

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: A HEART IN THE RIVER

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Exploring the boundaries of relationships, *A Heart in the River* questions the personal connections through which we identify the self. Through poems about war, poker, and family history, the speaker delves into memory and the devolution —then renewal— of trust. The Midwest, particularly northern Michigan, grounds the manuscript in nature; landscapes with rivers, birds, and a black walnut tree juxtapose with the artificial scenery and actions of civilization. The thesis is organized in three sections, each creating emotional and physical borders the speaker wishes to break, and it is only through sound and movement —both thematically and formally— that any reconciliation may be reached.

A HEART IN THE RIVER

by

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You cannot survive without that intangible quality we call heart.

The mark of a top player is not how much he wins when he is winning but how he handles his losses.

-Bobby Baldwin
Four-Time Winner of the World Series of Poker-
Main Event Championship

I.

Song of the Dragonfly

No, I am not silent. The touch
of my feet on the cold pond surface

reverberates, scatters minutiae
of water. I can feel it in my wings:

Every action has a consequence,
every consequence, a sound.

But I know you're not listening
closely. We've all been told

the nightmare, the boy
who captured three of us—

whether he cut the eyes or tore
the notes of each wing,

the body split itself down
the center. If you follow

my breath, you'll find
the still spring air, before

I break it. I leave a thrum
I am proud of. Forget the nightmare

for now. When I speak, I speak with
water currents, disposed light,

quivering reeds the seconds after
I leave them. Do you understand

my language? Even when you can't
hear it, I give you the letters

to read it. Watch me move between
these elements, conduct the day's

hums. When I dance along
the water, I am reaching back

to a home enclosed, a place safe

from echoes and sparrows. Here
in these strange moments
along the pond, we can find
whole histories untasted,
forgotten families that,
with the buzzing heat,
we've pushed away, for higher
and warmer winds. I don't want
to forget you. It is lonely
sleeping in the willows.
The boy who knew how to torture
did so because he, too, was
afraid— he couldn't fly or see
any more than he could walk
away from his own nightmares.
Let us sing a lullaby so sweet,
so tuned with the lulls and laps
of ripples even the sunfish
won't rise to bite. Today is
that day. Yes, we are going to fade.
Yes, when the body splits,
the heart keeps beat for another
three measures, pumps
its melody out into the world
through that center line. Yes,
there will come a time when
we will forget, for a space,
where we come from, all the shapes
and skins we've shed.
We will only claim our wings.
Those wings, which give us

words, will falter. Yes.
Listen to the song

I've made, my body carving
the wind, as I sheer

away from the pond, skim
the home I once owned

and the corners of this world—

Echo

Mowing the weeds around an apple tree,
I step on a nest of naked mice—
small, shivering in mid-April's breeze,
crowded together, facing the blueness
of sight. The grass is fresh and slick—
crumpled Honey Crisps still rot
even after this blustery season.
The ground has softened and leaks
its waters to the underground currents,
the river of our well. Soon a haze
will blanket the air, dust that cannot settle
with speeding trucks and pot holes.
Blossoms already bloom at this tree's tips—
it will burst into whiteness before
the month's end. But now, the *crunch*
of mice under my boot, the gray
I did not see beneath the crowding green.

Wearing the Stars

Years ago I met a girl at camp who collected
hair into a ball. For three months she unraveled
knots from her brush, pulled loose strands

from her scalp. She kept the ball in the window,
where everyone could see it grow, & some days
it seemed to brighten in the sun. That summer

I learned to escape at dusk through the girls'
communal bathroom, & leave light behind
at the lake— & even now there are moments,

entering the dark, I sometimes hold my breath.
When the weight of night bears down, noises open
their lids: bullfrog calling, mosquito whining,

a truck off the highway driving farther & farther
away. There, at the edge of hardwoods & open sky,
I stretched out on the ground & stirred the stars—

tipping Cepheus's crown, I slew Cetus with
my sword & speed, whirled higher on a flying
horse— & during those hours in the dark,

I knew only those stories could clothe me.
The Milky Way curled across my eyes,
& all I wanted was to wrap myself in it.

