

The Junction Box

Poems by

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# THE JUNCTION BOX

DAN HANEY

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For those who drive on the right, and pass on the left.

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# THE JUNCTION BOX

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# *THE JUNCTION BOX*

## APOLOGIA

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*The Junction Box*, in its most distilled sense, is a story of inheritance. This manuscript uses poetry as an attempt to replicate and reconcile with the only existence I have ever known.

Before my story, the story goes like this: several generations of Irish, Polish, and German immigrants settled in what is now known as Carbon County, Pennsylvania. The Appalachian Mountains loom omnipresent. The mountains were used for anthracite coal mining. Manufacturing defined the area—the nearby towns were also home to slate quarries, zinc smelting, and concrete manufacturing. It was a 7-3 kind of town. The mountains and the earth were rich, so the people were rich. One county south was Bethlehem Steel, once propped up as an icon of American industry.

The story had a predictable ending, so I won't dwell. The resources dried up, or weren't wanted anymore. The jobs left, the money left, the people left. The towns faded from public consciousness. The town and its remaining people lived on, effectively invisible.

This collection serves as an intersection of that regional inheritance with my personal inheritance. *The Junction Box* is a collection of 40 poems that are largely sad, and largely true. My manuscript is overwhelmingly autobiographical—the only doctoring done

was through the process of deciding what to omit. This collection centers around a family defined by poverty, violence, racism and drug abuse. Parenting in absentia. The works.

*The Junction Box* is the first instance in which I have found a consistent and defined poetic voice. It seems prudent then, to use this apologia to trace the inheritance of my own poetic and aesthetic lineage.

★

The core of my writing is rooted squarely within the narrative tradition. I tell stories. Even before I got involved in poetry, I was immersed in storytelling. Each Friday, we would drive 5 minutes to my grandfather's house and have a family dinner—about 8 of us or so. The meal would involve, between mouthfuls, telling stories: Vietnam. Centralia. Local yokels. Town myth. Many stories have manifested themselves as individual poems within *The Junction Box*.

My family was never one for reading or writing. You work, and then you watch TV. Yet through these weekly meals there were beautiful narratives stagnant in the air, passed on orally. The penultimate poem in this collection, "Eulogy for the Halves of Brown," is a preemptive eulogy structurally mirroring how these Friday-night family conversations went. My writing has always contained a record-keeping element, a desire to create some tangible record of a personal history lest it be forgotten. One poem in this collection, "Excerpts from Towamensing Town Hall Meetings," directly embraces this instinct through



satirical town hall meeting minutes. This kitchen of asbestos, Teflon, and cigarette burns is where my poetic identity began.

My favorite poets, tracing the invisible slackline back to Whitman's redefinition of American poetry, all use narrative as their work's primary vehicle. The authors that I identify most intimately with are those that, by the end of the line, by the end of the poem, and by the conclusion of the book, I feel as though I've traveled through some tangible distance. Whether that distance is through a particular town's landscape or solely through the cognitive churning of the mind matters little. There are three particular narrative poets I owe this manuscript's existence to, whom I feel necessary to acknowledge—James Wright, Mark Strand, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

James Wright gave me the permission to write about home. In several ways, his home parallels mine—uneducated, blue-collar workers in rusted-through towns. So often his work examines incredibly specific, forgotten landscapes, and does so in scathing detail, refusing to romanticize. In "In Response to a Rumor That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia Has Been Condemned," the reader witnesses the confluence of darkly comic humor, a dilapidated landscape, and a distanced speaker, the combination of which somehow imbues humanity into the scene. Sans the whorehouse, this has been the standard I hold each of my poems to—I want each line I write to contain truth, even if that truth is depressing and dark. I refuse to romanticize or smooth over a disturbing reality simply because that is the most accepted or comfortable route. If the poem is successful,

this slow accumulation of lines and stanzas of truths results in a poem that reflects a sliver of humanity, no matter how warped or jagged it may be.

In "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," Wright's canonical closing epiphany, "I have wasted my life," serves as one of the most startling examples of emotional transference into a landscape. Not only does Wright's poetry carbon date the locations he's traveled through, but it also timestamps his psychological state of mind at the time of the poem. This emotional transference happens frequently throughout *The Junction Box*—in the opening poem, "Fugue in Exhaust Fumes," the landscape of Appalachia is colored by the psychological struggles of the speaker.

Wright is not afraid to cut into himself. "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" is self-referential and self-implicating: "My name is James. A Wright, and I was born / Twenty-five miles from this infected grave, / In Martins Ferry, Ohio." Self-implication is a foundational pillar of *The Junction Box*—perhaps to its own detriment in its current draft. The collection's closing poem is simply titled as "Daniel Haney". The primary speaker throughout the collection derides and lambasts his past home, family, and life, only to find those same flaws within himself. Wright is the poet I feel I am most directly writing in the wake of.

Mark Strand stands in stark contrast to Wright, yet is equally essential to my development. Mark Strand, both in biography and work, serves as a foil to my work: urban, privileged, vague. Instead of Martins Ferry, we get "the small apartment." Instead of specific names like the murderer Doty, we receive "Death." However, Mark Strand was equally

instrumental to my development—he gave me the permission of strangeness. Strand taught me the narrative rigor necessary to convey an emotional arc without relying on heavy historical reference or overly-dramatic scenes. “The Mysterious Arrival of an Unusual Letter,” a vignette about finding an old letter from a father, ends: “Dear Son,” was the way it began. “Dear Son” and then nothing.” It provides no backstory, only a fleeting, clipped narrative, yet it carries an emotional heft that I can only attempt to achieve in my work.

Strand also showed me the importance of levity. In “2002”, we see a poet contemplating death, but avoiding heavy-handedness and cliché by reimagining death as a humorous homecoming parade welcoming him. Through his poetry I’ve come to appreciate the relief levity can provide, how humor and strangeness can simultaneously and paradoxically numb and amplify the pain of a heavy topic. I’ve attempted to recreate this same levity through some of my more surrealist poems and god sequences—I may end up writing every single one of my poems about death, faith, and violence. That’s fine—some poets are shackled by their obsessions. However, a successful work needs to encompass the full scope of human emotion, ranging from devastation to laughter, horror to absurdity. Each time I insert the strange or the comical into a narrative for a breath or a laugh, the ghost of Strand is clear (to me, at least) on the page.

Through Gwendolyn Brooks, I learned restraint. Brooks’ work, particularly *The Bean Eaters* and later, served as an emotional template of sorts, revealing how omission and formal control can maximize the emotional heft of poetry. “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad

of Emmitt Till" remains one of my favorite poems. As it is such a brief piece, I have excerpted it in full:

*(after the murder,  
after the burial)*

*Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;  
the tint of pulled taffy.  
She sits in a red room,  
drinking black coffee.  
She kisses her killed boy.  
And she is sorry.  
Chaos in windy grays  
through a red prairie.*

This is a generational poem that contains the signature characteristics of Brooks' later work: her restraint, her implementation of absence and white space, and her frequent violation of the readers' expectations. "The Last Quatrain..." carries as much resonance and longevity as any other piece written about race. However, this poem's heavy lifting occurs off-stage. Emmitt Till's memory is reduced to the last eight lines of a poem—what remains of the rest of the poem is either deemed insignificant, impossible, or irreparably lost—perhaps all three are simultaneously true.

The unfathomable atrocities committed against Emmitt Till are painfully familiar to Brooks and her readers, yet, in this poem, they are reduced to "(after the murder, / after the burial)". The truth is that Emmitt was bludgeoned, shot, and tied to a cotton gin fan, left to be found disfigured and waterlogged in the Tallahatchie. However, the truth is also that by acquitting his murderers, his life (and by extension, millions of black lives) was reduced to a

parenthetical summary not even afforded its own sentence. As mentioned before, I try to make sure every line I write contains a truth. Brooks compels me to think about the best, most powerful truth to push forward.

