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## Proclivities of the Common Southern WASP

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Proclivities of the Common Southern WASP

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

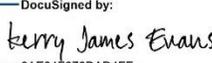
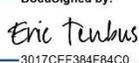
Paul Stephen Bryant  
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Thesis/Dissertation Signature Request Form  
 Proclivities of the Common Southern WASP

Submitted by Paul Stephen Bryant in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

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Proclivities of the Common Southern WASP

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Paul Stephen Bryant

## Contents

How to Listen .....	1
Sometimes I Forget.....	2
The Serpent.....	3
The BB Gun.....	16
How to Ride a Bike [A Short-sighted Self-portrait].....	17
The Gambler .....	18
Etymology .....	23
How to be Sisyphus as the only White Kid on the Schoolyard's Playground in the Early 2000s.....	24
The Camping Trip .....	25
Hephaestus Visits South Carolina .....	40
Portrait of a Plum Tree Growing out of Grandad's Guttled Ford.....	41
A Gift from Dad .....	43
The Football Game .....	44
Lilting Heart in a Flo-town Love Song .....	52
Antisocial Self-portrait with Dog and Blue Jay.....	53
The Seasonal Tadpole Stream .....	54
My Gay Farm.....	55
Fooling My Son.....	70
The Lost Space of My Youth .....	71
Spiritual Awakening.....	72
Self-portrait from a Hospital Bed .....	73
The Family Reunion .....	77
Sunday Supper.....	78
Nightly Routines.....	80
Acknowledgements .....	81
Copy of Critical Essay.....	82

## How to Listen

“Let me learn you pain from a switch,” Father says  
while he wrestles the thin vine off of the backyard  
plum tree. Blood drips from his palms after  
snapping off what looks like a long snake belly  
laying across his fingertips. “Touch it,”  
he says, so I poke the bloodstained rod  
both limber and hard like pig’s flesh and flinch  
as it bounces straight back. “Listen to this,”  
Father whips the brown blur through the air quicker  
than its whistling can keep up. “Hold out  
your hands.” He lifts the switch a foot above  
my palms, flicks it, and a stinging,  
fresh pink line forms on my white skin. “You’ll never  
get my scars.” Father throws the switch into the shade.

## Sometimes I Forget

Mother's hands are scars from cotton bracts  
back when the sun sank into fields of cow shit and tobacco.

No shoes. No voice. Cattle prods kept her lips shut.  
Her mouth only opened for boiled rainwater,

yet that girl still snuck pork skins to a starved dog  
and let him lick her hand while she slept hungry on a straw bed.

She reminds me of her sacrifices over nightly phone calls,  
the white hair at 40, the carpal tunnel scars right above her wrists,

the stack of bills my dead father left accumulating on the kitchen counter.  
After swallowing a Wendy's chicken nugget just last Sunday

she told me over the phone how "17-year-olds cost \$250,000 in total.  
You are 24 and I am still raising you."

Despite her complaints, I know  
that when my 2008 Toyota Yaris hobbles up her driveway during the holidays,  
she waits for hours humming prayers under the porchlight.

## The Serpent

One summer late afternoon when I was six, tired from picking weeds and chasing frogs, I walked across the yard to the crawfish ditch to rest my toes in the cool water. Through the chain-link fence that separated our property from the ditch — and that I had to climb to get to it — I saw bumblebees buzzing over dandelion blowballs and Tiffany-like dragonflies adorning goldenrods. Disturbed by my shadow, a bullfrog gazed up at me. From the grass sprouting from the swampy ditch, I could see crawfish claws poking out.

I had started to climb the fence, anticipating the feel of tadpoles fluttering between my sludge-soaked toes, when, through the tornado fence, something long, brown, cylindrical and curved caught my eye. At first, I thought it was a freshly-fallen tree limb, but then I saw it twitch. I climbed further up the fence and looked over the metal bar at the top. That's when I saw the snake: at least four feet long, gulping mud from a puddle, its triangular head expanding and contracting like an old-fashioned bellows.

It was my father's day off from his job as a meat cutter at the local IGA. He was in the backyard, building a third shed to house the old bathtub we'd gotten for the pet turtle, a yellow-bellied slider that had outgrown two aquariums. I would have run to get him right away had the snake not mesmerized me: the sheen of its scales, the flick of its tail, its long body stretching out straight behind it as it drank. Then I heard the sound of tools clanking in a toolbox and knew my father was headed indoors for a drink of water or to use the bathroom. I turned and, sure enough, saw him coming around the side of the house, headed for its brick front steps.

I jumped off of the fence and ran to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

On a chilly October night when I was five, the crickets chirped from the sound machine on the bedside nightstand, and starlight drifted through the half-closed blinds during my eight o'clock bedtime. The lavender scent of my pillow, the soft breeze caressing my face from the oscillating fan perched on the nightstand, and a long day of gluing together glitter collages and working on simple addition drills in kindergarten made my eyes heavy with sleep. Mother brushed the back of her floral nightgown and sat down on the fluffy Barney bedsheets. She reached over to the mahogany dresser that housed all of my tights-whities and ankle socks, and pulled out a thick hardback book, *The Beginner's Bible* from its surface underneath stacks of St. James and New International Versions that my eleven-year-old brother read from every morning.

Mother plopped the book on her lap, proceeding to tickle the arches of my feet with her chewed up nails, scolding me in a gentle voice that it was not yet time to sleep, for she must imbue me with The Word of God before bed. My brother, snug in his twin-sized bed across the room, cackled at my fate while I squirmed and giggled uncontrollably. Entertained enough by my torment, Mother brushed chaotic strands of auburn hair away from her warm brown eyes and opened the book to its trite-inspirational-quote-with-random-nature-image bookmarked page, balancing the bookmark on the tip of her knee. The smell of basic Colgate toothpaste left her breath as she read, "The Sneaky Snake: Genesis 3." She slowly turned the book around and double tapped the cartoonish image of a tree bearing red fruit similar in shape to pomegranates, standing tall in a garden full of rainbow-colored foliage, and she pressed me to notice the beauty of paradise.

Mother bellowed as God, sticking out her belly and chiding me with her pointer finger.

"You may eat the fruit from any tree except for one. Never eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Mother hissed as the serpent, flicking her tongue and swaying her head from side to side.

“Did God really tell you not to eat the fruit from this tree?”

She again slowly turned the book around, chanting “*Sasasasah-sasasasah-sasasasah,*” as her fingers slithered circles around the image of a plump, lime-green snake with an evil smirk spreading across its entire face, its naked, human-like eyebrows furled in mischief, its body coiled around a branch of this red fruit tree which supposedly bore the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

Mother in her dramatic flourishes continued to read how this *sasasasah-sasasasah*-Snake tempted, *MUHAHAHAHA*, Eve to consume the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, and how Eve, bless her heart, persuaded Adam to eat this fruit. Mother rapidly spun the book around to reveal the chapter’s final image of an angel swinging a flaming sword over its head, expelling the hunched over in despair Adam and Eve along with the now shriveled snake slithering its wiry body across shortgrass.

After Mother finished swinging her own fiery blade, she nonchalantly inserted the bookmark at the start of the next chapter, used one hand to close the book by its spine, rested it on her lap, and she yawned.

“Did you see how pretty the Garden was? They got thrown out because they ate from the fruit of knowledge of good and evil.”

“Why was the snake so scary?”

Mom patted my knee.

“It was possessed by the Devil, baby. The Devil makes us do evil things. The Devil makes us hurt others.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As my father's moc toe work boots clacked up the brick front stairs to the house I rushed up to him. The patented Bryant "deer musk sweat stench" assaulted my nostrils as I tugged on the back of his navy-blue polo shirt.

"Dad," I shouted. "There's a big snake in the crawfish ditch!"

He dropped his toolbox on a step, its contents clattering about, and he turned slowly. His cold green eyes glared at me over monkey-red cheeks, and his lips puckered as if he popped a Warheads Extreme Sour candy into his mouth.

"What does it look like, son?" he asked, his canned coffee breath coming through despite the pungent odor of his body toiling all afternoon in the sun.

"Black and brown and big. It was drinking water."

My father scratched his graying goatee, digging cracked nails into his chin.

"Got any stripes on it?"

I chewed my nails. My old habit when I searched for answers.

"Not stripes, but blocks on its back."

Father let out a sigh that traveled from deep within his belly. A hot gust of wind battered the patches of hair he had left on top of his balding head while he stared at the chain link fence in the distance. His eyelids fell, eyeballs rapidly fluttering behind them as if he was dreaming. A dark weight hung in his eyes when they opened. I shivered.

"Wait here," he said. "Don't you walk toward that snake. I'ma show you how to kill it."

Dad yanked the toolbox up viciously, the sound of smacking steel afflicting my ears. Father's black jeans merged with shadows inside as he rushed through the screen door.

\* \* \* \* \*

As far back as I can remember, my father had always hated snakes. One day, when I was bored out of my mind roaring through algebra worksheets at the kitchen table, I needed to take a break. I asked Father why he loathed snakes so much. Father spread the newspaper flat on the table, rubbing his hands over the paper's creases while staring up at the flickering kitchen light. His pointer finger and thumb massaged his wrinkled forehead for about thirty seconds before he recounted the story of his first and last visit to St. John's Pentecostal Church.

In a monotonous tone of disinterest, Father verbally introduced me to a new character who played a vital role in his romantic teenage years. Her name was Emily. Within the moldy tile ceiling and the cobweb-stricken brick walls of South Florence High School, Father met his first love. She was a freshman girl, a taped-up glasses-wearing, soft-spoken bookworm. He was a junior boy, a straight C student, the star shortstop player for The South Florence Bruins. They both came from good, Christian families that went to church every Sunday morning, that said Grace before every meal. Though father's Pa swore with every breath, and his whiskey habits were displayed by molehills of glass shards in the front yard, Father would not tell her that. They got to talking real platonic-like, first about her extraordinary grades, then about father's baseball prowess, before Emily made a declaration of love that cannot be found almost anywhere else but in the Deep South. She invited him to attend Sunday service at her church.

After a tiring afternoon assisting Pa (my granddad) with handpicking tobacco, Dad slid Emily's invitation into the conversation around the candle lit kitchen table over dinner. Ma grasped Pa's furry hand and bounced up and down on the tree trunk stool in excitement. Pa stared past Dad at the cracks between the cedar plank walls, where mosquitos, rats, and snakes seeped through, meeting the heel of his steel toe boots whenever they were spotted. Pa nodded,

and begrudgingly allowed Dad to borrow the beat up 1966 Ford F100 on the stipulation that Dad would bring Emily back to introduce her over Sunday lunch.

