

THE MILK CARTON AGE

By  
Dalton Owen Huerkamp

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
April 2018

Approved by

---

Advisor: Dr. Matt Bondurant

---

Reader: Professor Melissa Ginsburg

---

Reader: Dr. Kathryn McKee

© 2018  
Dalton Owen Huerkamp  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Matt Bondurant, Professor Melissa Ginsburg and Dr. Kathryn McKee. I would also like to thank a few former and current professors: Professor Molly Brown, Professor Beth Spencer, Dr. Jaime Cantrell, Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth, Professor Tom Franklin, Professor Beth Ann Fennelly and Professor Catherine Lacey. And, of course, I would like to thank my family: Mom, Dad, Brock, Sumner, Kamp and Ruby.

ABSTRACT  
DALTON OWEN HUERKAMP: The Milk Carton Age  
(Under the Direction of Matt Bondurant)

This thesis is a collection of poetry that examines masculinity and violence in the contemporary American South. Taking place in the states of Arkansas and Mississippi, these poems gather memories, voices and vistas to develop an understanding of place and identity that challenges traditional narratives about the region. Note: names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

## INTRODUCTION

The poems collected in this thesis were written between February 19th, 2016 and April 11th, 2018. The earliest poem, “Ballad for H.B. 1523,” was written outside of the classroom, but the remaining poems either originated in prompts from workshop courses or were written specifically for this thesis. That is not to say that this collection was assembled piecemeal. Rather, in writing poems to develop a creative voice, I found that all the work I had produced shared similar concerns about place and identity. When gathered together these poems, I believe, build upon each other to form a broader statement about masculinity and violence in the contemporary American South.

In this introduction, I will briefly outline the cycle of inspiration, inception, editing and sequencing that went into this project.

When I announced to friends and family that I had started work on a thesis in creative writing, the response was unanimous confusion. My major area of study is Public Policy Leadership with a minor in English, and even in my English studies I was focused early on with writing fiction. Poetry, however, came back into my writing life through courses with poets Molly Brown and Beth Spencer.

Molly Brown’s English 301 in the fall of 2016 was my first experience with creative writing as an undergraduate. This course covered poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction, but I was most drawn to poetry and fiction by the end of the course. I attribute my developed interest in poetry to Molly Brown’s passion for writing and teaching poetry, a dedication that was evident in the pieces she read to our class from the then-unreleased *The Virginia State Colony For Epileptics and Feeble-minded*. That semester I wrote early drafts of three poems that are included in this thesis: “Ballad for H.B. 1523” (my second draft), “Deer Head” and “Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays” (originally titled “those Meet the Press sundays”).

In Beth Spencer’s poetry workshop the following spring, I felt myself becoming more comfortable in the poetic forms I began working with in the fall. Much of my fiction at that same time was first-person, high-concept and dialogue-heavy. I loathed writing in third person, and having to produce pages of setup I wasn’t proud of in order to hit a stride was not for me. Poetry, which offers a broader venue for strong voices and big ideas, was a relief from these frustrations as well as a better fit for many my creative goals. So in producing poetry assignments that spring, I brought with me the ideas I had reserved for prose.

Many of the poems included in the Mississippi section of this collection come from that spring of 2017: “Buckner’s Trestle,” “The Church of Hatsune Miku” and “Water Towers.” Though I wasn’t conscious of it at the time, much of my writing then was about Oxford and Mississippi. I had just spent the last summer in town working as an orientation leader (my first summer not at home), and my junior year marked my third year living in Mississippi after growing up in the state of Arkansas.

In Arkansas, some of my earliest writing in middle and high school had been poems. The first piece I ever wrote, titled “To the Girl Who Was Divine,” was a rambling, free-verse poem about a girl. Despite being a bad poem, it was published in a student

literary magazine contest at Ouachita Baptist University in my hometown. Around that time I also started to read poetry collections, like Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I also remember being struck by individual poems, some I found on my own or some assigned to me in class.

Ginsberg's "In Society," for example, was one of my favorite poems in high school. I stumbled upon it while reading a sample from Ginsburg's *Collected Poems* on my Kindle, and I was struck by the way Ginsberg used his line breaks and specific word choices to build an internal rhythm and tension on the page. Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" was assigned to me in AP Literature, and the way Plath used personification to make an everyday phenomenon feel fresh was a trick I've been attempting ever since. A third poem I remember loving, and still love, is Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." Dickinson is an endlessly fascinating poet and her choices in this piece, from the capitalization to minute visual details, all carry a heavy existential weight and humor in just a few stanzas.

Studying other poets suggested by my readers provided further inspiration for this collection. Marcus Wicker's *Silencer* provided examples of how to write poems both personal and political, and his integration of elements from music informed references to lyrics in some of my poems. John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* inspired me to draw from my dream journal to write "Deer Head," the opening poem. Beth Ann Fennelly's recent *Heating and Cooling*, while not exactly poetry, excited me enough to include my own "micro-memoir." David Kirby's wicked sense of humor in *The House on Boulevard St.* showed me how to accomplish jokes in poems. Along with these, I also read the works of other contemporary poets: Jericho Brown, Ross Gay, Billy Collins, Claudia Rankine, Warsan Shire and Rodney Jones.

With this basis of poets as inspiration, I began writing new and editing existing poems for this collection. The majority of the poems below are free verse, narrative and persona poems. Free verse and narrative were forms I felt comfortable in writing before returning to poetry, but persona poems became a recurring theme in Melissa Ginsburg's advanced poetry workshop in the fall of 2017. My first poem for the class was "Teeth Puller," and the positive response in workshop inspired me to continue with others like "Frankie Avalon's Italian Sonnet for Frenchy," "Travel Tee-Ball Tournament" and "Coup De Grâce."