Brooks' best work feels like an illusion: the uncontainable fit neatly within a container. A hurricane inside sealed Tupperware. Tar stationary above a sewer grate. The centuries-long despair of black lives buttoned up inside the staccato offset stanzas of "We Real Cool." A mother who looks upon her killed son and is "sorry". For all of the talk of white space and juxtaposition as a tool in contemporary poetry, I've yet to see someone utilize absence as effectively as Brooks. Although it would be a stretch to call myself a formal poet, formal tendencies and decisions I make are often indebted to Gwendolyn Brooks.

Although this poet's work is a significant departure from the aforementioned three poets, I feel compelled to acknowledge John Berryman's influence. Several poems in *The Junction Box* operate through persona, including "Heroin," "Family Reunion," "Eric Frein Explains," and others. Berryman's *Dream Songs* gave me the permission to occasionally stray from the exceptionally clear and take risks for the sake of language or emotion. "Eric Frein Explains," for example, works in rhythmic fragments that refuse clear and logical transitions. This poem would not have been possible without being introduced to Berryman. Although *77 Dream Songs* was non-linear and often nonsensical, I still closed the book with the sensation that I had traveled a tangible distance and experienced a powerful emotional arc. The sequence proved that some of my poetic prerogatives can be

accomplished while straying from narrative—Berryman has encouraged me to take more risks in my current and future writing by showing that occasional obfuscation can actually improve the emotional clarity of a piece. I am forever haunted by the close of “Dream Song 4”: “Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry. / --Mr. Bones: there is.”

★

These aforementioned poetic cornerstones, combined with my personal aesthetic leanings, influenced certain structural decisions made in *The Junction Box*.

I made the conscious decision to avoid a title poem—a manuscript title independent from any previous poem titles felt like an opportunity. Titles are one of my strengths as an emerging poet, and I often try to maximize that afforded space using any number of techniques: seducing a reader into continuing, providing necessary context, and demanding a second reading. I was hesitant to place any individual poem under the increased scrutiny title poems receive. The title, *The Junction Box*, is referenced a few times throughout the manuscript, but only briefly.

My reasoning for the title selection is twofold. First, the electrical/construction term immediately grounds the reader in the language and texture this collection employs. *The Junction Box* has no ekphrastic poems of Renaissance artwork, no ruminations on Greek origins of myth—for better or worse. Poetry of the backcountry is neither superior or inferior

to high culture, but it seems essential to manage readers' expectations and make sure both agents here, writer and reader, are communicating a shared language.

Second, a junction box serves as an apt metaphor for the collection. A junction box is a small aluminum container used to conceal and contain the connections of several different spliced wires. A junction box is often recessed into a wall or concealed entirely, and is done so to aesthetically please, as well as for precautionary safety. This thesis examines the intersections of several different lives and themes—cognitive wiring that is often frayed and haphazardly fused. "Junction" contains the fantastic ambiguity of suggesting both a place of connection and synthesis, as well as a crossroads in which objects can travel in opposite directions. The landscape this manuscript exists within is, too, hidden—small mining towns and mountain communities far removed from the conscience of most of the country. Poverty and violence, understandably, often happens offstage.

There are no sections in this book. Rather, several sequences and repeating poems are interspersed throughout, creating one book-length section that refuses easy categorization or compartmentalization. This structure is reflective of a junction box. There are several "series" in *The Junction Box*—"What I do after work", "RE:...", "Terminus:", and so on. I wanted all of the narrative and associative threads—the electrical wiring of the book, if you will—to coexist simultaneously in one confined space. Just like a junction box. I'll discuss this more in the next section.

On a personal level, my father (who is decidedly not an electrician) did all of the electrical wiring to our house, with predictably disastrous results. Throughout my house are unfinished, exposed junction boxes brimming with multicolored wires. It serves as a powerful trigger that returns me home.

\*

The first poem of this collection, "Fugue in Exhaust Fumes", plays an essential role in the scaffolding of *The Junction Box*. If this thesis is a cognitive mapping of Appalachia, then "Fugue in Exhaust Fumes" serves as the map's key. Nearly every major obsession of the book is introduced within this first poem, and the following poems serve to further elaborate, elucidate, or complicate those notions.

The positioning of "Fugue in Exhaust Fumes" within *The Junction Box* is inspired from Terrence Hayes' *Lighthouse*, which opens with the poem "Lighthouse's Guide to the Galaxy". In this piece, the speaker shapes the following poems with confessions like "I am here because I could never get the hang of Time." It also serves as an introduction to Hayes' authoritative, personification-heavy imagery, such as "The small dog barking at the darkness has something to say / about the way we live." I hope to carry a similar effect, with images like "crowbars and hacksaws rattle / in the flatbed" emphasizing the chiseled musicality that frequents the collection, while phrases like "When I said my prayers, I should have // been more specific" introduce the manuscript's primary speaker as an assertive yet vulnerable voice.



Aesthetically, accessibility is an important component to my work—the subjects of my aubades and elegies are decidedly not poets, but hopefully eventual readers of my work. They never will be poets. They are afraid of poetry, of words operating in impenetrable and mysterious ways. If I can articulate my concerns as clearly as possible, it increases the likelihood that my work can reach a base level of emotional resonance with these readers, even if specific diction, techniques, and allusions are ignored. Poetry may never be a mainstream form of literary communication, but that’s not going to stop me from trying.

The main sonic and structural technique driving “Fugue in Exhaust Fumes” is the use of small-town names dotted throughout Greater Appalachia. Most of these I’ve driven through or temporarily stayed at. In fact, if you punch in routes to a GPS, you’ll find that they are primarily daytrips crisscrossing through the region, usually from Pennsylvania to Kentucky, Pennsylvania to Tennessee. Often in my work, a dilapidated landscape serves as a vessel in which the speaker infuses his emotions. This poem provides the literal container I’m working upon.

There is also a certain dignity I can provide in using specific names—this town isn’t just a run-down, post-industrial leftover. It’s Shickshinny.

\*

Many of the contemporary writers I most admire draw from a very specific landscape, and they, too, attempt to bestow that level of dignity on their landscape.

Although I am certainly not yet of their craft control or prestige, I feel a kinship with their writing, and would situate myself alongside them in the current state of poetry. Jamaal May's *Hum* feels like a stammering ode to his hometown of Detroit played on repeat. Natalie Diaz explores the exploitation of her Native American heritage, a bleak southwest landscape, and a brother hooked on meth. J Scott Brownlee's work lives intimately within hog-hunting, poverty-stricken rural Texas. These accomplished, emerging poets reassert their personal history and experiences, through narrative, back into the contemporary poetry conversation. I hope to one day be able to do the same.

The two contemporary poets I find myself *most* aligned with are former classmates Anders Carlson-Wee ('15) and Edgar Kunz ('14). I realize that may be an easy answer, but it's true. A Vanderbilt workshop requires a great deal of care and intimacy. Discussing the innards of Edgar's Baltimore and Anders' sprawling Midwest showed me how they were using landscape as a scaffolding for their work. In many ways, I feel as though my work follows in this vein: I pay attention to sonic qualities, rhyme, and imagery, absolutely, but it is almost always done so within the container of the place-based narrative, rather than a non-columnar experimental poem. This book couldn't have been written without their guidance and close attention I paid to their work.

I am eternally grateful for Vanderbilt's MFA for providing me with the time, space, and community that shaped this book. If it wasn't for my poetry cohort and mentors, this book simply wouldn't have happened. One comment during Nate Marshall's Craft Talk

moved me with its honesty and clarity—he explained that while he has some instincts, several highlights of *Wild Hundreds* were traced to other careful readers. I agree. This thesis has my name on the cover, but each poet and advisor who has worked with me has his or her fingerprints throughout it.