The first thing Dad noticed when he pulled up to St John's Pentecostal Church was its crooked spire that was missing a cross. Deep into the woods, loblolly pine limbs hammered the church's roof, and poison ivy and abelia littered the overgrown yard. Mold covered the church walls' chipped white paint, and the building leaned so far to the right it could have tipped over at any moment. As Dad approached the cement bricks used in place of front steps, he was accosted by pot belly, untamed bearded, torn blue jean-wearing parishioners, who asked him his name, where he was from, his denomination, and crushed his hand with prolonged handshakes.

After passing through the gauntlet of Southern hospitality, Dad entered the cramped sanctuary through an opened flush door. The humidity of human sweat socked him in the face. Bodies were packed everywhere, standing along the walls, sitting on the hard-wooden pews without cushions, and all of them were chatting, patting, and slapping each other as if everyone had known everybody since the day they were born. Dad scoured the room for Emily's straight as a nail blonde hair and found her sitting on a back pew beside a shorter haired blonde woman that must have been her mother. Dad nervously trekked across the rickety floorboards and excused himself for every person he walked past who sat on that pew. When he reached Emily, they nodded to each other in greeting, and she removed her hand from the seat which gave him just enough room to squeeze in between her and an old lady who smelled of pork rinds. Emily's mother smiled at Dad with her thin lips, waving to him with her fingers, and he waved back. He surveyed the room. A wall piano was pushed up to the right side of the ten seated choir chancel, and an acoustic guitar and a folding chair rested against the wall. There was no altar, but a short

pulpit caught all the light from the shack's two windows. Dad sat in silence scratching the palms of his hands and twirling his thumbs until the service started. The hard pew made his ass ache.

The white-haired preacher in a blue-striped shirt and blue jeans hobbled into the sanctuary from the entrance, the plain clothed choir folk skipping along after him. A teenage boy trickled in, unfolded the chair next to the piano, sat down and tuned the guitar. A gray-haired lady with a crooked smile cracked her knuckles after adjusting the height of the piano bench. The choir burst into song as soon as they took their places behind the preacher. Like Dad's usual Southern Baptist service, the congregation clapped, shouted, spoke in tongues, and reached their hands in the air toward God. The preacher hollered, amen, and flamboyantly threw his hands around as if he was possessed by the Spirit Itself.

"You know what time it is!" he shouted from behind the pulpit.

The pianist and guitarist energized the room with a rush of chords. The congregation's clapping was sent into a frenzy. Some shook violently, and others had their eyes roll into the back of their skulls.

The preacher waved frantically for two front row parishioners to hop up to the pulpit. The preacher walked out of their way, clapping and moving his shoulders to the rhythm of the music. The two stocky men in overalls stooped down where the preacher was previously standing, raising the steel cages above their heads for all the congregation to see.

\* \* \* \* \*

I waited out in front of our house when I heard footsteps rounding its side. My father must have slipped out the back door and gone rummaging in the farming shed. A single-bit felling axe dangled from his arm. Dad's pointer finger beckoned me to his side. As we walked toward the ditch, he talked down to me.

“That’s a Diamondback. They’re venomous. You have to strike down on their head. Cut it off in one go.”

“What happens if you miss?”

“You pray that it will give you the chance to miss again. And if you miss the second time, there’ll likely be no more prayer.”

When we got to the fence, Dad yanked my shirt collar and planted my shoulder firmly to that spot. “Now you stay here and watch,” he said.

I watched as my father crept around the fence to the side of the ditch and leaned over it. As he did, the snake’s head turned. Their eyes struck each other. Dad raised the axe, holding its gleaming head above his shoulder. He waivered. The diamondback flicked its tongue. Dad stifled a cough. The snake shivered its tail. *Tssss-tssss-tsssss*.

“This fucking angle,” my father muttered.

The crawfish ditch was over two feet deep. Dad had to swing hard enough to sever the snake’s head. If he swung too hard, the momentum would fling him into the ditch. If he swung hard and missed, the snake’s fangs would bare into his exposed throat. I was too young then to know why my father hesitated, why he didn’t swing right away, but I was old enough to see that his fear was palpable. Wrinkles creased the corners of his eyes. He bit his lip. With his left hand he held the axe at the nob to keep it from shaking. He took a deep breath, then another, and waited. Suddenly, the silver axe head swung down in a blur. Before the blade reached the base of the snake’s skull, Dad’s backfoot lost its grip on the slick grass. His head lunged toward the bottom of the ditch.

\* \* \* \* \*

The preacher wedged the cage between his protruding belly and chin. His free hands flourished wildly above his head. The congregation cheered and clapped jubilantly at the spectacle, as if the cage miraculously floated in the air. The preacher lowered one hand toward the door of the cage, while the other hand remained poised stoically above his head. He unfastened its latch, flicking the door open with his middle finger. The crowd grew more frantic; shouts amplified to screeches; shakes intensified to convulsions. Eyes closed and head pointed toward heaven, the preacher blindly wormed his hand into the cage. The cottonmouth, threatened by the intruder of its small habitat, pressed itself against the opposing metal wall. The preacher's fingers traced over scales until he found the head. Upon feeling the skull, the preacher's fingers coiled rapidly around the neck, yanking the serpent from its cage, and in this same instant, he flung the cage with his other hand, which crashed right in front of the spectators in the first pew.

In response, an old lady passed out in one of the middle pews, her torso slinking over the pew in front of her, but no one seemed to notice. The congregation became so loud at the sight of the freed snake that their voices and claps bounced off the walls at an inhuman, siren-like velocity. The preacher started dancing with the serpent, slinging it excitedly around, the poor animal's tail tracing figure eights in the air. It frantically tried coiling around his arm, wanting to stabilize its body, but failed every time due to the preacher's vigor. The pianist and guitarist's red faces poured with sweat as they exerted heavy force into each chord, but at this point, the noise of the congregation turned their instruments mute. The frightened snake continued to wriggle, smacking its ribs hard against the preacher's arm. After minutes of fighting, its neck shot out of the preacher's grasp. The preacher staggered forward, catching the snake midair before it could terrorize the congregation. He smiled in relief.

But the smile lasted no longer than a few seconds. The cottonmouth whipped around its head, sinking fangs into the preacher's wrist.

\* \* \* \* \*

The air whistled with the swing, but this sound came to me like an aftertaste. The crunch of scales and bones and vessels tearing. The thud of the earth. I jumped. Some blood oozed out, but not enough to make me cry. I started crying because the body flopped around. The tail smacked and coiled around Dad's work boots. What really startled me was the snake's head. Its dead mouth was a gaping smile.

"Stop crying, boy. What's dead is dead."

"But it's alive. It's moving!"

"No, it ain't," Dad said, hoisting the axe off the ground and snagging the snake's body by its tail, "nerves live on after the soul is gone. Well, that would be the case if it had a soul, anyway."

As he dragged the snake's carcass behind him toward the house, Dad's shoulders relaxed.

"Come on, boy. We caught dinner."

\* \* \* \* \*

The cottonmouth lashed its fangs into the preacher's wrist. The preacher's eyebrows flinched, but then he went back to singing, the serpent still lodged into his flesh. Dad surveyed the room. No one seemed to care. They were all still hooting and hollering hymns.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What the heavens?" my mother shouted as Dad dragged the dead beast across the living room carpet. My older brother Matthew's eyes beamed with curious intensity. Dad hoisted the neck of the corpse onto the kitchen sink.

“Mary, go get the butcher knife.”

Mom’s face was blank as she walked into the kitchen and unsheathed the knife from the rack above the stove.

“Hold the body to the sink cabinet, boy.”

My small hands gripped the snake’s width and pressed it to the double doors. Dad tugged the knife down the serpent’s length. The sound of scales ripping open reminded me of Mom’s paper shredder. He stopped right at my hands.

“Now hold the tail to the tile. Mary grab hold of the neck.”

Mom’s strong hands clenched the top of the headless mass. I moved my hands toward the rattle and clamped on. Dad kept cutting away, stopping at my hands, and chopped the rattle off next to my fingers. The blade crunched like pop rocks. The rattle felt soft in my hands.

While Mom held the tip of the snake’s body, Dad peeled away its scales. The inner skin was elastic as rubber. Finished skinning, Dad rolled the scales up into a ball and tossed it into the trash can. The snake’s red and blue muscle gleamed like the skin of a strawberry.

“Lay her out on the floor.”

While Mom held the head and I held the tail Dad dug the blade into the meat, cracking through bone. He was shaping slithers that could fit into the frying pan. Once finished, he hopped up, plopped the butcher knife into the sink, rummaged through the cabinet, and procured the steel skillet. He walked up to the stove and turned the near eye on high. He set the skillet on the eye and reached for the olive oil on the counter. He poured it on thick into the skillet. Then he plopped in the meat piece by piece, the kitchen fan unable to waft out the dank and musky odor of frying rattle snake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Years later, when I was in college and he was having chemo treatments, my father told me another story to do with snakes. Crumpled on the living room couch, chemicals dripping into his sternum, he recounted the childhood story which scarred him for life.

Dad was 7, walking through a mud and shit pen toward a collapsed sow. Her name was Bun-bun. She was the oldest with a brown splotch on her back. He thought she was sleeping, using a fallen tree branch as a pillow, but the branch flickered. Dad saw a head prying into the pig's bulbous neck, blood drying on the dirt. Dad dropped the slop bucket. Over a thousand pounds of pigs stampeded toward the spill but he barely noticed. He rushed back into the house for Pa to save the oldest sow. But Grandpa didn't save Bun-bun. Grandpa instead axed off the diamondback's head and flicked its flailing body over the fence.

Grandpa kneeled by the corpse.

"Shit! Get your brothers out here and help me move this thing. We're burning her."

Dad's knees wobbled at the idea of burning the pig he fed for 4 years.

"Why did none of the other pigs save her?"

Grandpa spat out his tobacco.

"Because she was 20 and pretty much dead anyway. Now stop making a fuss and get your brothers before I take away your dinner."

