

ABSTRACT

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The poems in *Antler* are perhaps best described through the methods used to write them. The earliest poems in the collection—those written first, such as “Before” and “Joint”—are attempts to linger in an event or memory, to allow the imagination to elaborate and recreate without any particular end in mind. Some of the poems—“The Lake,” for example, or “Long Black Veil”—are explorations in juxtaposition and layering. Later poems, like “To Someone,” are focused on incorporating sound and song at the earliest stages of composition and onward. Many of these poems seek to capture family stories. Others explore “family” in a larger sense: “our” (people’s) connections to each other, to art or nature, and to wonder and disaster.

ANTLER

By

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From *The Fortune Telling Book of Dreams*

A dream containing dogwood blossoms means
you are questioning your religion. A dream
in which you drive a Volkswagen Jetta up a river,
as though the river were a road, indicates
a general dissatisfaction with your daily routines,
but if it's raining and the drops don't splash
in the water, you could simply desire a gift
of some kind from your lover. Dreaming of marigolds
that grow backwards, from blossom to seed,
is a common dream that mirrors an inner need
for some childhood pleasure you've forgotten,
such as eating banana popsicles or reading in the branches
of a magnolia tree, but dreaming of either
of those things is a warning that a time of loneliness
is approaching. Trains in a dream mean someone is angry.
Ships, sailboats, or any sort of voyaging on the sea
suggest you are about to make a large purchase,
but if you dream specifically of the Pacific Ocean,
you are still mourning a loss you believed
you had gotten over. If you dream you are shelling beans
with your great-grandmother while everyone else,
including your mother, is skinning a deer, you long
to visit a place you never thought you'd want to go.
If, near the end of this dream, just after you sit down
to a meal of fresh meat and early summer beans,
your family leans forward, toward you, as though
they share the same body, and draws in a breath

as though to speak, you should write down what
they say, if you can hear it, because words spoken
in a dream mean you are trying to remember
something someone told you years ago.

Heritage

for my grandmother

Sometimes I look around for things that prove
I'm yours, not just the black sheep moved
five hundred miles away. I find a few:
the sheets you gave me, fluttering on the line;
the Dawn I pour into the dishwater,
its clear, sapphire scent; Duke mayonnaise
when I can find it. Some things I improvise:
Bisquick biscuits, soy sausage in the gravy.
Most of you is lost, lasts only as memory.
I'm nine years old. My ponytail is dripping.
I'm sitting on the lake steps as the bees
sip lakedrops from my hair, and daydreaming.
You call me in through dusk to dry and dinner.
The crickets whisper endlessly all summer.

Looking Up Hermeneutic

I open the dictionary
to a pressed dogwood blossom
shaped like a slanted cross,
its petals folded over on themselves,
flattened, creamy brown, edges
tinted milky purple-red. It stretches
from heresy to heritage, rests
beside hero and heroine. Also
on this page: Hermes, hermit
thrush, heredity, here, hereafter.

Cousins

I could eat them with a spoon Herman would say every time he drove the tractor over and saw them playing on the red dirt bank: they'd climb up and up and slide down so fast they wore their palms raw stopping. *Suppose there was a beauty pageant among them*, he said, *which one would win*. I snatched

the corn he'd brought and sent him on. That afternoon I found two of them stripped to their panties, kneeling over their toys, a naked Barbie on her back pressed underneath a bear. *What are you doing*, I said, *keep this door open*. My daughters' daughters. They blinked their eyes and didn't say a word. Suppose there *was*

a pageant—dark-haired girls, all apple-cheeked, eyes green as the lake. We put them in the fire truck for the Apple Festival Parade: look at them wave and toss down their candy. We should have found a spoon while we could have done it. Now can't a single one of them walk past a mirror without looking in it.

On Rereading *Leaves of Grass*

urge and urge and urge...

I remember it was the book Bill Clinton gave
Monica Lewinsky, when all that was going on.
The AM deejays and my Social Studies teacher
kept snorting about cigars, stained dresses. My cheeks
grew warm when they mentioned it, as they did
when the girls on the bus giggled as I passed, ketchup
smeared on my face maybe—from lunch? which was
hot dogs, how awful. Eating a popsicle, banana'd
started to mean something, something I connected
with Becky Brady's hickey, the cherry Kool-Aid-
colored, spiderweb-edged circle under her left ear.
The math teacher didn't stir behind his newspaper
when she walked out of class to dart across Highway 9
to the red dirt worksite where her boyfriend dug ditches.
What confused me more than the jokes was how everyone
hated Hillary Clinton, *that bitch*, my father'd spit
at the TV when she appeared. Her blond, professional bob,
her tired eyes, reminded me of the school secretary,
whose husband came to my mother's beauty shop
twice a month, less for a haircut, she'd sigh later,
than to flit and flirt around. He'd hurl himself at her,
lips pursed; she'd place her flattened palm against his chest
and say *No, Joe*, and *See you later*. He was a good tipper.
None of this was I to repeat to the school secretary,
or to anyone at school, ever. So many men seemed
to love my mother, her auburn curls framing her smile.
The summer before seventh grade, one sat waiting
for his haircut, slouching, knees wide, his shorts loose,
and I saw a bald, pinkish tip of flesh pointing
toward me, something like the elbow of a pale,
fat baby. I kept sneaking glances until he got up
to pay, then stole to the back room to wait him out
among dusty Clairol boxes, blue plastic perm rods,
and decide whether to tell my mother what he'd done.
Or what I'd seen? Or what I'd done? For years,
I thought Tricky Dick was *Clinton's* nickname.
In Hillary's autobiography, she tells the story
of a bad haircut her mother once gave her,
the fake braid she wore to school, the boy behind her
on the stairs who reached to pull it, and he yanked it
right off, and stood there with his mouth open,
the long, blonde shock of it clutched in his palm.

