

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: *In The Hall of The Great North American Mammal*

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“*In The Hall of The Great North American Mammal*” is a collection of poems in three parts that examines a speaker as he grapples with the concept of his own inevitable adulthood, finding, ultimately, that the depths of his heart linger in the romanticized promise of perceived adolescence. The dissonance he finds between the two stages of himself is treated as a real geography, a physical space where the forces of “other” and “self” wander and meet, where the unexpected or dangerous environment proves or tests the trajectory of this speaker’s growth. Through the narrative of the extended poem in section two, this landscape becomes a way to flesh out the dissonance created by the speaker’s maturing, while still attempting to recognize and celebrate the work that comes with forging or finding a path in an unfamiliar world.

IN THE HALL OF THE GREAT NORTH AMERICAN MAMMAL

by

Mason Henderson

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Were The Future Cast in Snow

Bring me the scattered winter sky, its shapes gathered and named—
the great bears, paired always, *Major* and *Minor*, the hunter,

Orion, the dogs at his heels, his dogs, his stars, endlessly leaping.
Bring me the dog stars as they would have it—give them teeth,

their cold, their burning season. Bring me the snow we carried
beneath them, the curves of it we dressed in my father's clothes.

Bring me your stories, the ones whispered and curled, new as smoke
in my ears— the boy who returns from the woods, most of himself

intact, the boy who returns as a dog, the boy who returns with the sky
packed like snow in his hands, still recognizable, still blue-black

and glistening as it's shaped to the shape of a man—Mother, I have
tried to be like that snowman's ever-open eye, like the two branches

holding up the air between nothing and the nothing of space. I have
tried to hold the future as you did, to work a certain snow and to walk

through the mirror of my regrettable boyish self but I have reached
no star, to no woods have I run or charged through well enough to

have a thought or to be a dog like the dog I was so I must ask, instead,
Mother, bring me what I've reached for and have not grasped:

the mirror that caught each descending sun that fell that winter or
the light of each throne, each star-hunter cast in his victory or shame.

Bring me the answer to each unanswerable question—did we tell
it true with those three frozen spheres? Was the future pulled like

a man from your head? Bring me an older age, one capable of telling,
of barking down the light of each new star, or of eating whole the dark

air surrounding each one's intangible tooth. Bring me the wooden limb,
the fortunate eyes, the discord we made—what will? what chance is next?

The Accidental Colours

Here the quiet street, its even trees and lawns, its cars parked neatly empty, everything clipped and separate; here the house,

ordinary and satisfied in its own construction—its red door, its small garden curled toward the front steps, only a little

over-bloomed—; here the floors and furniture, the French doors, the bedposts, all their shades of wood—dark oak, white bamboo,

maple, solidly bright—; here the morning we woke to a robin flying against the glass it couldn't see—the living room windows,

unmarked by cloth or cracks—*alone* you said. Living in a house without curtains is sometimes difficult—lying bare against the rug

after breakfast, our shadows, awkward in their way of barely touching, throwing themselves out where anyone could see—but Jesus, that light

that light pushed blue through the leaves of the front yard elm only gets in so often and even that bird was telling of the time

we spent in that house, singular in its flight, its way of breaking the light with its wings—its endless engagement, to us, somehow worth it.

The Familiars

In the summer of no one's
great concern, there was
a sudden migration inward,

back to the city. We bummed
around like birds confused
and ended up north. Empty

cars alarmed us, their *hell-oh*
hell-oh's went out to no one,
collided with the avenue

maples twisting their heads
from the street.
Breaking its sleep like a

red-faced infant, a siren
wakes the flower of a paper
bag and the flower of a mouth,

homeless, drinks what is left
of the boulevard. We took
to the streets that way,

plucking at mirrors and windows,
seeking the inward path
of each reflection. The groaning

and wailing we heard as it
inched its way through the streets
and our veins was a gift of the city.

We opened doors in ourselves
and the sky poured in. Had we
ever been different? Could we

ever have lived somewhere else?
The stars fought their dog fights
in the distance, and we huddled

in our globe of noisy light,
unseeing and unconcerned.
We woke to the cold sweat

of autumn and, hearing the
determined engine of those who
slept beside us, ticking away, felt

the shock of being beside
ourselves, of a room,
unfamiliar, surrounding us.

And this is the way we
find each other, piled
at the altar of our city.

One night we walk through
the doors of our houses
and find everything

impossibly quiet. The colossal
gears have stopped, the chairs
and walls have stayed right

were we left them. We pace.
She is done with us, our city,
and yet the air in our blood

still fires—something trailed in
long ago lingers and we stop, feel
its approach—an animal smell

that's waited, here, for us, figure,
fur and shadow, suddenly
alien and dangerous in the room.

Watching a Ruined Dog Die in a Dream

He's cradled by a blanket and lies there,
panting. On the bed, wet fur, matted spots

of blood. The dog is dying slowly—*he's
alright* you say, *is he going to be alright?*—

looks sideways at nothing. No wronged rib,
himself, no failure—fate, different in his

one good eye, sees the scampering paw,
the gouged tread of a wheel, the escape he

tried or should've tried, all made good in the
bare blessing of a bare brush with death.

The obvious truth—breath, short. Body,
crushed as if by machine, there's no car, now,

but there's been one—the ear thinned back,
the mouth tightened down—you know it

the way the future, in a dream, confesses:
the hand finds your throat just as you think

no, not that or the crow admits to an old girlfriend
all your new catastrophes: *Last night he...Last night we...*

Or how my mother's sister's feet, bare and red,
clearly knew the truck, when she tore toward it

in the snow, or how my father's shoulder, still
a child's, wore a shotgun stock as he stepped

to the animal mess in the street. This dream
has two halves for the dog: one where I wake

and, to no one, say *he's on your side again*,
one where, legs no longer necessary, he wears

a helmet into space, and you, who once might've
thought or made a thing like this, think, *moondog*,

you're not my child. If he could speak, the dog
would say the human heart's not quick enough,

that the dull wallop he, or the car, or the shotgun
made was not the sound of death but of his body

changing, of bone and toothy petals sprouting like lilies
from his snout, so that now when he lies as they do

when hurt or denying hurt, wearing, not a grin,
but the necklace of his own chipped teeth, he is able

to say that I, unlike the merciful child that was my father
shooting his broken mutt, lack the courage to name,

either with buckshot or turned eye, that which I love.
His future, a lonely one, spread on your blanket.

What have we done to him? What have I?
Before gone completely, I watch the dog twist

the covers with his need and remember, then,
that my reprehensible heart has turned, like him,

from the first loss and gone, greedy as mouth or fang,
wanting another and another and another.

I hope you have learned something different.
It is afternoon and the school kids walk the alley

kicking or carrying bottles from the trash, breaking
or not breaking the glass in the sun's new light.