Outside of the classroom my writing process is as follows: I've kept an observation journal since the spring of 2017. In it I like to record quotes, tweets, overheard conversations, definitions, doodles, movies and wrestling matches to watch, random lines for a poem and concepts for poems. A majority of the time I will start a poem going off of an idea I recorded in my journal. "Final Thoughts of the Dog Hung by Mike Huckabee's Son at Camp Pioneer in Hatfield, AR in 1998," for example, started as an idea note in my journal before becoming a fleshed-out piece. If I'm stuck on a poem I've already started I'll thumb through my journal and try to find a note for inspiration. In revising "Ballad for H.B. 1523," I integrated some stray lines I had saved as notes in my journal.

I always write my first draft of a poem out on a legal pad in pencil and then type it to save on my laptop. I've found that typing after writing in longhand is the best editing tool. The speed with which you can write on a keyboard can reveal the success of attempted rhythms and line breaks. Reading poems aloud after typing them also helps with this, plus it also tests riskier word choices. If reading a specific word aloud sounds awkward, I will change it to a word that better suits a performance of the poem.

I've also included works in forms such as the sonnet, sestina, haibun, and pantoum. One of my personal creative achievements in this project was not just working with these forms, but also finding ways to not be confined by them. My introduction to many of these, including the haibun and pantoum, came through class assignments. While some pieces remain close to their original draft (like "Coup De Grâce"), other assignments were discarded and their forms applied to different or new poems.

I didn't want to work in traditional forms for the sake of working in traditional forms. The choices I made in matching narratives or personas to forms were to find structures that complimented and enhanced the stories I wanted to tell. For example, "Shannon" originated as a journal entry, but I wanted to somehow integrate it into this thesis. I thought this character fit well with the themes I was developing, and I also wanted to use his forestry studies to touch on Kentucky's natural landscape. The haibun, combining prose and haiku, allowed for this kind of piece to work as a poem.

Their organization into two sections, Arkansas and Mississippi, reflects not just their settings but also a mindset in which the poems were written. As I mentioned earlier, many of my early undergraduate poems concerned Mississippi but when I was presented with a choice of going to graduate school in Mississippi or Arkansas, my poems started to concern where I grew up. That is not to say my intention wasn't to turn this thesis into a pro-con list about both state. This issue of state identity and what it means to call a place home was on my mind throughout writing, revision and sequencing.

In early sequencing I became inspired by the R.E.M. album *Fables of the Reconstruction* from 1985 and Randy Newman's 1974 album *Good Ole Boys*. Early albums by R.E.M. do not follow a Side A and Side B format. Instead, the band would give each side an arbitrary name that didn't tell the listener which side should be heard first or second, like the names "A Side" and "Another Side" on *Fables*. This interchangeable order is something I can't accomplish in this collection (unless it is published as a tête-bêche book), but the way the tracks on both the album's sides reflect and contrast one another was something I was inspired by. The track listing of Newman's *Good Ole Boys* also inspired some sequencing choices. The way the album jumps across perspectives, time and spaces was something I wanted to replicate in the collection. Both artists intended their respective concept albums to reckon with the contemporary South and its history, and I wanted the overall order of the poems in the Arkansas and Mississippi sections to reflect my similar intent.

I've come to understand through this project that to be a Southern writer, whether that be in prose, poetry or nonfiction, is to be a speculative writer. Let me explain: the American South fits the criteria established by Lewis's Narina, Le Guin's Earthsea, Herbert's Arrakis and others: it is a place whose borders, citizenship and cosmology

exists only in our collective imagination. If you were to ask a series of strangers to draw a map of the South, identify who is a Southerner or to even *define* the South, you would get wildly different answers from each person. All we have to really go on is a past, and to write about this place is to grapple with the world-building conducted by competing interests over generations. This understanding of the South and what it means to be a Southerner comes from Dr. Kathryn McKee, one of my readers for this thesis. Her Southern Studies 101 course, which I took in the fall of 2015, introduced me to concepts like simulacra and time-space compression and applied them to the region I grew up in.

But growing up, I was disinterested in such reading about or study of the South. Much of the media I consumed was escapist genre works like science fiction and fantasy. Even now, though I am interested in Southern writing and writers, I still find myself drawn these genre works for entertainment. With the basics of poetry from course work and these new ideas introduced by Dr. McKee, I started seeing these two worlds, the stark realities of the contemporary South and the imaginative possibilities of speculative writing, interesting in these poems.

My main intention with these poems and this collection is to give voice to the kind of Speculative South I've sought out as a reader. Poems like "Water Towers," "Reptar Crossing the Mississippi" and "The Church of Hatsune Miku" are the most direct attempts at this. I have found some similar concerns in recent books like Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*, Michael Farris Smith's *Rivers* and Alissa Nutting's *Made for Love*, but those are novels. For my goals, poetry is the medium where pure language can alienate, heighten and reveal truths about the world that has been made for us.

I had the pleasure of meeting Marcus Wicker in Beth Ann Fennelly's class this semester, and his comments on the role of the poet in society and academia expressed ideas I had about the subject for some time. In our class discussion, Wicker talked about how he hated how poets were writing for a select crowd of academics and students of poetry. To paraphrase his comments, poetry should be accessible to general populace and speak to and share the experiences of everyday lives.