February and After

There are roses under the windshield wipers
after the bell rings, after soccer practice
and learning about fractals: treetops, coastlines,
cold ferns on the front porch that frame our first kiss.
The white oak leaves still clinging to their branches
plus breeze equals crackly ginger whispers but no words
we can make out. He holds my hand in the auditorium,
tries to measure the circumference of my ring finger
by wrapping his index finger around it,
but the ruby heart in the end is too big and moves
during my dance lessons. As he drives me there
I pull off my jeans, tug down my sweatshirt
to cover my underwear, edge and shrug into pink tights
and a black leotard while he sings and doesn't look,
don't look. In the summer or winter his father dies.
After the gravesite we go to Burger King, the sun
so low and bright through the greasy windows
I get a headache so it must be winter. Salt
on my fingers, salt on my face. Spring mornings,
driving, the sky looks like cake batter, wet
and scalloping a scraped bowl, the pines
on the mountain dark as emeralds, stretching up
and toward clouds blue as a prom dress,
silver-shimmered on one side like a fish
or a dash of salt. At sixty miles an hour and faster
the petals break loose from the rose, pause
in midair and expand, clean sheets on a line,
ones we never set foot or finger on, then shrink,
rush backwards and fall—

Relocation

Spoons snake toward her as she eats.
She picks forks off her wrist like bugs,
like burrs after a walk in the woods.

She didn't want to move here, then she did.
Tulips stud the white-top driveway's edges,
neatly spaced, white siding shining

in the sun, bright blue shutters, a dollhouse
bloomed life-size. At the lake it got all
the way dark. Here streetlight seeps in

through the blinds, stripes the walls.
The magnet bracelet was a Christmas present.
She winces when the clasps pinch, make

tiny bruises—her arm sprouts violets. But
it helps her hip. As cars pass, their headlights
darken the shadows, just for a second.

If you weren't sure where you were,
their engines might sound like the ocean.
Their headlights, the moon on the waves?

This room is a boat we're closed in. All night,
the rocking between brightening,
dimming, all night the waiting for morning.

Day Hike

We weave in and out of the shadows
of mountains, thinking about tomorrow.

The hills, rippled with evergreens,
recede in frozen ocean waves. The city

was dream: around the next bend a house
with empty rooms, wide windows, an open gate,

is waiting. The winter *is* the future.
Snow and silence stretch, down in

the distant meadow, farther than that white fence...
We're always under a circling hawk,

walking like this

Joint

The year she'd finally stopped hiding it from me,
it was a warm winter—*Christmas in July!*
the deejays on my father's favorite station
kept screaming. He'd get impatient with the radio
and pick the songs himself, quizzing us
over endless opening riffs (*who's this?*
It'd be Led Zeppelin, Lynyrd Skynyrd,
Earth, Wind, and Fire), songs from the same records
I used to slip first from their cardboard covers,
then flimsy paper sleeves, and carry gingerly
to the stereo, holding them wheel-like before me,
my fingers just grasping their edges.
Still the same stereo too. Dan Fogelberg
was singing about snow turning to rain
as air balmy as late spring streamed in
the kitchen window, rushed over the table
and out through the side screen door. We were
putting together a puzzle, two thousand
and two pieces: white wolf, crescent moon,
some owls and a blueblack river. Difficult:
the real wolf and moon (and some wispy clouds,
puffy treetops like clouds) reflected in
the water, everything doubled. We kept
getting sick of it, getting up, then drifting
back to fit in just one more piece. My mother
kept catching my eye, signaling: thumbtip
to fingertip, hand arced to lips, a sucking in
of breath like drinking through a straw.
We'd go outside, strike a match, watch spice-
sweet smoke weave through bare branches,
then smudge our ashes into the white quartz rocks
that lined the driveway. Inside, my sister, my father,
the dim living room, tangerines on the mantle,
the citrus-scented cedar twinkling rainbows.
Christmas Eve when we went back in—the sky
above the mountains tinged dusky navy, burnt orange—
they were gone. The last record was finished,
still turning, a static kind of silence.
Under the table we found a tuft of fur, an eye
of the wolf, an eye of an owl, a chunk of moon
in river, and somehow—the window was
closed now— two feathers, more ashes.