Dad turned back toward the house and opened the backdoor into darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Father immediately left the church after the preacher was bitten by the cottonmouth. He did not know what happened to the preacher after, since he never spoke to Emily again. This break off was the for the best, however, since it eventually led to Dad and me eating the snake that night while Matthew and Mom stared at us like we were crazy. We popped pieces bare-

handed into our mouths like jerky. Aside from the bones that I forgot to spit out, the meat tasted like burnt dollar store chicken breasts. Dad ziplocked the leftovers and threw them into the fridge. They lasted the entire weekend.

## The BB Gun

“Squeeze the trigger like a stress ball,” Father says,  
his hands aligning my shoulders straight.  
Hot jerky breath slips down my neck.  
He looks at the red dot sight  
aimed at the Mountain Dew can’s center whiteness.  
The can rests too comfortably on the 2 by 4  
sticking out the ashes of the backyard burn pile.  
“Are you going to wait ‘til hogs  
come to super?” he taunts. A little pissed off,  
I pull back hard on the curved plastic with my fingertip,  
and the BB strikes the poor tin bastard  
in its legs. It rattles to the ground.  
Father picks it up. He points to the low blow.  
“Remember this, the best way to miss is to still hit something.”

## **How to Ride a Bike [A Short-sighted Self-portrait]**

What gives the optometrist the right  
to tell me what I already know?

I can still see the rust on the back of Father's blue Schwinn bicycle  
better than the skid marks under my eyes.

I fell so much that summer afternoon  
my glasses became the brown mud flaps on Uncle Glen's 2000 Dodge Ram.

Still, Dad slid the spectacles into his breast pocket  
and I learned to ride without being able to see.

Then off he went,  
my father's tires sparking off our gravel driveway like flint and steel.

## **The Gambler**

Many a night when I woke up to use the restroom or to get a glass of water, I would find Father in the dark hallway rummaging through Mother's purse for stray dollar bills. Mother was quite aware of this behavior, so eventually she decided on these strategies to prevent Father from taking her hard-earned cash: taping 50-dollar bills inside her black, slip-on flats, stuffing 20-dollar bills beneath her pills in the CVS medicine bottles inside her cheetah print purse, and to act like her purse had tears in them, using black duct tape to cover up the inside zippers, where she stored most of her loose paper cash. Father needed this money to buy lottery tickets and scratch off cards from the BP station a few miles down the road. This addiction had so much sway over his life that his money pilfering habits didn't even stop when he predicted 5 numbers correctly on a lottery ticket, an occasion which caused the family to take a trip in his white van to the state's capital, Columbia. Since Father won earnings over \$50, it was required for all winners of such amounts to visit the South Carolina Education Lottery (SCEL) Office in downtown Columbia to prevent fraud, and since Mother did not trust him with such a gross amount of money (I believe this figure was around \$5,000), she forced the entire family to take the trip with Father since she also did not trust my brother Matthew and me to be home by ourselves without gruesomely bludgeoning the furniture or something of the sort.

The hour and a half car ride was one of the most silent, bone-chilling I have ever experienced. Mother and Father did not look at each other, did not speak to each other, did not even breathe in each others' general directions. The only sounds emitted from the front seats were the occasional monotonous directions from the GPS on the dashboard, Father clearing his throat with a chainsaw-like viciousness, or the sound of Mother turning a page in her dollar store

romance novel. Matthew and I, pressed down by this silence, decided in our fidgeting discomfort that it would be best to play Pokémon on our Gameboy Advances without saying a single word.

After the GPS recalculated over and over because Father could not find a parking space while making laps around downtown Columbia's hellish, almost too precise of a square grid layout, full of cars parked everywhere in each public lot imaginable, as if there were any public lots at all in Columbia's abysmal city planning, he eventually parked in the South Carolina State Museum's lot, which is approximately a 20-minute walk to the SCEL Office. On the bright side, our family was treated to the phenomenal South Carolinian early spring weather, so the heat was still bearable, but the silence as we left the ugly, rectangle of a museum, crossing the U.S. 21 with its plethora of lanes and raging drivers, walking past a generic Marriot hotel and cramped, almost identical brick buildings on either side of Lady Street, this journey of absolute familial silence, was unbearable. When we finally arrived at the nondescript, dirty beige office, its tin roof jutting out from under the second level of a water-stained, private parking garage, I practically yanked the glass door off its hinges, its SCEL Palmetto logo shaking fervently as I was the first to rush inside.

I was welcomed by the nastiest shag blue carpet I have ever seen, and my eyes met the young Black man's whose head shot up from behind the counter of bullet proof glass. I waved shyly to him and quickly found a plastic chair at the corner of the room next to a round table which housed a fairly large fake plant in a brown round pot. Matthew decided to sit on the other side of this plant, and we sort of performed a telepathic transmission, where we both agreed to sit back and let our parents handle their... business. Father wobbled in after us like a drunken peacock, slapping his winning ticket on the silver counter, while Mother tracked a foot behind him, her eyes glaring more bald spots into the back of his head. The clerk requested that Father

put the ticket in the tray in front of the glass, then after Father completed this task, the clerk scooped the tray up through a sliding compartment. Father and the clerk then shared some jovial pleasantries all of which I missed because I was fixated on Mother's right foot thumping against the wildly frayed carpet. Eventually, Father was buzzed behind the steel door next to the counter so he could get his picture taken in the back of the facility, a tacky image which would inevitably be displayed on the SCEL's website. Even many minutes after Father and the worker disappeared down the gray hallway, the door shutting fast and its lock snapping closed behind them, Mother still kept her arms folded and her vision straight on that poor, inanimate door, which I am pretty sure never felt so violated before in its entire inanimate existence. When Father emerged from the door, he held up his check for a whopping \$2,500 after taxes to the pale, fluorescent lights like it was Simba, and an almost dumb, crooked smile reached across his face. Mother sucked her teeth and dug her nails into her auburn scalp. Matthew and I locked eyes, and nodded to each other in unison for some strange reason, as if to say, "*Everything will be OK,*" or, "*At least we are in this deep shit together.*"

I wish I could say the atmosphere fizzled down on our journey back to the van, or the van ride home, but the only difference in the silence was Father's humming of old classic country songs during the ride back, all dealing with gambling such as, "The Gambler," by Kenny Rogers, "A Good Run of Bad Luck," by Clint Black, and "Ace in the Hole" by George Strait, tunes which putted Mother closer to the hole of ultimate fury, her page-turning growing to such an excessive level of force that I was worried she was going to rip the bark right out of her romance novel.

But Father's happy time soon came to an end when he parked the van in Peoples Federal Bank's lot back in Florence to cash the check. Father would soon have to place all of his

winnings except for a previously agreed upon \$200 into Mother's more responsible hands inside this intimidating building, which was designed like a concrete jail or fortress in the shape of a square obelisk, and his humming immediately abated as he parked the van in front of one of its concrete side walls.

At least when we silently passed through the automatic sliding doors, the inside of the bank felt more like a bank, with its cool air humming from the tiny vents in the shining white walls, its very tall mahogany counters polished so well I could see my frowning family's reflections, and the miniature lightbulb powered chandeliers dangled ever so gracefully from the vaulted ceiling. Also, there were only two well-suited gentlemen consulting the clerks at the counters, which amplified just how politely quiet the bank's internal environment was, and this quietness on any other day would have probably made me feel calm, but on this day the lack of stimuli did not help my mind escape from Father's hurried pacing to the counter, and Mother's almost violent steps right on his heels.

Matthew and I followed our parents like timid little ducklings all the way to the counter. I do not believe we held hands in a brotherly fashion to reassure each other that nothing exceptionally tense or potentially family breaking would ensue, but we probably should have because the interactions which occurred between Father and Mother were, in separate parts, both awkward and painful.

After Father mumbled his business to the cute, ponytailed clerk who gave him a pink smile, and after he slowly reached and grabbed the \$2,500 stack of 100-dollar bills off the granite countertop, Mother presented her flat palm right below his chin without moving away from the counter, so that the clerk could watch this husband submit to the absolute authority of his wife from only a few feet away.

Father's hands were shaking even though his face looked expressionlessly stone-cold. One by one he plopped the 100-dollar bills down into Mother's upturned hand, a triumphant smile burgeoning beneath her wild brown eyes. This occurred for about an entire five minutes, and for some reason, maybe because the bank was not busy that day, or maybe because Father's absolute melancholic and cyclical motions put her in a trance, the clerk just sat there with her cheery smile, and did not request that my parents leave her station. When the deed was done, and Father looked down at the measly \$200 in his left hand, his green eyes wrinkled up, and his thin lips puckered sourly. This was the only time in my life where I have ever seen Father almost cry.

## Etymology

Let me learn you somethin' 'bout how to talk  
country. Don't say nothin' without sayin'  
somethin' first. It ain't "Where are YOU?" but,  
"Where YOU be at?" You always got tobaccer  
in your mouth even when empty. You ride  
on a *howus*. You wash your hands in the *zinkg*.  
If you talk faster than a 5<sup>th</sup> grader  
reads, the Greyhound driver will ask you what  
the hell you just said. If you say *Goddamn*,  
you best be condemnin' somethin' to Hell.  
Some 'T's after vowels become 'D's. Waddar  
you doin'? Hand me a glass of wader.  
He waded at the doctor's a long time.  
Now don't get me started on the missin' ledders...

## **How to be Sisyphus as the only White Kid on the Schoolyard's Playground in the Early**

**2000s**

Make Mother buy baggy jeans  
since the high waters made Derek say,  
“Them jeans makes you a faggot.”

Stuff Skittle packets into your gay jeans' back pockets  
and hand them to the smaller kids so someone will acknowledge you.

Prepare to be picked last  
even in cops and robbers  
though you're small enough to squeeze through the slides and monkey bars  
without ever getting arrested.

Realize when pushed from behind  
that dirt does not taste bad,  
plus you just learned in Bible school  
humans are made from dust,  
so you're only kissing a relative.

Repeat this cycle every day until middle school,  
when you will be accepted into an advanced academic program,  
and baggy jeans and skittles will never win over  
the white kids who have everything.