I share this view of the role of poetry and the poet in society. The poet's role, to me, is to bring a different perspective to readers, a perspective outside their own that adds to a social, cultural and academic discourse about a time and place. The poems a poet produces can be experiments, statements, rants, stories, or take on any shape it pleases; what remains important is that the poet aims to transmit concepts or images that, for a moment, give the reader a different and interesting perspective.

This collection represents my attempt to reach what it means to be a poet by developing an understanding of the region where I grew up and continue to live. By gathering memories, voices and vistas from my own life and from the lives of others, I am engaging in my own kind of world-building. I could have written these poems in the tradition of the Great White Dead Oxford writers (Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Hannah's New South and even Brown's Rough South), but I believe their sandboxes are inadequate for this century. In the larger world of poetry, I want this collection to add to the voices of other contemporary Southern writers who are all searching for their own



ways to define, critique and change this, to borrow a phrase, beautifully complicated place.

In closing, I want to return to a concern I had early on in this thesis project. My major course of study is still Public Policy Leadership, but this thesis only fulfills my minor in English. Politics is a theme in many of my poems (see “Ballad for H.B. 1523” and “Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays”), but I also consider this a thesis in public policy, albeit a nontraditional one. In addition to the same line of thinking concerning the role of poetry in society, I also believe that poets have an obligation to use their talents to combat our current politic’s scarcity of imagination.

So often in our political debates, the only two options appear to be slow, incremental forward progress or rapid devolution back towards an idealized past. Utopias, it seems, are out of style in contemporary media. This quote from one of my favorite writers, Ursula K. Le Guin, is a succinct statement of what poetry can accomplish as political statements:

“We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.”

In this new age of political activism through poetry, with this thesis and my background in policy, I want to lend a voice to and pursue positive change in my community, state and region. This collection is just a first step in this journey towards depicting and enacting larger change, presenting a snapshot of my early creative and personal life. In my future poems, I look to expand upon the ideas and ideals presented in this introduction. I remain proud of the output I’ve accomplished thus far, and even in moments of frustration in editing I am inspired knowing this is only the beginning of my writing life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Arkansas	
	Entrance	...2
	For Maddie	...3
	The Great Vagina	...6
	Frankie Avalon's Italian Sonnet for Frenchy	...7
	Auctioneer	...8
	Travel Tee-Ball Tournament	...9
	Final Thoughts of the Dog Hung by Mike Huckabee's Son at Camp Pioneer in Hatfield, AR in 1998	...10
	Deer Head	...11
	My Other Cheek	...12
	Reptar Crossing the Mississippi	...13
II.	Mississippi	
	Coup De Grâce	...16
	Buckner's Trestle	...18
	The Church of Hatsune Miku	...19
	Ballad for H.B. 1523	...20
	Teeth Puller	...22
	Autocorrect-Generated Beat Poem	...23
	Ode to the Granny that Fell in Square Books	...25
	Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays	...27
	Shannon	...28
	Water Towers	...29
	Pantoum on Hugh	...30

Part One:  
Arkansas

Entrance

I am the Grand Admiral Welder  
and I come out to my theme music  
    “Ain’t it Funny” by Danny Brown  
dressed in a waterfall of white  
The epaulettes, the medals, the ribbons and devices  
jut and overhang like precarious rocks  
streaming a bedazzled wall of cape to the stage’s floor

On my face I wear  
a mask of my own design  
a winged forehead  
a unicorn’s horn  
ears like an elf  
gills like a merman  
and I carry a spiked metal chair  
in my left hand.

Behind me walks my wife  
Akira Hokuto  
in a black wedding dress  
I don’t look at the crowd  
    despite its size  
I look to the ring  
where stands some shadow opponent:  
    a jobber jabroni

I step forward  
into the cacophony of lazer lights  
stepping as if RuPaul is watching

I’ve already won  
I’ve already won

For Maddie

I.

I'm looking at you  
through rose-tinted  
binoculars, through  
your black bedroom  
window, into your  
looking glass,  
where you brush your bangs.

II.

That night  
in the old Earle Hotel,  
I remember  
standing in the mildewed  
staircase, in an off-the-rack  
blazer, modeling my father's  
Purple Heart on my sleeve.

Up that staircase  
in the decrepit ballroom we collided,  
a coincidence of assigned seating,  
sitting in those "late to Easter service  
no empty pews  
back of the sanctuary"  
kinda chairs.

Must I write  
how you looked that night?  
You yourself know,  
but I've sketched it so many times  
the image in my mind has faded  
like a picture  
overexposed by time.

We fox-trotted on linoleum,  
later, to the tune of "Hey There Delilah"  
playing out of a cassette player.  
I stepped on your toes.

In return,  
you stepped on mine.  
We laughed

over store-bought  
cheesecake and  
Shirley Temples.  
A mother, either  
mine or yours,  
took a photo that night  
that I could never find after.

III.

And how I looked.  
That was the Fall Ball.  
That winter I drew maps,  
wrote fan-fiction,  
charted flight plans  
for another collision  
at the Spring Ball.

And I looked for you  
through a thousand Maddie files:  
no hard copy photo,  
not on my mother's hard drive,  
no intel,  
no Instagram.  
It was 2001.

Those nights,  
tossing turnless,  
I escaped through my window  
playing "Hey There  
Delilah" on repeat,  
following streetlight  
nightlights, calling out your name.

IV.

Come Spring Ball,  
police scanning the kids  
in the hall:

no sign.

over store-bought  
king cake and  
Mary Badhams:  
no sign.

on linoleum  
goose-stepping  
to the tune of  
“Low (ft. T-Pain)”:  
still no sign.

