted panes
of our own happiness
out of glass ashtrays, empty
beer bottles, jukebox tunes
and pool cues, we
left school.

We who have no reason now
to wake before noon,
who rise and do not shine,
we, who often enough see
dawn from the wrong end,
we lurk late.

We, who line up a bank shot
like we snipe in the mirrors
behind the bar—we
who choose carefully
our angle of approach, we
strike straight.

We, who will try anything
twice, who take what's given
and ask for more,
we who want nothing less
than to do a line
off the naked stomach
of the muse,
we sing sin.

We, who can spot bad tippers
like a lion eyes a gazelle,
we whose job is
to make friends,
we damn sure
thin gin.

We whose lives pass
one game to the next,
easy as an eight ball sunk:
quarters, clunk, ball-release,
that smooth felt stretched over slate
like fake grass beside a coffin—
with a fresh rack of days arranged,
waiting for the break, we know
better than most
we die soon.

Elegy To the Tune of a Talking Heads Song *for Ticker*

The thin calligraphy
of an eyelash
cuts across the contours
of my fingertip,

small and sharp
as an incision.

Psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est?

I never wish for anything
anymore. Used to be,
every crack in the sidewalk

rhymed with spine.

Used to be,
I'd never heard words
like 'metastasize.'

Better run run, run run run away.

All I could ask for
are figments:

the warm blanket
her arms wove,

the way her smile
over the course of an afternoon, slowly
changed into a slice of lime...

Psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est?

It's no use.
I let a gust tug
the eyelash away

to wherever it is they carry
their empty promises—

(Better run, run away)

to that unhappy corner
of the imagination:
the Kingdom of Lost Socks,

the land where nothing
is undesirable
and everything is unattainable—

Psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est?

The weakest side
of the wishbone.

Next year's candles
that can't be blown out.

The broken land where shooting stars
come to rest unseen,
sleeping cold underground,
burning themselves brilliantly to death.

Freddy Watches a Ball Game, July 4th 2001

He shuffles up from his barstool,
a process that takes a good long while

these days, now that he's not
the man he used to be.

Mathematically speaking, he's roughly
four-fifths of the man

he once was—that quick-stepping kid
who disembarked in Denang.

Maybe he's not as quick now, but maybe
he stands straighter with a metal leg.

On his feet now, and his hand rises slowly
and inevitably to his forehead—

if you didn't know him, you might think
he just had a headache like any drunk,

except that his fingers are too rigid
against his temple, and his eyes never leave

the TV screen, on which an American flag
hangs, limp in the breathless night

above Yankee Stadium, while someone
down on the field sings *God Bless America*.

Summer Fragments

I. Honeysuckle

The ceremony of it
is exhilarating, your touch
gentle, delicate,
and utterly destructive,
tossing one broken flower aside
in search of another.

II. Lightning Bugs

...and all of a sudden outside is underwater, as if the whole world is a lake whose surface is the sky—it must be, because you can see the reflections of stars swimming around you, you can catch them and hold them in your hand, and somehow walking becomes swimming without even meaning to; and time is a riptide, swift and lethal and more powerful than you notice, and you don't see that the stars around you and above you start to waver and fade, until you can't touch them anymore; you can't touch the ones you held and you can't touch the ones you never held but always believed you could; you panic and suck in a breath like you've been exhaling for hours, and they wink out altogether, and the deepest dark is dawn.

III. Bullfrogs

Your feet tock hollow on the dock
like a gunfighter swaggering out
into an empty street.

They wait just long enough
for your eyes to adjust,
then a spring releases

and a groan at your feet,
because you're dead
before you know you've been shot.

IV. Storms

Lightning
is God's tube sock,
scraped across
this woolen world—

Thunder,
the inevitable
ineffable cussing.

V. Water Striders

They are tiny poems, bad ones, skittering in the shallows.

Inscrutable patterns in the rippling shade of oaks.

A study in surface tension: or, how not to sink.

Wade out among them. They nip and tickle.

They know of the large trout lurking in the depths.

At Hazel Creek

It is an art of arcs, of crafted curves:
my fly line flicking back and cast
traces a wave in air. The river-
round rocks, the way water slides
by silver salmon like a thick night's
sliced by the thumbnail moon.
The way they breach, humped up
and grinning that secret smile,
smug, as they go to breed
and die.

Legend has it
the Tree of Knowledge grew
above a stream like this:
its nuts fell and the fish fed deep
on the divine. My rod is a scythe,
my hook a crooked finger-bone,
and even the water striders
laughing from the shallows know
that my hunger is old and insatiable.