And the next day the girl would roll her dead hair
& I'd watch the ball continue to grow. That girl
said she wanted more, she wanted to learn

everything she was made of— & what, in the end,
that single summer might weigh. But I needed
more than a ball of hair— I wanted a beautiful

head of snakes, I wanted to hunt Prometheus's
eagle & sit in Cassiopeia's throne— I dreamed
of releasing my nightself, of discovering

every shape I could one day become, what
real stories I might contribute to the stars.

The Hand

It's pocket deuces and I'm either in or out, no backing down, *all in*, eyes forward, before the flop's even been had, before I can truly settle what's what, chips forward, flop down, King-Jack-Three, two hearts and a club, the guy left of the dealer grins, so unprofessional, about his pair? almost flush? Next to him, another joe, twenty-something, hyped up on Red Bull and Grey Goose; across the table, an old man, white hair crossing his head like feathers; and by me, a woman, nothing special, I think is like me, or the woman I'll be in ten years. And it seems I'm almost always here, right here, second guessing myself before all the cards are bare, trying to spot the coming bluffs, sometimes raising, it's all about perception and what cards they think I have, even if I don't. I take a sip of water. The turn, a Two, diamonds. I check my face. It'll take a heart in the river, that single heart to end me. Unless the others hold better pocket pairs, maybe Kings, or a straight slides in at the end. Always this risk, that I've wasted the last of my chips. The old man sips his Scotch, the good stuff, the two joes laugh at some joke about an elephant, and the woman and I look at each other—her hands are fisted together, maybe her tell, but her face, her eyes, are absolutely still—then we look at the dealer, wait for the burn, the slow flip of the final card.

Dear Charles Gretten Norton (I)

Arlington National Cemetery—April 2009

At your gravestone today, I propped yellow carnations
by your name. I never met you, you died days into '45,
Private First Class, 86 Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain
Division—all acronyms carved in marble. It's been awhile,
it seems, since you've had visitors. Here, after Easter,
the sky's cloudless, grass brilliant & thick with ants.
I brought these carnations for no one in particular— but
I'm guessing you deserve them. After the unknown soldiers
& up Porter Drive, I found your stone right off the road:
white marble splattered in bird shit. I couldn't leave it.
I broke some twigs from the red pine five stones over
& scraped the shit off best I could. I hid the darker stains
with flowers. Your home wasn't so bad when I left—
rustling leaves & a bird trilling above the quiet.

How to Bluff

I.

The man who taught me said it is natural.
The hawk will circle the cornfield for a quarter
hour with the mouse caught in his eye

before swooping. It is patience, it is knowing
by the pressure in your skull when the moment
is right to act, and not before, and what reaction

is appropriate. Instinct. Almost every animal has it.
Sellers in their frippery stalls in Tortola will not sell you
their items if you offer the asking price without trying

to bargain it down—they won't sell you anything
if you don't pretend, for a moment, you will leave.
Almost every animal can do it, to survive.

II.

Tells are the giveaway: a twitch on one side of the lip, you're trying to hide a smile; a long sip or gulp of whiskey after the turn, your play's all fake.

Tapping foot, tightening grip: this is one language of bodies. Here enters the artist. Most people control their words easily enough. But there are

at least 656 muscles in a human, 656 chances to move the wrong way, let a stranger read your truths. Can you keep your pulse steady?

Can you stop the impulse to swallow? How many times in a minute can you blink before someone notices you are counting, or you are trying not to cry?

III.