\*

I've struggled with how to make sense of the many archetypes I write within—father son dynamics, landscape poems, poems of witness. However, something that Wyatt Prunty said during a discussion served as a watershed moment. Prunty, Sewanee professor and accomplished contemporary poet, visited Vanderbilt this semester to give a reading and a craft talk. During this discussion, Prunty said he felt as though contemporary poetry was cycling back to Romanticism—that in the face of automation and internet anonymity, there is an emerging, recurring instinct to claim, “I am here. I exist. I matter.” This was a revelation to hear aloud; what seemed latent within my work was actually a throbbing beacon. As if each time I write an ode, each time I elegize someone still living, each time I enter the persona of a forgotten voice, it gives these individuals some level of legitimacy. *The Junction Box* serves as an affirmation that their plight matters, that their history is recorded through the annals of poetry. Something like that.



## FUGUE IN EXHAUST FUMES

---

White Deer to Rawhide. I drive  
a Chrysler, owner long gone—obituary  
to notary in three hours flat. Cheap.

Gutter leftovers varnished in slush.  
The cold tick of mile-markers.  
Hokendaqua to Hanging Limb.

Every pickup I see, rusted work truck  
or wheezing diesel, I imagine the driver  
drunk. Crowbars and hacksaws rattle

in the flatbed. Burnt Cabins to Burning  
Springs. Concrete lesions jar me awake.  
Backroads limbed with white birch.

The point of Pennsylvania is to get through it  
as quickly as possible. Frozen Head  
to Hungry Mother. Smokestacks.

Gristmills. The lies I tell myself at the end  
of the day. Shickshinny to Shoulderblade.  
I let my hand linger on the cashier's

as she gives change. Slippery Rock  
to Suck Creek. Punxsutawney to Possum Trot.  
When I said my prayers, I should have

been more specific. Aquashicola. Catawissa.  
Cheat Lake. I thought if you mourned a place  
hard enough for long enough, it would let you

go. Tamaqua. Tunkhannock. Towamensing.  
Ask what Appalachia means to me.  
Smokeless. Sassafras. Dewdrop.

## SOMEWHERE, GOD SLIDES OFF A NIGHTGOWN

---

I let the sunrise steep.  
Each morning, a mug of coffee

I palmed but didn't drink. If you stayed  
asleep, I'd slough off infidels

for hours on our muted television,  
wait for you to notice my heat signature

no longer pressed against your back.  
This became my new normal:

you wore only a bath towel  
for the entire day. I slipped the knot

pinning cloth to rib,  
and you didn't mind.

I convinced myself nothing existed  
beyond this town's drowsy borders.

Somewhere south, my brother  
took a safety razor to his thigh,

and I didn't care.  
I rolled out the paisley blanket

as Lake Cayuga's cold breeze  
cracked over us. We drank wine

in the afternoon and fell asleep  
in public. I grilled chicken in the rain.

Somewhere, my mother asked  
for money, and I disconnected my phone.

I acted like I knew how to choose  
the most delicious pomegranate.

The gorges bursting through town  
were so beautiful they enclosed

the bridges with chicken wire.  
We trespassed along the reservoir,

found a tire swing, and I forgot  
about my father. Your silhouette

as it dissolved a half-step behind you,  
navigating the blackness towards our bed

Our monotony an aubade that taught me  
my hands could do something other than hurt.

You shaved the divots of my back  
I couldn't reach. I tackled you

in the cherry orchard, slathered  
the juice against your skin. You clasped

and unclasped my belt, leaned in  
when we kissed. I can't remember

why I ever read the headlines.  
Lord, I don't care where you drop bombs

so long as it isn't here. Who could bear  
to interrupt this temporary dusk

as it broke over us and yoked to dawn?  
We slept through.

## SELF-PORTRAIT AS MY FATHER

---

Every morning I wake up in the wrong bed.  
Slits of noon needling in from strange  
angles. I'll straighten my belt as I leave.  
On Sundays I'll swing by the first church  
I see, reach the altar. Pray it off. I'll stop  
at some diner, some gutted freight car  
with homemade scrapple. The waitress  
mentions the snowfall in May—she tells me  
it's biblical. Rapture and suffering. I'll agree,  
say *I hope it comes soon*. I never wanted this  
life: water bottles sloshing with piss  
in the passenger seat. My family a photo  
facedown in my wallet. Some people  
aren't meant to stay in one place. So they  
loosen the waitress's apron. Only pay cash.



## WORKING DOUBLES AT ENOLA YARD

---

My uncle got me temp work through winter,  
welding with him inside the roundhouse.  
He taught me the yard's law: never stop

working—they make rookies go wheel-tapping  
if it seems like they've got nothing to do.  
On patrol, if your flashlight sweeps

across a freight-hopper, let him sleep.  
Every man here's ran away from something.  
Afternoon leaned into dusk's lurch and squeal.

Three Mile Island throbbed nuclear downstream.  
On break, we took our lunch to a bonfire  
along one of the decommissioned junctions,

walked past the coal carriers gussied up  
in Conrail blue. I'd taken off my gear too soon;  
while welding, my body was fevered, a swamp

in dead December. Now, I was worse than naked—  
wind wracking my skin. The regulars laughed,  
and Jess passed me something to keep warm,

said Rule G doesn't matter out here. We spent  
the next shift sprawled underneath freight,  
torches off, our arteries wrapped in wool.

## WHAT I DO AFTER WORK

---

I shake off my coat, toss it on the floor by a crumple  
of clothes, thumb the television to static. I slouch  
into my night job

as the welder. In this unending riot,  
people need something to do with their hands. I used to  
have no work, nothing to do but write with my welding mask on.  
But all the chainsaws snagged, all the whipsaws dulled,  
and the looters had killed so many they got bored.  
So I duct-taped bear traps around knuckles, powdered  
wrenches with phosphorus, blessed every pistol in town  
with a soldered bayonet. I could tell by their posture  
what each regular needed: a weedwacker restrung  
with baling wire, meathooks dangling from a truck bumper,  
a cinderblock welded to rebar. When I close up shop,  
I count cash beside the window—watch a bystander get bent  
over a cop car, see faces smudged with a rifle butt.  
This is as close as I'll ever get to god.

RE: HEAVEN'S SPAM FILTER

---

*Dear Dan,*

*I'll be your new God for the foreseeable future. Remember when you were a child, and your mother would tell you that God passed over people like you? Not far from the truth, actually.*

*The original G has stepped out for a few weeks, so you can think of me as your Interim Savior. I focus primarily on international tax evasion schemes, the refugee crisis, and deal with the spam filter. Which is where I found you.*

*I got your poems. Thanks for your (unsolicited) letters. Frankly, reading through most of them, I couldn't help but think you should be seeing a therapist.*

*Do you think before you hit send? I mean, honest question. For example, I found this one the particularly cringe-inducing: It was originally titled "Letter to the Angel of Death", but I altered it slightly:*

DAN SENDS OFF ANOTHER ILL-ADVISED EMAIL TO THE LORD

---

Lord, if you still believed in mercy  
you would have killed me off  
before now. I imagine my viewing:  
the church sits almost empty.  
Even Jesus left, peeled off the back mural.  
My ex-wives are there. They reach  
the casket, all agree: *This must be  
the first time he's slept alone in years.*  
The pastor who speaks of my integrity  
has never met me. Mourners tuck  
cell phones inside pew bibles,  
text each other about which pub  
might have enough parking  
for the entire funeral procession.