Vegas

for Noah

Hotel room. Flint of change
on change, keys in your pockets,
spectacles testicles wallet and watch.

Watch out. Flick a switch,
quick rickshaw uptown, the cabbie says
the marquees swim in a neon puddle.

You say it's more like drowning,
but he doesn't hear you. He's too busy
treading the water of what people never tell him.

The games begin. An old flame
once blamed your mother for you,
but this isn't a town for shrinks.

Just like it's not a town for clocks
that haven't stopped. Watch out,
they're giving away free breakfasts.

The best laid plans of gamblers and whores
amount to about the same thing:
get in go down get up get out.

You get drunk. Learn to tell the difference
between gamblers and whores. Use them both.
Learn that the house never grins.

Step outside for a smoke. Watch the sun
coming up over the towers over the desert.
The desert is made of dead things.

Remember that you, too, are dead,
and that there is no afterlife
that's not drowning in neon.

Remember to ante up, double down,
go all in and watch the roulette ball
spin, cutting a counter-clockwise rut

against the grain of its red and black
gravity. And remember
that it came to rest thirty years ago

in another kind of desert —
thirty-to-one, the longshot
of an Iowa winter.

The Farmhouse

It has a smell all its own, that clings to us:
like sweat, but less flattering—half propane,
half apathy, part smoke from the bonfire
set last night on top of the mountain next door,
part smoke from the cigarettes
we don't care enough to burn outside,
part gunpowder and two parts booze—
the reek of weeks-old beer
oozes out the screen door's pores.

There are three of us living here,
if you can call it that: Brandon, DJ, and me,
the bastard children of Thoreau—
lost in the woods between where we were
and where we're going, which is, of course,
nowhere fast, which means we haven't even
arrived at nowhere yet—but maybe
we've found a different, more devious way
to live simply and suck the marrow.

We have abandoned ourselves
to the winding mountain trails of whim,
given ourselves over to a compass that we believe,
fools that we are, never points north.
But every sip is another second,
every laugh is a breath we'll never get back,
drawing us against our will, one gulping lungful
at a time, toward the terror of the rest of our lives.

Freddy's Box

Freddy's box lives behind the bar at Hannah Flanagan's, and is available to him upon request.

All employees of Hannah Flanagan's are instructed to remove any pens that they might find in Freddy's box.

Freddy's box has contained, at various times:

Bills, pens, religious pamphlets, a lost plastic ring, rubber bands, cigarettes, a sheriff's badge, a bible, and postcards from several charity organizations thanking him for his donations of \$3, \$7, \$12...

When he dies, Freddy will lie down in a grave shaped like his box.

Freddy's box is a psychiatrist, and can prove both calming and inflammatory.

Freddy's box commands my complete attention.

Freddy's box was built from splinters of a cargo crate, found with him in the wreckage of a helicopter crash.

Freddy's box is a phantom limb.

All employees of Hannah Flanagan's are instructed to charge Freddy for everything he orders. If he doesn't have cash on him, withdrawals can be made from his box.

Freddy's box is a well, from which he draws like water the ghosts of his parents.

If you peeled him like a Russian doll, what you would find at his center would not be his box, but would closely resemble it.

Freddy's box is the house he never goes home to.

If Freddy's box were an art exhibit, its placard would read:

Wood, paper, metal. 10" x 6" x 4".

The artist has chosen this specific composition to represent one particular day in the subject's life, as evidenced by the postcard inside dated September 14th, 2006. It is unknown if this date holds any significance.

Freddy's box was built from old lumber, stolen during the demolition of a house that nobody here has ever seen.

Freddy's box is buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Freddy has his mail delivered to Hannah Flanagan's. When it comes, we are instructed to put it in his box for him.

Freddy's box is his next of kin.

The mechanical bird in Byzantium was constructed entirely from components found in Freddy's box.

Freddy's box is full of ashes.

I will build my house out of the ruins of Freddy's box.

I have twice seen Freddy's box empty, and both times was filled with an immeasurable feeling.

When full, Freddy's box weighs the same as a headstone at Arlington National Cemetery.