Exchange

Honestly, I try to avoid him,
arcing to the curb and back
to the doorway, but he looks
right in my eyes, says "I just
want a cup of coffee." I say
"I don't have any change" but
then "I'll buy you one inside"
and he says "cream and sugar,
please" and I'm saying "Do
you want anything else" and
his eyes get bigger: "a sandwich."
Inside it's lunch-hour crowded;
I think of skipping the coffee
because it's so much to carry,
my sandwich and his and
the coffee, but find I'm
filling the cup. Waiting
in line I keep putting it down,
it's burning my hand through
the paper, and the cashier's
clumsy when she gives me
the change, some spills
on my fingers. It's scalding.
My hand part scarlet when I
go back outside, his "thank
you, thank you," my "you're
welcome," our turning from
each other to a spot where we
can eat our lunches by ourselves.

To Someone

Your great-great-grandmother
returned as cat, orange. I saw her
on the steps behind the cottage
I lived in. I was in college. It was
winter, but balmy, the breeze
like breath or warm water.

*

Little things come in the mail
for you. We put them aside
while we wait. On the table,
a vase of mauve daisies, red
rosebuds small as buttons,
fernspray spread like a sail.

*

We kept warm with a woodstove
shaped like a big black pig. I'd cup
the handle with a yarnscrap potholder,
pull the mouth open, stand back
as someone bigger shoved in pine,
said *don't touch*; rain sizzled, died.

*

Your great-grandmother, dying:
I've already mourned her. Shame.
She made biscuits and gravy,
cut a melon with a paring knife,
rind and all. Gone. Can't go
back to the garden, it's sold.

*

I had a white lace tank top, wore
it braless, sat on a bar stool,
thoughtless, absorbed in music.
I outgrew it. Whiskey sours, darkness,
once I climbed to the bar roof,
kissed—someone—hours.

*

Mourning sickness. That's why
the name persists despite
its inaccuracy. Today two
submarines carrying sixteen
nuclear warheads scraped.
It can strike at any time of day.

*

The seas, snakes in them swimming,
spiraling in salt swells. Inside each
snake, another sea, finite, pliant tube,
snake-shaped. Inside the mother, something
breathing water. And the flooded river
I stood above, its eddies swirling letters.

*

At the top of the stairs in red lipstick,
she half-turned to look back, her eyes
were clear then, she was thin
and strong like a half-grown fawn.
Her babies were eggs. They hug
her in her bed now, faces drawn.

*

You are several specific doors
closing with a quick sharp
click, and the end of quiet. You're
a door opening—no, bigger—
our roof blown off in storm. Where
ceiling was, clouds now, stars—

The Lake

Just past the northern boundary of Polk County, North Carolina, beyond Saluda, is Lake Summit, a 300-acre lake created to power the Green River Mill. Around the lake's 10 miles of shoreline are more than 150 cottages and boathouses. Although a few of the homes have been occupied by the same families for generations, some since before the lake was filled, many of them are summer retreats available for lease.

Lake Summit (1)

Lake Summit's the Green River dammed.
The map shows the fine blue thread of it
thickening, meandering in paisleys and part-circles
from west to east, shows North Lake Summit Road
stretching from the north, Fishing Rock Cove Road
curving with the shoreline, shows the railroad tracks
crossing the lake at its northeastern tip, just west
of the dam. This is our part of the lake, a basin,

pool in the northeast corner, shining green-black
below the bank behind the stone house,
a doublewide trailer my grandfather frosted
with cement, then studded with granite. The trestle
crosses the lake in front of us, a horizon line.
Fishing Rock Cove Road is straight below us.
The dam marks off its boundary to the left,
or left, at least, from where we stand,

in the cut grass at the bank's edge, looking down,
watching the passing boats make waves that splash
the diving board. We play horses while we wait
for someone to take us swimming. Cindy *is* a horse,
and gallops, makes hoof-noises with her mouth.
Her mane's caught in a loose braid that will fly
out behind her when she jumps in later.
I'll make her jump in first to scare the fish.

Lake Summit (2)

176 twists up the mountain, past apple packing plants
and roadside cider stands, levels off in Saluda,
snakes toward Tuxedo. Left on North Lake Summit Road,
left again onto the driveway we all keep going back to.
It rises gently to the house, past the stables that held
Cindy's horses, past the muscadine-covered chimney
that marks where the old house stood, past
my great-grandmother's trailer, her zinnias
still scattered through the clover,
past my grandfather's last crafts, plywood silhouettes

of black bears, airplanes made from Diet Pepsi cans,
tree stumps sanded and shellacked to stubby stools.
Beyond the driveway, what was the garden waits
under August sun: a few volunteer bean patches,
a scattering of scorched corn stalks, crow-picked
blueberry bushes, a soft watermelon,
fragrant in the silent midday heat.