Thank god football season is over,  
they say. It's not even Sunday.  
When my day finally arrives,  
please let someone be crying—

*Jesus Christ, man.*

*When I assembled you, this isn't quite what I had in mind. I didn't give you rough hands & all that dead weight so that you could sit at home and write poems.*

*Go outside.*

*Swing an axe. Lightly choke your wife—see if she's into that.*

*Some people aren't meant to write elegies—I need people like you to dig graves.*

*It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's the cosmic balance. You've got heaven all wrong—You act like mercy comes easy. Reincarnation has so much red tape. I have my own Powers That Be to listen to.*

*So what can I do for you? I'm no puppeteer. There's no silk strung from elbows to heaven. I didn't make you leave home.*

*I'm sick of people like you trying to lie themselves clean.*

*I'll tell you this: I can't stop you from burning. But I can take you to the river.*

*You could drown yourself.*

*That way, you won't remember any of this pain—  
only someone else's hands pulling you to the surface.*

*Love,*

*God*

## OVERBOARD JUDAS

---

Every goddamn bridge in this state  
is a collapse waiting to happen,

my grandfather says from the driver's  
seat. We're idling in one-lane traffic above

the Susquehanna, jackhammers prattling  
against our windows. Summer vacation.

Poured tarmac shimmers our vision,  
heat-haze of work vests & traffic cones.

I tell him, imagine this bridge buckling beneath  
us. I talk of the current swallowing

vehicles indifferently. The futile pounding  
against glass. News teams interviewing

locals still waterlogged with grief.  
He doesn't talk back.

By the time I realize my accidental cruelty,  
my grandfather is already gone.

Back in Vietnam. How he watched the deck  
for sailors jumping intentionally. Called out

*Overboard Judas.* Sometimes the ship  
could turn itself around in time, and he'd pull

gasping bodies back onto the ship.  
Strip them naked. Wring out their uniforms.

Sometimes the ship didn't stop.  
Occasionally, jumpers would break

on impact, sink into blue.  
Traffic moves. My grandfather next to me,

the arm's length between us a river  
with no source and no mouth.

## AT THE LUNCHBOX

---

Pap was fork-deep in his shit-on-a-shingle.  
My grandfather and I are at the only diner left  
that still passes out ashtrays.

He spoke with the waitress about the new casino  
opening a few hours south. She asked, *red-dot*  
*or tomahawk?* He said it didn't matter,

said his coffee needed topping-off. I came back  
to town for Pap's rehab. Ruptured achilles  
and a laborer's mind split stir-crazy.

We stowed his new wheelchair against a toolshed  
behind the diner, gimped in with his arm draped  
around my shoulder. I asked about the regulars.

He said they worked—this guy at the aluminum plant.  
Seated to his left, trucker. The end of the counter  
managed the coal slurry on Pisgah Ridge.

Pap continued to parse apart the diner:  
name, age, what they did with their hands.  
Chew, swallow, repeat. No one left anonymous.

Another man entered—*Jim. Retired cop.*  
Jim sat next to us, said as he was driving here  
he passed a black man pinned against

an empty storefront on First, cops surrounding him.  
He shook his head, said *Ain't this diversity great?*  
They both laughed. Pap paid for our meal and left

cash for Jim. Jim shook my hand, grinned,  
*hey kid, you think he was guilty?*  
I watched myself as I said Yeah. Absolutely.

## ELON MUSK'S FAILED MISSION TO MARS

---

Sure, I remember it. The satellite feed stuttered in over a motel's box TV, me sprawled across a cot, broke down south of Kentucky. After watching minutes of alien steps, the transmission fluttering in and out—rain. The astronauts looked up, drenched, lockjawed; as if they found the exact angle of sky, the only pillar of light in which they would claim god. In that moment, nothing else mattered: not the horrible mercy of a butcher, not the hillside bioluminescent with life. Everything seemed closer than ever—the moon nearly yoked to earth, pressing down telephone lines, bending the trunks of cedars back. Lightning veined across the sky. It didn't matter whether the crew made it back or not. Didn't matter if any of this was a lie. Back on the road, tapwater in my radiator, I drove through the night. I remember this: in each town I passed through, there was a field. Flood lights and porch lamps leaked onto the field, revealing the same child. She was always running, pirouetting, her face arced to night, rain plinking helplessly off her fishbowl helmet.



## THE LIE

---

We were at a baseball field. We weren't listening to the radio in my dad's truck. It could have been raining, slanting against the brim of my cap. Dust kicked up and whisked itself across the infield. Wind clamored song along the outfield fence. The details make no difference. I was pitching. Clasped mitt and hand together. Pivot, knee bent, body folding itself, then unfurling from the rubber. I wasn't old enough to throw curveballs, but I threw them. My father kneeled behind home plate, old umpire mask still in the truck. The clasps had rotted through. I hooked the ball towards him, ball skittered and scuffed with rosin, and I knew we didn't love each other, knew my pitch was low, ball throbbing towards him, bouncing off home plate, seams splitting his nose, him cursing me, doubled over and spouting blood into his catcher's mitt—me chasing the baseball rolling away.

## WHY GEORGE LOKITIS LEFT CENTRALIA FOR GOOD

---

Because there were only six of us left.  
Because the seven containment strategies  
didn't work, and no one deemed us worth  
an eighth. I swear I saw more wildlife saunter  
down Main Street than people—the black  
bear that ambled around town, crossed  
the latticework of cracked asphalt.

Because I went to baseball games near Ashland  
and kept imagining the centerfielder getting swallowed  
whole by earth, one clean gulp, outfield buckling  
and quivering. Infinite digestion. Because I couldn't  
let that happen to me, like it almost did, back  
when Tom Dombowski's lawn sinkholed  
next to me and all that kept him  
from the ground's gullet was a tree root.

Because I wanted the ache of muscle after  
shoveling fresh snow. I wanted frozen, certain  
ground, not hissing steam lapping snowdrifts away,  
forever nipping at my ankles. Because the stoops  
looked so lonely leading up to houses

that weren't there. The lawns grew unruly, the ivy  
impatient, so I mowed everyone's yard, everyone  
who isn't here—the Mayor, Marjorie, my son  
who surrendered to Tennessee—chopped the inevitable  
into a fine green mist. Asphyxiation never was  
my fetish, waking up on my bathroom floor  
with a bloodied lip, air acrid with copper and piss.

Because I wanted a more civilized way to die  
than this, than a town where a dipstick dipped  
into an oil tankard surfaced as a shriveled metal hook.

## THE COAL CRACKER'S VILLANELLE

---

The horizon's breaking blood-orange off in the distance—  
autumn-sopped leaves cling to longer in Anthracite  
Country. Hemlock, Ash—it doesn't make a difference

how you call these mountains beautiful. Your license  
plate tells us everything we need to know. Brake lights  
from semis fade to slate, measuring night's distance

from dawn. Here, each sunrise is an act of resilience.  
We clock in at No. 9. mine. Cash checks, fistfight  
behind bars. Pray to scratch-offs. It makes no difference

what you think—our town has no bad men. Violence  
only towards ourselves—junkies gnawed by frostbite.  
You must believe those sores measuring the distance

from wrist to vein are to blame. No—we've got grievance  
with God, pretty-name podunk towns our lone birthright.  
Call us broke, call us lost, call us home. The difference?.

You left, so don't bother coming back. No transients.  
No honest work here for poets. We don't want an overwrite  
of our sorrows—mourning mine fires off in the distance  
and writing down smoke won't make a lick of difference.

## HEROIN

---

I only came back because no one else would.

They found you on Alter & 10<sup>th</sup>. Lying  
in a snowbank in the Turkey Hill parking lot,  
asking for me.

Here I am.

Your family isn't. Pap won't let you back home,  
and besides, he moved the rest of the jewelry  
into storage. He'd just force us apart.

You look like shit.

So let's get you well.

I'm waiting for another summer. How we lay  
on the ratty futon together. Listened  
to conversations glance past our open window.

Like sunlight. Wearing only my silk nightgown.  
How our bodies would stick together, the two of us swimming  
through tar.

Forget the other girl.

Hurt her. Leave her. She wasn't there for you  
like I am.

Like when you had to drag that sofa  
onto the sidewalk, ask people if they'd pay you  
20 bucks to watch you steal something from Manjone's.

Neither one of us wants to hurt anymore.

We can still make each other feel  
almost like we used to.