Moonshine

Between my fingers and my thumb,
snugging the hole where a handshake should be,
a mason jar fits as if planted there. Maybe it was,

years ago, seeded in the alcoholic streak
that runs through my family like a vein of coal,
carving its slow gnarl through the bedrock

of genetic history. My grandfather keeps a jar
in a cabinet I never noticed, tucked away
like a family secret, only to be brought out

when the grandkids are grown. I wonder
if they tried it together for the first time
those years ago: my young and by all accounts

(including his) rascal of a grandfather,
and his good for nothing brother, who'd been hid
from us kids like one of those secrets: an alcoholic

who drank himself to death in Florida,
and left nothing for us when he passed.
This would be post-war Hickory,

the double-feature for a dime days,
when the textile mills changed the kinds of calluses
a young man wore. Just about the time Popcorn Sutton

was first starting to still.

**

It's not much of a stretch for me to picture them carousing
on a neighbor's farm, or maybe somewhere out in the woods,
hiding from the eyes of the Lord their Father—

my great-grandfather Glenn (who we called Pawpaw),
a man sprung up out of dirt and rock, put together
in the Lord's own image. A hard, rasping man

who lived long enough to bounce his namesake on his knee,
but as vengeful in those days as anything
out of that old book with the family tree on its inside flap.

So I guess they would have hid up somewhere,
still in their teens and sipping on sin...
I wonder if they felt that Mule Kick as hard

as I did, the first time.

**

To my grandfather, moonshine was White Lightning:
he called it that the first time he pulled
a large jar out of a cabinet I'd never noticed,

unscrewed the cap and poured a snort
into two glasses, handing one to me.
My grandmother was asleep, a ball game on TV,

and clearly it was a time for men to do foolish things.
To go digging for coal.
His hands, smaller than mine, and cracked up

like an old cutting board, barely fit around the girth
of the Ball jar, as he replaced the lid and ring,
tightened it up as he'd cinched so many before,

and stowed it reverently away. He said
it was some of Popcorn's shine, said he got it
from one of the old boys down at the carp pond,

and asked me if it was my first taste. He seemed eager
to instruct. He allowed that there was no shame in a cough,
that it kicked like the dickens going down,

but reckoned I'd get used to it.

**

By then Popcorn was in his prime, supplying corn liquor
for most of Western North Carolina and East Tennessee.
He was a tourist attraction unto himself,

driving his Model A with a still built into the bed
puttering up and down the neon streets of Maggie Valley,
with only one or two convictions to show for it.

If you wanted a Belly Bomb, he'd sell you one
right there on the side of the highway,
a single cherry steeped in the liquid history

of that place, and he'd tell you a story
or pick a banjo, to pass the time. His long gray beard
was grown out of the grave of the Appalachians,

equal parts bristle and blackface, hubris
and humiliation. He'd also sell you a copy
of his autobiography, *Me and My Likker*,

if you had the cash in hand.

**

That night I'd wanted to hear the story
of his first drink, and I almost got up the nerve
to ask him, but like a good grandson I sipped

before I spoke, and that unsweetened Firewater
burned the words right out of me.
Not him. He told me instead about a hunting trip

he'd taken when he was my age,
with a couple of friends over in Tennessee,
and I sat there warming from the inside out,

like a good grandson, drinking down what was given me.

**

Pawpaw's been dead twenty years now,
but I can still hear him today. Not in a figurative sense,
mind, but in the real—the voice of a haint

talking back over the years through the speakers
of my computer. Some woman from UNC
had the sense, some time ago, to make a collection

of voices—I guess she would have called it
a Folkloric Study of the Declining Rural Culture
in the Wake of the Textile Mill Boom,

and I guess she would have been right.
She interviewed my great grandfather
for a total of twenty-five minutes,

talking about what Hickory had been like
when you could still trade eggs for coffee
at the general store. He didn't speak much,

but when I heard his voice, I visited a house
that had sat empty for twenty years. She asked
about his father, and I could hear him fidget. Terse.

Well, things was harder back then.

**

I felt like Peter after two cocks crowed.
I'd lied to my grandfather that night, to his face,
told him it was my first time tipping

the strong stuff, when in fact DJ had been dripping
his own shine from a still he built
out behind the Farmhouse, and we'd drunk

amongst ourselves from his fruited store
for more than a year. It was DJ's brand
we were drinking on the night

we set about spitting fire, combusting
from the inside out. The moon was mostly full,
and the bonfire was busy

making stars, the three of us with a pint jar each,
mine burrowing its fit into my hand,
and the strawberries flavoring at the bottom

lying in wait like a hangover. We'd hup a gobful
then spray it out over the flames
to make a rain of tiny fireworks, but saved

the bigger nip for ourselves. Brandon had hacked up
a downed tree before he got too drunk
to work the chainsaw, and DJ thunked an axe

through some of the bigger logs, and that fire
raged and raged all night, and us along with it,
burning right back at it, in the face of it,

trying our damndest to meet it halfway.