Fires (1)

So much to burn, my sister said, the fire
lasted three days—they kept carrying things to it,
stuff they'd collected from years of scouring
yard sales and flea markets for bargains,
half-broken things they'd saved for no reason.
My grandparents were moving back to Bell Avenue,
had three days to get rid of whatever was leftover
now that everyone had taken all they wanted.
Anything that would burn, some things that wouldn't:
sheets, queen- and king-sized, bedspreads,
down-filled comforters, fifteen pillows
molded from storage, cracked leather suitcases,
purses of all sizes, socks in their original packages,
plastic dishes, wool scarves and gloves,
straw hats for the garden, church hats
adorned with fake nests and cardinals, worn-out
overalls and workboots, brand new shoelaces,
refrigerator magnets (a smiling Florida orange,
Have you taken your insulin today?),
a stack of old Farmer's Almanac calendars.
A complete set of Green Stamp silverware.
Maternity dresses embroidered with daisies,
stuffed animals, plush or tattered puppies and bunnies,
a talking bear with its batteries, a tea set meant
for a dollhouse, hairbrushes, a pair of crutches,
combs with broken teeth, feather dusters, the rags
of old tee-shirts, a shadeless bedside lamp,
a box of lace curtains. Seventy-seven
paperback romances; Heather said
she counted them, threw them in one at a time.
The fire burned long after the last sunset.
They had to go inside, everyone had headaches,
they couldn't even stand there and watch it.

Family Secrets

(1) My uncle Gary, the Henderson County Fire Chief, burning brush in the pasture (for what reason we'd ponder later; he wasn't even supposed to be there, but (2) all of us kept coming back—whoever'd bought the house only stayed on the weekends, so weekdays Carolyn came to steal blueberries, Glenda brought Elijah to swim, my grandfather weeded the garden, planted secret corn) (3) watched his fire jump the road and spread to the woods where that very day a psychic hired by *Unsolved Mysteries* was supposed to come try to *see* something about the triple murder that happened there in 1966 (three bodies cut up and left in a shape some said was a pentagram, some said was random). (4) My aunt Glenda said she and Doug used to park in those woods before her curfew. My aunt Glenda, teen-aged, in Doug Tankersly's olive Chevy (and him the preacher's son). They lost three-pound Jacob hours after he was born. That night they were in the hospital, (5) Julie and Jeremy fed me a bottle of baby aspirin, pill by orange-flavored pill. I was standing in the Emergency Room crying and refusing to drink the ipecac as Jacob died (tiger lilies on his tiny plot). After the funeral (6) Cindy whispered about her mother's sister, who we'd had to sit beside, *she stinks*, and someone heard and said I said it. (7) My mother and her sisters sat on the bedspread, midnight, counting out quarters for bail money (it was navy, had a starchy, almost vinyl feel; the money shone on it, sorted in little hills of five dollars). Sister by sister they'd come, bearing (8) now unhidden pickle jars of coins to share. My father was in jail, had been served a warrant for communicating threats, even though it was my mother who threatened her brother's wife. (9) Years later I realized they thought I really *had* said it. (10) *It is a fact that the crime scene was used as a garbage dump by some local residents, and many objects can still be found at the site. The site was not visited by the crew or stars of the television show, since there was a brush fire there the day of the filming.* They asked him: how could a fire chief lose hold of a fire like that? And what he knew of the triple murder. He (11) said, I was twelve when it happened. (12)

Lake Summit (3)

Moss-covered stones, their edges worn
to curves, uneven stairsteps webbed
with sun and summer leaves' lacework patterns.
Climbing down, we breathe the lakescent:
melon or cucumber, *snakes*,

my great-grandmother says, raising her chin,
looking quick to left and to right; *it smells like snakes—*

Lake Summit (4)

summer harvest, every morning,
my grandmother, great-grandmother,
the kitchen table, slice and snap, damp faces
in the fanwhir. At noon I crouch in the crop rows,
eat a raw ear of corn, stalkshadow
striping my legs. Later, in twilight,

the long, low whistle: night train
on the trestle. Moonshudder
in the water. They're calling me back
to the porch now, handing out crescents
of cantaloupe, icy chunks of salted watermelon.

Horses (1)

When our parents were speaking
again, we rode Cindy's horses
from Fishing Rock Cove to the dam.

She made our horses run.

Just to the west,
my left, the water
sparkled in patches, flashed
between the blur of branches
and red dirt sloping down to the lake.

She made our horses jump through hoops of flames

(In

the small splashes
of fire I saw

a shape
like a house,

a shape like a hand
reaching up,

a garden-
row of knives,

a rose-
shaped
boat)

Fires (2)

So much to burn, my sister said,

the fire lasted 3 days—they kept
carrying things to it, throwing things
in it, clothes, suitcases,
silk flowers
they'd bought to put on graves,
the ones for people already dead, the ones who
would be eventually. Anything that would
burn So many
suitcases, no one knew why they had so many suitcases—
and the
clothes—
bathrobes, little girls' dresses, bright-hued bells of satin and taffeta,
dozens of frilled socks, polyester
pantsuits like the ones
my great-grandmother used to wear,
blue jeans too old or not old enough to suit
any grandchild's taste. My grandparents were moving
back to Bell Avenue They got
headaches from the smoke They had
3 days to leave The house was sold—
The new house
was full already Truckload after
truckload had been taken to Goodwill
Purses my grandmother said
Where are all my purses They
never traveled—Why had they
bought so many—Where are all my
suitcases —
silk flowers

Lake Summit (5)

My grandfather calls us up to see the Lake Summit movie, which we think is going to be a documentary but is really a home video: a few seconds of six-year-old me with water wings on my arms saying *Mama, watch* and jumping off the diving board, then almost forty minutes of my grandfather recording the shoreline while my grandmother steers the boat. She never learned to drive a car and she is nervous; she keeps saying *A boat's a-comin', J.V.*, and the tape clicks to static while my grandfather takes over. Or he forgets to turn it off and the picture turns to water, the camera waiting on its side, the small, pine-colored waves flashing, shimmering in the sunlight of mid-evening, once five full minutes of just water, little splashes, reaching up and falling. It makes its own pictures when you watch it that long, like looking at clouds, or the eye finds pictures in it. You can hear it lapping the boat's sides.