I am crowned King of the Ring  
and even up on shoulders:  
no sign.

by mother-son dance  
I am crying  
accusing her of stepping on my toes  
as an excuse

V.

Maddie, I have a hundred crushes  
planted across Clark County  
like land mines.  
But your name,  
your name,  
Mah-dee:  
you are an atom bomb  
and my heart still stands  
in the shadow  
of your detonation.

## The Great Vagina

In middle school, there was a hole at the edge of the playground. My friends and I would congregate around the hole during recess and drink chocolate milk. The hole was wide enough for just one of us to stand in, barely a foot deep. While the girls sat in the shade of the rotting gazebo and the other boys played touch football down the hill, we would take turns standing in the hole.

We called it the Great Vagina.

Around the uninitiated, we referred to it as “TGV.” We became obsessed with its origin: was someone trying to dig under the fence to escape? Was it a portal to Hell? We started to make sacrifices to the Great Vagina. Crinkled Cheeto bags, pepper packets, mechanical pencil lead; any detritus we found in the halls or blown by the wind we dropped into the Great Vagina.

In April, just before summer break, I told a girl about the Great Vagina. To my friends, this was the ultimate betrayal; the breaking of a circle that must remain unbroken. I told her during lunch and, by recess, word had spread to all of the girls. When I brought them to the hole my friends were leaning on the fence, arms crossed, disgusted.

The girls looked at the hole and said, “that’s not what a vagina looks like.”

“Yes it does,” I said.



Frankie Avalon's Italian Sonnet for Frenchy

Though I descend from Malt Shop in the Sky,  
not Christ, nor bird, nor hunk do I appear;  
forever gilded, 'mongst the permed and spry,  
these locks oblige dye black and mousse cohered.  
But Pink! Hence Paul, Damascus Rd. beneath,  
take heed my academic counseling:  
return to Venice High, your brush bequeath  
for glare of Principal McGee, lapsing  
your beauty school hairdressing daydreams now.  
It could be worse, you could be me: allowed  
relief from Heaven's glare exclusively  
to gift (impart) advice in manner "thou."  
Oh, Sisyphus of Tartarus, aloud  
I pray for boulders over truant deeds!

Auctioneer

Failed Soundcloud rapper  
Now working the family gig  
Spitting out cattle prices  
at the Texarkana Auction Barn

There's manure in the cracks of his Yeezy's  
The gavel's smack makes his headache worse  
These gallon hats can tell he's slurring  
Did Lil Peep ever feel like this?

Maybe he'll move out to Houston  
Maybe he'll make moonshine with the family still  
    Sell it at the barn after hours  
    Make enough to buy that Neumann mic

Then the gallon hats'll stop calling him wigger  
Then they'll start buying what he's got  
But the still scheme wouldn't, couldn't work  
So he'll just have to fill a mason jar with water

Practicing behind the barn's dumpster:

“Gathered here today to say, I say,  
like Foghorn Leghorn  
Born to brew this corn but I should warn  
before you're stillborn  
This shit make you still like Custer's Hill  
at Little Bighorn  
Last stand that trip X what else you  
expect from Prof. X  
I may be messin' 'bout that mason  
but not Amex so  
if you want effects it ain't complex:  
personal effects  
like rocks, socks, glocks and clocks, locks, blocs and  
cash, cards and checks  
you know I perplex, know I get sex,  
know I'm up next.”

## Travel Tee-Ball Tournament

There's a body in the Yeti  
in the back of my SUV. I

am driving to Texarkana  
with my fucking family. I

see my wife, she's in scrubs, and my  
son, he's in cleats, saying, "gee, I

hope we win." They better win,  
or swear to Lord almighty I

will kick that coach's ass in front  
of God and everybody. I

am not fucking around. Think I  
am? Take a look at the body. I

shot the spic crossing the border,  
right through his cranial cavity. I

bagged our militia's first casualty.  
I've fulfilled the fantasy. I

am now tasked with disposing of  
him, under Red River realty, but I

can't get these cleats wet. And if we  
get pulled over, better believe I'll

pull out my AR and kill them,  
my wife and my son, and myself, me.

Final Thoughts of the Dog Hung by Mike Huckabee's Son at Camp Pioneer in Hatfield,  
AR in 1998

Allegedly  
Allegedly  
A llegendly  
a legend he  
a rope from behind the cabin  
a ledge  
my mouth  
no my neck  
a tree  
Hanging but not  
Hanging not hanging out  
Hanging and swinging  
swinging  
like the rope is in my mouth  
in my neck  
in the rope  
is climbing  
I have ears  
I hear laughing but I can't see  
someone laughing  
someone screaming  
I have no neck  
my head  
distant  
from my body  
my body  
sharp  
distance  
dis stance  
this stance  
dis can't  
this can't  
can't stand  
can't  
cannot  
can  
can kick  
kick  
kick  
kicked

## Deer Head

A cloud moves west  
over the peak sun  
as the mud and blood besiege  
the last of the tap water

The drops fly off my face  
leaping and glittering  
back into the male end  
of the garden hose  
my mother holds

We four are all standing  
dirty  
again  
and my mother opens her mouth  
making a sound  
like a VCR  
before she drops the hose and moonwalks  
back to the driveway

We moonwalk  
down the path to the brown water  
of Mill Creek

When we reach that place  
the sun reveals it  
and the three fall in line  
as I float  
into the red water  
and extend

my arm shakes as the ripples besiege it  
the antler leaps into my hand  
the head blinks  
the mouth opens  
and it vomits  
glittering black tape  
that circles my head and crowns me  
creating antlers of my own