**

*We'd brought along a quart of shine for the weekend,
but sure if we didn't make it but about halfway through Friday
before we run out. Those boys got liquored up*

*and set to arguing about a woman, some girl
that neither of them knowed too well, if you catch
my drift, but here I was trying to break them up from wrestling,*

*and me drunker than both of them.
And I'm the one that up and gets punched in the mouth!
Well, my lip swelled and I tasted blood mixed up*

*with that White Lightning, and I felt for the first time
like a hillbilly. The lowest of the low down on the totem pole.
The kind that them from way off*

*think we all are. Good thing the boys had forgot
about them guns setting up in the truck bed, or I don't know what
would have happened. I never did*

speak to either of them again, after that.

**

Popcorn's gone too, now—he drove himself to death
in his own garage, and that's where his daughter
found him, looking peaceful

in his 3-Jug Car, that he traded for
with a few gallons of his best.
He'd been diagnosed with cancer

and was facing an eighteen month stretch
at the age of 62, just about the same age
my grandfather was that night

when we sat up watching a ball game,
thinking together down those dirty deep-mountain ruts
the old boys at the carp pond like to speak of:

the long dirt that shunts a man tilling
till he's under it, never was much chance of rising
over it or above it, so he takes his row to hoe

and he makes it his own. He makes it.

**

That's lies. The old mountain ways are dying off,
true enough, but the cruelest joke is that the joke
will never die—Popcorn Sutton gave his life

to make himself a punchline.
My grandfather would say
the back that cracks under a bushel of corn

knows better than to sew much more,
and he's right. The earth my grandfathers moved
to serve their fathers is not the body

given for me. But the moonshine's the blood,
and it's been given and given. Heaney
said it too, and better, but I'll be goddamned

if he wasn't right.
Between my fingers and my thumb,
the mason jar's snugged. I'll dig with it.

I'll dig the graves of my grandfathers.

Freddy Doesn't Drink

Freddy doesn't drink, I learned after my first week working at Hannah's. And still, people buy them for him—even the regulars—because they think it'll do him good, or because they think it's funny, or because they think that his pain is their pain.

I've seen him,
a time or two, with a beer in hand as he makes his rounds:
checking the exits, looking in on the empty back room,
stretching his leg. He holds the glass out, away from his body
as he paces, like a hand grenade he's afraid to pull the pin from.

Freddy and the Jukebox

It's been more than a month now, and for the first time
I see him use the jukebox. It's late, on a slow night,
and he must've found some quarters on the floor,
or been given them by someone who didn't know any better,
because when a song comes on that nobody recognizes,
I look in the back to see him feeding the thing like a slot machine.

After about two dollars' worth, he starts mumbling to himself
and pushing buttons. He could be any one of us.
Eventually satisfied, he flashes the peace sign to the machine
and limps back to his booth. Curious, I go to see what songs
he would want to hear, and there, in the usually blank white field
labeled, Search For Your Favorite Songs Online! he has typed in:
USArmyFreddySSN547324#828—and pressed *Play*.

Freddy Doesn't Pay

I'm ashamed to admit that it's taken nearly six months for me to stop charging him for food. His sweet tea has always been free, but every day he orders his two grilled cheese sandwiches with mayo—I mean *every single day*, the man must by now be mostly composed of grilled cheese—and he has paid for them, and tipped, every time, entirely in ones.

I am ashamed
to admit that it has taken me this long to realize
that he lives underwater—everything around him swims
in the shifting, distorted, refracting, thick liquid
the rest of us call air. Language is a life preserver,
floating so close he can see a clear sky through its porthole,
but every time he reaches out for it, tantalizingly close,
it drifts just a little farther away.

Silence

Like the sound of melting wax,
or everything that is not

inside the airplane—or, more
precisely, everything

that *is* inside the solid
sea of clouds that seems

unbroken from Santiago
to Miami. Wait, scratch that—

I've heard the sound of icicles
licking themselves solid,

and, for that matter, glaciers
groaning their way

back home. There is no silence
in water. So back

to the wax—that's the kind
of quiet I mean,

the kind that's surrounded
by the sputter of flame

on one side, the stutter
of the table as dancing feet

send the silverware
on a slow migration

on the other. Or, better still,
surrounded by a solitary

gringo on one side, a smiling
young *Chilena* on the other—

that's the type I mean,
the worst sort,

the kind that floats between
two people who

have everything to say,
but no means

to say it, so they
just shrug and stare

as a bead of wax leaves
it's hot spring to slide

carefully down the candle's spine,
and, slowly, solidify.