Is there a difference between bluff and lie?
Is it degree of consequence? As in, *This game*

*is fun, no one will get hurt at a table
stacked with cards.* (But people lose too much;
a woman learns to silence her eyes so deep

her children know the whips of insincerity.)
Is the difference in location? In the parties

involved? Is a bluff for a stranger, a lie
for a lover, even regarding the same content?
Is the difference in intent? *I didn't mean*

to hurt you. Or, *Your dress is quite flattering.*
In the end, are bluffs any less violent than lies?

IV.

In Texas Hold 'Em it is illegal to tell the truth about your cards. You may claim to have any other pocket deal but the cards actually dealt. They say

this is only fair; opposing players must be given the opportunity to know you are bluffing with cards they already own. Also, if you are telling the truth,

there is no need for any additional betting to occur, assuming the players believe you, and this makes for a boring game. No one wants a boring game.

V.

Keep your face consistent. If you are smiling, keep smiling. If tears form, for whatever reason, continue to pinch your thigh under the table until that single hand is complete. Do not flinch. Do not look away. Do not tense. Those rules

also apply to lies. Except lies are deeper. Bluffs remain unstated, shown in faces and deliberate actions. Words accompany lies: whole stories made up, often elaborate, as excuse. To lie: Stick as close to truth as possible. It is easier to remember. Avoid complicated tales.

Do not name real people, even celebrities, on the off-chance someone is acquainted. Do not mention places you have not been. Do not forget to destroy any conflicting evidence, such as restaurant receipts or cat hair, from your body and vehicle before speaking as a liar.

VI.

The first man who taught me about lies:
All sweetness, baby. Disappeared

fast as dusk in winter, or some other
such bullshit. This is not a lie.

Drinking strawberry wine coolers around
the bonfire, Mackinaw, MI, no

flinching. No blanket. October night, we were
young, told the story later of how

the fish were biting, when they weren't.
We didn't have bait, no poles,

I could say we stuck our bare feet in the lake
and wiggled our baby toes, but that's

too far-fetched to believe. It was a clear night,
or it was raining. We had a tent, or we

slept outside. Do the details really matter? Is
exaggeration a lie too? All that counts here:

How quickly he disappeared, in memory
it feels like mere minutes, and that

I may have caught a rainbow trout for dinner.

VII.

There will be risk involved. Your pocket
Tens may be conquered by a pair of Aces

on the river, and you'll have no choice
but to buy your way out of the bluff,

go all in. Someone may see your bet
as desperation rather than confidence,

and call you on it, and you'll know then
you've lost it all. Too bad. Two Aces takes

two Tens. You failed. Maybe next time
you'll get away with it, maybe not. For now,

pass your chips, leave the table. Leave this game.

Ampersand

The number sign (#)
is called an octothorpe.
Strange, she says—

nine spaces, four lines,
a solitary building for
x's and *o*'s— but when

he draws it on a napkin
& they count the points
where each line drifts, ends,

maybe the name makes
sense. She remembers
when they discovered

the squiggle to use
in emails & long-distance
letters in place of a simple

dash, the symbol called
a tilde (~) — sometimes
meaning equivalent,

other times, missing words.
He couldn't stand calling
it *squiggle*; & he argued

she used it too often. *But
there's so much left unsaid.*
Then, the ampersand (&)

— a single line coiled so
tightly it double wraps
its own shape, each curve

another *and then, and
then*— like a rope, two
people knotting together,

in a constant grapple, taut.
It takes time to feel the chafe.
And what is it called, she

wonders, when the people
separate & dress, under
all that tangible silence—

what should she name
the shape of the space
between them?

To the Pilot, Stalling

When you're climbing towards five thousand feet,
over sixty knots, the weight of rudder
under each foot and each elevation, each tight
layer of cloud fighting your one-handed hold
on the throttle—when you're ready to push back against
the cumulus gray and scatter what's leaving you blind,
ready to cut your nose like a blade through the current
and to let the atmospheric chill press against your skin—
don't be afraid to pull the wheel back harder,
the plane higher, perpendicular to ground, allow the pressure
to keep you, so you tumble down, corkscrew, turn
giddy through the air. And when you're stalling in winter,
as you fall, look at the fragile town below—
footprints, from here, broken spirals in snow.