## My Other Cheek

And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

—Matthew 5:40-41 (ESV)

That red riverbed  
that clay drilled by cleats and drills  
That twin tumulus  
that splitting railroad  
those graffitied boxcars  
the power lines  
lining the way towards town  
That tornado  
its shadow still downtown with  
its feed store and pound  
That collapsed turret  
that twisted rebar and broken  
wall atop walls atop walls

But atop even that  
above my other cheek  
I see it all  
I can see for yards and yards  
the empty fiefdoms of moons passed  
the unmanned towers of mascots dead  
the unguarded citizens of meritocracies toppled  
and over the Ozarks: Mount Comfort  
and over the Mississippi: the Long-Lost Brothers  
over and over  
the crow cry uncovers the battlefield

## Reptar Crossing the Mississippi

Pressing craters into the river bank,  
soft as an infant's posterior fontanelle,  
It never looks down; lizard eyes locked,  
Its glare is for the opposite shore: a stretch  
of deep Delta emerald, a farm downstate  
of endless roaming.

The last crater for the eye, into the Earth's  
scabbed embankment, brings lapping  
brown to Reptar's scaled feet:

Like John 13:5

Like the rusted, barnacled hull of a ghost ship dividing the water  
like a deck of cards.

The moment does not last.

The next step touches water first, then earth.  
water climbs Its body like a thermometer in heat,  
cooling the cold-blooded king.  
From my vantage, up on the bridge,  
looking not down or up,  
but straight across at Its t-rex arms,  
i think to myself  
*can it even swim?*

It doesn't have to.  
Even at river's deepest part,  
the brown mercury does not even exceed Its chest.  
The river's flow flowing around It,  
i wonder to myself

*can Its presence,  
in the middle of the river,  
can that be felt in the beginning water?  
all the way up in Minnesota or down in the Gulf?*

Its presence is flooding both shores,  
burying craters behind and watering emerald ahead.  
Even in the middle, in the deepest, he stands.

Though his ignorant wandering has destroyed farmland, townland and cityland  
across Arkansas, sending me now for refuge in Mississippi,  
he seems to understand  
that where he stands is the division between two words:  
a division not drawn up in ink  
but taken as itself a mark  
because it is a force of nature,  
like Himself.

National Guards from both states guard  
on their respective shores,  
waiting for his next move,  
watching to make sure he does not destroy  
the bridge I am on with other cars and other drivers.  
*Yet I feel no fear.*

White smoke escapes Reptar's nostrils.  
Not a threat, I pray,  
but maybe  
he has finally picked a new Pope.



Part Two:  
Mississippi

## Coup De Grâce

I saw Finn Bálor wrestle  
one Sunday in Tupelo,  
Mississippi by myself.  
I drove forty-five minutes  
and paid twenty-five dollars  
to see him live, in person,

foot-stomp another person  
from the top rope of the wrestling  
ring. Twenty-five dollars  
well spent at the Tupelo  
Arena for some minutes  
of peace and calm for myself.

The drive up there by myself  
was long. I'm now a person  
who drives forty-five minutes  
to watch just one pro-wrestler.  
I forgot that Tupelo  
was Elvis's birthplace (ten dollars

per tour). Just ten dollars  
to see the place, for yourself,  
where a boy from Tupelo  
began his ascent from person  
to Star Child, garbed like wrestlers  
future. Apt it's minutes

from the arena, minutes  
I won't spend because ten dollars  
is not worth missing wrestler  
Finn Bálor. By myself,  
I watched the other person  
take that stomp in Tupelo.

I don't think that Tupelo  
crowd grasped those precious minutes.  
To see an ascendant per-  
son is worth ten times the dollars  
I saved and spent myself

to see the world's best wrestler.

I saw Finn Bálor wrestle  
that Sunday in Tupelo,  
Mississippi by myself.  
I drove forty-five minutes  
and paid twenty-five dollars  
to see him stomp me.

## Buckner's Trestle

“Built by the Mississippi Central Railroad  
in the late 1850s, this trestle was the site of  
two train wrecks in 1870 and 1928. The 1928  
wreck injured forty-two passengers, including several  
University of Mississippi students and faculty.”  
—Mississippi Department of  
Archives and History, 2013

Magnolia, memorialize them,  
our splintered bodies.  
It was the Lord's will  
for us to shatter like lanterns,  
for our smoke to rise up.  
Magnolia, report the number  
of soulless bodies  
never to ascend.  
And now  
build atop our carcasses.

Magnolia, amend us,  
our sprained student body.  
It was our will and testament  
testing our flame in rain,  
to shift the mountain trunk.  
Magnolia, gather our luggage,  
and the pages on the wind  
descending into the town.  
And now  
we live as truants of heaven.

## The Church of Hatsune Miku

I visited the Church of  
Hatsune Miku one Sunday.  
The congregation was in blazers,  
VR headsets, seersucker dresses.  
We passed the Bitcoin offering  
plate as the choir streamed  
for half a cent per hymn.  
The sermon, periscoped in  
from Jackson, ran long;  
mothers had to silence  
their babies, grandfathers snored.  
I gave it a thumbs down  
as we all rushed out for mimosas.