Pucón

Sleepy eyes, flashes of sunrise cutting through the trees
like machine-gun fire. Day breaking
over vineyards, avocado farms, skeletal rivers
that writhe over dry beds.

Nothing moves in this tiny town we rumble through
except dust and dogs, so many dogs,
rustling through the cigarette butts
and scraps of empanadas
discarded by drunks in the stumbling hours of the night.

In the buildings we pass, curtains shut
like eyelids against the glare,
houses roll over and go back to sleep.

What do walls dream about, if not the absence of ceilings?

If I could join those drunks in the night,
those dogs in the gutter, I would.

If I could, I would lie down beside them
in a room without a roof,
and if I could only find a way
I would wake with them, singing,
in the sunlit house of another language.

Ars Poetica

*And if we banged
into the absurd,
we shall cover ourselves with the gold of owning nothing.
—Cesár Vallejo*

*I wonder if the great poets ever had this problem
I think, as a bottle rocket cuts a hole in the night*

*next to my right ear. Sure, Wilfred Owen
was pinned down more than once, and Pound*

*found his gods in the landscape outside Pisa,
but neither chose that. I step out from behind the corner*

*I'm using for cover, and set light to the fuse
of another scream, this one leaving a shower of sparks*

*as it skips off the screen door he's hiding behind.
We're the only people for miles.*

*Yeats was a dreamer and Dylan Thomas was a drunk,
but neither was this stupid. Soon, very soon, we will tire*

*of banging into the absurd. We'll go back inside
to grab another beer from the Farmhouse fridge*

*and we will drown ourselves in gold.
I'll leave it for tomorrow to find the poem:*

*the combustion of tiny fireworks,
the new hole burned through my favorite shirt.*

Freddy Watches a Ball Game, July 4th 2007

The fireworks are about to start.
He begins to disassemble
what he has collected
and arranged on the table,

the patchwork of cigarette packs,
lighters, quarters and plastic rings,
Mardi Gras beads, single keys
that belong to no known lock—

laid out in perfect rows and columns.
He tucks away scraps of paper,
muttering to himself
what could be a prayer

as he folds them, each one
covered in his relentless script—
numbers, dates, his rank
and serial, social security, over and over.

Repeated too are his parents' names,
Doris and Charles, their birth dates
and death dates, and the Lord's Prayer
written in German on the inside flap

of his pocket bible. Some words, at least,
he has been sure to set in stone.
He puts the plastic sheriff's badge on last,
after each of the items has found its home.

These few things are the closest he gets
to memories. The rest is fracture and order—
the broken mirror he can never look away from,
the *desperado* he's trying like hell to ride down

as he limps to the back of the bar
to watch a baseball game
with the sound turned all the way up,
since the fireworks are about to start.

Freddy Flinches

*They're about to start,
Miguel says, pinche bendejo
come on, you're going to miss them—*

I'll go get Freddy.
Before I can explain to him how
and in what ways that sentence
shows that he's new to the bar,

he bounces off to the back
to try and talk Atlas
into laying down the world.

Hey, Loco! is all he manages
before the first of the fireworks
high-fives the sky outside,
and Freddy, eyes on the screen,

flinches.
Miguel must have seen it,
because right there,

in the middle of that moment,
he changed. I never knew
pity could be so visible
in the posture of a man,

had never thought much about Miguel's past
until he answers my question
before I can raise an eyebrow —

*I know what it's like, Barbón,
to fight a war. For him,
outside is Vietnam.
Now come on, cabrón, before they finish.*

And all I can think about,
as colors and patterns
are added to the black sky

of what I thought I knew,
is the curiosity of watching an explosion
from a long way off—
not knowing how long it will take
before I hear the bang.

The Deathmobile

I.

Color of a Metallica album,
I can almost see the lack
of shirt sleeves and good sense

due at signing
on an El Camino like this.
How proud he must have been!

How sensual that first touch
of chamois cloth to sheen,
tracing the seam

around the driver's side door
as if in blessing.
He must have felt

like he had two cocks
when he'd rev it to redline,
dump the clutch, and peel

a strip of hide
off the gravel drive,
the pull of inertia

or some other fundamental Law
he didn't comprehend
yanking him with a lurch

toward the main road,
and the highway that leads
to all highways.

II.