Of the city I am leaving, one smokestack
in the rearview. The trees, skinny out of Baltimore,

reveal slivers of familiar human life—the house,
the yard—and the highway, risen in the mirror,

to the jawing sky of dawn, is the hound's one truth:
Yes, the slow heart wakes, is late again.

When I Heard You Were In Prison

I hadn't seen you since a friend of ours was married. In the first year of college, you bought a ridiculous blue suit for concerts and ended up wearing it down the hall, flapping your arms and your pinstripes all over us. At the wedding, that suit looked different. The pleat, faded at the thigh. Your hands, worrying, one in each pocket. They, too, were changed. In school, jumping and slipping across a saxophone, they could make any one of us jealous. When you played, your odd mustache jumped like you were telling a joke or laughing at one, which you were, though none of us knew it. Your hands, then, happy accidents, working the eye of each key and knowing, already, how and when to use each in its time. *O's* of ears and mouths, shaping something other than blame—that perfect silence the waiting make as they listen as though across a great distance—you used to sing that way when you wanted something other from the machine in your hands, used to spit the wild syllables of what you'd hear before you even began to play. Your mouth, bent to a perfect ring. Your ear, patient for that note, like a stone in your head, to sound.

Carried past the cliff of your face, you played like there was nothing else for you. Who knows that at twenty? Who knows the distance of a room as something more than it is, that the space from the chair to the door or the hallway isn't a space but a way to send yourself out across time? We all thought you were crazy and you were that too, when you played. The cops came every night to close the building and you'd wait with the lights off, quiet against an upright, so that you might keep going. *For what? For how long could he?* —questions we

each kept, those who had known you,
and, though no one answer spoke, I can
see you like that now—sitting on a cot that wasn't
made for you, that maybe smells of someone
else, or afraid in the corner like someone
waiting as you did, every night in college—
the lights outside, cycling to black, your heart,
suddenly ready and alone. Your hands, I think,
fluttered then, your fingers cast, at your sides,
different bones for the future, and you, if you'd
stood still enough, heard yourself play as we did,
like someone else in the room, in your cell, playing
hardest, then, as if you knew who, exactly, was listening.

Elkhart, Indiana

I

Stashed in the basement
of the old house, its
easy clasp of string, left unwound,
the box I found and up-ended,
the confused rush
of shadows scattering,
the floor, suddenly covered
in careful shapes—this was me

discovering my mother.
Her paper dolls, cut
as if from the dark, spilled
and their flat clothes, their
little bodies, collapsed
and they wore each other,
there on the floor, like envelopes.

II

Just outside town,
already waiting

for the teeth of winter,
the hungry, white
landscape, to devour—

the barns
shifted. The days

grew short. The snow
fell. People came
back. People left.

They were covered,
flattened
left in the dark.

After His Death

In Michigan, finch-feeders hang
by his wife's window. All day, bright
colors flit between ground and
glass and the cage where their

feeders hang. Not much else to do
for the birds. Not much else to do
for my grandmother. It's hard to
imagine—early morning, hands

full of their suet or seed, each box,
a window, a dish to peck from.
They look at her knuckles going
in to drop a hard cake in each,

five stones leaving inexplicable gifts.
Nuthatch, black tipped, Goldfinch
that'll leave come winter—some
will sing, will recognize a birder's

knobby joint, while others, too
new or too young, will swallow,
will flip each pale, arthritic stone
down their throats so, later, they can eat.

When we emptied the house, we
emptied the feeders and put them
in a box where they clinked like
simple ornaments against each emptiness.

Each box was labeled, was carried
from yard to truck, for husband
or for wife, for the living or
for the dead—their bed, one half

each thing, was loaded last and,
because my mother and father couldn't
afford a hotel, we slept that night
on the floor of a bed-less house.

The birdsong, hung in the air outside,
called for an offering. We pretended
not to hear. I was a kid and worried
that I'd wake surrounded by my guilt

or that, worse it'd be the furniture,
moved back into place.

She says she wakes up, now, not
recognizing anything. Barefoot

on the lawn, the nurses pick pebbles
from her feet and nightgown, toss
them back to the yard. She says she
feels him, sometimes, my grandfather,

leaving the room. We pretend
not to hear like we did with those birds.
That night I slept on the floor
of his bedroom, in the ghost

of his ruined bed, I worried
what he'd ask for, what his mouth,
hanging open for rocks or for feed,
would say or that, over me,

trying to speak or to swallow
like all those birds outside,
his house would be mistaken,
empty, as it was, with all of us in it.

Aubade

Light rippling through a stable—it crosses the flank of horse.
Effortless. A boy, he can almost smell it in the air, see it,
this sudden brightness shot through the morning, corded,
beneath the skin, through the muscles of each horse's neck.
The sun, yes, but more than just its cool light. He walks down
the line, counting them, naming the ones he hopes to ride.
Outside, dawn's half-light continues to grow. A lantern spits
protest from its hook on the wall. He's forgotten his jacket
this morning and is cold. But this is part of it—the cold, the frost,
the scent of winter, worn in the hay, still wet from the night.
The horses, swing above morning feed, dipping before him
like cranes, kissing the oats in their buckets. Heads bowing
in agreement of one another, they are singing, he thinks, a song
for the morning. Does he listen? More than ever. The oak and oil
of that place fill his mouth and he leaves the stable that morning,
forever bewitched. Over the fields in the East, the new sun, rising.
In the stables, the screwbald mare, speaking in his quiet,
screwbald tongue, catches, sideways in his sideways eye,
the shape of the boy as he leaves. And we, who have seen,
who remain, the only things left, are cast: shadows on the wall.

A Different Knowledge

When we were children we watched our fathers in fascination, men pulling fire from beds of grass, taming it in circles of small, flat stones. We stood behind them while they plunged into old trucks, their curses, their *goddamn*'s and *sonofabitch*'s peeling, into the rust, a language,

one we'd not heard before and, later, tried to learn ourselves so we could talk to our fathers, their machines. Instead, a different knowledge—counting with them, at the fish ladders, the silvered backs of salmon bolting cold and sudden from the froth—we'd grow older. We'd rush forward

towards nights when we could spill ourselves in well-drunk shadows, tripping over each other like cats across someone else's lawn. We'd drive out beneath streams of rock and dust, beneath the sky, its stars burning at each other there, scarring our vision, and our bodies would flick

open and closed like pocket lighters, the tiny plastic purples and blues marking our exits with a soft popping into darkness... We learned this, just as they had, our fathers, men of fire working fire, men silhouetted, green on the river, watching their fish, leaping, willing us up and up and on.