## The Camping Trip

After a couple weeks of badgering Mother and Father that I wanted to experience the joys of camping at age 7, Mother finally made Father succumb through the use of her Southern charm and puppy dog eyes, to take me for a summer night out at Timrod Park. After an early 5 o'clock dinner, I assisted Father with inserting a plethora of camping supplies into the back of his highly pollinated white van, including: the poles and the sheets of the two-person tent with a jammed zipper my brother previously used for his rich, private school field trip up to the Greenville mountains, one rolled-up, black, adult-sized sleeping bag and one rolled-up, hand-me-down, Buzz Lightyear and Woody sleeping bag, Father's rusted bait and tackle box with assorted goodies inside, two extremely rigid fishing rods with lines still attached, one humongous LED lantern the height of Father's calf, an oversized duffel bag stuffed to the brim with: two sets of very cheap plastic binoculars purchased the previous day at Walmart, two unsealed cans of OFF! bug spray, one SPF 30 bottle of sunscreen, one roll of 2-ply toilet paper, an extra pair of Hanes briefs (*just in case*, Father said), two of Father's stainless steel coffee thermoses filled with tap water, a stale bag of Jack Link's Beef Jerky, two slender, and honestly underpowered flashlights with extra batteries, and a book called *Falling Up* by some children's poet named Shel Silverstein Mother bought at Books-A-Million that week thinking I would like it. After Mother gave Father a peck on the cheek and squeezed my narrow shoulders goodbye, chiding Father to, "Make sure our boy stays safe," Father double-cranked the van's dying engine, and we set off on our magnificent journey through the cramped roads of just-got-off-from-work-time Florence to Timrod Park.

There were only two cars in the park's narrow, 20-space parking lot, both a testament to the type of people who would visit a terribly underfunded nature park, as I would come to learn

later on. One was a 2001 Chevy Sedan dented like it was covered in pockmarks, with black tape over the passenger side window, and with the rear bumper and one taillight completely missing. The other automobile had the body of the Scooby Doo van, but was completely black with windows so tinted that I could not see inside. I was mesmerized by this complete obsidian vehicle when Father tapped my shoulder.

“Come on, boy, we have to find somewhere to pitch the tent.”

Father forced the key into the trunk and gave it a good jiggle.

“We’ll leave all this shit in here while we find a place. *Here.*”

Father handed me the stack of flimsy poles one by one, a few immediately slipping from my arms, which I had to pick from the chewing gum-infested parking lot. He then crinkled the red and orange sheets into his chest, clutching them like a football.

“Hey, boy, can you close the trunk?”

I fidgeted with the poles, debating whether I risk the jump for the trunk door or set them down on the disgusting ground or leave them leaning against the side of the van.

“Why are you scutterin’ like an epileptic chicken? You can jump can’t ya?”

Because of Father’s scold, I jumped, letting the poles go limp in my arms. I crashed the trunk door with so much force that the sound echoed off the surrounding, scattered adolescent loblolly pine trees, but when my feet hit the asphalt, the poles which fell from my hands spilled beneath the soles of my Nikes, and I slipped onto my ass.

“What the hell are you doing?” Father turned back around to ask, already at the concrete stairs which started the dirt trail. Before I could respond, his back was already to me, and his head started to sink below my vision as he descended toward the trail. I hurried and scrambled up

the clinking poles into my arms, but failed to notice the small crack forming across one of their centers.

I silently followed behind Father's profusely sweat-stained, dark blue polo shirt as we walked past the path to the gray bathroom shack up the hill, past a small flower garden whose stems browned in the summer heat, past a barren playground set of pale monkey bars and slides, across the creaky wooden bridge that overlooked a narrow brown stream, past a group of shouting adolescent boys who I could not get a good look at because of the sun's glare, past one of the gazebos with a few old benches huddled around inside, until we reached a line of trees at the back of the park, where Father decided to leave the trail and walk toward for many yards. I continued to follow him under the shade of hickory and oak trees, bobbing and weaving through various shrubs and poison ivy, my shoes sliding over the crunch of fallen leaves.

"We won't get caught here," Father said, spreading the tent flat across the ground.

After spreading it flat, Father walked away and sat crisscross in the bed of leaves.

"Well, you wanted to learn how to camp, so get to it."

I examined the poles in my arms, then looked back at the tent on the ground. The poles seemed too short to support the full structure of the tent. I noticed the long silver edges on some of the poles, realizing that they needed to fit together. After some finagling, I completed the extension of one pole, but saw the crack caused by my clumsiness on one of the sections for the would be second pole. I provided Father with a close-up viewing of this crack, which seemed to wrap almost all the way around this section's silver edge, but he waved his hand to dismiss my unfounded worries over such a trivial detail. Completing this worrisome pole, I found the little holes in the tent, and carefully slid both poles through the tent's sleeves.

Then the tent looked like a squished arachnid's four-legged carcass. I must have stared blankly at this limp mass for about 5 minutes before Father said:

“The pins on the corners. You got to stick them through the poles.”

There were rings with silver appendages at every corner of the tent, but I thought they served no purpose other than aesthetic pleasure similar to the carabiners some kids brought to school. But upon Father's correct assertion, I found that the first pin inserted quite easily into its pole, and upon further inspection, after accidentally tugging on the second pole because I lost my balance while fitting its pin inside, I also found that these poles gave the tent shape. I inserted each pin and tugged back on the tent's exoskeleton, watching a pyramid erect before me.

Father grunted, striding over to the tent, removing small iron pegs from his breast pocket and shoving them through the circles at every corner of the tent, straight through the leaves and into the hard dirt. Then he swiftly tied the poles together at the tent's apex, and started walking back toward the direction of the open park.

“Are we done, Dad?” I asked, trailing behind him.

“Sure,” his sweat-stained polo responded back to me, “the weather should be good all night so we don't need the rain cover or to peg it out.”

“Peg it out?”

At the edge of the tree line, something caught my eye through the beams of shade. It looked like some sort of extremely moist and crumpled see-through plastic. I walked toward it, seeing that the object had a texture more like that of rubber. There seemed to be some flesh-colored ring at the top of this unknown litter. I bent down, picking it up by this ring, lifting it toward the light cracking through the canopy of trees. The entire artifact slunk down with a wet-

slapping sound, unraveling into a jittery cylindrical object with some small white liquid substance in its rounded base.

“Hey Dad, what’s this?” I called, my fingers still pinching the uncomfortably flimsy top ring.

Father about-faced, immediately grimacing in response to what I picked up off the leaves. The expression on Father’s face was nothing like I have ever seen before. Even though his thin lips perched in disgust, his green eyes were crinkled in almost childlike laughter. He inhaled deeply, holding his hand over his mouth, then exhaled, moving his hand to rub back the thin hair on his balding head. What he said next was suspiciously calm.

“You should put that down and go wash your hands. Another man’s penis has been in that.”

I instantly dropped the artifact, examining my soiled pointer finger and thumb.

“Is that some sort of weird underwear?” I asked Father, who had already turned away from the scene, taking his first step back onto the park trail.

“Something like that. Go wash your hands. I can carry the rods and tackle box back down myself.”

I walked up the hill toward the sagging square restroom shack, its pillars and roof lines bent from the weight of age and fallen debris like the sticks and leaves scattered all across its roof and drains. The brick restroom’s men’s door was one of those heavy, chipped and frayed wooden doors that can be found in the shoddy rest areas which line across the South’s highways and interstates. A flickering purple fluorescent bulb on the peeling ceiling tiles lit what was left of a door handle so loose, I was surprised it didn’t fall out when I pulled the door open with all the weight I could muster. Exiting the dusty concrete patio, I stepped onto the sticky bathroom

tile, welcomed by that unattended-for-days-on-end public restroom smell. On the wall there was one low to the ground yellow porcelain urinal open for the world to see, its pipes caked brown from rust. Behind the urinal was a gray stall, tattooed with artwork and calligraphy from previous visitors, including: a hairy cock and balls in black marker, an all too round depiction of female breasts etched in by mechanical pencil, the holy cross spray-painted gold with 3-dimensional shading, a plethora of phone numbers in different mediums requesting sexual favors, many an uncouth word never stranded into coherent sentences, a rainbow of chewing gum splatters, and of course my favorite inscription written almost across the entirety of the stall's wall in green sharpie: *God can suck my fucking balls!*

At least the lighting in the room was somewhat pleasant. Over the singular sink's mirror there was a calm, almost blue rectangular light like the one on Mother's portable make-up mirror. This light, mixed in with the warm yellow sunshine leaking through the open window near the top of the ceiling, made the room feel almost like a distant place while I was standing inside of it, as if I was watching myself swim behind the green of a fish tank.

I had a hard time unsticking the faucet knob, and watched for a moment as the water begrudgingly trickled down the brown circle of the drain. I looked at the fragmented puzzle pieces of skin twisting in the shatters of the broken mirror, watching the tufts of seemingly someone else's dark brown hair rise up and down across the cracks like waves. I nudged the soap dispenser, but of course there was nothing in it. The old metal paper towel dispenser also cranked out nothing. As I shook my soggy hands, I then noticed the gnats buzzing around my forehead, and the little pink marks on my tan forearms started to itch.

Outside, it was impossible to resist the urge of scratching my forearms. Soon red streaks formed across my arms as I hobbled down the decline and sat next to father near the bank of the

narrow brown stream. His line was already set in the center of the stream, and its silver reflected the sun while it swayed along with the weak currents. I think he heard the scratching before he saw the marks. I was too preoccupied with the squirming sensation on my skin to look up at him as he said:

“Good God, son. If you needed the bug spray that bad, just say something.”

I heard Father jog up the incline, sliding and occasionally catching himself on the soft grass. Before I knew it, he was already behind me, lifting me up by my shoulders and maneuvering my arms and legs however he wanted. The hiss of the cold chemicals hit my skin with more satisfaction than bacon sizzling on the frying pan for Sunday breakfast.

“Cover your nose and eyes.”

I pinched my nose and closed my eyes while Father peppered my whole head with spray. My hair dampened with its heaviness.

“Alright, you’re good now.”

I opened my eyes and breathed in the gnarly sanitized smell. I gagged and coughed for a minute, spitting out a little lob of mucus before growing accustomed to the stench, all the while Father peppered his on body in the spray.

“You need this too?” Father asked, producing the bottle of sunscreen from the back pocket of his khaki shorts. I shook my head.

“Of course, you don’t. I don’t know why Mary made me bring this. We are Bryant men. We don’t burn in no sun.”

Father slid the bottle back into his back pocket and squatted down where he left his rod on its side. I saw that he had already attached the fiery feathery hook to the end of my line, and I cast the line a few feet from his.