The car was all she left him in the divorce.
She had always said he spent more time with *it*,
and now he wouldn't have *her* to stand between
him and his one true love. She was cheating on him
but didn't want to admit it. So he lost himself
in its intricacies, the delicate interdependencies
of a harder heart than his. That summer he dismantled
the entire engine block, cleaned and polished every piece
with a relentless eye—then rebuilt the whole thing, just like new.

This is the part of the poem where I'm supposed to say
his catharsis was complete, that he managed to repair
the broken-down wreck of his life—because hasn't the car
been a symbol all along for his psyche?
I don't know. All I know is that, come fall,
that El Camino may have looked a little beat up
on the outside, but under the hood it ran like a Swiss watch.
Like something that hadn't been pulled apart inside. Like new.
And that he sold it to Brandon for fifty bucks.

III.

And so it is written:
Deathmobile,
in algae-colored spray paint
against the flat black primer
of the rest of the body,
tattooed across the dented tailgate—
only slightly more garish
in its audacity
than the skull and crossbones on the hood.

IV.

Brandon is a collector
of stray cars, in the same way
some people choose pets
they see themselves in.

After Amber dumped him
to marry her cousin, he wanted
nothing else but to celebrate
mediocrity. He wanted to own a stereotype

he could beat the shit out of.
So he gave that car the worst half
of a paint job, got drunk
every day, and took it out

on the roughest roads in the county.
Funny thing, how love can echo
itself. Like hand-me-down clothes
that never quite fit right.

Funny how they tell alcoholics
that the definition of insanity
is repeating the same action,
expecting different results—

but fail to mention that flipping a car
into a river in January isn't too sane either.
Funny how blurred the trees are,
how riotous the engine pounds

with the hammer down,
as he speeds home from Hannah's
to the Farmhouse, *The Black Album*
blowing the speakers out,

windows wide open,
almost doing ninety.

The Curvature of the Earth

after A.R. Ammons

What drives us
to climb ever higher,
from hill to peak
from summit
to space

so high eventually
that height
itself
becomes irrelevant?

It's not,
surely, man's
inborn desire
for exploration,

balls to that:
I've met
plenty of people
who were quite satisfied
with mystery.

Not curiosity, then:
call it rather
a fear of heights—

and all it proves
is what we've feared
all along,

that no matter
where
the arc begins
or ends, or
even if it does:

what's underneath it,
what is bound
by its concavity
is always, always less
than what's above.

Holes

We shiver, all three, and notice for the first time that it's evening.
Up on the ridgeline, the slant rays of the sun still flicker
weakly through the trees, but in the valley
shadows have started slipping out of the corners,
stretching and growing, puddling together like water
filling a dry lakebed. We have been distracted by science.

What else but science would explain these six holes,
spaced evenly apart at intervals of fifty feet or so,
out here, miles from any road? What else but fascination
would drive us to examine them so thoroughly
when we know we should be heading home—
a lightless half-hour's trek back down the hill.

We begin our experiments. Width: a shoe and a half.
Depth: five seconds, according to the instruments
we have at hand—rocks and sticks, a squirrel skull
sent chattering down into the darkness. They look
like they lead to the center of the earth, someone says.
Silent agreement. Night is climbing up the mountainside.

Something to do with geological surveys or soil samples,
we hypothesize. Surely not the product of witches—
they build stone circles and kill chickens. Not ghosts, either.
Could be demons of some kind (our friend swore he saw one
running the trails up here last summer), but the symmetry
is too exact to be anything but government work.

Still, how did they get the equipment up here? The drills
would be large and heavy, and the closest things to roads
are those old logging trails that haven't been used in fifty years.
Our reasoning runs us once again into the invisible wall
of the supernatural. Our faith in science and logic quickly
diminishes. Night has reached the bottom of the holes

and we can feel it churning down there, rising toward us.
Maybe it's an Indian burial ground. Maybe
we should leave, someone says. We are already moving,
and as we descend we can feel the blackness well up
out of the earth and follow us downhill, racing each other
toward the porchlights sparking on in the distance.