Drift off in the afternoon haze,  
watching baseball on TV.

We could hitchhike north. Catch a train.

Ride towards the other coast. I'll hold  
you, keep your head from chattering.

It would be us, us moving so far away  
from this life, from the mountain range on fire.  
I swear,

when I enter you, it still tastes like velvet & antifreeze.

## THE WORST MAN IN HEAVEN

---

You could have ended this in the mountains.  
I was speeding down the overpass, macadam  
snow-cankered with popped blisters. The ridgeline

folded in on itself for miles—two lanes tracing the grooves  
between your knuckles. It was even raining.  
We both know I was begging for it. Just toss a bear

over the embankment in front of me  
and be done with it. You could have awarded my father  
custody. Could have sent us off the grid

in some cabover camper, dropped us in the yawning wild  
and let us teach each other what it means to be a man.  
Could have scissored off the closet's padlock

so I could get my hands on his shotgun.  
I spent my nights dreaming about running my tongue  
along the barrel, charting the inside of my mouth with metal.

I would have pulled the trigger if you told me who to aim at.  
You could have denied me release after all those involuntary  
holds. Could have jammed the rig in my thigh instead

of passing it under the kitchen table to my uncle.  
You could have. You could have.  
At this point, I'm basically doing your job for you.

I get it, though. You want me to drive each day from darkness  
towards a slightly warmer darkness. Want me to hold  
my brother until he no longer winces at the touch.

When will your angels come to vulture me away?  
You could have. You could have. I've waited so long,  
this knock inside me is beginning to sound like song.

RE: HAVE YOU BEEN PAYING ATTENTION IN WORKSHOP?

---

*Dear Dan,*

*Are you implying that I'm the worst man in heaven?*

*That's just mean.*

*Sorry it's taken so long for me to get around to this—when my inbox gets cluttered, I have this nasty habit of ignoring it entirely.*

*Anyway, since you won't stop writing me letters, I thought I'd finally sit down and write a good one back. There are some trends in your work that you should be aware of. Consider this a friendly and supportive critique.*

*You should add this correspondence to your book—I think it would work particularly well as a foreword, just so people know what they're getting themselves into.*

*If you'd like a blurb from your Interim Savior, consider: "Throughout this collection, Dan has largely avoided talking about flowers, which has to count for something."*

*For future reference, please leave all messages with my secretary.*

*Warmest Regards,*

*-G*

#### SYNOPSIS OF THE DAN HANEY POEM

---

The Dan Haney poem's been honing its shudder, dead gaze when someone brings up its dad—but back home, there's a decade of missed calls yawning in ether, landline slung off the hook.

When it needed to try  
Its inheritance on—some motel room, rye-clapped

mouth, stranger bent over, hands skimming  
along a blouse. I guess it doesn't matter what it fucks  
if it never gets out.

As if it could still blame anyone  
for leaving its house—most nights it lurks over  
the kitchen table, waiting for meanness to dribble  
from the corners of mouths. Jess, it knows  
you're hooked on smack. It'll use you for a few good lines,  
but it won't help out.

It'll claim the sauerkraut &  
turkey gizzards like it's a part of its past. It writes  
about the coalcrackers but hasn't gripped a pickaxe—  
like the gossamer gauming their lungs is something  
to write hymnals about.

It's dreaming of a barbeque  
somewhere down south, rotisserie chicken glistening  
spit-stabbed in a neighbor's yard. The wallpaper sunset breaks  
the same each day; its leaky showerhead's the closest  
it's gotten to rain. When it speaks, the apologies get coughed  
out, spat covered in bile.

It keeps writing a false history  
in hopes someone begins to believe it. As if it could just  
disappear to the hills, tend a farm on the government's dime.  
Marry a mistress, have her strip it down each night—  
give her a penny to scrape the plaque off its teeth.



## ERIC FREIN EXPLAINS

---

Wanted them bodies emptied. Didn't miss.  
Was trained dark. Was driving shadow.  
Was killed lights. Left Cherokee yawning  
in sewage ditch. Left passport. No  
longer exist. Was watch. Was taught.  
Was tease. Was flash on ridgeline  
then spill into breeze. Was woods'  
hushed breath. Was after sound.  
Was buried as them roil over me.  
Was bucktooth knocked loose  
then swallowed whole. Left AK  
hung on elm tree. Was hunting  
season beginning and ending.  
Was lake bottomless blue.  
Was Rambo. Was Camo. Was  
spent shells. Was sprawled  
on tarmac tracing dead stars.  
Was manhunt in moonlight.  
Was bloodied handcuffs.  
Am going to die.  
Am flashlight beam sweep.  
Am hangar gleam. Am guns  
stashed in lean-to. Officer,  
let me show you.  
Have mercy.  
Want no one getting hurt.

AT THE BARBEQUE IN BIRMINGHAM LAST NIGHT

---

The hellhounds had found him.  
A slab of night, he chugged,  
wheezed, sputtered,  
  collapsed.  
They lassoed him with a horsewhip,  
belt-buckled the body, these new bruises  
stippled halos.

Kerosene sloshed from a greasy jug.  
A match tossed into the brush—  
wood coffin. Strawkindling and bone.  
Fire engulfed the body, not the screams.

My grandfather told me:  
*be a good Christian boy.*  
*Listen to god. Listen to elders.*  
*Don't you want to go to heaven?*

I sit in his attic of asbestos,  
bibles, and fishhooks.  
On the back of the postcard,  
he'd scrawled:  
                        *at the barbeque in Birmingham last night—*  
                        *nigger got it good.*

In the postcard, faces,  
strawbrimmed and cigar-lipped, huddled  
around this catalpa cremation—  
mouths hooked as scythes,  
eyes piercing the blackest smoke,  
sanctuary nowhere to be found.

I ask my younger brother what the word  
                        *lynch* means.  
*The football player,* he says

## LEARNING TO PRAY AGAIN

---

My grandfather's garage. The deadbolt, rusted, kicks off without complaint. Slatted sunlight forces itself through greased air. Dust susurrus from my entry reveals your Studebaker. Starlight. The last of my inheritance to pawn off. A useless engine, parted out, valveless carcass dangling from its hoist. The car's always on fire in my dream, toolbox humming a language I don't understand. I look for something I don't want to find—your fingerprints on the windshield, tracing the breasts of women in calendars. I told you I would come home. I ease off a vicegrip embracing the mismatched fender. I speak the limbs I still recognize. Manifold. Gasket. Pinion. This car will never drive again. I turn the key over. Again, I turn the key, as if it will be different this time. Forgive me. I turn the key, like this meant anything to me.

## MONTH-TO-MONTH

---

I must look like someone who's done this before.  
My landlord lingers in the garden behind me. Tennessee dirt feels different, but the dimensions remain: shoebox wide by shoebox deep. The shovel kicks back occasionally—mourning's rhythm clanging off quartz and karst. I close the cat's glassed eyes and shroud the face with a dishrag, then knot the box with leftover Christmas ribbon. We both know a garbage bag would be easier than this. I mercy the cardboard casket into the ground. My landlord stammers, this old woman I've lived with for two weeks, housemate I hardly know, sunk in grief, and I've been preparing for this moment my entire life. I'm lying. I'm saying *I know how hard this must be*, her only pallbearer abandoning the ceremony to go inside her home and wash my hands.

## SKIPPING THE FUNERAL

---

I left my car idling on the shoulder and stepped into the woods. The foliage was slick: severed branches glistened, moss squirmed beneath my soles. Leaves mourned in place of me. After a mile, I saw you: figure rising from swamp gas, specter resting against a crooked tree. A campfire hissing embers, an empty beer-can shrine. Father, my deepest wounds were hallucination—

## IN ANTICIPATION OF THE GREAT EVENT

---

Nothing normal happens in Normal Square.  
Porch lights cast silhouettes  
of my neighbors. They've been preparing.  
One man swabs the barrel of his elephant  
gun, slumped in an ivory wicker chair.  
Casings lie unspent at his feet.  
Inside, his wife polishes off the last leftovers:  
a dollar store Salisbury steak.  
The megachurch looms almost religious  
in the distance. The pastor lay down  
his gas mask, calls It a good run.  
The town payphones haven't worked in days.  
A few blocks east, a police cruiser closed  
the intersection, its windows hotboxed  
shut, light bar bathing the row homes  
in a siren of blue. The night bleats.