As the sun beat down on my greasy head, the sound of the juvenile boys came back to me from the shady distance. With the sun then barely hanging over the trees, I was able to see the group more clearly. They were typical lower middle class high school kids, with Bieber bowl cuts, V-neck T-shirts, and tight highwater blue jeans throwing a dark red football across the air. There were five of them. Someone would throw the football with the highest arc possible into the air from many yards away, then the other four boys would compete to catch the ball that usually warbled uncontrollably. Once one of these boys made the catch, they became the new quarterback and rotated their position out as the receiver to the kid who was unable to throw a slippery ball good enough. If none of the receivers made the catch because the quarterback threw a nasty ball with a ton of tilt and torque, or because the boys crashed into each other with such force that a catch would be impossible, the quarterback kept his position until someone caught the pigskin. Needless to say, the sound of their bodies smacking into each other and into the hard earth while they all shouted unfiltered unpleasantries as a dirty football hissed through the dusk was a tremendously uninviting sight and auditory experience juxtaposed to the quiet laps of the stream.

Father then heaved out a big sigh, preparing for his usual contemplative and meditative philosophical ramblings that only occurred while fishing.

“Boy, do you know why I brought you to the PeeDee to fish sometimes on my days off?”

I shook my head. Father’s solemn eyes stayed locked on the brown stream.

“It is because us Bryants are cursed to be good at everything. But look at where all that talent got me, my brothers, and sisters. We don’t have to shit in outhouses, and snakes no longer creep up through the floorboards, but with all that talent, we could’ve gone much father... Do you know why that is, son?”

Again, I shook my head. But it seemed like Father paid me no attention. It looked as if he focused his words so that they would sink into the bottom of the stream.

“It’s because we give up too soon. Once something gets hard, we just move on to something else. What I’m telling you, boy, is that if you think you got a true passion, hold onto it for as long as you can. I think your camping phase – is just that – a phase. But once you think you found something, please be patient with it. You can turn out so much better than me.”

The sun was no longer in sight, but its light seeped through the trees. I realized that the group of juvenile boys must have had left some time ago. Grasshoppers started their little songs.

“Dad, how come we haven’t caught anything?”

He pointed to the small pile of litter – balled up sheets of paper, a couple of cans, and one plastic water bottle across from us – and said quite frankly:

“There’s too much litter for fish. Hell, there is probably more plastic here than water. But we still got to fish on my days off. It’s about the process, not the haul.”

Father and I made the silent trip back to the van as some of the first stars started to appear. He tossed the fishing rods nonchalantly into the back of the trunk, grabbed the bait and tackle box from my hands, and placed it gently beside the black duffel bag. He then jerked the duffel bag from the trunk, setting it on the bumper, unzipping the bag, and extracted the two flashlights after some rummaging. He flicked one on and handed it to me, while holding the other between his teeth as he closed the bag and wiggled it onto his shoulder. Then he reached deep inside the van and dragged out the large lantern. His voice, obscurely muffled by the plastic inside his mouth asked:

“Can you get the trunk?”

The park was unexpectedly loud during our journey back to the tent. Frogs, grasshoppers, and the occasional owl blended into a beautiful cacophony more pleasant than the artificial sound machine at my bedside back home. Our small beams of light zigzagged across the path until we reached the woods dense with darkness. How Father navigated the undergrowth to take us back to the tent is still a mystery. His sense of direction was the greatest I have ever known. There were some clues, some tiny landmarks he grunted in recognition at, but at his breakneck pace it was almost inhuman how he deciphered these natural signposts in the complete darkness. And, for some reason, Father felt completely comfortable letting the unlit lantern hang limply at his side.

When we finally reached the tent, Father let out an intense *Whew* before hassling open the jammed door and dropping the duffel bag and lantern onto the tent floor. He then knelt on all fours onto the loud leaves, his top half disappearing into the tent, where a faint circle of light shown outside from his flashlight. Then a click of the lantern, and his shadow inside the tent was revealed, and a circle a few feet long pulsed with light across the bottom of the tree trunks, and every tint of brown on every grounded leaf was completely visible. Father crawled back out and ushered me inside.

There is nothing quite like a child experiencing the small grotto of a tent for the first time. The godly sheen of light at its center, the vinyl sounds of flesh against nylon scrambling across the floor to go deeper, deeper into the orange walls which are compact, yet open, airy, and free, while seeing how these walls excitedly shiver from every minute motion, also noticing the faint mark of distant shadows from the trees and bushes teasing the thin fabric like the images of cave paintings lost to time.

As I sat crisscross in this space, and my eyes traveled over the building's curves and edges, Father popped his head through the door.

“Well, I'm going to get the sleeping bags. You sit tight in here.”

He fought with the door again, zipping it back up in a tug of war he ultimately won. I heard his feet crunch against the leaves and slowly fade away. For some indescribable reason, even though I was technically abandoned alone in the woods, I was not afraid.

Father returned with the rolled-up sleeping bags, handing me the *Toy Story* bag to unfurl while he laid his out on the opposite side of the lantern. He then rummaged inside the duffel bag, handing me a set of the very cheap binoculars, and then poked his head out along with his own pair outside the tent door. I followed suit, lying flat on my belly, and peered out the circle of light into the mixture of unrecognizable shapes of sticks, trunks, and undergrowth in the small distance of the woods that I could actually see.

“What are we looking for?” I asked.

“Anything that moves.”

I tried looking through the binoculars, but the black lenses caused our little circle of light to flare up, whereas the darkness of the surrounding woods turned obsidian black.

“Damn things.” Father said, chucking them behind him.

I crawled back into the tent, picked up Father's pair which landed snugly at the head of his sleeping bag, and stacked them both inside the duffel bag beside the unused sunscreen. I wiggled back out to view the surrounding darkness with Father.

In summary, nothing happened. I learned to quell my excitement whenever I heard the occasional snapping twig or rustling of leaves that sometimes shot through the sounds of crickets and silence. Father even started to nod off to sleep, his nose brushing against the crinkling leaves

before his head jolted back up to stare intently into the black woods, as if he knew some magical creature would waltz across his vision at any moment. Then, when Father's head tilted back toward the ground, a shadow shuffled in the distance. I reached out, shaking Father's ribs with my hand. He shook his head and wiped saliva from his lower lip, directing his eyes to where I pointed. There was a long square patch of white hovering between the trees. I heard the creature's light rustling as it approached us closer, and saw a pair of yellow-green orbs emerge from behind a dark brown tree trunk. I could not make out the tip of its snout, but saw its ovular ears, its long light brown, almost tanned-flesh colored neck, and its spindly white forelegs. At first, I wondered if the animal had two sets of ears, but after seeing its real ears twitch, I realized that the spindly obelisks bridging out from the middle of its head were antlers. A white-tailed buck stumbled upon us, and stared at us with his pair of yellow-green orbs as intently as we stared at him.

I do not know if this moment lasted only a few seconds, or for an entire hour, but I do know that after this phantasm slinked silently back out of vision, my stomach started to rumble and lurch in multitudinous directions.

"Dad, I have to use the restroom." I said, our heads still a few inches off the ground.

"Well, you know how to pee standing up don't you? Just hop out and go anywhere you want."

"But I don't have to pee."

Father's head quickly disappeared back into the tent while I pushed the door aside and stepped into the woods. A hand shot out from the tent with the roll of toilet paper and his tired green eyes squinted up at me.

“You could always try to see if the restroom isn’t locked. But if it is, or if you do not want to take that long of a journey, you have this whole here land to your disposal. Happy squatting.”

Father settled back into the tent and zipped the snagging door shut. But then immediately unzipped a small hole and pushed a flashlight through.

“Here, you might want this to see what you’re doing.”

With the toilet paper in one hand and the flashlight in the other, I stood there for a long while, experiencing a raging internal debate of whether I should squat down in the woods full of invisible insects like spiders or other microscopic critters that might deal damage to my posterior, or walk out of the woods to a restroom which may or may not be locked, then having to risk losing my way in the woods on the way back and wander around for the entire night trying to find the tent. For some reason, I decided that the latter was the safer option.

The flashlight, even with its faint light, proved pivotal for me to take mental notes of the landmarks to follow back to the tent: here is a large mass of poison ivy, here is a shrub with weird pointy leaves, here are thick roots sprouting out the earth like a spider web, here is a trunk with a hole in the shape of a belly button. Upon exiting the line of trees, I learned that there were only a few wispy clouds in the sky, and overall, the stars looked crisp and beautiful, which helped to take my mind off the discomfort in my abdomen. I walked past the gazebo and its huddled benches, past the tuft of grass and leaves where the shouting adolescent boys had tossed around the pigskin, across the creaky wooden bridge that overlooked the narrow stream devoid of fish, past the barren playground set of pale monkey bars and slides, and past the small – with a few hints of dying – flower garden, with the toilet paper pressed against my rolling stomach, and my eyes toward heaven, pleading that these stars would detract me from some of the pain.

The bathroom shack was completely dark. I heard voices murmur from the opposite side, which immediately stopped once I tried to turn the knob, but it wasn't working. I tried it again and again, but no matter how fervently I jerked the knob, the door would not unstick. I walked around the building to the women's side of the restroom where the voices came from and shined my flashlight on the chest of a tall, middle-aged Black man with a graying beard and soft eyes. He wore a black hoodie and black pants, even though it had to have been a little over room temperature outside. Behind him stood a bald white man with arm sleeve tattoos wearing a tank top and Nike shorts.

“Do either of you have the key to the restroom?”

The black man shook his head and leaned down to me.

“No, but I could pick the lock if you really have to go. An old lock like that, I could get it done in 5 minutes.”

“But that's illegal.”

The Black man chuckled, showcasing his long mouth and perfect white teeth.

“It's illegal to be here after 7 when the park's closed down. Are your parents here with you?”

“Yeah, I'm here with my dad.”

“Good, then go back to your daddy and have him drive you home.”

I walked away and the two strange men resumed their conversation at the entrance of the women's bathroom. I followed the trail and navigated the woods back to the tent using the landmarks I made a mental note of earlier, and squatted down a few feet away from the tent, covering up what I did with a pile of leaves. It turned out that doing my business outside was not as scary as I thought it would be.

When I crawled back into the tent, Father was already asleep in his bag. I opened the duffel and guzzled down the all the water from one of the steel thermoses. After a long day of new experiences, I was exhausted and forgot that Mother packed a book for me to read. I flicked the lantern off, nuzzled into my sleeping bag, felt its warmth engulf me, then fell asleep.