Freddy Watches a Ball Game, July 4th 1970

*I inlisted in the USArmy July 7th, 1970,
and will always be a soldgier.
—M.F.D.*

In three days, he will tell his parents he loves them.
He'll kiss his mother on the cheek, and she'll joke
about him shaving his beard before shipping out,
but he'll see her searching underneath it
for the boy he used to be. *I'm still here, Mom*, he'll think

but not say. He'll turn then to his father, to whom
so much has not been said. Too much. No use
in trying to say it now, so he'll speak without words—
a clasp of the tremulous pale hand, a slight nod.
As if settling a bar tab. He'll turn away
and not look back. *I hope you're proud of me, Dad.*

In three weeks, he'll board an airplane and feel
for the first time the downward push, that sinking feeling
of the earth dropping away underneath him. It won't
be the last time. There will be other men, there, too,
on the transport aircraft, one of whom
will try to strike up a conversation. But the window,
with its long last look at farmland and forests,
its silent distances, will distract him. *I'm still here, Mom.*

In three months, he'll have completed Basic Training.
Clean shaven now, and in better shape than any
professional baseball player, his perfect vision
and quick reflexes will pull him into flight school.
That downward push, that sinking feeling he can never
accurately describe, those worlds falling away from him—
all will become familiar, commonplace. In another few months
he'll wake up in the jungle. *I hope you're proud of me, Dad.*

In three years, the world will come crashing back—
his helicopter shot down, and he the lone survivor.
He'll wake up in a hospital bed with one leg
and will find at last the proper words to describe
that sinking feeling. Those worlds lost. The words
will not exist in a language he knows,
so he'll have to invent one. It will be necessary for him
to speak to the dead. *I'm still here, Mom.*

In three decades he will be sitting in a bar,
asking a waiter for twenty dollars so he can take a cab
to the VA. The waiter will give it to him, not knowing
if he'll ever be paid back. The room is full
of long last looks. He will get up slowly, and adjust
the belt that keeps the prosthetic leg attached to his hip.
After he's out the door, the waiter will notice on a crumpled napkin
that he's written: *I hope you're proud of me, Dad.*

In three days he will tell his parents he loves them,
and will board a bus that will never bring him back.
But today, right now, here, he is sitting on the couch
in his living room at home, watching a baseball game
while his mother makes potato salad in the kitchen.
His father is out back spilling whiskey while he grills
some burgers. It's dusk, and after dinner they go out
in the front yard to light fireworks with the neighborhood.
Each tiny explosion up and down the block sounds
like the echo of something that hasn't happened yet,
something that cannot, and will not, ever be put into words.

Freddy Speaks

Amen, amen. Have a seat, Senator—sure, go ahead and smoke one. This pack is for Monday, this one's for Tuesday, ok, and this blue one is for Wednesday. That's Thursday, that's Friday, and over here is Saturday.

This baggie is for Sunday—that's my special medicine, ok. Doctor says I smoke that on Sunday, and every other day of the week too, forever and ever, amen.

It always brings me good weather, that special medicine, you know?

So I put on my headphones like this, ok, and they pick up all the transmissions in the universe—all of them at the same time—aliens, and everything!

Everything except Dad, amen, he talks to me so I don't need my headphones, unless he makes it rain, you know, with the interference.

But then on Tuesdays I'm the President of the United States, and president of the BB&T bank, and King of Everything, you know? On Tuesdays and once a month on Saturdays, amen.

So I'll pay you back that forty I owe you on Tuesday, ok, because Presidents can pay their Generals back. Presidents pay Generals back—Presidents pay Generals back, and Generals pay Sergeants 'till Tuesday.

This cowboy hat? I got this hat from John Wayne. Yeah man, we were riding horses on a trail when here comes this big branch, and I said, "Watch out, John Wayne, watch out!" and the branch just knocked his hat right off his head!

So I picked it up for him, I did, and he said, "No Freddy. You keep it. And you report to Hannah Flanagan's in Asheville, North Carolina, Sunday morning at 10 AM." And I said ok, Dad, and I've been here ever since, amen. Amen.

Yeah, Dad is our Heavenly Father, Charles Ziegfried Tessendorf, and I am his son Albert Tessendorf, King of Germany, ok.

These coins? Yeah, President John F. Kennedy gave me these dollar coins, you know. He gave them to me and said, "Freddy, you're the new President of the United States, so go out to the VA Hospital twice a week."

He said, "Go Tuesdays and Saturdays, and call a cab at 8282541155, but remember your real job is Head of Security at Hannah Flanagan's, ok?" Then he gave me this sheriff's badge, too, amen.

Can I get some sweetened iced tea, and two grilled cheese with mayonnaise?
Thank you General, thank you Senator.

Thank you Doctor. That's good medicine. Man, I'm gonna fly out into the atmosphere after I smoke this one! I'm going to go visit the Cheesecake Factory and everything. Amen, amen. Gonna go see Dad.

And I'll take forty 'till next week, next Tuesday. Twenty? Yeah, I'll take twenty and give you sixty on Tuesday. Twenty is half-way. Twenty for the cab out to the VA, twenty for the cab back.