The Window

The rain stopped falling
and I saw it, like a fingerprint,
but from a wing. It was

wider than two hands spread.
There was a brighter
spot toward the right. Not

brighter. Darker. It wasn't sunshine
but a mark. It must have been
the spot that hit hardest—

the heart. If I'd gone
to the window, looked out,
I might have seen the bird.

I didn't. Imagine it flying,
such light, speed. We're going
to lose *everything*.

Before

This morning, before the clock radio clicked on to the news of the real wildfires, of the San Diego County man whose brother, who had lost his own home in the cedar fires four years ago, told him *Call your house: if the phone rings it's still there; a busy signal means it's burned*, and he called and got a busy signal, and the deejay used “four years” as a transition to report that that’s how long it would take for the government to perform the tests required if a dirty bomb exploded in an American city (they’d need to know what kinds of radiation were present, whether the buildings were safe to reenter, if those exposed were suffering from unknown internal injuries, etc.), I was dreaming that our house was on fire. We were of course trying to leave, but we couldn’t find the cat, and as I was looking for her (quite calmly, I realize now) I was walking from room to room calling, but pausing, often, at the window, to see the flames melt the tree trunks and some pieces of—plywood?—falling from our roof. Each piece smoldered cinnamon red at the center, faded from center outward to nothing, to air. Then we were on a train—I don’t know if we had the cat—and I was alone at the end of the last car watching the wind in hurricane gusts uproot whole trees and churn the sky—smoke, pine needles, sunshine, ashes—so strong it rolled the fire like an ocean through the fields, rattled the train on its tracks. Standing there, in the last car, before the alarm—it’s odd to say so, but I felt it all day—I was relieved that we wouldn’t have to wait anymore.

Mission Dolores

There's a bright light in the upper right corner
that I missed at first. I kept drifting back
to reread the caption—*Brendan O'Rourke,*
a little boy with AIDS, saw the Pope, leapt
out of his father's arms and into the embrace
of the Holy Father—and wonder how
the photograph happened to be snapped
at just the right second to catch the boy
halfway there, his arms grasping the Pope's
neck, his legs wrapped around his father.
I got caught up in the faces of the people in the crowd,
in this man's face, just at the picture's center.
His eyes, framed by the dark parabolas
of his glasses, seem to have met the boy's eyes,
his mouth's a flattened, anamorphic oval,
he's baring his teeth. All the faces are his face,
upturned, thunderstruck, watching this sick kid
lunge at the holy father who's traveled so far
to be there to bless them. They're holding their breath.
The light—a white ball hovering in the background,
above the Pope's head, a near perfect circle,
brightest in the center, fading to mist at the edges—
must be the camera's flash, caught in a mirror
or pane of stained glass. A photographic accident.
I take a picture of the picture and go back out
to the tiny garden of tombstones, where the afternoon
sun makes it hard to read the names and dates
etched in white granite, so I watch instead
the shadows of eucalyptus branches waving
on the stucco walls. We walk, the rest of the day,
past the Pacific, grayer, choppiest than we thought
it would be, the fenced-in herd of thirty-odd leftover buffalo,
the bookstore, the bridge, and hundreds of flowers
I don't know the names for. Orchids, maybe, giant
honeysuckle, fuchsia, violet blooms everywhere,
piled up as if the city's getting ready for a parade
or a funeral, all this and us under what the locals keep saying
is an uncommonly empty, entirely blue sky.

6th and G

He's out there weaving through cars.
The dirty blue bathrobe's gone this time;
his plaid shirt looks just ironed, clean
beyond clean, crisp. Red stripes crossing
on white cotton, all right angles, sharp corners.
Even when the light's green he lurches
toward cars, touches their windows.
His screaming's like singing. He's
holding a tabbed tin of something,
peaches? I saw him eat them once
last summer, dipping his fingers into
the can, fishing out wet, tender crescents,
holding them over his head, raising
his mouth to them, dropping them in it.