## Hephaestus Visits South Carolina

Show me a Carolina steel stronger  
than the chords forged by Greenville's textile mills,  
or tides stronger than Charleston's skyline,  
which could suck all the marshland salt into bowls  
Catawba smelted by the sun's red clay.  
If not, have Darlington land its Raceway  
onto my front porch railing, which slides deep  
liquor from the Enoree River through  
the headlights of Spartanburg's BMW  
plant. Watch how alligators dive headlong  
from the Waccamaw clouds into Myrtle  
Beach's white sands. Do not forget this  
is the South. There are bloodstains hiding in  
every bag of gold rice, in the slumber of cricket calls.

## Portrait of a Plum Tree Growing out of Grandad's Guttled Ford

Is there really anything to see in the mirror,  
but an image posted by Grandma's empty bed  
of my little hands saluting with a cowboy hat  
and pointing to the camera with a cap pistol?

I wish to regain  
my will to run to the PeeDee River  
in just swim trunks again  
but I am now aware of my white skin,  
how the hairs on my chest  
are remnants of the Jack Daniel's  
Clifford Hayes dropped through the cracked floor.

But Grandad never hit  
their daughters again  
after Grandma  
took his leather belt straight off his Carhartt trousers  
and turned him redder than his Ford F100.

A wild plum tree  
sprouted beneath Grandad's metal carcass,  
and when Grandma  
called in the scrappers 18 years ago  
and they wrapped a metal chain around the engine hood,  
she looked at the older man's denim hat and his soot-blackened face  
and said that she'd give double the pay,  
"If y'all run over Clifford's soul."

How many years  
has Jack Daniel's flooded Grandma's picture frames?  
And how have my feet  
not slipped through their abandoned swamp shack's floor?  
Its beams  
have been swallowed by the woods at the PeeDee river,  
but somehow, I can pick a plum from the tree in Grandma's backyard  
without suffocating  
completely.

Grandad died 23 years after slaughtering  
enough pigs to fill his mason jars of savings on the kitchen counter.  
With this money, he bought a mobile home  
only a mile away from Shiloh United Methodist Church.

This year I turn 24,

and the only trace left of Clifford Hayes  
is the backyard plum tree the scrappers weren't able to run over.

It is only fitting  
that the last taste of an alcoholic is so sweet in my mouth.

He died too young,  
but the plums are still so sweet.

Oh, so sweet.

## A Gift from Dad

My head feels less heavy  
than when I was 12 years old.

At that age, I remember the smell of Mane n' Tail every morning  
as Father washed his few strands of hair over the bathroom sink.

The blow dryer exhaled  
and he whistled, "Green Acres is the place to be..."

In the shower, my confidence is sucked down the drain  
along with the curling tufts of stray black hair  
which increasingly populate the yellow bathtub floor.

Thanks, Dad.

Thank you for the day I hit 20  
and scratched my scalp to find three rings of hair wrapped around my fingers.

Thank you for showing me how to comb what strands I have left diasporadically,  
so that my dome has the most surface area covered,  
so I don't have to worry about tan lines forming on the crown of my head.

But dammit.

What am I complaining for?  
If Dad could sing a whistle  
of perfection  
at his bald reflection,  
then so can I.

## The Football Game

It all started when one of Father's coworkers at IGA got dumped but had already purchased two tickets for the Cardinals vs. Panthers game in Charlotte. Since Father was such a popular and charismatic guy at his workplace, and since it was probable that Father previously mentioned during breakroom conversations that the Panthers were my favorite team, the coworker gifted him the two tickets instead of refunding them. My 13-year-old self bristled with excitement, for this would be my first time attending any communal event in a professionally large stadium. Mother waved Father and me off that chilly October Sunday morning, telling us not to have too much fun. I hopped in the passenger's side of Father's new beige van (a relatively fresh experience for me as this was the year I reached 4'10" and Mother begrudgingly allowed me to sit at the front of vehicles), and Father and I made the two and a half hour ride to Charlotte without any rest stops.

Charlotte was, and still is, a fascinatingly confusing place of diversly crammed lanes and mysterious road geography, an amazing and beautiful maze for automobiles, where passengers are privy to the sights of geometric towers sprawling toward the sun like their own Babels. What intrigued me the most about entering Charlotte was passing by a Jack in the Box, whose familiar squat red structure seemed out of place in the zigging and zagging buildings peppered along Charlotte's rapid asphalt rivers.

What was more exceptional than this Jack in the Box, however, were the multiple views of the Bank of America Stadium I garnered from Father circling this grandiose facility while cursing up a storm, since finding any sort of parking proved to be an abysmal endeavor. The building was a fortress – no – a castle of square blocks of concrete and steel linked together like chainmail, with densely populated blue windows hiding in between strong modern rectangular

colonnades connecting the jutting sections of the facility which flowed inward and outward like an expansive concrete sea. The stadium's image had a haunting presence in my mind, setting its mortar down in my brain to stay permanently while Father drove out a few miles away from the main traffic, and we eventually parked in the lot of an undisclosed hotdog shack that had a sign printed using Microsoft Word taped to its one glass door which read, "Closed for the Panther's Game. GO PANTHERS!!!" with the team's black and blue logo of a roaring panther underneath this note.

After zipping up my jacket and exiting the vehicle, I witnessed something similar to a mass exodus. Waves of blue and black jerseyed bodies emerged from the parallel parked cars stuffed almost on top of each other, and from the small cracks between buildings, all of these strangers making a solemn pilgrimage toward the curvaceous structure which seemed to almost shine from miles away. After Father parked his van, no cars drove down this road, and it instead became a swelling body of people wearing two main colors, with diverse names and numbers on their backs: Williams 34, Kasay 4, Smith 89, Delhomme 17, Peppers 90, Gross 69, and then the lost heroes of Fields 58, and Smart 32 among others.

I do not remember exactly the few miles walk from the van to the stadium, how Father held me by the back of my neck to make sure my small frame would not slip away into the waves of blue and black bodies, the smell of other men's cologne and Bud Light breath, how all of our bodies spilled over the roads and sidewalks, how our shoulders scraped into the sides of buildings as we pushed each other forward through the sounds of our footsteps, how we grew wider than every pedestrian crossing, how the annoyed glare of office workers in their sedans latched onto us as we continued to jaywalk across the streets like bloodstreams that could not be stopped until we reached the heart of the stadium. I cannot recall any of this. I cannot even

remember the names of the streets we took, or of buildings that held my fancy because all I could think about was the stadium, its massiveness, imagining its many illustrious inside corridors and its expansive green field. What I do know for certain is that at the beginning of the walk I was chilled by the autumn sun, but by the end of the walk, when we reached a ticket line which sprawled out to the edge of the sidewalk, I was sweating in my black cotton jacket.

But thankfully, since our tickets were preordered, we passed by these stagnant lines of sweaty men, all waiting for their turn to interact with the young women in the ludicrously tiny booths spaced a few feet from each other, and arrived at the open security gates with our tickets already in hand. A tan Latina woman, sporting a Panther's cap, wearing navy blue under a yellow vest plastered with the word SECURITY, scanned our tickets with a little black device and checked their authentication with the tablet she held at her hip. After waving us through, we passed by the open, curvaceous, heavy metal doors that seemed to weigh more than one human could manage, toward the gaping entranceway. Here, signs were everywhere, on the ceiling, on the side of walls, even on the floors, all disclosing with pointing arrows and giant bold font the directions to the different levels of the stadium. There were multiple rampways sprouting off in different directions, and the seemingly impossible wrap around nature of the architecture made my head spin, but thankfully Father pushed me forward to the ramp which eventually led to our seats in the nosebleeds.

Surprisingly, there seemed to be less foot traffic inside of the building than outside in the city, probably due to the ingenious design of the stadium and how the passages snaked around each other in ways I am still unable to comprehend. There were no stairs that I can recall, but only these hallways which slowly inclined and that were at least four times the width of a double wide trailer. I saw the energetic city's traffic and packed buildings, and the spider web of people

pilgriming to this building, all growing incrementally smaller with every step I took. I was amazed by the height of these hallways, how my father could have jumped up and not have even touched the ceiling. It was also in this space, where the murmurings of friends and families dressed in their jerseys, hats, face paint, and custom-made necklaces echoed faintly off the concrete walls, that I felt out of place. My black cotton jacket and my blue jeans did not seem adequate enough to experience the magic that these half-buzzed, cat-grinning faces were obviously controlled by. I too, desired to be a part of this magic.

Halfway up the climb to our seats, I saw a stand with black and blue Panther caps lined up at the front of the table, their \$20 price tags masking taped onto the silver tabletop. Among this table were other piles of knickknacks like thermoses, armbands, and magnets, all of their price tags also masking taped in front of each item pile. Beside this table was a hanging rack of various jerseys, A cardstock sign attached by a thread to the center clothes hanger read, "Jerseys \$75.00". I turned around to Father, who still had his hand at the back of my neck, and pointed to the stand.

"Can you get me a Panther's cap?"

Father nodded. Normally, he would not make such a sentimental purchase, but since Mother provided him with a 50-dollar bill at that morning's breakfast for the trip's food and gas, he made an exception.

"Blue or black?" asked the old woman, her gray hair curling down her shoulders.

"Black," I said.

She stood up from her stool and picked up a black hat from its stack, handing me the curved, sturdy bill with both of her liver spotted hands. While Father paid her and she produced change from the metal box under the table, I adjusted the cap's size and wiggled it onto my head.

For the rest of the journey to our seats, I strutted with my head held high, knowing that I too was a part of this great pack of Panthers, and was no longer an unbranded entity unrecognizable to my fellow felines.

Father kept pushing me forward until we reached the round entranceway to our nosebleed seats, where he then directed me to place my hands on the steps' steel railings which would take us even higher. I did not yet have a good chance to observe the stadium surrounding me, nor did I view the field below while we climbed up the steps and passed a few spectators sitting in their bright blue seats when we walked through the tight aisleway. But when we finally sat down in our plastic chairs, the air felt crisper and cooler, though the sun's beams felt warmer across my face. All around me was a behemoth of a blue ring being filled up by the swarms of blue and black bodies, and to my right, a massive flat screen on top of the stadium's wall with the Bank of America logo protruding out the arching screen's top showcased different images of the field alongside the name of the current generic pop song being played through the speakers. Below me, the statues of giant men warming up on the field were reduced to the size of thumbtacks, and the gargantuan yard markers and the blue letters of *C A R O L I N A* sprawling across the endzone looked to be the size of my shoes. The only objects which seemed impressive in terms of size were the goalposts, their slender yellow arms reaching straight up, higher than a quarter of the stadium's total height, almost miniature skyscrapers compared to the tables stock full of orange Gatorade cannisters in the middle of both side's benches.