## THE GREAT GARDEN GNOME CRIME SPREE

---

began innocently enough. One red-copper plucked from petunias. A granite angel lifted from arugula. The Gruber's Kristkindlmarket souvenir was reduced to an indent of muddled grass. It could have been the cats, their lusty mews. Or even a few crows, around these parts large enough to carry off your misbehaved child. But the town's faith remained unfazed. A police blotter cooed of other failings; main street burbled & brapped exhaust, the zinc plant chugged along. Then came another absence. Flamingoes were uprooted, their plastic bodies a sun-stained salmon. Little lawn divots like graves. No one could mow their lawn with all this loss. The fake deer, their plastic heads garbage-bagged and rubber-banded for autumn, they disappeared into some ether, along with the maintenance crews' lost traffic cones—a rookie was forced to windmill in a florescent orange coat. A crime watch assembled, swept the town perimeter, from Aquashicola to Lonesome Lane. Grandparents chambered revolvers, growling: *we can't take any more chances*. Soon, whispers came from dollar stores, from gas stations, over menthols and beer: Maybe this wasn't a prank. Maybe it was a child, one from the woods, one raised by wild boars and loosed on the town. Imagine him, hidden, blustering beneath brush, one snowshoe, one meathook. Plastic cartilage dripping from his tusks, and when he opened his mouth, radio static. On Avenue A, morning teabags resurfaced in toilet bowls. Whatever it was, it was coming. All truck nuts were unhinged, stowed in nightstands. Churches were standing room only. Family escape plans were rewritten. Squirrels were trapped in milk jugs, taken to shelters as a precaution. No bread, no eggs, no calm. The next night, on the school's front lawn, a bonfire erupted. A crowd gathered, watched smoke

spuming into open gymnasium doors, into terrified nostrils. Some thought it was the Herman's, or the Handshaw's, already planning their next petty arson, topping off gas cans sloshing in rusted truck beds, tinfoil as a makeshift cap. Others were inconsolable, murmuring *the child—he's Coming*. Volunteer firefighters were nowhere to be found.



## EXCERPTS FROM TOWAMENSING TOWN HALL MEETINGS

---

*January 13<sup>th</sup>:*

The most ambitious Yankee commuters must be resisted.

The borders of the Great City continue to slither outward, acupuncture us.

They don't use their turn signals.

They all drive chrome-trimmed Tahoes, the ones

with independent shock absorbers—

with no need to patch the potholes, the road crews will turn lawless,

prowling the shoulder. They'll trap nesting cardinals inside traffic cones.

They'll take off all of their clothes save for the iridescent work vests, jaunt down mainstreet.

Traffic lights will have to be installed.

I suggest we send pickups with floodlights to patrol the county line.

If we bring along their hounds and rifles, who could blame them?

\*

*February 10<sup>th</sup>*

[Meeting canceled on account of snow.]

\*

*March 10th*

Our mountain is not on fire, although some wish it was for the drama.  
Centralia certainly got better press.  
When the government slapped us with the superfund designation,  
I expected a little more pizzazz.  
You know, mysterious workers at the convenience store in hazmat suits.

Instead, it just lies naked, baring its slate and digested boot soles.  
The zinc plant choked off all the trees in the 80s.  
A few retirees have grown nostalgic about it.  
The flyby seedings haven't stuck  
I'd rather have mutated trees instead of a brown skyline.  
Mayor [REDACTED] feels we could get some good tourism money  
if people feel bad enough for us.

The trailhead hostel has been closed until further notice.

\*

*April 14th*

The town drunk asks why we can't buy beer  
in grocery stores, and everyone agrees this is an important issue.  
A memo is drafted. Our rarest postage stamps are used, licked off to Harrisburg.

\*

*May 12th*

The schoolboard has approved conversion of the building formerly known as Parkside Chemical Plant, located at 826 Delaware Ave. The building will be stripped of its asbestos housing and decontaminated thoroughly by government officials before being repurposed into an elementary school—tentatively called Parkside Elementary—begins. The project is expected to be completed by the next fiscal year, though the cost is yet to be determined.

A school official who requested to remain anonymous explained: “The potential for positive mutations will remain, which will give our children an extra leg up in this challenging job market.”

The farmers on the outskirts of town have tipped over their plastic cows and carried them inside the black barns to prevent them from becoming sun-stunned. The Dutch barnstars, on schedule, have each been given a new layer of primer and rotated 180 degrees.

\*

*June 9th*

The secretary continues to write poems where the minutes should go. He does not understand that all archives remain permanent.

\*

*July 14th*

Eric Frein's manhunt has punctuated town life. There are police with glinting rifles and snarling shepherds at every intersection, and the town feels important and protected. It truly is a town where something important may happen.

Every house with a porch has the man sleeping outside of it, weapon of choice blanketing his lap. Some do a better job at containing their excitement than others.

\*

*August 11th*

Pandemonium sweeps the town hall as some ask how the gays will impact our towns life. The commuters were bad enough, they say. Who knows where we accidentally hollowed the earth out— do you want the hillside beyond town to give way under the weight of their granite countertops and touch-screen refrigerators? We'll be buried in stainless steel & kitchenaid.

And now you're saying the Onion church will give these folks rings, let them play grabass walking down the aisle, have the same delivery pizza privileges? An older lady wonders if Frein was a sign, and asks if we have prayed enough.

No, I have not prayed enough.

\*

## THE WORLD'S LARGEST GENERAL STORE

---

You would think there'd be more security cameras.  
Outside, we pass a sprawl of RVs, outliers

on yellow-lined macadam axis. Synthetic oil  
puddles rainbow beneath their engines.

Under spooling lamplight, long-haul truckers  
barely stir, dreaming of crankshafts and canker sores.

It's almost beautiful, how the all-american nomads  
stop here for their nightcap pilgrimage,

roustabouts of an apparition's carnival.  
Our navigation is now routine: we zag through

the petting zoo shantytown, then take  
a left past the nickel candy and stall

of homemade fudge. We pass the statues and stuffed  
animals hugging their own shadows, *Death*

*in all his right angles.* We watch the grand taxidermist  
mounting a panther on the store's back wall.

We're all tired, and he's the most tired of them all.

## HORSEHEAD

---

If twenty years of telomere-burn dremeled me /  
into a replica of my daddy / If I found myself back  
at Horsehead Zinc / If I came to make amends /  
If there were hands tending the furnace / the  
levers like sawn-off tusks carving up ingots / If  
they were my father's hands / The levers sawn-  
off tusks carving up ingots / If they were mine /  
Sawn-off tusks carving up ingots /

## CHAIRMAN MAO ORDERS THE ERADICATION OF SPARROWS

---

We killed because we were asked to.  
We only knew the birds' bellies  
were full of our grain.  
Knew we were hungry.  
Our fathers were given rifles  
and as many pellets as they could carry.

Soon we were asked to join the adults.  
We waded into the paddies,  
blew air bubbles in the murk. Waited  
for the bleat of wings overhead.  
We squinted into sun, tracked feathers  
into the imagined crosshairs of our slingshots.

Red flags billowed from windows.  
Birdbaths were streaked with mercury.

Our mothers made music. Clamored  
gongs, dragged knives along the bottom  
of brass pots and pans.

If the sparrows couldn't sleep, they couldn't  
fly, wouldn't survive. After a few nights,  
birds fell. Dropped from rocks.  
Exhausted, some dropped in surrender,  
flawless as falling bombs.