You Can View a Slideshow of Politicians' Wives Standing By Their Husbands During a Political Crisis at NPR.org

Even though a few of them, in a habit hard to break, are smiling at the camera, their faces share a kind of frozen, turned-to-glassness, mask-like. Here's Mrs. Edward Kennedy and the Senator standing in the eye of a hurricane of reporters. Microphones point at them like arrows. Next, Mrs. Marion Barry, unblinking behind her sunglasses, listens to the mayor, who has a white rose boutonniere pinned to his chest, answer questions about the crack he smoked, the ex-lover he smoked it with. Mrs. James McGreevey wins Miss Congeniality—she's almost beaming at the now ex-governor's announcement that he's had an affair with another man. The next was snapped in profile, her chin lifted at an angle that suggests she is Most Likely to Leave. And this one's Most Disgusted, the outer edges of her mouth turned down as though she's just discovered what's been making that smell in the refrigerator. This one stands shoulders back, head cocked to the side, eyes lifted to something higher than her sightline, as though she's posing for a wedding portrait. And here's a classic, Mrs. Clinton regarding Mr. President with an almost Mona Lisa smile. Her earrings are gold doves. The men look earnestly at the audience, or cast their eyes downward during a pause in their speeches, or lower their eyebrows at a question they don't want to answer, or are caught with their hands outstretched in a kind of explanatory gesture. No matter what happens later, after all the apologies, the sudden outpouring of attention, and whether or not the iceberg of disbelief in her chest is ever melted by a sudden blaze of anger, I suppose that each will eventually find herself alone in front of a mirror, noticing whatever there is to notice — a stray eyebrow unplucked, a gray strand catching the light from above the sink. No matter what one suspected, half-wondered, or willfully overlooked, the hope remained that one would be enough. Knowing now one isn't, one feels it would be a relief, a gift, to be allowed to stand, expressionless, there, alone, forever.

Thrush:

From the French, *fourchette*, the frog
of a horse's foot. Songbird, a robin
or blue one, brown-backed with
breast spots. Or a kind of whitish rash.

The frog of a horse's foot—hooves
in the west pasture, hoarse chorus
surging from the marshes. Or bird,
a thrash in the shadow of brambles

edging the threshed field; a blue one,
or the robin, brown-backed, bright breast,
calls from the willow branches. Wind
wet in the shallow grasses, hoarse

chorus surging from the marshes, thrash
in a tangle of brambles, spring shower
splashing down. Rush of the rising creek.
Over the creekbed, passing shadow,

cabin window. Spring downpour, then
the drowning. Then the drying, thrush
in the mouth or the branches; flash of
the spade, silver, thrust in the damp pasture.

Three Months

September, heat turning the world into a dream space,
the world these paths I follow daily, the heat
turning them into tunnels. When my mother says on the phone
she thinks Obama's probably secretly Muslim, I can't
quite hear her through the tunnel rush. How I was born,
that old story: a car in a K-Mart parking lot
in Huntsville, my mother's window rolled down,
someone lunging in, grabbing her, pulling her halfway out.
Did the window catch on her belly, bruise me inside her?
Was my father shopping? She screamed and scratched
and the man ran away. My parents went back to the hotel
they were living in; my mother rearranged the furniture.
She felt funny; the doctor told her to take a bath; shortly after,
nearly three months early, I was born. She got lonely
when my father went to work, but made a friend,
a young black woman in the building. They'd take me
on long walks. One day a car slowed beside them, a face
shadowed by cap rim, a voice: *I don't want to see y'all
together no more.* Sped up and disappeared.

“What did you do?”

“I stopped walking with her.”

My grandparents called a certain kind of nut (a chestnut?)
niggertoos, and a certain part of Hendersonville *niggertown*.
On the 30th, we give fifty dollars to boost the campaign's
September numbers. An Obama Biden sign arrives
for our window. My eyes keep reading Osama Bin Laden.
For most of October, I avoid the newspaper. I try to write
a letter to my mother: Why I'm Voting for Obama.
Rational, fact-based, organized as a list. She's worried
about safety. Her fear for me here in this city because
I'm her child. Other mother's children, elsewhere
in the world, downtown, not on her mind.

I knew

last time around that Kerry wouldn't win,
so I wasn't disappointed when he didn't. Or was,
but not by dashed hope, just by getting what I expected.
I kept calling the White House, but all I could say
when someone answered was that I felt like I was living
in 1984, which for all I know they took as a compliment.
This year, we spend election night with my husband's co-workers.
CNN beams the image of a slim reporter from Chicago

into their New York studio “via holograph;” we laugh,
and dinner’s catered, but my stomach hurts. I sit
by myself on a straight-back chair. I’m lonely.
I can’t call my mother or my sister, and the friends
I try in North Carolina don’t answer. When Obama wins,
it happens fast; though someone shouts he’s won it all
when he wins Ohio, I don’t believe it until the words appear
on the screen: *Barack Obama, 44th President*. They go directly,
no commercial break, to McCain’s concession.
He silences some boos. People cry. It can’t be real.

The trees

that have burst like matches in slow motion
these three months are fading to rust. It’s possible now
to see birds in their branches as the Metro passes.
They’ve put up and taken down the fair beside
the Hyattsville station, the one I like so much
to see after evening classes, the children shrieking
on the Ferris Wheel, colored lights streaking the sky.
In three months, we could have started and lost a baby,
or started one that lasted long enough to tell our families.
If I had a baby, I could forbid certain things to be said
in front of it. Whether or not anyone followed my wishes,
my position on the matter would be clear.