The Wounded

Last night the grand machine of a muzzle worked
open the door and, though I wanted to answer,
I feared what I'd say. Who knows what it sought,
what it might've felt quivering in the wood of that

fragile hut but the beast's primal test of
worrying snout, left me with nothing but a shelter
of my own silence. Not so for the man we knew
as children, who wore, in scars, the practical attack

of a bear he'd surprised while walking, and who,
for us, walking through town, became a monster
in his own right—mangled cheek, half-swallowed
face, scars like another's hand, clutching its fingers

at his throat—never more than that, his old wound
smiled at us and, though he might've been father
or uncle to some kid we didn't know, his flaw
was still the hot white fear or form of what we,

shameful children, made of him when we jeered
or laughed or ran—what monster had come for us
but the monster of our own hearts? His scars, hidden
in the high collar or brief fabric of a shirt, were still

found by us, just as he must've found them, in mirrors
or in the worse reflection he, himself, kept—the way
the bear is my more accurate reflection of my own
cowardice, the way each dream is a cowardice, each

one of us, a coward in the shadow cast by his own act—
he became a haunted thing and, though I don't know what
to speak or say at the door of my own judgment, I know,
that, there, she left a kindness—a word or grace toward

my own forgiveness. What pity, what tender shame
did she know or feel toward me when she walked away,
the way the man walked from himself or the way we,
when we were kids, hid the tooth of each mean truth

we spoke of the heartsick, the mistaken, or maimed?
What word? What silence stopped her? At the door,
the same mind that, now daily, condemns itself, that hopes
for the undoing of its cruel child-year, hopes that the man

was not killed by our vicious hearts, is the same mind
that, unlocking the door, wanders toward the wood
of its resurrected beast, seeking a wound with its
found word—*Get on with it. Do what you came for.*

II
The Gill Net Boys

Windows shut, the bay, barely audible, he sits in his trailer or office, picking the skin of his teeth. His arms, propped on elbows, his ears, tuned to that perpetual sounding of the elements outside. Something we can't yet hear

for ourselves, his voice, remains the sound of a great many waves upon an infinite wall and, like the shore outside, is distant, is slowed and muted, the sound of a great many beads pulsing within the horn of a shell. Does he speak?

Not with the intent of being heard for no one stands before him and his title—master or captain or keeper of this place—remains empty. There is something about him that we might be unsure of and he stills as if we were watching.

Fixed like that—same pair of coveralls day after day—dirt collects in the room like a shadow, draws across his cheek and, for what could be months or days or, perhaps, simply, a moment, his eyes narrow. Here he is, waiting.

Already, we imagine the curses speaking beneath those eyes and, though the image is our approximation—maybe he picks the phone up and speaks or maybe he shuffles a pack of cards out in front of him—we are what's missing.

Of his place, this is known before we arrive. The water has warmed, the season has settled. From Soldotna, he will retrieve his crew, each of us plucked from the tiny planes that have ferried us, the mountains of Anchorage left behind for the muddy

waters of this smaller place but...that is for later. For now, the sea and his arms at the table. For now, sit or chew and, like a beast or riddle from a book, think only of that which wanders toward you. His purpose—to hold, to guard.

The path's end or perhaps the woods themselves surrounding his camp—these are his questions for us. He will ask them differently for the different shape of each boy that ends up here. Quiet, now. There's laughter from the woods,

from the shadow on his face, something stirring. The image changes— the cards go back into the pack, the flat cry of the sea is exchanged for a word. The chair is empty and we have arrived. His business is no longer waiting.

I

Airstrip, Soldotna

Take the man at the wheel, packed among rolled tents, fishing cord, soft stacks of Penthouse and Playboy, asking a name for the fare. Or else the pilot, when she leans back, thumbs her cigarette like something decided or reached, looks to the window

and the trees, clear, closer now, appear as a wall at the dark edges of the tarmac. If it didn't begin with work or the rubbed-raw hands of work, it'd begin *The first fools must've looked as they did: kids, they blinked away the light of a new sun, or shore,*

or stand of trees, and gave up their names to that first wandering stranger.

On the plane's dash, the old halo of a coffee cup is a paper mouth eating fallen smoke. The glass dials in the console are glass faces sliding back to zero. We descend.

Or we stand at the hatch of the man's jeep wondering *where could all this shit have come from.* From the airport in Anchorage, we send letters, postcards—Wishing YOU all this Alaskan beauty!!—pictures of the accurate mountain air that,

up the winding, bone-dust road to camp, is, now, the air of a real place, striking the nose of the jeep. *Anchorage. Knick River. The Kenai up to Skilak Lake—* more waters than we'll ever pass through, we are like boys sent looking halfway up

the Congo, or that scrapping-and-smoking-and-shooting-pool-crew, who, in the presence of one dumb, wooden boy, found themselves the whooping jack-asses of some ill-mannered trick. We imagine—must imagine—ourselves to be different.

And if the air, here, is too clear or too thin, or our packs, too easy? If the country has that wayward look of a final station? Well, then...then we ride in front, surrounded by hooks and magazines, pictures of the odd leg or bare breast crushing us, and,

though our bodies, our bags in the back, do not make the machine, though no coin is taken or lifted from our lips, some deal has been struck. We think of the hides displayed at the airport—caribou, an elk, a bear that, teeth ringed in a terrible *o*

of rippling lip, stood like a man to face the mark of a rifle. Or else her own darkness—What did she ask or say in defense, the moment that thing judged her unfit? In the air, what signs, what knowledge held in dials at our knees as we flew?

We can taste the pilot's smoke. We can smell the pine and see the skins. The grind of her taxiing four-seater calms, kicks out one last time. The two outside, bent double in procession toward the plane—orange vests, orange plastic-squares-for-ears,

orange cones held in orange gloves—are like two neon angels of the airstrip, raising their limbs to the new or the newly departed—*How high? How far East or West?*—the machine's glass, forever ahead, a fluorescent message, forever in their hands.

II

Kenai Bay, Alaska

But first the washed-out miles, the dark wheel kicking, the too-bright stone.
 Immovable in the open field, the sun's look, the noonlight, catches
 the crow straight, or snags, at great distance, the flat animal yelp.