I do not specifically remember much about the game which ensued. I do know that the coin toss favored the Cardinals, but for some reason they decided to defer, that later on Smith caught the ball stepping on the white out of bounds line, that the referees still ruled the play as a catch even after the replay, and the entire stadium cheered at the announcement, and eventually I

did too after the first seconds of conscious panging subsided. I recall how my mind flittered between the overhead view and the close up, angled shots presented on the immense, almost disembodied flat screen to my distant right, and how I tried to imagine myself among the clacking helmets on the field by piecing these two fragmented dimensions together, smelling the fresh turf and dirt through my tingling nostrils, seeing every fiber on those grass-stained, silky-black jerseys, and hearing the chatter and chuckles of the players on the bench up close, their calming sweat-stained towels wrapped around their heads and necks, juxtaposed with the furious screeching of Coach Fox as his headset rattled around his ears.

I do remember the football throwing competition during halftime, how a pretty blonde woman on the field wearing a black corduroy jacket announced the yardage of local middle and high school students (all who wore their favorite Panther's players jerseys), each lobbing the ball as hard as they could through the air, and how jealous I was that people my same age could interact with such a pretty blonde woman and become instantly famous for absolutely no reason whatsoever.

I remember the second halftime spectacle involving a celebrity look alike game, where the large flat screen zoomed in on satisfied customers scattered across the stands who resembled: a middle-aged, darker-skinned version of Beyonce, a skinnier, balding John Goodman with an excessive amount of face wrinkles, a sunburnt, younger Sean Connery with a light scar across his forehead, and an exact carbon copy of Eddie Murphy.

I remember the rumblings of class hatred I felt rise from the pit of my stomach, but for which I could not name nor truly understand at this point in my life, whenever the big screen zoomed in on the older white men in their striped shirts and ties as they cackled behind the wide glass of the luxury suites.

I also remember the annoying hot dog, pretzel, popcorn, and soft drink vendors strutting up and down the stairs, yelling their wares in their funny little caps, their trays tied around their podgy necks and protruding underneath their protruding abdomens, and how skillfully they did not trip or fall, nor did their display lean or tilt through their motions but stayed perfectly pristine when the men bent over for cash or tossed a bag of pretzels over an aisle of seats.

I also remember the stench of spilt beer all around me, the noisy conversations of the neighboring customers layered in thick Southern accents, but also the pleasure that raced through my body whenever the stadium shook from the blue and black bodies hoisting themselves out their seats, throwing their arms and jubilant cries toward heaven, and how my body felt like a small streak of foam helping to carry this wave forward across the sea.

I do not remember the end of the game, even though I should have felt at least somewhat satisfied since the Panthers won, nor do I remember our expedition out of the stadium back to the van. I think by the end of the game, my senses were overloaded from the elevation, the loud speakers which played various tunes sporadically, the shouting and booing crowd, the feet stomping against the concrete floor for certain required chants, the smells of sweat and alcohol, the images flashing across the big screen and the voices of referees and announcers buzzing like electric bug traps through the stadium, and though I desperately craved a morsel to eat, and though my bladder was fuller than the jam packed stadium that day, I passed by the multitude of concessions and restrooms without a word on the way back to the van, only speaking of my discomfort to father when I firmly fastened the seatbelt into its lock.

“Well, I don’t blame you. There was a lot of people tryin’ to leave. Are you fine with Jack in the Box?”

When I opened the restaurant's door, I was met with the familiarity of a rundown, fast-food chain. The smell of cheap grease was reassuring, and the dull fluorescent lights and uneven ceiling tiles assuaged my senses. There were crumbs and crumpled napkins scattered across some of the thin, sticky tables, and when my soles hit the tiles toward the bathroom hallway, they were met with the squishing sound derived from a floor mopped with dirty water, the yellow wet floor sign and its slipping man was such a yellow pillar of pleasantries. The creak of the heavy red bathroom door, and the jarringly bright bathroom lights hurt my eyes in the kindest way. And, after I did my business, I locked myself in the shadows of a bathroom stall for quite some time, letting its quietness take over me.

In this silence, I realized that my quality time with Father did not go as planned. There was too much noise and too many people for me to have had an enjoyable experience. I would have preferred Father screaming at the television back home. I missed the comforts of mundanity.

### **Lilting Heart in a Flo-town Love Song**

Your tan legs leaning cotton stalks along asphalt highways  
do nothing for me because I see them all too often.

Your blue eyes like moonshine hiding in a maple's alcove  
are pretty, but most times I wish they'd soften.

Your black hair rippling like Forest Lake's boat lights  
would smell nice if we lived in a coffin.

Your B-47 waistline lodged in Mars Bluff  
destroys me with vigorous throttlin'.

## Antisocial Self-portrait with Dog and Blue Jay

I wish I could skim the lines of my body  
like the soft alcove in my pet Lab's neck  
when I grab him before he chases after a bird.

Though I don't think I can like anyone more than my stupid dog,  
my roommate tries to make me a social bird.

They flutter around every new back porch, every new grill or bonfire  
and toss another empty beer can on another foldable table.

Faces come and go,  
and in Mother's words, "I fake my kindness."

She taught me this lesson after I refused to wattle like a duck  
for the "Do Re Mi" dance Ms. Lily, my piano teacher  
tried to force upon me.

Something about my dog's big black ears  
remind me of her hips rocking that antique floor,  
an unknown euphoria I once also experienced  
when a blue jay hit my kitchen window during a lightning storm,  
and I danced "Do Re Mi" after I could not find its corpse the next morning.

## The Seasonal Tadpole Stream

Father's cracked fingernail worn by sawdust  
traced the black stars past a bellflower's hanging neck.

His heavy arm wrapped around my shoulder,  
he spoke the truth of age.

"That one's two weeks old. See there? That one's seven weeks."

If I could have sat forever in the stench of bellflowers, squirrel droppings, and Father's sweat  
then would I still feel safe?

My college's brick buildings are obtuse in the plain sky, and my teenage students  
have dark, wrinkled eyes.

My apartment is too small, and I am tired  
of listening to 18-wheelers barreling down the highway every night.

When Father died, he did not stop breathing  
until he heard my footsteps in the hospital hallway.

He made sure my arms would wrap around Mother at bedside,  
but that I would not see him when he swims past the bellflower.

## My Gay Farm

The real reason why my family got two goats is up to interpretation. The story changes depending on who you ask, but the facts remain the same. Dad had a coworker from IGA who owned two goats. The coworker was moving from Marion, a small town near the city of Florence, South Carolina where I grew up, to another town across the state. Due to lethargy, a lack of supplies, or environmental hazards pertaining to his new home, the coworker could not bring the two goats with him. So somehow, we picked them up.

My black goat Fido liked the smell and taste of pine. I used to go out to my dirt lane and break the limbs off pine trees. He would suck up pine with a *wutwutwutwut*. My white goat Billy Bob never ate pine. Instead, he would always take big chunks out of the 5-foot-high wooden shed Dad and I erected for the horned mammals.

My two goats were stupid. Think about all the brain damage NFL players get even while wearing helmets. Now think about two territorial goats cramped in a small pen with nothing else to do but tackle each other. They slammed the full weights of their bodies through their heads so much that I think Fido forgot how to bleat. He never forgot how to eat, though. He was as round as an eight ball. Sometimes when I would enter the pen with his pine branch, he would run up to me, curled horns pointed forward, and aim straight for my balls. Usually, I would catch the tip of his horn in my free hand and hand feed him the pine branch. Sometimes I would miss, and the tip of his horn would barrage my testicles. I would groan in pain, but I would never cuss at him. He didn't know any better.

Billy Bob was the smarter of the two. Sometimes he would amuse Fido, but when he didn't feel like interacting with the dumber goat, he would hop up on the 5-foot-high shed and just lie there. Then he would watch Fido as he angrily pranced around the shed.

The first time I learned about homosexuality was from my two goats. Now please don't correlate my goats' stupidity to their homosexuality. Goats are like people. There are smart ones and there are stupid ones. I just happened to have two stupid goats who were incidentally homosexual.

Anyway, I was never taught about homosexuality in my southern schools, and my parents never mentioned it. Sometimes I saw Fido on top of Billy Bob, but I just thought Fido wanted to be propped up because he was so fat. I saw his belly pushed out over Billy Bob's back with his much too skinny front legs flopped over either side. It took me a couple of days of observation to notice Fido using his hind legs in this process. I noticed his stock flex and relax and his hock shiver with each undulation. Billy Bob would stand there stoically. He would stare at me with his serene honey-colored eyes.

My Dad hated these goats. At the time I couldn't figure out why. They were always nice to me. It is true that Fido would charge me, but it is also true that once I gave Fido his pine branch, Fido would let me pet him. A fair exchange. Fido would never charge me if I didn't come to the pen with a branch, so I wouldn't say he charged me out of aggression, but Fido charged me because he thought that this interaction was some game. He was more of a play partner than a bully, even though the play involved sacrificing external organs. Billy Bob was nicer. He would always stand still while I patted his white coarse hair. I didn't realize Dad didn't like these goats because of their homosexual behavior. I was in high school when I finally learned the word "homophobic," and by then the two goats had already passed away.

One day Dad and I came out to the two goats carrying two bags of feed. I usually fed them by myself, but my bag was almost empty so it wasn't going to be enough, and I was too weak to carry a full bag. When we arrived at the pen's gate, Fido seemed to be enjoying himself

more than usual. His front thin legs smacked against Billy Bob's sides.

*WUTWUTWUTWUTWUT*. Since Dad was there with me this time, and since Dad was an adult and had more experience in these affairs, I decided to ask him if he knew what process the two goats were undergoing.

“They’re fuckin’ each other. We got some faggot goats.”

This really didn’t help my learning. At the time I knew “fuck” was a bad word, but I wasn’t in middle school yet so “faggot” hadn’t entered my vocabulary.