Long Black Veil

*Now the scaffold is high, and eternity's near.
She stood in the crowd, and shed not a tear.
But sometimes at night, when the cold wind moans
In a long black veil, she cries over my bones.*

--Danny Dill and Marijohn Wilkin

(1)

The veil was a wedding veil.
It had been white. Turning
from the scaffold, throat swollen
with (what?) (silence, it
would have to be) she'd walked
home with her husband. Perhaps
they'd held hands. As soon as possible,
she'd found it: handmade lace,
dotted with pearls, embroidered
silk vines and flowers, a whole
woodland scene in silk,
does and fawns peeking from
a curtain of willows, noses lifted,
tiny ears cocked. Or something older,
passed down from a mother
or grandmother. Or something
cheaper—perhaps they were poor.
It doesn't matter—she found it, and she
made it black—

Ashes:

dry, breathable; firecracks pressing
the soft places below her kneecaps,
kneeling. Ink from an inkwell:
ebony, consistency of milk
or blood, vinegar-scented. A bowl
of blackberries, holding them
one at a time between her thumb
and forefinger, pressing, juice
staining the veil, also her fingers,
her wrist.

*

*The Judge said son, what is your alibi,
If you were somewhere else, then you won't have to die.
I spoke not a word, though it meant my life,
For I'd been in the arms of my best friends wife.*

*

(2)

I imagine

she lived in the woods,
the mountains. Although I want
the mountains, they're not mine.
I didn't grow up in them, just
under. My great-grandmother
tried to teach me to crochet, but
I wouldn't learn. She knew a storm
before its thunder by the way
leaves turned in the wind.
I remember that. Once I asked her
about my great-grandfather,
who died before I was born.
Whatever she was doing, she stopped —
she was rarely still—*I didn't mean
to marry him*, she said. I laughed.
An accident, like missing
a step on the stairs. She'd had a bet
with her sister to see who could get
a ring first. Thinking she could break it
later, she accepted a proposal. But
her beau arrived in a borrowed car;
without telling her where they were going,
he drove to the preacher's house.

*

I didn't wear a veil, having read
that the lifting of one by the groom
signified the bride (as body)
passing from father to husband.
For others, veil as (mere) accessory,
something pretty to complement
the ballerina skirt and beaded bodice.
Or veil as modesty, preserving the bride's
beauty for the groom alone. Norse brides
were kidnapped: a blanket thrown
over the head of a captured woman
secured and subdued her. Or veil as privacy.
A (welcome) place to watch.

*

*Ten years ago on a cold dark night,
someone was killed 'neath the town hall lights.
There were few at the scene, but they all agreed,
that the slayer who ran looked a lot like me.*

*

Pearls, tiny
pearls, in a haul
of three tons,
only three

or four pearls.
From the James
River, mussels?
Or the ocean,

oysters? Shapes:
round, button,
pear, circle,
drop; sizes:

collar,
choker,
princess,
opera,
rope.

*

My mother's first marriage
was much like her grandmother's.
Seventeen, a high school senior,
her boyfriend dropped to one knee;
she laughed and said her father
wouldn't let her. He laughed too,
said he'd already asked him.
For the honeymoon,
they drove to Disney World.
She called collect to tell her parents
they were safe, but her father
wouldn't accept the charges,
explained when they got back
the call itself had been enough;

he didn't need to speak to her
to know that she was there.

*

*She walks these hills, in a long black veil.
When the cold winds blow, and the night winds wail.
Nobody knows, nobody sees.
Nobody knows, but me.*

*

(3)

Did she run to him? See him there
where he stood on the scaffold
maybe her husband
found her, took her hand maybe
her eyes met his maybe she cried out
as the rope pulled tight maybe
she looked back at his body swinging,
ripe peach on a summer branch

And after,
did she live in the forest?
How then to keep the veil black?
Mud wouldn't be enough. Mushrooms,
their charcoal gills? Pulped roots
of irises? Crushed hickory nut hulls?
Feathers the crows lost, tucked in
by their shafts to the lace?
Did she sleep on the ground?
Under elms? And once did
a shadowy moth land beside her
in the dusk? Its wings, if plucked
and smeared, a fine dark dust?

What Happens to the Soul

for my mother, who asked

It becomes, in equal parts, the strands
of a mimosa blossom, the wool
of a sheep, and the spikes of a cactus.
Like snow, it melts, then snakes
itself into groundwater. As we die,
it evaporates, then hovers near the ceiling
till someone who loved us opens
a window, allowing it to float to a forest
where it eventually rests in a grove of pines,
inhabits the spaces between needles.
It becomes salt, cinnamon, paper, or
whatever it is that makes things shiny:
mirrors, coins, feathers. Gravity
is caused by a compressed core of souls
at the earth's center. If you are good,
it becomes river water. If you are not good,
it becomes river water. Your soul will become,
in equal parts, clean sheets, a key,
a green umbrella held against low clouds.

Antler

Smooth branch of a small tree. Ponytail
at the top of a jump-rope skip. A many-
fingered hand reaching up. A wing in flight
turned stone. There was an antler—just shed
and splashed in the time we were gone?—
shining in the water when we got home.