At the gate, rattling its tin, a road sign groans with its one nail and there—
 pole barn, hewn timber, a yard, beaten flat—a camp. A settlement.
 From our ride up, finding the gate open, to that first slip of paper, signed

at his desk—an order that ends with the man. Enormous. Beat-to-shit bibs.
 Mud in his hair. He has the distrustful look of someone left alone and, when he
 turns, his shirt turned out, it's as if the dark curl of hair we see at his belly were,

like an animal smell, our first warning. Not a care for us. Not a word.
 A girl, a daughter, second in command or closest thing—too-big arms, hair
 knotted back—takes us around: *here is the camp and its boats and its nets and all*

*its old trucks and here the bunkhouse where you'll sleep and here where you'll eat
 and here the table where you'll mix Tang! and Kool-Aid powder and here a shed
 for things and here another barn filled with nothing but scrap metal and here*

*the outhouse you'll hate and love because of the shit cooking and all
 the Tang! and here is where we'll weigh the fish and here's the crane
 that will lift them up and here is an honest-to-God phone booth and here*

is the place and here and here. Soon enough she'll have us flipping
 boats out of storage, hooking thick coils to stern points while we
 beat on them, fist to hull, hull to ground—*fat-motherfucker, fat-motherfucker,*

beattoshitbeattoshit—a song for her father. O boys, what cruelty!
 What demented waltz! What hair-brained syncopation of work in the sun!
 Twenty-two hours, each day starts with his rules—*No alcohol, no otherwise*

impairing drug, no women from town. Down his daughter's face, what the point
 of two thinly crossed scars stitch to her cheek—*Keep a knife at your hip.
 Keep the rope from your feet. Young trespassers, when a buoy line flies*

and thrashes your face, keep the mirrors out of the room. In the Northern light,
 we work stone-blind, new ears listening to the new word of this place:
fuel now two parts old and one part new; water is both larvae and spigot;

*time is now tide and cocksucker becomes what you are when you're late;
 bitch means ocean and work; work means bloody stones for hands.* The North Hour
 pulls and refracts and we tack it to the edges of our knives, hold, at arm's length,

its stationary point until, like boy scouts, like the arrow of a compass or turning stone, longitudes and latitudes and time's shadow in the yard are the blade's shadow in the dirt, the shadow of our hands stuck through.

III

The Camp, Kenai Bay

We lose count of ourselves, work with our hands. John keeps a bundle of tails, squirrels he's marked with a rifle, a .22 he calls *Kindness*. *The boss poisons them* he lies so the gun's name is true. In the end we spot with him. The little tufts

of fur falling out of the trees remind us of dogwood that won't grow, can't, this far north. The boss has a hound he keeps in a pen that never stops snarling. On the roof of his hut he maddens, is driven hoarse by our scent. Our strangeness,

a truth in his teeth. We, like him, curse constantly. Most of us begin to smoke. Grown up working combines and grain silos, the kid from Kansas chews his tobacco, already accustomed to the sanctity of bad habits. Smoking. Cursing your neighbor.

He's the first to wake every morning and the only one to talk to the dog through the fence. He tells us he is nameless, makes up his names as we work—*Heathen, House-Pouncer, Frecklefaced-Dirtroller, Blue-Eye, Bluedevil, The Kid*.

Outside, we dig trenches, burrow under lean-to porches, run piping between the ramshackle shacks where we sleep. The sun gives no rest. At the edge of our torn-up yard, huts—the old, the disconnected and cast aside—are left to be

reclaimed by the woods. *Sickener, angel-wing and brittle-gill, chicken-of-the-woods*—trunk-side or brook-bellied, each spore, each creeping tongue of the forest is named a thousand times so that a hand, knocking one color from a stump, might know

which was which and yet, destroyers, all of them, all honorable reclaimants to the refuse of man's sorry house. Feet strike the damp wood of a floorboard. A piss's steam ghosts a doorway's invisible frame. Ancient and discarded, stuck in a stream or

tumbled down a ravine, we find them: shacks full of moose shit and afterbirth. Chip of charcoal, branch's ashy tip—we drag letters through the walls of each empty, barely human room. Mud-eyed socket. Wallpaper, shed like leaves. Names,

ours and others before us, darken or lighten the wood, the plastic tables, the thinly countered kitchenettes where someone maybe played cards or wound their fingers round a cigarette—the last leavings of some forgotten tribe,

abandoned to this country's growth—what could be remembered? What mineral of our skinless selves could we expect to remain? Each pelt, tacked. Each small bone, shot through and hung. The trailers, not so noticeably small, are now nests of the odd,

the oddly found. We tie shells, the broken mouths of bottles, old Christmas bulbs to each skinned trophy, as if the whole group of us were hungry, were light-strung junkies seeking light to calm us while we sleep. Summer—twenty-two bright hours.

One day, we get up and find the barking has stopped, find the hound's pen, empty, find John pleading to the little squirrel, to the hide-rent bone above his bed in defense of his lengthened shadow: *O lasting tooth*, he begs, *O Rodentian skull*.

IV

The Long-Lit Shore, Kenai

While we sleep, our boots fill with mud, salt, air—weight we never expected. The moon dries in its station like paper, like the tacked wings of a moth. We dream. We back-lay buoy-lines, cable and rope. We lean over gill-nets,

twist new knots while each fish-scented line twists knots in our stomachs. Twenty-two hours of daylight. No stars. In their place, the mosquitos persist. Bigger than anything, without fear of the wind or the hard smack, they whine

with an ugly, inhabiting grace. Bastards. Zebra-striped devils exacting communion. Our bodies, constantly shellacked with sweat or bugs are being eaten alive so we grow desperate, burn candles, let curls of incense smoke at our feet.

Over row after row of unkempt nets, we work in pairs, collect diamond after diamond of the line, floating broken between us, waiting for each swollen finger to mend what the king or common salmon will try to escape—the truth of each gill,

of each knot we've tied in our own artless way, of the work, of the inescapable bite or sting of each bug: we wear not the intended, optimal skin of a true-hearted man. Around the nets, we keep our hoods drawn, our unspeaking faces, hidden.

The lines, hung for redressing—our burden or charge or last lasting significance. When one is finished, a prayer—a number, a tag, and a name. We move down the line with the names we've been given—names that we'd burned, once,

into the bunk's wood, have now been forgotten in the unrelenting air, in the chanted song pulled across our bodies in that fortune-teller's, that daughter's voice—*Boys, you are forgotten, are late to yourselves. Needle. Stitch. Tie the knot tight*

for your work is your last vessel, the last house you shall keep. For this net a tag—*Starcatcher*—a name. Quickening wind off the bay, the sunken head sinks lower. The work in our hands shrinks, uncles. We walk the two miles up the road

to the bar—lone sanctuary—walk the two miles back. Bottled fists. We go down to the beach, stack driftwood and newspaper in a shape we will fill with a fire. Come sleep, we dream generations back, great grandfathers occupying our limbs

because they recognize our work as their own—Len Anderson, no more than five foot four, chucking five-gallon jugs fifteen feet over our heads to the back of a truck or my father's father, whacking wildly at the wings of a plane while we

hand up our wrenches, sockets, and fists. They'd hoped for better. But we, who've come to prove something of ourselves to someone, are like those bottles, passed across those flames—half ourselves, half the clear glass—leaving, each drink, a space for each ghost.