II.

Song of Husks

Today our black walnut opened its underside
to the shadowless light at noon. I never watched
it happen until now—the way the fleshy pale leaves,
like hands, flipped themselves over as if longing

for something to calm them, your presence
now that it's gone. I've heard of plants bending
toward a window, desperate for food in the dark,
but this—with wind, each branch, a new rosary of leaves,

betrayed its body by turning. The leaves will settle
soon. I'm still in that day we pulled out maps of Ireland
and plotted tours of Cork—planned, with a picture,
to capture the same time on each side of St. Anne's clock,

the Four-Faced Liar—the day we said that the land
wasn't stationary: stolen and sold, broken, plates
crashing, we agreed everything changes with a whisper.
Erosion. We tried to stop it. Our tree, when we planted it,

was only nut—to give it a chance in the ground,
we stomped the green husks till they cracked, then
peeled back the hulls with our fingers. They stained
our hands for days. It's that cracking, that constant rattle

of shell against the road, that echoes, an endless
refrain. And when the sound is beginning to fade,
I will press my hand against the bark to listen.

Mockingbirds

Until the storm pushes full throttle against the sky,
crashes through itself to the ground, until the hail
& electricity are unleashed, blown away, some birds
will continue their songs.

Tonight there is no light
to split the clouds, no light, & the mockingbirds hide
outside the street lamps' cast, around cobblestone
corners, while the yellow bulbs flicker like sin.

*A storm's rolling from the west, we might find a little
quiet, you'd say. Out the window, birds clamor
for attention.*

Mating season in the city, singles
claim every block, solemn in their gray & black suits,
their wings' white ties, all birds waiting, impatient
& bruised, calling from their posts for a partner
to finally descend.

They'll move their homes to break
the loneliness, they'll brew unnatural squawks
in their throats to prove each bird unique—crooning
myriads of songs, hours before dawn, to show devotion.

This is not how it usually is, I know— you, unkempt
& cross in memory, arguing with the birds to be quiet,
for just an hour's reprieve from their nightly jabber—
you would never understand the simplicity of their
music: to them, even the mimicry of a car alarm
means passion.

If you had crawled beneath my window
& sang whatever commercial jingles you found beautiful,
or hummed the bridge to "Battle Hymn of the Republic,"
do you believe I would have turned away? Would our
last words have changed, if our laughter had ricocheted
off the building's brick & the road's new stone, found
its own wings to carry it across the night?

Now there is
nothing to say.

Mockingbirds won't hush with just rain.

Fish Hooks (I)

You don't know what to do with them.
This pocket deal, the cards feel

sharp under your fingers: yeah, you think
it's nice at first, owning a pair

higher than nine others, your wonderful
double Jacks, but anyone can drop

an overcard to kill you. All it takes: a single
Queen in someone's pocket, another

in the flop, & damn, you're a fish on the line:
you, the weakest player hooked,

holding out for the river. Don't think.
The odds are 3 to 1 some royal card

will hit you hard, but fate likes to mess
with the deck. So while you're

watching for other wreckage, teasing the table
with each bet—not too much, just reel

the big fish in— go ahead & hold your breath,
pretend you're impossible to catch.

Service Flag

A service flag ... may be displayed [by] members of the immediate family of an individual serving in the Armed Forces ... during any period of war....

-Title 36, United States Code, Section 901

I don't know why it is here, the flag—
red wool, white cotton, scars of pulled thread—

here, in her small attic trunk under skeins
of unused yarn, under her Double Ring quilt.

Folded perfectly in half, tied with yellowing ribbon.
Grandmother: one sister, no brothers. Her father

didn't fight. She met Grandfather years after the war.
But the bottom edge pills toward the center,

as if the weave were finger-stroked away,
as if the wool were skin.