~

Sunday afternoon, browsing the Freer.
In Arts of the Islamic World, a stone
and paste six-pointed star, early thirteenth
century. At its center, a painted deer
is opening its mouth; a single, leaf-flecked
stalk, milk-colored, reaches up to meet it.

~

By home, I mean back to my parents' property,
to my mother's favorite spot, where the creek
curves and pools under a flat, mossy rock.
It's in a little clearing of the trees, so
the pine boughs frame it. The water gurgles,
whispers; on the bank in its breeze, ferns quiver.

~

In Buddhist Art, a headless, handless statue.
When he prays, he sees the whole cosmos,
so the cosmos is carved on his robe: thin-
striped fish, jewels round as eggs, storm clouds,
conch shells, a handful of bees, clusters of bells
here and there, a fire-breathing dragon near the hem.

~

My mother and I had gone on a long walk.
She'd had the idea that if we took the logging road
to its end and crossed the creek, we could push
through brush to a paved road we could follow
to a gate that would open to a field embroidered
with paths, one of which would lead back to our land.

~

At the Buddha's heart, two cobras coil
and stretch up Mount Meru, where grave
gods peer at a baby on a lotus. Below
the snakes, a couple rests under an apple tree,
holding hands, gazing up, but they can't
see the gods. Too many clouds.

~

We reached the gate, squeezed through,
set out into the field. What happened next
happened all at once: I saw couches scattering
the field, and saw that the couches were cows,
decaying. Above my head, a vague swish
and swoop hardened to dark wings.

~

At least I imagine it's an apple tree. It's just
a trunk and branches; no leaves, no
apples. A tree in winter, or its shadow:
two vertical parallel lines for the trunk,
three or four upward strokes for branches.
The apples I made up, or I remembered.

~

I mean, ahead of us, we began to see
several large things, brown, bulky,
the back of a couch, slit as with knives,
chopped chunks of armchairs around it—
my eye twitched?—or mind—the couch
was a torso, torn open,

~

Below the couple, *the tortures of hell*:
one man holds a spear at a slant above
another's heart. People chasing people.
Someone's stretched and strapped
on a table circled by flames,
the tip of a blade just pricking his chest,

~

skin peeled back, revealing ribs and pink muscle.
The field was dotted with skulls, legs, hooves,
and different-sized flesh-picked bones.
The wind folded the grass down flat to the dirt
and stirred the smell. *Cover your mouth,*
my mother said, pulling her shirt over hers.

~

He's screaming, or his mouth is open as if
in a scream. Beside the Buddha, a turquoise
mandala, carved like a castle, a silver bat
smiling from the doorway. The rest of the room's
strewn with cracked bowls, painted silk panels
with titles like *Peaches, Rocks, and Flowers*.

~

We were halfway across the field;
we spun on our heels in slow circles,
looking for a way out. We saw a path,
downhill a little, took it, first running,
then tiptoeing over cow parts, my mother
coughing, saying, *who did that, who did that?*

~

I want to go back to the deer star. I do.
It's such a delicate deer, and rare, its legs
a single brush stroke each, its body
a lighter brown against the dark brown
star. What seem to be ferns curve
around it, and across the star's points.

~

We pictured a farmer, his sons beside him,
backing his truck past the gate in the moonlight,
heard doors slamming, the heave and shove
of them leaving the cows, whole or in pieces,
the thuds of the bodies hitting the grass:
a thump, its echo, a thump, its echo, thump...

~

The caption below the star: *Throughout*

*the thirteenth century, human and animal
imagery permeated all media. Although
the meaning of this sensitively rendered deer
is unknown, it underlies a new and unfamiliar
artistic fascination with the natural world.*

~

When the path ended, we were still nervous,
not quite sure where we were. Then we heard
the water whispering, saw the pool in the clearing,
and the flat, mossy rock. In the water now,
wavy patches of white. I thought it was
another piece of bone. It was, and it wasn't—

~

a many-fingered hand reaching up, smooth
branch of a small tree, a wing in flight
turned stone. My mother went closer,
counted the points, felt for velvet. Her wrist
dripped cool water as she handed me the antler.
We took it home and put it on the mantel.

Notes

“The Lake”: The epigraph is adapted from a description of Tuxedo, North Carolina in the 2008 edition of *Tryon Magazine*. Number 10 of the “Family Secrets” section is quoted from the Hendersonville, NC *Times-News* article “TV Psychic Describes a Violent Scene” by Jennine Jones Giles. Line 10 of the “Horses (1)” section is adapted from Bonnie Prince Billy’s song “Billy Horses” from the album *Sings Greatest Palace Music*.

“Long Black Veil”: The song “Long Black Veil” was written by Danny Dill and Marijohn Wilkin. The books *Wedding Dress Across Cultures*, edited by Helen Bradley Foster and Donald Clay Johnson; *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, edited by Jennifer Heath; *Jewels and the Woman* by Marianne Ostier; and *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, edited by Newman Ivey White, helped inspire and inform the poem.

“You Can View a Slideshow...”: See http://www.npr.org/news/images/2008/mar/11/wives_gallery/index.html, active as of April 8, 2009.