Still Life with Barstools

I used to imagine she woke up
at the same time as normal folks,
after the patrons had stumbled home
and we'd finished cleaning—Hannah,
the woman in the portrait, the accidental
namesake, given pride of place
above the other kitsch on the wall behind the bar—
sometime around dawn she'd sprout the specter
of a body, come floating down
among the upturned barstools,
the darkened jukebox—for a few hours
she'd dance, all alone, to the music
that wasn't there. And if someone
was lucky enough, in passing,
to glance through the front window,
he might catch the shimmer of a smile,
floating among the dust mites
catching light in the morning sun.

Freddy Recalls Standing on a Street Corner, and Seeing the Work of God

That streetlight hung like fire in the sky, Dad, like God's eye
singing down at me on the corner. Singing down so hard
I had to stop and listen, amen. I couldn't help it.
I wasn't moving too fast, Dad, but I had to stop stock still
and listen as that light took on a body shaped like you.
Not shaped like me, and not shaped like God, amen,
but somewhere in between, with a thickness so that I could tell
the wind was cutting through it, Dad, like it cut through me,
and that cold metal pole stopped being a pole and started
being a backbone. That eye up high in its head, and a stop sign
banging loose at the base, metal and screwed-on like my leg
but cutting a jig just like the leg I used to have, amen, swinging
easy off the bottom of its backbone—that rigid, straight-up spine
that won't ever bend down and break. Like God's, amen.

It was beautiful to see, Dad, and I wish you could have been there,
because right then the wind picked up a bag, just a little paper bag
like we used to make masks out of, Dad, the wind picked it up
and hung it like a hat on top of that streetlight, amen, flew it up
like a bird, and I almost fell down and cried, Dad, right there in the street—
because that's how God made man, I think, or at least
that's how He made me. Out of light and masks and metal.
But dancing, Dad. God made me and I'm dancing.

Erosion

for DJ

Two days of rain, and the Green River
is rising, sharpening its blade
on the rough whetstone
of an undercut bank.

In its swift-steel current
a hollowed-out moon
swims, refracted in the rapids
like a fishhook.

Look, how up in the sky
another, more solid moon cracks
against night's hard helmet.
Look at the earth, crumbling apart at the edges.

Look at the river, running away,
and look what happens
when you try to catch it:
your kayak upside down in the dark

and no one there to spot you.
The frayed safety rope
floats a few feet away,
and if you could loop it around

that slender cleat of a moon,
maybe you could haul yourself
to shore. But ever since
you started giving yourself over

piece by piece to the river,
it has demanded nothing from you
but more. So let the cold water wash
the last of you downstream,

let your sediment settle with sand
and become that rock on the bottom.
Become that cold and unforgiving rapid.
Become that curved black blade of night.

Mass

from the Spanish of César Vallejo

When the battle was finished,
and the combatant dead, a man came toward him
and said: "Do not die! I love you so much!"
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Two men came near and repeated, again and again:
"Do not leave us! Courage! Return to life!"
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

A crowd of twenty came to him, a hundred, a thousand, five hundred thousand,
clamoring: "So much love, and no power against death!"
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Millions of individuals surrounded him,
with one common plea: "Stay, brother!"
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Then all the men of the earth
surrounded him; deeply moved, the corpse saw their sadness;
he rose slowly up to join them,
threw his arm around the first man, and started walking.

Freddy's Prayer

I wish it wouldn't rain

quite so much in the summer—

the smell of asphalt cooling smells

like a baseball

thunked into the worn catcher's mitt

of your love,

O Heavenly Father.

The rain in the jungle doesn't smell

anything like asphalt,

and every tree is the Tree of Knowledge

of Good and Evil:

of your love,

O Heavenly Father.

I spent two years in the jungle,

of that much I'm certain.

The tropical birds

mute among the tripwires

of your love,

O Heavenly Father.

A helicopter is a bird

with one wing.

I used to feel safe in the cockpit

of your love,

O Heavenly Father,

but these days I fly in circles.

I attach to my hip
the Tree of Death,
and drag it with me through the dimming streets
of your love,
O Heavenly Father.

My beard is a new wing—
it will help me balance
as I walk now through the jungle
of averted eyes
and the long uncomfortable silences
of your love,
O Heavenly Father.

My mouth
is the Garden of Earthly Delight:
my words
are tropical birds,
singing finally to the tear-wet trees of Arlington
of your love,
O Heavenly Father.