We climbed trees, clapped  
the pests' eggs onto bark until yolk  
oozed into the creases of our palms,  
the tortoiseshell residue webbing  
between our fingers. We took turns.  
We all wanted to know what it felt like.

## WHEN I SHOEBOXED A KINGFISHER

---

I've been warned not to impose meaning  
on the meaningless, not to treat my experience  
as an inkblot: how, when I was still a boy—  
before the animals revealed themselves  
as a jumble of blood and bones, before  
the sky was a smudged watercolor of tempera,  
mud, and milkweed—the small kingfisher  
I cradled, sick from sewage water, muck  
crusted on tousled plumage, was just a bird  
that could not be saved. Like the bud  
dislocated from bramble, or the berry pestled  
in my innocent palms, the kingfisher's  
wild eyes were not a message, its life not  
sacrificed for grand premonition, its death  
no warning of separation, of autumn's coming  
indifference. I try to remember only this:  
my small red hands, beak, wing.



## WHAT I DO AFTER WORK

---

I shake off my coat, toss it on the floor by a crumple  
of clothes, thumb the television to static. I slouch  
into my night job

as a surgeon. They call me the panic  
merchant. When my slapdash ambulance weeps  
through intersections, they all run, cry *here comes  
the butcher*. No one understands what I'm searching  
for. No matter how many people I open  
up, I can't figure out what glitches & jags against  
my skull. All I remember of home is a grimed spigot.  
Every patient's hand becomes my brother's,  
skin sloughed to knuckle—a botched smokebomb  
spit-up. My scalpel & rib-spreader teeter in the cup holder.  
When my hands fail my patient, I'll slump the body  
against a lamppost. Everyone I've lost quivers  
inside me, each one a moth with chawed-off wings.  
There is only the road, my headlights sawing through dusk.

## AFTER THE DIVORCE

---

The repo-wrecker comes for my Chrysler too soon.  
I unscrew the re-used oil filter. Runoff seeps  
Into the storm drain. I line my coat pockets  
with a two-buck scratch off, some truck stop  
road map. Lift the stolen milk crate from the trunk,  
toss in crinkled bottles & starburst wrappers. I leave  
our blanket spread across the backseat. Patch  
the gnashed leather with duct tape. A wake  
before the wake. The driver loops cable around  
the chassis, and a winch drags the body onto the flatbed.  
I spend the rest of my life walking home.

RE: SURPRISE, ANOTHER SAD POEM

---

*Dear Dan,*

*OK, my turn. I got this new card game, and it's pretty great. It's a nice time sink—it's been a godsend for our cross-spiritual mixers.*

*Any rate, you seem really sad. Being you must be hard. So I decided to make you a poem to help you feel better.*

DAN'S BIOGRAPHY FOUND WITHIN *CARDS AGAINST HUMANITY*

---

It all began with opposable thumbs. Then daddy's belt.  
Chutzpah & uppercuts. My grandfather eating the last  
known bison. Chewing on friendly fire in Vietnam flashbacks.  
Then dying of dysentery. We were poor people, white—  
exactly what you'd expect. Soon came puberty's snotsicles.  
Taking off my shirt, scrubbing under fat folds. Hot pockets  
& Axe body spray. Full-frontal nudity: The American Dream.  
Obscure porn streaming in HD. A surprising amount of hair &  
an erection lasting far longer than four hours. Third base.  
Letting everyone down. The primal, ball-slapping sex  
one of my parents was having. Plagiarizing my own suicide note.  
I'm sorry, Professor; I was crying into the pages of Plath.  
I'm praying for an unhinged ferris wheel rolling towards the sea.  
For amputees & anal beads. For chivalry & civilian casualties.  
My first death. Reloading from a previous save. This new life  
in the South. Survivor's guilt & all its regiftings. Oncoming traffic.  
A cheap motel. Wearing underwear inside-out to avoid  
doing laundry. A Hungry Man Frozen Christmas Dinner for one.

*Please, hesitate to respond.*

*--Your Temporary God*

## TERMINUS: PASQUO

---

This year, the summer's swelter won't break.  
Book bindings spill half-stitched across the kitchen counter.  
Garden zucchinis sweat themselves out of baskets.  
The dog piss melts into ether.  
Grief can only be repurposed.  
I entered this home as a tenant, as her truss.  
Each Sunday, football crackles on my TV.  
My landlord talks about her daughter, rewinding a replay of a lateral endlessly.  
A faucet drips unchecked, and an abscess presses against the drywall.  
She tries to tell me about her daughter, but can no longer remember her voice.  
Until what's left of her silhouette, too, wilts to static.  
The den's faux-fireplace whirrs rust.  
We wait for our quietest losses to pass through us, wisping out a cracked window.  
August swallows.

## TERMINUS: BURNWOOD

---

The endless mountains end six miles from here.  
Fracking rigs puncture the ridge—metal husks against blue.  
On the dock, I hook my hands for tadpoles, sift lakegunk.  
Lillypads try to keep themselves afloat.  
The cabin owner's shriveling lungs tether her body to a gurgling machine.  
I join the contractors every day.  
We carve an artificial cove from the lake's rim.  
Capsize her canoe.  
Uproot sycamores, cleave them from the shore.  
Excavate ground between the porch and water's edge.  
Lay an electrical grid in lieu of spools of nasal tubes.  
Run copper cables from the cellar junction.  
Attach them to an electrical socket tucked inside a plastic tree.  
The cabin sits vacant.  
There must be a god watching this.  
He knows I am nothing if not selfish.  
I've spent this year hopeless, dopesick, and learning to steal.  
Be it halo, be it sickle, let him come.

## FAMILY REUNION

---

Look, Vick, I'm just trying to get my tools.

I know your methmouth brother  
didn't already pawn them off.

Besides, it'll be good for me to stop by—  
Remember when we'd walk  
down to the backside of Beltzville with a case of Yuengs,  
crush them, then try to skip  
the cans across the lake?

You act like we never loved each other.

I lived there, too, shacked up with you  
in the middle of nobody.  
I could come back anytime.

Sure, your dad has a shotgun, but he's miles away.  
Why not drive the kids down for a weekend visit?

I know the gash in our screen door.  
How to jig the locks. You've left  
the windows open each summer day for your entire life.

I'd have to kick my own dog whimpering at my feet.  
Pour molasses in your fuel tank.

Don't you remember how Danny  
loved to be with me?  
When you worked nights,  
and I'd jerry-rig the back of the work van  
full of bungee cords and rubber straps?  
I let the kid thrash around in there  
till he gave himself a concussion.

He loved it.

You've kept that from me for years.

It could have been different, Vick.

The star-smeared nights we spent together  
renovating this house.

God refused to rain on us for an entire summer.

I rolled out a blanket, and you said there was nothing beyond  
our unfinished, unroofed home.

Now I have to clog the coal chute,  
sever the well pump,  
tear down this entire house I built for you.

Imagine if I still had a spare key.

I wouldn't even wear a mask.

I'd want you to know it's me.

## THE TRUTH

---

My father stole a projector from work, screwed it loose from its mounting after hours. The drywall's white faltered, then splashed itself blue. Construction in technicolor. As it hummed against spackle, he hooked up the xbox and grabbed another beer. I could barely wrap my hands around the controller—he placed one hand on my shoulder, the other guiding me, moving the virtual gun crosshairs until they flashed red. His finger pressing mine down. It was the first time I remember seeing blood. He took the controller from me, reloaded. Paused. He said that some things don't feel anything. That there's nothing wrong with enjoying it. Aliens blossomed out blood violet, tangerine, azure. Graffitied the walls electric behind them. We passed the controller between us playing *Halo* for hours, until dusk walked in through the propped-open cellar door. He went to the garage, set his half-finished beer atop the junction box, the spliced wires inside sloppy and fraying. If only I had this as my night job, he said. The truck's engine turned over. When he left, I poured my soda into one of his empty cans, drank.