I imagine she sewed the first seam,
and then unseamed it
where the edges overlapped or puckered.
The flag was one hand wide,
two hands long—

When her mother pinched her fingers
around the needle said *Stitch*,
you can stay at the window,
she stitched until her fingers bled—

As a child, I tried to teach my fingers
to mimic her threading tug, the arch of her wrist

as she tied more fabric into the whole.
Baby dips she'd say then *Practice*.

Cut away the messy thread, start again. Overlapping
material, needle pulled straight through.

Thread knotted like punctuation.
But I never gained her skill.

The flag's base layer is red wool
like maple leaves before winter

like a fresh wound
the harvest moon first rising

over the lake when they went fishing
off-dock he said she had to unhook the fish

alone with her own hands and maybe
pliers to bend the metal there was blood

red like an apple
like her own blood but it was fish blood

the hook snagged twice through the lip
and the fish the tiny fish squirming

the night was windy too dark
hands shaking seconds choking

the fish out too long
and it died in her hands.

I can't remember a time when autumn
didn't smell like apples, when wind

didn't shush Grandmother's stand
of sugar maples and tug at their top branches,

force those hand-like leaves to fall.

Grandmother told me she almost died
twice before her twentieth birthday.
She said there wasn't any light to face
just Dark and it sounded capitalized.

Once a boy dared her to swing
off an old oak branch—rotten, gray,
sagging broken over the lake.
She cracked her head open, falling.

The second time *was complicated*—
She would never say more than that.
She looked away, busied her hands,
sometimes stroked my face.

It could have been illness,
something simpler to mend, I suppose.
But in her eyes, her words echoed
lost someone. And I never asked.

In the middle of the red field,
white cotton
where it's needed, at the center:
a stronghold.

She cut up a sheet
not threadbare but worn
iron-yellow from the well
three times before the piece
was the right size,
each edge level—

three times
before her white
white hands stopped shaking
stopped shredding the white cloth
the clean seams—

At the time the flag was sewn

she hadn't met Grandfather,
and she had no soldiers for siblings.

She received the quilt before making the flag,
and the quilt was Double Wedding Rings.

The first time
she wore a
white dress, she

twirled, lace hem
fanning out
at the knees,

in front of
the mirror,
age thirteen.

She dreamed she
was getting
married in

that dress, down
the aisle,
irises

and roses,
baby's breath
curled in her

hair. She would
look up and
see him—some

as-yet face-
less groom, who
loved her. She

lowered her
tablecloth
veil. There would

be dancing.
There would be
cake. She picked

a bouquet—
white and blue
wild flowers—

from the cow
pasture next
door. She clutched

them in both
hands, held them
to her chest.

In mirrors,
she looked old-
er. Someday

her life would
happen.

Maybe their rings were white gold.
(She won't wear that metal now.)

Maybe she moved to her parents' home.
(Everyone in the country has a well.)

Maybe she touched the flag before bed everyday.
(In some places, the wool wears thin.)

Maybe she lost the casket flag.
(Or maybe his parents kept it.)

A star on the flag
at the center of the center:
a blue star: *Loyalty. Service.*
Alive.

Each stitch precise. Each stitch
invisible. No snagging, no
rippling thread. It must be
centered, must be clean.

—But in her sleep she'd see
gold a golden crown
covering the blue:
a gold star: *Dead. Just dead.*

The door handle was gold and the doorbell,
edged in gold, the rope tying the curtains
away from the window, gold. Her own scarf:
blue yarn woven with yellow.

There are no pictures in the trunk.

The first time she met the ocean:
algae high in the tide, herons
diving beneath and rising

nearby like Champagne corks, like
dead bodies. The water was red
at sunset. At dawn, it was a blue

deeper and darker than black,
just as he'd predicted. They stood together
on the dock: shushing against the rocks,

the water pulled itself back
again and again. The air, like sweat.
She couldn't see any life

beneath the waves. He told her
she'd learn to float.