Ballad for H.B. 1523

Wooden crosses on the side of the highway  
missing signs on a telephone pole  
yellow tape across a dark alleyway  
and a stone marking where there's man in a hole

All of these things they put up for you  
all of these things mark what they cannot undo  
but these are the things that they never would do  
if you were alive and still hiding what's true

We fell in love when we were just kids  
still believing that our hearts were corrupt  
corrupted by thoughts that our Lord forbids  
but no thought of damnation could interrupt

The love notes between us were emoji hearts  
and Snapchats shot across town like little red darts  
Even the words we exchanged in the dark  
were softened by these cartoon postmarks

Our game went on like this until our senior year  
never a word in the field house or the halls  
and despite the way that we tried to appear  
those who would kill you still saw through it all

Our last semester during homecoming week  
you promised for Friday the thing we'd postponed  
that after we left our dates with a kiss on the cheek  
we would find a dirt road and kiss on our own

Out in that country laying flat in your truck bed  
both under the blanket of a darkened oak cove  
the headlights surrounded us with the squeak of tire tread  
and the dark figures snatched you, threw you in and away they drove

I parked your truck next to mine at the high school  
I didn't call the police, your parents or your phone  
I looked out for myself and I know it sounds cruel  
but the paralyzing guilt was something I could not postpone

But I thought of you at wooden crosses on the side of the highway  
And I putting missing signs on up telephone poles  
and when the yellow tape went up across a dark alleyway  
I cried by the stone where they put you in a hole

All of these things we put up for you  
all of these things mark what I cannot undo  
but these are the things that they never would do  
if their corrupted hearts didn't make laws against our own

## Teeth Puller

call me "Dentist Dalty"  
i'll stare into your void  
i'll scrape the plaque  
    (like a painter in reverse)  
i'll fill your fillings with fingernails

have you been seeing other dentists?  
is there an "Orthodontist Owen" on the side?  
i can feel a pulse  
in your breathing  
vantablack atop vantablack



## Autocorrect-Generated Beat Poem

I.

My name is Dalton and I am still not going to the show  
I am so sorry for that sir  
I think you should come pick it  
and you can pick me  
your shirt for me  
your welcome sir

II.

I was born a year old but I'm not a fan  
but I'm not going as a fan  
I don't have a fan but I'm sure it would never be a bad thing  
but I'm about it

III.

I was born to a good man and he is my lord  
I am so far off my lord and he said it is my god  
I am a good lord  
I love it  
he said he was the lord who was a good man  
to good and holy holy god god is god holy holy  
god god I am holy god

IV.

I don't think you can get a hold of me  
your love is a good man  
and he is a good man  
and he is a good man  
and he is a good map  
and he is a goop man  
and he is a god map  
and she is a good man  
and he is a good

V.

is that god is a man that god I love ❤️

god i hope 🙏

god has been god holy god god holy hell he was god

holy god god holy man god is holy

Ode to the Granny that Fell in Square Books

Of all  
the places  
on the Square  
to trip:  
the curbs,  
the potholes,  
the balconies,  
you chose  
the most  
operatic.

The missed step,  
a perfectly  
executed  
*en pointe*  
on air;  
your arms,  
thrown  
out;  
floating,  
like Dalí's  
Christ;  
your hair,  
immaculate,  
still,  
like Doris Roberts;  
your chin,  
tucked, and your face,  
unperturbed.

Your body  
has remained  
intact  
for decades  
in spite of  
leaded gasoline  
saturated fats,  
colds wars,  
high heels,  
hurricanes.

You know  
how to fall;  
you are a  
professional  
at plummets.  
And here,  
in this  
mecca  
for the  
elderly,  
you are  
putting on  
a clinic  
for your  
peers,  
doing  
the most  
before  
your warranty  
expires.

Those Mar-a-Lago Sundays  
or, Barron

“Will be having many meetings this weekend at The Southern White House. Big 5:00 P.M. speech in Melbourne, Florida. A lot to talk about!”

—President Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), 6:51 AM - 18 Feb 2017

sundays, too, the pack  
would arrive at dawn  
and reveal their backs  
in the verdant heat.  
Then, with ungloved  
hands that ripped  
and swam in their dance  
made tangled brambles fumble.  
I thanked them so much.

I'd bake and glean  
that neighboring drone, sizzle.  
When the line died,  
he'd call,  
and lickety-split  
I would leap and fan,  
fearing the chronic  
fumings of that room.

Mumbling distant to him,  
Midas, who will soon  
drive out the Others  
and soil my good  
name as well.  
What does he know  
What does he know  
of gilded and lonely Oval Offices?

## Shannon

Last fall, I visited Kentucky for the first time with my roommate Sam. Instead of getting a hotel we stayed with a guy named Shannon, a friend of Sam's from his hometown. Shannon was a fine host, but he was an eccentric one. I discovered, over the three days we stayed in his sparse, one-bedroom apartment, that he has many quirks.

For example, on Saturday morning, Shannon said he went to bed at five in the morning and woke up at seven in the morning. He said the same thing Sunday morning. Also, every time we went out for meals, all weekend, Sam and I would order food and Shannon wouldn't get anything (other than a drink or two). The only thing I saw him eat all weekend was a stale loaf of bread from Jimmy John's on Saturday night. He would also vape, if that counts as food.

At a crowded bar on Friday night, Shannon showed me his collection of nude photos he said "girls from home always send me randomly." The next night, at another crowded bar, he told me he was "genetically superior" to every guy around him and could "kick their asses if they tried anything." Then there was his tattoo: Shannon had a tattoo on his right shoulder depicting a man and woman, both in medieval garb, with the man holding a dagger, standing defensively in front of the woman. He told me he designed it himself, said it represents his life motto: "to get to her, you have to get through me." Sam later told me the woman on the tattoo looked just like the girl who had rejected him at his last college.