## WHAT I DO AFTER WORK

---

I shake off my coat, toss it on the floor by a crumple  
of clothes, thumb the television to static. I slouch  
into my night job

as a god. All my children are born dead,  
stone embryos clattering against marble. A different  
yellowjacket petrified on my windowsill each morning.  
I tell my subjects *don't write about me*, yet they write and write.  
In this depression of earth, there are rules:  
no one sees the same bird twice. Forgiveness happens  
when the river is smothered with cherry blossoms  
and six-pack rings. Executioners are always given  
too much rope. If you pray to me, you'll receive  
a chisel and slab of styrofoam on your stoop.  
One man reached me, undressed his flak jacket  
in the crossfire. I could only cry with him, could only say  
*no one leaves that easily*, hover a dead wasp back into the air.

## EPISTLE

---

When I reached you, I got down  
on my knees. I said I'm tired  
of forging crises hoping you answer.  
Is this all I do? Clasp my hands like this?

RE: THIS INSUFFERABLE VICTIM COMPLEX YOU HAVE

---

*Dear Dan,*

*I get it—people who are hurting go on to hurt other people. But I can imagine you in an unfavorable light, too. Since you have no problem pretending to be me, I wrote you a poem where I'm you.*

*It's quite accurate.*

DAN GIVES A POETRY READING

---

The Poet arrived for his reading. He was to read from his first book, *New and Selected Feelings*. We entered the repurposed church. We sat pewly. He reached the pulpit, spread out his papers. Said *this is my favorite poem. It is a poem about myself, and it is a poem about Poetry*. The air was holy with anticipation. He adjusted the microphone. He rolled back the cuffs to his houndstooth suit, and began slicing at his arms. Really going at it. Literally strumming his veins. Soon, other Poets in the audience joined in. A man took his belt, made a tourniquet at the elbow. A woman carved phrases into the back of her hand as reminders. This group of emerging writers, unsure if they wanted to fully commit, went through the motions with their safety razor still in its packaging. This Poem lasted for several minutes. Each time we thought that The Poet couldn't possibly bleed any more, and each time he bled anew. When everyone was finished, we eased back into the pews, basking in the refractory period. Light refracted through stained-glass windows. We were prismatic. The Poet, after catching his breath, said *this is a good poem about Poetry*. And we all agreed. He said *there should be more poems about Poetry*. And we all died.

*Best,*

*-G*

## INHERITANCE

---

When you left, you must have taken Quarry Run.  
I've traced your absence along the county map,  
fingers smooth against the brailled distances —

how the road rumbles over a one-lane bridge, yields  
to uneasy gravel as it spools along the weak bank  
of the Pohopoco. Toll booth to turnpike to truck stop.  
81's southbound artery meting life into before and after.

Some departures burn into birthright.

I've spent half of my life fighting whatever faintness  
I still carry of you—knuckle, belt buckle, faded catcher's mitt.

It was nice, for a time, to think I'd end up any different.  
That I'd redeem this last name.

But I've tried out every town name I've ever wandered through,  
and none fits as well as ours. Our name dribbling out  
of the corners of mouths of every woman we've ever kissed.  
Our name shivering inside every prayer misfired,  
skidding belly-up in the empty field furthest from heaven.

When I leave, I'll take Quarry Run.  
Stick-shifting with a screwdriver.  
Fatherhood faltering into lockstep. You,  
your father, every father before and after.

Whatever this is inside us.  
This manufacturing glitch. This chromosomal kill-switch. This  
ancestral spigot-drip.  
Whatever it is, you were right.  
Even in our most spectacular moments,  
we only pretend we can turn it off.

## EULOGY FOR THE HALVES OF MR. BROWN

---

A toast. For the Mr. Brown experience.  
For this town's very own Plywood Proteus.

For the man with the nudie mags hung  
next to the bassinet. The man with a bible  
in the glovebox of a mothballed Cadillac.  
For my proxy father kept at arm's length.

Your turnpike crew named you Butch.  
For you, Butch. Ain't this something?  
That tunnel you built ends up leading  
this whole procession to your cemetery.  
Didn't even waive the toll.

I swear I hear the casket complaining of potholes.

God told me he had you punch through  
those mountains because he knew  
you would still listen to him.

Your neighbors named you Brownie.  
For you, Brownie.  
For the essential mementos—  
the hundred-axle sheetmetal monument  
we'll keep rusted in the backyard.  
Everything those cars gave you.  
Four kittens and a flood title. All original parts.

The crumple and screech from guardrails  
after you left the bar. All of the dents  
you reached in elbow-deep  
and punched out, fender  
looking like it never had a swig.

The school kids named you Nugget.

For you, Nugget. You always had the right idea.  
When you ran out of Packerton Middle  
and never stopped. We stayed, and if we laid  
out every pay stump we saved,  
cashed out every scratch-off we've won,  
we wouldn't have enough dough  
to gas it out of the county.

The boys in Vietnam named you Boopsie.  
For what's left of you, Boops. You shipped off  
to the Pacific and never quite came back.  
Those foreign women, how you looked at everything  
but their face, and never touched. Just imagined  
the perfume an invitation curling  
underneath the scruff of your chin.

I bet the angels have already named you Krimp.  
For you, Krimp—  
there aren't enough laws against you.  
For all those dirty pictures you drew  
to the Angel of Death without any postage  
stamps to send them off. You must be licking  
the lace bra strap of an angel  
right now, still thinking of your wife.

You were named Bob when you asked for Robert.  
For your life of substitutes—acorn coffee,  
garage with broke-down Starlight  
where a Bel Air should be.  
A junkie silhouette masquerading as your son.

And the family back home who named you Pap.  
For you, Pap. For the final motions.  
No catheter, no hospital, no  
sentimental shit sobbed out along the bedside.

How you hung your skin on the coatrack,  
escorted yourself through the sanitized double-doors,

body starched in your only seersucker suit, double-breasted  
women draped on either side.

May there be no intimacy issues in heaven.  
May there be the same Lunchbox, that same diner,  
with the same scrapple and same coffee each sunrise..

For you, Pap. For the only reason this family  
isn't panhandling on the side of road.  
For your gravestone that we could engrave,  
but won't. For your antler chandelier that contains  
every half of you that we'll take down  
and sell to the highest bidder.

DAN HANEY

---

Son, we're both worshippers—  
you pray my body is found facedown  
in the Pohopoco. Pray I fall  
into the sewage vat at work  
and can't climb back up.  
Imagine my body pinned  
beneath a stump grinder.  
You feeding your father  
to a wood chipper. Me?  
I pray for back dimples & curved hips.  
Unfamiliar skin. Silicone tits.  
The tongue & its barleyed breath.  
Some people get what they want.

\*

I've read a few of your poems—  
you make me out to be a real dick.  
Just admit it: you miss me.  
You don't miss home—  
your mother, the house you escaped,  
windows boarded-up concealing  
her mountains of miscellaneous shit.  
I can call Children & Youth anytime.  
Just admit that I was right.  
Question: have you ever made it through  
a poem without talking about yourself?

\*



We have the same name.  
Same failings.  
It's only a matter of time  
before we're together again, Danny,  
when I'll sidle down next to you,  
stool against stool at a bar.  
It could be anywhere.  
We'll have years to catch up on:  
the wedding I wasn't invited to.  
Your cum along the inside thigh  
of someone you never loved.  
The divorce soon afterwards.  
When you went to court to change  
your name but didn't have the cash.

\*

We'll talk. We'll talk about this  
recurring dream where I pass  
you in the street and I don't  
recognize you. You've got your own  
kid then, and grip his hand tighter  
the rest of the walk home.  
I'll order you something stiff.  
One of our favorites. I'll place  
my arm on your shoulder  
for the first time in years, say  
*Look at us now—*  
*you can't even tell the difference.*