After waiting years,
she forgot the taste of sweat,
apple on her tongue.

I imagine she counted every red thing on the ground—
brilliant, crinkled leaves, only a few, she could count them
on one hand—
and then she'd count them again.
Even when all the leaves changed, even when
red coated the ground,
the number never mattered.

More Fire

Centralia, PA

I.

In the city that burns from beneath, in the closed
cemetery above the mountain town, smoke curls

around what remains of grass, crumbling
headstones, rows of bodies primed for fire—

surface ground collapses, combusts. Nothing
much to do. Everything eventually falls.

II.

I remember my childhood neighbor's stories of hell,
how her cat would purr as she rubbed her bare foot, bone-spurred
& callused, against its granite fur. Afternoons in summer,

she'd weave grapevine into wreaths & spell out
the ways people blister: *It's better to sleep with a Bible,
dear, than anything with breath.* I didn't understand

the anger kindling her words, or why she hated her cat.

III.

Towards the back of the cemetery, left
of the central statue, a couple's shared
gravestone, cracked limestone, hand-carved:

Beloved Husband, Beloved Wife—

Martin & Helen Schmidt.

Martin died in 1960. Helen has no death

date. It probably means she was alone
when she passed, that no one could
chisel her end into rock. She could have

died after the cemetery closed, her dust's
not even there. Think, though: There's
a slight chance she's still alive in the area,

watching the mountain crumble
& town disappear, still waiting.

IV.

The city doesn't live anymore: trees have
eaten the churches, weeds overcome the roads,
& the single wooden bench naming the town

in what used to be city center has faded.
In the homes, five hold-outs refuse to move.
Under-fire can't be stemmed, but they vow

Nothing can make us leave. Someday
they will. For now, they watch the destruction,
count days, watch their bodies age in the heat—

like wood slowly turning, then eaten, in flames.

Fish Hooks (II)

Then you lose your guts,
your skin filleted open.

Lying on this dock, you've been
caught & cut into pieces, strips.

The dock is creaking. Out here,
light slices skin. No simple

catch & release.

This is the transfer of impulse:
Someone cast a line—

the feathered fly at one end,
its two hooks & lead wire,

leather dyed to match the heart—
& with every cast, he'll load

the rod with power. It builds.
Eventually something will break.

Something will bite. Before
the hooks dig in, remember:

when trying to get free
from metal, or be let free,

the untangling — a disengagement
between what used to be hook

& you— hurts worse. Once
caught, it's an achy return.

What Could Be the Captions

I.

Eva Cassidy is singing “Time After Time”
through the bar’s stereo speakers and,
even though it’s not your favorite song, you
acknowledge her vocal talent. Something
about inner cracks, or despondency, or her grasping
wail above it all. I probably say it is
beautiful. That is it. And there are three
empty mugs of Guinness the bartender
needs to clear, and our current glasses are
full. Occasionally you shake your head
slowly, barely, as if unsure of the night’s existence,
but I don’t think you realize there’s movement.
I never tell you. You are leaving in a week.
And I don’t remember the song’s end.

II.

Another snapshot: Flying above Detroit,
restricted airspace between airbase and city,
in your small Cessna-150, and my door opens
because I didn't lock it properly on the ground.
With one hand, I pull at it. I can't look at you.
Then you laugh, *no worries, the seatbelt's there
for a reason*. So I breathe out, lean my head
out the door. There is nothing below me
but wind which, even moving, has no shape here,
and the crank of the plane's motor against that wind,
then cold vaporous clouds you purposely power through
right at that moment, to get my hair damp.
The pressure sucks at me. You grab my arm.
Thousands of feet down, nothing looks like home.

III.

The first weekend we met, you drove me three and a half
hours across the state in your beat-up Chevrolet,
and you said to pay in apple cider. Three gallons.