Shannon had transferred to Kentucky from Purdue to study forestry just a year ago. When he wasn't working a part-time job as a J.V. football coach for his uncle, he was exploring the forest behind his apartment. He told us about a creek he found, one that had tunneled its way through the underground root system of an impending tree line and bubbled back up to the forest floor. We asked him to show us the creek, but he never took us.

a Kentucky creek  
a line of reddening trees  
what eats at their roots?

## Water Towers

kudzu crawls over the mass graves like the cover of the R.E.M. record up the stairs and to the landing up the stairs into the hall of my doorknob tractor that I pilot to clear the vines and churn the hills sowing roses in my wake from Metcalfe to Scooba Walnut to Pascagula my sideline the Flood Zone and my guidepost rusted water towers Big Daddy would say to me as I would bundle bouquets of weeds in the yard son the only thing you'll be is a ditch digger and he was right about that and right about faster horses younger men older me and no more money he didn't live to see our Worker's State and he didn't live to see his work ethic in me in our Relaxation Plantation fifteen an hour for fifteen a week I'm making overtime making time in my revolutionary combine and I know I have either run over him or will run over him over in some sarcophagus in some charmin shaw you had to die Big Daddy you had to die for full communism you had to die you were bad and bougie and I can't look down or I'll die I like to look up through the icy windshield through the mirage and wave to the folks fanning blue tarps as I pass now I prefer henbit to be quite frank but thorns keep your ghost below until planting season comes again

Pantoum on Hugh

*He begins with a lie and ends with the truth.*

Do you recall the Nutt Administration?

Ten years prior, one state over?

Oh, what a clusterfuck his malice has wrought!

“Do you recall the Nutt Administration?”

I remember breaking the news on the radio.

Oh, what a clusterfuck his malice has wrought!

Falling for Bathshebas like a preacher or politician.

I remember breaking the news on the radio.

The way he tried to make the letters of his words red,

with vague warnings about falling for Bathsheba’s like a preacher or politician.

But isn’t a football coach a preacher and a politician?

Oh, the way Hugh tried to make the letters of his words red,

tried to invoke the forgiveness clause in his contract.

Isn’t a football coach a preacher and a politician?

Laying tracks for the next election, the next congregation.

But can he invoke the forgiveness clause in his contract?

I remember him at the front row of the Church of Hatsune Miku,

laying tracks for the next election, the next congregation.

They did love it when he raised his hands to the ceiling.

I remember him at the Church of Hatsune Miku.

Even the true believers say he hurt his family,

but they loved it when he raised his hands to the ceiling.

And they’ll love him at the next congregation.

Even the true believers say he hurt our family:

our brand, our narrative, our moral integrity.

They’ll love him at the next congregation,

but will he be bitter, like Nutt?

Our brand, our narrative, our moral integrity,

carefully crafted by boosters in Hallmark TV movies.

Will he be bitter like Nutt,

and smash the next idol, a new Ozymandias,



carefully crafted by boosters in Hallmark TV movies,  
a new Nebuchadnezzar in a Nike visor, and even he will  
smash the next idol, a new Ozymandias, one  
more incarnation of Moorcock's Eternal Loser.

A new Nebuchadnezzar in a Nike visor...  
Do you remember the Freeze Administration?  
Another incarnation of Moorcock's Eternal Loser.  
That's what it will be remembered as.

Do you foresee the next Freeze Administration?  
It will begin with a lie and end with the truth.  
That's what it will be remembered as.  
Ten years future, one state over.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

### INTRODUCTION (pg. v)

- Berryman, John, and Daniel Swift. *Dream Songs*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc, 2014.
- Brown, Molly McCully. *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded: Poems*. Persea Books, 2017.
- Dickinson, Emily. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—." *Poetry Foundation*, 2017, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45703/i-heard-a-fly-buzz-when-i-died-591](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45703/i-heard-a-fly-buzz-when-i-died-591).
- Fennelly, Beth Ann. *Heating & Cooling: 52 Micro-Memoirs*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "In Society." *Collected Poems, 1947-1997*. HarperPerennial, 2007. pg. 28. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: and Other Poems*. City Lights Books, 2010.
- Kirby, David. *The House on Boulevard St.: New and Selected Poems*. Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2007.
- Laymon, Kiese. *Long Division: a Novel*. 2013.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. "National Book Award Speech." 65th National Book Awards. 65th National Book Awards, 19 Nov. 2014, New York City.
- Newman, Randy. *Good Old Boys*, Reprise Records, 1974.
- Nutting, Alissa. *Made for Love*. Ecco Press, 2017.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Mirror." *Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper, 1981. 173-174. Print.
- R.E.M.. *Fables of the Reconstruction*, I.R.S. Records, 1985.
- Smith, Michael F. *Rivers*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.
- Whitman, Walt, and David S. Reynolds. *Leaves of Grass*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Wicker, Marcus. *Silencer*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

### ENTRANCE (pg. 2)

- Brown, Danny. "Ain't It Funny." *Atrocity Exhibition*, Warp Records, 2016, track 6. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/7ItFoQDmQIh3MAPsxiP6Vt?si=q5E24S6RQ021qEUB9XdRBA>.
- ryuusenkei80. "Akira Hokuto vs Manami Toyota (2 September 1995) 1/3." Online video clip. YouTube, May 23, 2010. Web.