V

Frankfort, Michigan

He's been working the fields. It is only just beginning to get light out. A section of fence has come down in a storm and he's just finished mending it. On his hands, cuts from the wire he's twisted, that will hold the cows in,

throb dimly. He barely notices, puts his gloves on. He is my grandfather. He is just a kid. No more than sixteen. As he stands, the sun blossoms in his eye. He walks back towards the house, the barn. Even with his limp, his lame

left side, he is handsome. He does not know how long it will be again before he is as glorious as he will be today. As he walks back to the house, the sun on his neck delights in his skin. He's been seeing a girl in town. He will see her tonight,

if he can. His mother worries about him driving the car, his one good hand, switching between the wheel and the gear-shift. She drifts to him, worried now too, *Jim, Jim*, his name drifting in her voice across the fields where he is walking.

He thinks he is dreaming it, until he hears it louder, cutting the cold wind all the way from the kitchen window *James, come quickly*. He quickens his pace as much as he can. At the backdoor, she is waiting. *They're in the barn*

with your father. Jim I don't know what to do. Jim they're back. I have one picture of my great-grandmother—she stands in the background smiling, through a screen door, at my grandfather's back. He is in uniform. She is wearing an apron.

She knows what she loves, what she is afraid of losing—her son holding a horn in his hand; her husband walking dirt through the kitchen. On the day she calls her son from the fields, she is worried there will not be enough. She watches

her son half-dash, half-limp to the barn. She is proud. She is terrified. There is no picture of this moment and she is glad. Up the hill he stumbles, already he hears them—his father talking, then one man, then another.

They will be dressed like men from the bank, will wear suits, and will be holding, one of them, a pistol. He has seen this before. They want his father's land, have brought a briefcase for it, and the pistol. His father is about to be beaten bloody.

These men, who are not from the bank, will beat his father, one smashing his face while he slumps in a chair, the other, holding a pistol on him. He is sixteen, my grandfather. He has one good hand and is afraid for his father. He knows,

already, about losing. Knows what to do about it. He will sneak up behind the man with a pistol. He will bring a wrench crashing down at the base of his neck. The man will slump. My grandfather will think he has killed him.

He will stand over him stunned while his father rushes the man with the fists. They will kick over barrels of milk as they wretch on the floor, one choking as he is choking the other. My grandfather will watch the milk pool at his feet,

twist pink with the blood dripped from his wrench. His father will win, he does not know how he knows this, but he is ashamed, nonetheless, that he does nothing to help. Ashamed at the not-dead man lying in milk. At the flecks

popping, scarlet, then pink, then pale white around him. He is sick. He runs from the barn. Hand at the ground, he buckles, steadying himself. Before him, a vision—six boys at a fire. They must know what he's done, that he has done

the right thing. His father will win. The men will leave, tearing off for Chicago. He will stand. His father will join him. His mother will love them. When he walks to the house, the future will blossom like the sun, like these boys, in the pit of his eye.

VI

Manistee, Michigan

James Anderson, you—your face-full of whiskers, your storied temper, your bald head, your *birthing complications*, worn at the arm, from the knuckles up—have entered. You've come as I knew you. Not the young man learning Armstrong,

blues from the radio, to play infield one-handed, quick as anyone in the red earth. Not the boy who was moved up and down Lake Michigan or who worked a farm with his father. Not the one who loved dawn, the sun pulling steam from the cold-no-

matter-what fields, pulling bellows from cows while they sung daylight all over, singing it, always, for the very first time. Not the one who hated the years of moving after, years saved only by the call of the beach. Not the one who hated and loved

the arms of his father—arms holding his mother. Arms slinging milk, pallets, up in the air. Arms that busted his lips every Sunday, cranking jazz from a saxophone while he bled through his horn like something out of the bible. Arms that conjured

Charlie Parker, American Bandstand, Duke, Satch, Porter, and Gould. Arms not particularly with or without God that belted him more than was countable. Arms that knew how to fight and did. Arms that I never knew to be anything

more than memories, passed through the son who hated and loved them. Not that, Jim. You're old and these things have passed. You come to me as I've known you—the grandfather-face wrinkled, yet taut, the arms, one lean and corded, even in old age,

the other, wrist curled wrong and violet in the dark of a womb, stunted from birth. They are your own. One side demands our attention. One side has something to say about love. You're not surprised. Of all things, this would not change. Jim, since I

have seen you alive and dead, I'll ask—Which face did you choose? The living face or the mask of death you wore—the long snout, the still tongue of our martyred, saintly mutt? I saw you, once, run, towards the lake, naked down to your underwear,

to your pale legs, pitching your half-body all at once to the waves. You'd grown up on that lake and had somehow returned to its water—the waves, the white chop. I watched you throw yourself, toss your back, weightless, to the waves, one after

the other, farther and farther out. I watched the light of your teeth given to the light of Lake Michigan. Over and over, your laughter one with the wind, your smile, harder and harder to see—first the face of a kid. Now your father. Now the grin of a dog.

VII

Gill-Net, Alaska

O hound! O mutt please forgive us! At night we will crawl to your pen, our limbs all committed to four-legged walking, the moon, the hour, dark in your honor—were there honor, were there any moon left. We howl

to the starless sky, discourse with the mountains as they judge us for the soul we have lost. O hound, O poor dead dog, you will be born, again—an American, red-jacket-cowboy, deep-voiced and Marlboro-smoking—

O pup, O disgraced red rebel, you will love only one woman and be true to her as we could not be true to you in your sacred hour of loss. What names will you choose? What letters, pulled from the dust or dark

or foreign road? Wound through the desert, a road we might have walked had we not wound up where we did—the wind, timeless, the sun, a baked bone, full of its own smoke, and in the distance, dunes that are each boy's imagined place—

a camp, a canine heel, a fire pulled from a horn. At hip or heel, a dog, waking, our work, waiting in the yard—in the distance, the name that is carried over mountain and sea is the name of the lost—*Warren; Sleeping Bear*—of the irretrievable beach.

Taken from dreams or our childhood they will last as long as we have lasted. Even as the dunes trade beads of sand with the wind, even as they become more or less over time, our own letters, cast out of us, here, down a stick or a stone,

will last less than an instant. We will run down the beach. Our dogs will follow, will have something to say—their names, the names of our fathers, mothers—a language we think understood. The wind will wear itself thick

in their coats. They will lick our palms, reading our fortunes—*You will look for me deep in the woods. On the beach. Under the moon. The bluffs will hang out over the muck. Touch my fur, the wind there. Listen. It will grow dark for the first*

catch of salmon. Their backs will shimmer from the sparks of your lamps. It will grow light too quickly and you will forget how they looked like stars in the dark. Before you look for me, listen—I will be waiting.