You grinned as you stowed the bounty. You asked
for cider payments that whole year, every ride home:

I truly thought you were ridiculous.

That first ride, I don't know what we talked about,
or if we talked at all. But when you still wouldn't
press your black sneaker even one micro-millimeter
further down on the pedal, wouldn't go more than
two miles per hour past the limit, even in fast highway
conditions—*we'll get there eventually, geez—*

I understood the trip would be a long one. Just
those gallons of sweet cider at the end.

IV.

There is so much I don't know: What any moment means.

Where you will be soon. The way the moon
reflects the sun but somehow faces us, at night, when
the sun has disappeared. And those strange periods
early morning, some late fall afternoons, when both
sun and moon mingle together, share sky.

Something about physics and light, you once said.

(I believe you.) I can guess why we'd discuss this,
why light is now important. When we talked yesterday, it was
only war. And death. The feel of metal in your hands.

I don't know how to talk about those things. I don't know
how to tell you I'm afraid, without diminishing it.

You don't know how to say it either. It's okay. We'll talk about
light and food and sex, anything easier, to avoid it.

III.

The Geese

And suddenly they were there, pressing through the ash and smoke: Eight Canadian geese, a nearly perfect V, above the gas station's climbing flames. The fire started without warning—none of us saw it begin. No explosion, no sound to bother the neighbors. The blaze, a brilliant blue and green, refused to be extinguished. Snow was falling. The birds kept to their southern route. And we saw three of them crumble to the sidewalk moments later, their brown bodies crashing, twitching. The police cars' lights flashed red against the snow. I don't know what happened to the rest of them. Duffy said they probably continued their flight—he said the birds would compensate in their V for all the dead.

Dear Charles Gretten Norton (II)

Arlington National Cemetery—April 2010

(My best friend joined the Air Force today.) You
were a spy in Italy, skiing the mountain down.

I can picture the snow, powder muffling your fall,
but I don't know how you fell. I'm trying to focus

on other facts—how reconnaissance was your duty—
(I'm trying to remember the last time I saw my friend).

I don't know what you saw in those last moments.
(There's no connection between you & my friend, no.)

But you also flew, your body splitting the cold, sometimes
sweet air below you, the tops of pines. The quiet *pfffft*

of your return to pillowed ground. I can imagine your
speed, weaving around trees, skating over rock face

& river. Those moments before, you must have known
breaking. Even snow can't muffle some sounds.

Five Hundred Crows

I don't know how to say *I love you* except
to point out the five hundred crows
that have taken flight all at once, moving
in the same direction; along the highway,
on telephone beams and wires, across
the ground, then everywhere, birds rising,
a black wave, as if by signal, as if some
telepathic thought ruffled their wings
and made them twitch in unison. You lean
across the console and me to glance,
before returning your eyes to the road.
They pool together, fifty feet up, then ribbon—
a hundred, more—out of sight, disappearing
in northern black clouds. And all I can say:
I read somewhere that animals sense a storm.
It's instinct, to fly from it. I pause, and you
don't respond, focused on brake lights ahead.
Later, when it suddenly rains, when we are
caught in the rocking season-transitional storm,
I watch you smile at the fury. And it makes
sense, that desperate rush of feathers.

Halfway Through Susan Wiggs' *Marrying Daisy Bellamy*

Midway through the book, one of the main characters, Julian Gastineaux, unexpectedly and brutally appears to die in pursuit of his military duties. Marrying Daisy Bellamy is the eighth book in the Lakeshore Chronicles series.

And I fell out of the plane too—for seconds, nothing.
White space. Just another page. Then,
the shock of it:

their passion had been growing through seven novels,
I had come to trust this man—suddenly there's a grenade
& he's jumping to save his crew & Daisy's here trying on
dresses, someone breaks the news—
there are so many miles
to the ground. Words can shatter like bone. And I cannot
breathe:

He is Air Force too. I won't ever hear of the nameless
dangerous missions, only jokes about bombs, crashing—
He brushes it all off.