### FOR MADDIE (pg. 3)

- Coen, Joel and Ethan Coen, directors. *Barton Fink*. 20th Century Fox, 1991, [www.netflix.com/title/60000822](http://www.netflix.com/title/60000822).
- Flo Rida. "Low (feat T-Pain)." *Mail on Sunday*, Atlantic Records, 2008, track 5. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0CAfXk7DXMnon4gLudAp7J?si=ndro4HMVSuiso9JO-LzDGA>

Plain White Tees. "Hey There Delilah." *All That We Needed*, Fearless Records, 2005, track 13. *Spotify*, [open.spotify.com/track/4RCWB3V8V0dignT99LZ8vH?si=Xa2MIC8iQFyhnAfwJiTgtQ](https://open.spotify.com/track/4RCWB3V8V0dignT99LZ8vH?si=Xa2MIC8iQFyhnAfwJiTgtQ)  
Low ft. T-Pain

FRANKIE AVALON'S ITALIAN SONNET FOR FRENCHY (pg. 7)  
Kleiser, Randal, director. *Grease*. Paramount Pictures, 1978.

FINAL THOUGHTS OF THE DOG HUNG BY MIKE HUCKABEE'S SON AT CAMP PIONEER IN HATFIELD, AR IN 1998 (pg. 10)  
Ryan, Erin Gloria. "That Time Mike Huckabee's Loser Son Allegedly Tortured a Dog to Death." *Jezebel*, Jezebel.com, 5 May 2015, [jezebel.com/that-time-mike-huckabees-loser-son-allegedly-tortured-a-1702327150](http://jezebel.com/that-time-mike-huckabees-loser-son-allegedly-tortured-a-1702327150).

MY OTHER CHEEK (pg. 12)  
"A Look Back at the Tornado of 1997." *Arkadelphia Siftings Herald*, Arkadelphia Siftings Herald - Arkadelphia, AR, 5 July 2012, [www.siftingsherald.com/article/20120301/NEWS/303019998](http://www.siftingsherald.com/article/20120301/NEWS/303019998).

The Who. "I Can See for Miles." *The Who Sell Out*, Geffen Records, 1995, track 7. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/60XhKk8WC7RALPENkgSfT5?si=2o2jGOCRR2KziPef02hduQ>

Wilson, Brian and Van Dyke Parks. "Cabin Essence." *The Smile Sessions*, Capitol Records, 2011, track 8. *Spotify*, [open.spotify.com/track/2yKZ1sBNcr4VsYpaAJFMu4si=degE8X88TBuZafZV9y7IEg](https://open.spotify.com/track/2yKZ1sBNcr4VsYpaAJFMu4si=degE8X88TBuZafZV9y7IEg).

REPTAR CROSSING THE MISSISSIPPI (pg. 13)  
Bergqvist, Stig, and Paul Demeyer. *The Rugrats in Paris: the Movie*. 2000.

COUP DE GRÂCE (pg. 16)  
"WWE Tupelo, MS, Live Results: Roman Reigns vs. Braun Strowman." *WON/F4W - WWE News, Pro Wrestling News, WWE Results, UFC News, UFC Results*, 28 Aug. 2017, [www.f4wonline.com/wwe-results/wwe-tupelo-ms-live-results-roman-reigns-vs-braun-strowman-241831](http://www.f4wonline.com/wwe-results/wwe-tupelo-ms-live-results-roman-reigns-vs-braun-strowman-241831).

BUCKNER'S TRESTLE (pg. 18)  
Diggs, Mitchell, and Bill Dabney. "Buckner's Trestle Marker." *Ole Miss News*, [news.olemiss.edu/buckners-trestle-has-tragic-but-forgotten-history/buckners-trestle-marker/](http://news.olemiss.edu/buckners-trestle-has-tragic-but-forgotten-history/buckners-trestle-marker/).

THE CHURCH OF HATSUNE MIKU (pg. 19)  
Gordon, Jeremy. "Holographic Pop Star Hatsune Miku Performs on 'Letterman.'" *Holographic Pop Star Hatsune Miku Performs on "Letterman" |*

*Pitchfork*, Pitchfork, 9 Oct. 2014, [pitchfork.com/news/57031-holographic-pop-star-hatsune-miku-performs-on-letterman/](http://pitchfork.com/news/57031-holographic-pop-star-hatsune-miku-performs-on-letterman/).

BALLAD FOR H.B. 1523 (pg. 20)

Mitchell, Jerry, and Geoff Pender. "Controversial HB 1523 Now Mississippi's Law of Land." *The Clarion Ledger*, The Clarion-Ledger, 23 June 2017, [www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/06/22/controversial-hb-1523-now-mississippi-law-land/419941001/](http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/06/22/controversial-hb-1523-now-mississippi-law-land/419941001/).

WATER TOWERS (pg. 29)

Migos. "Bad and Boujee (feat. Lil Uzi Vert)." *Culture*, Quality Control Music, 2017, track 4. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4Km5HrUvYTASUfiSGPJeQR?si=5Lqfm45sRP2yWpFTdZPinw>.

R.E.M.. "We Walk." *Murmur*, I.R.S. Records, 1983, track 11. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0bgpdODy1x66hKX420veWC?si=1nfbo3NuQnaEtOpj43dDIA>,

Williams, Tennessee. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. New Directions, 1975.

PANTOUM ON HUGH (pg. 30)

Hancock, John Lee, director. *The Blind Side*. Warner Bros., 2009.

"Hugh Freeze Resigns." *YouTube*, YouTube, 20 July 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DASsOPojkCU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DASsOPojkCU).

Tor.com. "Michael Moorcock Is The Eternal Champion." *Tor.com*, 17 Dec. 2015, [www.tor.com/2015/12/18/michael-moorcock-is-the-eternal-champion/](http://www.tor.com/2015/12/18/michael-moorcock-is-the-eternal-champion/).