III

In *The Hall of The Great North American Mammal*

Visitors contemplate stillness. Behind
one glass, two bears, standing like men.
Behind another, a herd of buffalo, stiff

in their skins. Some seem more alive
than others: a skunk, wrestling its
way up a tree looks a little too caught

in the act, while a wolf, flipping a rabbit's
soft heel from the snow, obviously believes
in the thing that he's found. Like a photograph,

the heel's truth catches in the glass
of his eye. I saw a buck like that once.
Two points of fog on a hill—I could hear

him scenting me before I saw his breath
on the cold or his antlers, heavy with
moonlight. Like the dead wolf, he was still

as I passed and yet I knew the glow he
wore like a crown on his head could've shot
straight through me, had he wanted it.

What a thing to carry. What a trick
to know. Down from the wolf's kill, king
crabs hang like the bearded old and there

the hall changes—primitive hooks and traps
for fishing wait, spears that passed, for decades,
father to son, now sit, racked on a wall.

From left to right they grow smarter, sprout
barbs, next claws, next rings woven for throats,
next and *next* and *next* and—my own father

taught me to listen down near the ground
for the snort of deer, down where stillness casts
out its heart. Our history, no different than

that. Back down the hall a family of buffalo
listens. The hungry wolf catches his prey and
I think of what I hid from my father—the deer

I found and the thing that he carried, the way he
looked on, fire in his horn, and in his heart,
a fear, not of me, but of the thing I might do.

Knuckles

Here: me, dark on the coast,
brought low, doggish,
to the salt and muck, arm
hung across the body

just as the gill-nets
have been slung through the yard,
rows and columns of them,
their heavy mesh

bundled in the open air, my father
marking them for quality—blue
ribbon and little scraps of paper—
tagged like fire aftershapes,

my father holding
his own kind of darkness—
calloused hands
collapsed around my own,

their black weight torn,
grit and tar and blood, cold
against the skin, the bones in mine,
a light, translucent fiction.

The Story

A mare's chestnut flank split halfway open.
 Its stall wet with fear. The stitches, fifty-two of them
 up the side of the horse, maybe more. Staples,
 not stitches, like railroad tracks. The side of the horse,
 pulled back together. The beast brought back, its,
 my god, its wild hide brought back ripped. The side

of the van crushed, somehow crushed by the horse.
 The finger popped like a bug, found four stalls down.
 The rope wrapped around the hand, the canons' crack,
 punctuating the mistake. Of the rope. Of the horse that
 they frenzy. Men chasing after her, yelling people off.
 People yelling *my god! look out!* The horse jumping

two cars, one and then the other. The van, last in its
 row of cars—its door, blue colored, her failure, certain—
 and the horse, plowing right into it. Frantic. Not close
 to clearing it but believing she can. Her staggering, after,
 all anyone could talk about—the black bruise of blood
 splashing out of the horse and onto the road.

All anyone could see, they saw in an instant.
 The mother looking her ribs up and down a day later.
 The ribs reflecting back in the mirror, black, then green.
 The man who pushes her out of the way. The horse
 barreling towards her. The road that rushes up to meet her
 not yet black with horse's panic. The stroller she pushed,

not yet rolling away. The man's remorse, even
 as he does it. For the push. For the bruise a day later.
 For the blood on the road. But the horse. The baby. My god.
 Now, someone's van bashed to hell on one side. Now,
 someone's baby rolling away. Now the side of the horse.
 Now the story—fifty-two staples. Or more. My god.

Ice

Winter. The beach. Rocks and boulders wrapped tight as Christmas turkeys lie in crystals at our feet. Out ahead, the lighthouse, its catwalks and jetties,

glisten like wet bone. Waves turn beneath it, one quick gasp of cold followed by another and another and another. Inhospitable. My father loved the beach

this way and took us often. While we ran ahead, he'd walk the shore, saying nothing. We'd turn back and he'd be standing there smoking a cigarette.

This was before the winter when my sister went in up to her thigh, her boot boring down at the fish in the ice. That lake—smaller, inland—was peopled

with men hunched over folding chairs, buckets of guts, and holes drilled flat in the ice. In little thrown-up shacks, they'd stare into spaces, cut from the ice,

and watch the fish slow at the trick of homespun lures catching the light. In the hissing of each lantern's gasbag, the men, their faces, changed,

too-bright, fleshless as skulls. When my sister's foot went through the ice, our father watched, through his sheltered space, the Bluegill dart away and

in her eyes, I saw what he missed—the fear that said *It's happened. I'm falling.* No one noticed. What else to say? That my father pulled her by the elbow, that she

sat in the car, wriggling out of her boots? That elsewhere, like fires hung on a line, the other men pulled writhing scales from the water, that they threw them, their

dark small-mouth and dripping perch, back out at the sun? The loud crack of ice erased her leg, and I imagined it followed by hip, belly, chest, and face—

all but the hand, lost, the hand that remained, grasping at emptiness—What else but the hand, its silence in the air, endured? What but the impossible purchase she sought?

First Job

For me it was a tractor and the acres skirting
 my grandfather's house—the cinderblock
 toolshed that tore your knuckles, the old oaks
 that woke the aluminum roof with their seed—
 I rode flat rings into the grass, counting
 time in the bored passes I made, in the island
 of uncut grass that, lengthening its shadow
 of light, worked as I did, from the outside in.

Those summers I worked in circles, riding
 a wheel of lazy blades that shook and spit
 old gas, and thought myself older or growing
 older or simply at home on tracts of land
 that warmed to what I did. Saturdays, early,
 my father would take that tractor and show me,
 again, how, if you forgot to choke the engine
 or let it turn too slowly over, the whole thing

would cough and jerk and, just as quick,
 fall quiet. But if it fired, if the gears caught and
 the gunmetal grey of the hood shook truly,
 then the thing, the square brow, home to no
 chariot or fine machine, was still a use to you.
 Flames the size of insects had their voices shaped
 and cycled, pistons, roared like lions on the lawn
 so that your voice was forgotten. You'd sit on a bed

of springs, singing songs to yourself, not
 knowing whether the noise you made
 made its way from your seat or if it stayed
 in the machine of your body, singing, like
 the fire at your feet, for no one but yourself.
 The springs beneath that seat, lowering
 with certain weight, so that you were the key,
 were the essential, unseen circuitry the beast

needed to live. These were tricks I was too
 light for, that I couldn't understand, and that,
 like a heartbeat or the black bottom of a lake,
 existed without me knowing them.