I rub the book binding, creased
from my hold. *Gone*, a simple word. I throw the book
across the room. I won't pick it up again.

Song of Water

They were a gift from the gypsies, my grandmother said—
these bangles that clanged with movement. Four bracelets,
each a chain of amber squares, each square an inch across—
and pressed inside, some wild flowers. When they jangled

around my grandmother's wrist—(she never took them off)—
I believed they sounded like a waterfall, or how I imagined
a waterfall to sound, until I swam near a real one. There,
somewhere deep in Maine, I learned the difference between

trickle and *rush*, water waiting to stir and water moving
with agency. The rainfall that summer was heavy—deltas broke
denser than veils over falling limestone faces— and I remember
the touch of that water, colder because it was night, and humid,

and I wasn't supposed to wander beyond my family's camp.
I was thirteen, my grandmother wasn't there, only her frequent
words in my head—*Darling, live wild, dance every minute*—;
somehow that translated to *escape*. By the falls, the hard woods

were silent beneath the breaking river, the fifty foot drop
to a wider pool, which then continued Atlantic-bound.
Its *shushing* called, soothed. I found a path to the bottom.
And there, for no reason I understood, I peeled my jean shorts

from my body, waded within the muck. The current hit
the top of my thighs, pulled me deeper. Even in the calmest
places, the water twirled, dipped, spun itself away. I could see
on the opposite bank a few wildflowers drooping, heads

needing the day's light. I would've picked them, preserved what
felt like a pivotal moment, if they weren't so beautiful. I can't
remember how long I stood in the churning river. My grandmother
once said she used to be an *enigma*, what souls are called that

won't keep a rooted home—they move through forests, dancing
to a music so tuned with the earth's roll that sometimes
they hear silence. I always wanted to be one of them, to feel
the magic, the pulse of the land, hear the chorus of its movement,

or rather, feel the quiet beneath it—like that water, something
more than the clinking of bracelets, rolling down a wrist.
Even now I can hear them sing, *Just keep moving*.

Since the house is on fire, let us warm ourselves

Italian proverb

“The genesis of the Centralia [PA] fire ... could have been extinguished with a few shovelfuls of sand.”

—Jeff Tietz, Harper’s Magazine, 2004

At the end we know only this: flame— & what heats it.
There isn’t much

I wouldn’t do for you. Think of the boy who nearly
drowned in fire

in Pennsylvania, when the ground beneath him
dropped & he dangled

from the roots of a tree, sulfurous smoke swelling upward
like a geyser, smothering

his face, & beneath him, a black hole too deep to see
the bed, the boy sinking

in melting clay—a rainstorm three days prior mingling
with 20 years

of burning coal, all the underground mines more food
for one flame.

Think of the boy’s eyes squeezed shut to the smoke.
Think of his clothes—

a 12-year-old’s jeans, the grass stained knees, now masked
in mud & soot— & then

think of his body, unharmed at the end of it. No scratch. No
burn. We’re not even

close to the end. What feeds our fire is the same: the heart
of 1000 cherries

we’ll someday consume—when we spit the pits, we’ll aim
for open land, unknotted grass,

& we won’t know, until we return in 20 years, if any tree
grew from those seeds.

Can you imagine the blossoms? When the boy brought
his first wife back

to that place, or before that, the first time the boy crossed the road
alone without flinching,

he grew impenetrable: the fire at his feet baked him strong
against any other fear,

& conquering it, he was free to touch the ground. What
joy in that sentence.

Give me 20 years of burning, & I'll show you a new
Achilles, no broken heel—

I'll give you proof of real hunger, all the ways a fire works.
At the beginning,

every flame starts with friction. You can bury it, stamp its flush
into the mud,

it's your choice— or you can let the spark kindle, explode
into heat. Don't be

afraid any longer. We'll find the flame together— we can give it
a little breath.