The engine could forget me and I knew it, so
 while my father walked back to the house holding,
 out ahead of him, the small body of lessons he had,
 I would sit bone-stiff in the seat, riding it in circles,

afraid of the moment it or I would give up
this work. The silence after, an old thing, loosened
like the blackberry at the edge of the back plot
smudging the ground with its ink. The path down,
narrow, peppered with its berries, the small pasture
that waited, clear, as if cut from the sky. After finishing
most Saturdays, I'd watch my father drive the tractor
beneath the back field, down to where the brush

had been, years ago, bared or burned or cut and
wonder if the wheel in his hands and the wheel at his feet
moved, in that quiet place far from the house, to some
specific purpose. Sometimes he'd come up sweating, bundles
of sticks towed at his back or he'd stop and reach
from the seat for a branch, his hands coming away black
and sweet. But if he sent me down the hill, I'd circle
tracks in the grass the way he'd taught me—one

eye on the wheel, one towards the work's middle—
each time I passed, each time I turned back down
the hill, afraid that the engine would cut out and its
silence would tell me where to go or sit or where
to train my eye, that from the woods, someone
else would walk, another boy would be waiting.

Letters from the City

The Owls

Tonight the moon wears an orange skin.
 At the dock, the fog quickens, crosses the lake.
 The pines, shedding the fire-start of their beards,
 think themselves young. Summer is ending.

The lake bugs sting, hunt one another belligerently,
 sharing their poison. The air fills with the longing
 of their papery wings. On the bridge, two painted faces,
 two sets of wings beat the light of a streetlamp to death.

Tonight I write to you without having intended:
 Tonight the moon's color was almost unbearable.
 Tonight the heat broke and the leaves buzzed like moths.
 Tonight bodies that did not want to be seen,

announced themselves despite it, and were given
 two terrible masks, two sets of terrible claws.
 Tonight the unanswered nightbird felt its hurt and grew sick.
 Tonight that kind of thing seemed to make sense.

Tonight the moon's color was preened from each breast.
 Tonight when I finished the start of this poem, the summer
 folded itself, lines, changing their shape to that of the mouse,
 the shrew-bodied thing I heard hunted and killed by those birds,

that ran or tried to escape its own poor shadow—
 the poor shadow of these words, circling their purpose:
 Tonight the moon wears an orange skin.
 At the dock, the fog quickens, crosses the lake.

...

City Poem

Out back, a family of raccoons is waiting out the rush
of evening traffic—one mother, three young ones, now
almost grown. Eyes like the homeless, they glint

over carcasses and fishmeal with a purpose, entirely
foreign. They are almost startlingly beautiful. Three sets
of bright beads puncturing the night, they peer out,

accusing me of something so improbable—*Unsuspecting
Homeowner Shamed by Bandits and Their Gawking*—
I almost apologize. The interruption has broken something

between them. Back up the hill, the summer house, open and lit,
spills its laughter in circles on the lawn. The human voice
of a party goes on, waiting for no one. Long after I return,

the eyes—the glare or warning of this new feat—
will persist. A hundred households will find the murk
in their yards unsettled by hands, wholly animal. Night

will belong to the strangers, to the mother and her children.
Come morning, lids from the bins will be carried to the alley,
one in each hand, where I'll beat them, or try to, out to the light.

...

The Future

I watched a Grackle approach the porch,
hopping towards the tufts of hair that—
our dog's winter coat expelled in the heat—
my mother had thrown out on the lawn,
and realized that he could tell the future.
I'd watched him in the yard that morning,
scouting, wanting the things he'd need
to build his nest. The lawn, empty. No dogs.
No fur. Twisting his head in question after question—
What was he doing? What could he want?

...

Of Fish, To Self

Swimming, paired, the fish, unloving.
One below the other, so close, almost

bedded down to lake-bottom, yet still
swimming—the two of them, looking to snatch

the odd water beetle or the young of others.
Above. Below. The two of them, going along

like that, gobbling the little everythings
without knowledge or care for the other.

Why do they do it? Standing, moonlit
on the edge of the dock, watching the lake-perch

nibble at moonlight—because their bodies,
like all else, continue making what they'll make

without permission. Like clockwork, each spawn,
each spawning season waits within them

until it's too late and they chomp at the moon
with the shock of it. Spill it, they think,

let me be rid of it. And so they set themselves,
for weeks, against sleep, trying to unmake

the work they've done to each other, to themselves,
approaching with an untamable will. Unashamed.

Half-mad. And you, gutless at dock's end, feel
within yourself, maybe for the first time,

a kinship with these waters—complacent in your
biology of love or hurt or harm, abeyant as you

are in each touch of each contemptible body—
why do you make as you make, do you do as you do?

...

The Eucharist

Moth stuck on the landing for days, wings pressed
like pennies against the super's tape traps, their strips,

the way it trembled there, between one thing
and another, appetite for sugared paper,

the only thing left living in that apartment.

We were still going to church most Sundays,
learning to kneel on wooden benches, to ignore

the ache in our legs and to wait for the bread
to dissolve on our tongues, rituals of patience

wasted on us, boys who were, instead,

learning the secret names of insects,
to soften them, the way we did for saints:

Actias luna, the mother, translucent;
Acherontia atropos, rider of death;

the gypsie, our own moth, suspended

just before its unsettling, the exhalable quiet
wrapping his face—

returning home to find the stairwell
empty of wings, swept up, as they had been,

pressed still, alive or dead, thrown out in sheets.

The Royal Rubber Factory on Its Day of Public Demolition

He tells me how they'd only ever seen the inside of one on film, how Mrs. Shultz taught them the value of Michigan and Ohio through the ancient window of a projector's old electric light, and how the lines of Fords and Buicks magically matriculated, how men's arms sped up or slowed down to the keying

shift whistle or the fraying of the ticking reel of tape.

An essential element of the age and yet one less dignified than iron or oil's bloodless pitch, all it ever manufactured was the practical sanctity of a rubber soled shoe. No gears, no intricate assemblage went on inside, and yet the smoke

it belched was just as black, the film it bled, just as weightless on the river as so many things were to them back then.

He tells me how it worried them as kids—could you really catch on one hook a fish with two living heads and, maybe could you eat a fish's poison like a secret, without knowing,

without it looking any different? To be safe, they'd bridge fish crawdads a mile from the place, believing the stories, some of them, some simply wanting to avoid the place where their fathers, uncles, neighbors worked. This was at the tail end of steel's heyday, when the indestructible Age of God's

Gift, the Automobile was slowly driving to a halt and still some insisted that their father's were building cylinders, engine blocks for Mustangs and Cadillac's, striking glory to the hard headed angel of an ornamented, cream-colored hood. Men from Ohio, from Michigan. Inside, what few

remained, swarmed over vats of the Royal's rubber liquid, carried barrels stoked with fire, wore thick chemicals in the stink of their cowhide hands. If they wanted to smoke, they smoked. If they wanted to breathe, they left their faces bare. And the boys, catching the black smoke smell of their labor

on the river, dropped a barb through each white tail's prehistoric flesh and dropped it from the Logan St. Bridge. The waters of the St. Joe River, brown as all hell, the clawed bait, spread-eagle the whole way down. Pulled taught in the current, their nickel's worth of bait sought shelter. Two, maybe three stories

below and a mile downriver from the plant, each little lobster
 clung to lead no one had made or made for them, the trick
 of each boy's sinker keeping him in place and, whether by bite or the
 miracle of escape, each found his own truth in the weight that
 bore him down—these boys weren't forgers, weren't the

sons of gloried men and would never sing on a line or
 cast the holy sacrament of a fire in their hands. The old rubber plant,
 winding down even then, still cast in the letters of a name that
 meant something more than what it was—Would they work there,
 one day, or in someplace similar? Had their coins or beads of

splitshot, the knicked casings spat from one forgotten .22,
 been forged in a selfsame place? If they were lucky, those sinkers
 used to commit each shell, each claw held long enough,
 looked—the silver dollar, the bullets filled with clay—like a clump
 of dead fruit and were a victory, then, cast by an imagined hand

at the end of a line. They pulled up their lines and were surprised
 or satisfied. The shift whistle blew and some men, soon to be jobless,
 stubbed out their cigarettes. And, yesterday, when we learned
 the principle economic tenants of a free-market system,
 no one mentioned their cities, spoke of Detroit, of Flint or Buick City,

so that now, my father drives faster, tells his story clearer,
 and when we park in an alley of the old neighborhood,
 feels the need to run. Across the bridge, hundreds waiting
 behind chalked out lines to see the Royal buildings fall, see
 the same thing: the fourth floor sways, the windows crack,

then men and women cover their mouths and their
 children's mouths while a cloud of dust engulfs them,
 rolls from the old rubber plant like its old black heart
 stinking up the river...I can only imagine. Later, he will take me
 to the ballpark and put a bat in my hands. I will stand

knock-kneed and he, because he knows I am afraid of everything,
 will tell me to think I'm bigger than I am, to lie to myself like
 those boys on the bridge. He will tell me how each fish's weight
 was incredible, pulled through the air and how each crawdad
 spun from the bridge in the sun. He will flatten his palm like that

in the dirt and, my right shoe covering his knuckles, will tell me to swing. Our feet pounding down the alley, the Royal buildings we never saw fall, are, like that hand, like those bridge-flung creatures cast in the name of those cities, of a place we'd not been borne to, to which we would not, could not return.

In The Garden

There they are: two black spots
of fur, of blood in the yard.

The back legs still kicking,
the shovel's rusted blade

separating what's been cast
an inch away—the mole's head

looking blindly, stupidly to
the sky to answer for the spade

in its body, as if it had not been
simply kicked after that first

fatal blow by a boot that so
did not want it to live. We gather.

Children, we want to say,
like the mole, that there's nothing

less fortunate than being
stuck in the wrong place

at the wrong time, that the
mole's face is something other

than the flat coin of disappointment
caught in the dirt. Slick-sneakers

running the rows of squash,
tearing loose the light down

of each tomato's stalk and leaf,
kicking his furred back from the earth—

a game, now, I can't remember
but that was wrong, as much

for us, as it was for him.
Playing at soldiers, maybe.

Cowboys and Indians.
Robbers or insufficient cops,

we want to have arrived
earlier on scene, want to have cried

Hold it right there! with our
toy guns cocked. Instead,

one of the cousins, running
to the house, the mole split

in half before our eyes because
he moved in the garden and

because we moved in the garden
and saw him. We want to say

*My god, he's going to get up,
he's going to get up and keep going.*

We want to say what they must've
said in the trenches, watching

one of their buddies trip a mine and
go up like a smokestack and then

cheering for him, silently,
after his body hit the earth,

all of them hoping to see a leg
move or a wisp of breath on January's air

that would say *hang on boys, I'm not
finished yet* the way I hoped for the mole

who had no chance of living,
no chance of forgetting—

Watching the hand send him so,
we want to say, like we do in

church, *Forgive me Father, for I
have sinned, I have shown you*

something I shouldn't've. We
want to say, one to the other,

*Forgive me Sister, Brother,
I don't know what this means.*

We want to know that there
is something more fortunate

like the time I watched him
run a pitchfork over and over

through the compost in our
backyard, stabbing at nothing

and the idea of nothing, the little
bodies of mice already scarce,

and covered my sisters eyes
without thinking what it was I did.

Or last Christmas when she,
who was always the stronger

soldier-in-the garden, said
forgive me but I want to be a man

and he hid his father's-face behind
another face and three pink gates

opened on her arm and I, worse,
thought *I love you I love you I love you*

but said nothing. They used to say,
if you lost a fight or someone died,

*that you'd been in the wars or
had seen the trenches.* On her arm now,

I catch those three pink scars, unstitched,
healed, ugly, and think of the mole's body

split in two separate pieces,
of the three infant mice we found

abandoned in the compost.
Maybe we had been simply

playing war or making reference to it
with our child-lives, but, when I say

to you now, that I have in no way
tried hard enough, it is to explain

the bad effect of this, of my bad poetry:
there they are, the two black spots.

There it is, my early memory buried
like mice in the crook of your arm.

Return to Kodiak

The master of some weird dance, she comes at everything lop-sided, afraid to approach head-on, her head itself, tilted and heavy, caught between two crests of shoulder, each hunched, unsure. *Kodiak, Kodiak* read the prints she leaves, that ursine two-step, full of her confidence. Alone, she scoops apart the mountain, stumbling, campsite to campsite, closer, her name in each step. She stops. She stands tall—something, there, on the wind. She is *absence, hunger*. She is *wind in the trees*. Falling, all fours, back to earth, she comes on fast and slightly flat. She knows what she wants, who's dream this has been. There on the mountain, waiting the whole time, you've stood, ready to leave. The dark rows of pine give themselves to that other darkness, as black as fur. She is *consumption*. She is *mercy*. She is a nightmare telling me something about the way that I love. After you, the great muzzle moves along the mountain, curling each new scent—mushroom, cookfire, worm-sweet earth—into memory, into something to chew. This is what the bear loves, more than anything and my memory of you sinks deeper from her head. Her lips keep moving, always, as if there were something left, something, still, she so needed to say.

Notes and Dedications

“Were The Future Cast in Snow” is dedicated to my mother, Sally Henderson.

“The Accidental Colours” is titled after an excerpt of Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks that reads: “The accidental colours of the leaves of trees are four, namely shadow, light, lustre, and transparency.”

“Aubade” is written after the painting *Screwball Mare*, an oil on canvas by Lucian Freud, 2004

“A Different Knowledge” is dedicated to my father, Curtis Henderson.

“In The Garden” is dedicated to both Haleigh and Wren Henderson

“Return to Kodiak” is dedicated to Jenn.