My dad was a “devout Christian.” I put these two words in quotes because that is what he called himself. But he really wasn’t devout in anything except for gambling. Every day he would drop me home after school and then, “Run out to the store.” Dad would either choose the Shell station across from Francis Marion University or the BP station adjacent to it. Then he would always come home with at least two scratches off cards and one Powerball ticket. His gambling wasn’t a complete waste though. Eventually some of his money came back to me in the form of my state funded college scholarship.

Now comes the hard part. Was Dad “Christian?” I think he believed in God. Dad used His name a lot while swearing. At least I hope Dad believed in God because if not, then asking for something’s or someone’s condemnation from heaven wouldn’t be worth it. I think Dad prayed too. Or maybe he was just drowsing off while reading the newspaper.

I remember one day, when I was about five or six years old, Dad and I went to the Agri Supply Store to pick up some goat feed. It was a squat, yellow tin store that sold farm supplies. Most of the farm supplies were common farm equipment such as buckets, sprayers, hay rakes, ploughs, and tractor parts. But there were some things there that you would have never seen before, and other things that seemed to serve no purpose other than looking dangerous.

As we were walking to the store from the parking lot, I noticed that there were no children. All I saw were skinny old white men who wore denim and dusty boots. They walked as if they were secondary students running late to class, pressed down by their heavy book bags. That was when I noticed Dad's hand latched onto the back of my neck. He always had his hand there whenever we would move across a parking lot. It was as if I was a small puppy, he would pull back my scruff if there was a car coming, and he would push me forward if it was safe. Then I remembered that Mom would always hold my hand, and I recalled all the little girls in their pink shirts and butterfly pants who latched onto their mother's arms in front of Walmart's. I tried to turn my head around to ask Dad a question, but he kept pushing me forward. I decided to ask him anyway.

“Dad, why don't we hold hands?”

“Men don't hold hands, boy.”

“Mom holds my hands.”

“Two men don't hold hands. You can hold hands with women. Not with men.”

By then we were already in the store. He took his hands off my neck and turned me around. He squatted to my eye level and looked at me with his wrinkled green eyes.

“Son, I know what I said don't make sense to you now. But I can't have you turn out like those two goats.”

He then placed his two strong hands on my shoulders. It felt as if he was pressing me down into the concrete floor.

“No, it's OK, Dad. I understand.”

I understood that the weight of his hands was killing my shoulders. I did not see what Fido's resting position had to do with men holding hands, but I wasn't going to question Dad.

This was the first time he ever tried to explain life to me. I couldn't ask him a question or he might not ever try to explain anything else. Dad smiled, got up, and walked over to the six-wheel stocking carts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once a week, Mom would make a dish called Tostados. She made this name up herself. Got it from the Latin American dish "Tostada," even though "Tostada" is a tortilla-based dish, and Tostados are served on plates. Also, the word "tostado" in Spanish actually means "toasted," but Tostados are baked in a cooking pan. Tostados are composed of a layer of Nacho Ranch Doritos spread on the bottom of a cooking pan, with sliced sausage bits and red kidney beans placed on top, then the whole thing is sprinkled with shredded cheese and baked. An artery clogger for sure. It also stuck to plates as much as it would stick to heart valves. I remember that a couple of days after my interaction with Dad at the Agri Supply Store, I asked Mom about Dad's relationship with the two goats, while she was toiling away at the sticky residue left from former Tostados plates.

"Mom, why does Dad hate the goats so much?"

She crinkled her eyes as she scrubbed

"Because they do what all animals do."

"I don't understand."

She put the red grimed plate into the bottom of the translucent water. She pulled up her hands and clasped them together as she leaned her elbows on the counter's fake wood. She turned and looked at me, but it felt as if she was looking past me, past the drying rack, and past the line of trees past the back yard.

"Do you remember the story I told you about when your father and I first met?"

“You were both at Skateland. He fell, so he asked you to rub his bottom.”

Mom laughed her Southern belle laugh.

“That’s right. Do you know how different Skateland was back then than it is now?”

“No.”

She turned away from me and fished for the grimy plate. She found it and continued to meticulously scrub out the clots of red that had become part of the plate’s existence.

“When we were there, the front lobby as you know it now didn’t exist. There was no foosball table, no air hockey table, no crane with prizes, no gray floor with green and red zigzags, there was only that wooden counter and shelves of shoes. There was no lobby to separate that hard blue rink, it was just a desk connected to the span of blue.”

She paused from scrubbing, inspected the plate, decided to give up on it, and rested it on the drying rack. She pulled a fork from the suds and started scrubbing.

“Skateland didn’t play the music you hear now. It played music from our time. There was no Britney Spears, no Backstreet Boys, but Elton John and Duran Duran.”

She placed the fork on the drying rack and unplugged the sink. The swirling of water reminded me of Fido inhaling pine. *Wutwutwutwuwutut*. Mom washed and dried her hands with a towel that lay flaccid on the counter. She dried the fake wood around the sink with that same cloth. Then she left it crumpled and sighed. She smiled and turned to me.

“Do you remember what the goat pen was before you helped Dad make it?”

“Wasn’t it just an empty plot of grass?”

She nodded, “An empty plot of grass.”

She put her hands through my hair and started frisking it. I drew two steps back and started patting it down. She laughed.

“Your father never liked it when I ran my hands through his hair either. Now he doesn’t have much hair for me to frisk anymore. Times change. Places change. People change. That is why your father doesn’t like those two goats. When I first met your father, it was many years ago, but he is still that same boy who fell down and asked me to rub his bottom.”

I still didn’t understand, but visualizing Dad falling on his butt was too funny for me. I laughed and forgot that I didn’t understand. Years later I would finally learn what the term “gay” was. There was a decreasing stigma about homosexuality, and an increasing number of people started coming out. I didn’t realize it, but Mom talked about how Dad clung to that old stigma.

It is hard for me to talk about Dad’s relationship with this stigma because Dad was a hard man to get information from. I know he supported the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, instituted by President Clinton, then backed later by President W. Bush, which banned LGBTQ military members from coming out. When Dad was pressed about his approval of this policy by anyone, the response would always be one flat statement, “It ain’t natural.” When Dad watched news of President Obama’s administration repealing this policy, he would stand in front of the TV, staring at the ground and shaking his head. “It ain’t natural.” One time I had enough courage to ask him why he thought so. I got another flat statement, “Because it ain’t the way God made it, son.”

If God didn’t make gay people, then who did? Satan? I did not ask. This was the only time I can remember where I didn’t ask Dad for clarification because I was afraid of the answer. Mostly I didn’t ask questions because it was a rare occasion for Dad to talk about something serious, and I didn’t want these rare occasions to be permanently canceled from a single stupid question. But not this time. I didn’t realize it then, but at the time I didn’t want to stop wanting Dad’s serious talks. I didn’t want a single stupid answer to ruin it.

Even though I didn't completely understand the stigma against homosexuals, I was still affected by it. That old stigma permeated the music Dad listened to. Dad would drive me to school in his beige van while listening to a bluegrass and country Christian radio station. Sometimes the song "Down to the Farm" by Lewis & Lewis played.

*Come on down to the farm, come on out to the barn.*

*You won't see two roosters walkin' arm and arm.*

*They couldn't make a chicken; they don't have an egg to hatch.*

*When God said, "Love your brother," I don't think He meant like that.*

I would look outside my window seeing the rush of trees, textured splotches of green and brown. Obviously, Dad understood the song. I heard him say "Amen," "Mhm," and "It ain't natural," as the song lulled on, a composition of blue grass, country accented spoken word, and an indistinct female humming.

But at the time I didn't understand the song. I thought the lyrics didn't make sense because roosters don't have arms; they have wings. Later I realized my nitpicking prepubescent brain missed the bigger picture. Lewis & Lewis argued that people can't be gay because animals aren't. They should have come down to my gay farm.

They should have come down to my gay farm because Lewis & Lewis seemed like genuinely nice people. They have their own website. It is clunky, with a gray tiled background similar to a bathroom floor. The home page has a picture of them, a married couple, grandparents, arms folded, standing back-to-back, shoulder to shoulder, smiling in their suits. The husband Ray, died from a three-year long battle with cancer, and the scroll text box on the home page describing the wife Laura's process of mourning is heart wrenching. Laura held him

in her arms until he passed. Then once Ray passed, Laura still held his hand until the body was taken away. Laura didn't want the shell to leave, even if the soul was gone.

After I read the text box, I wondered how someone with so much love for another human being could be so ignorant to others. How did Laura not know that this song, "Down to the Farm," wasn't spreading the love of the gospel, but insinuating gays as unnatural and thus preempting hate? Then I found it. "Ray's Ranting." It was a box on the side of the website. I clicked it, and it sent me to a page where Ray was grinning at me, dressed in white, his arms bearing down on some invisible white surface, surrounded by a body of text. The body of text was entitled "A Last Call to Stand." Even though Ray was sitting down, he urged me as a Christian to stand up against President Barack Obama's "anti-Christ mentality" (even though Obama was and still is a practicing Christian), and urged me to stop being a "meek and lowly" Christian (even though all Christians are supposed to be meek and lowly), and stand up against the people offensive towards our religion (Were these offensive people supposed to be Christian congressmen who pushed for a multi-religious society because freedom of religion is one of our land's founding principles?). Ray stated that our nation was founded on Christianity and these liberals are going to turn our Land of Liberty into "an immoral Godless wasteland." This was when I realized how someone with a religion that preached love could practice hate. Politics does evil things to good people.

"Down to the Farm" was produced in the late 2000s, seemingly in response to Obama's election. In fact, the same radio station Dad made me listen to that played "Down to the Farm," was a different radio station before Obama was elected. 100.9 The Cross, located in Fairmount, North Carolina, and somehow picked up in Florence, South Carolina, changed its programming after the 2008 election. When Dad first forced me to listen to The Cross on his car radio, there

was a lot of preaching, and a lot of singing, but most of the other programs were about Bible Distribution. Spokespeople of these programs spoke with seemingly good intentions, urging people to donate money so that Bibles could be distributed to Third World Countries, and to countries with strict restrictions on religion, like China. I would say about a third of The Cross' entire program urged people to donate for the growth of faith in China. Specifically, China. Of course, this had political implications as well. The Cross' strong Conservative stance was against shipping jobs overseas. A way of stopping this would be to Americanize the Chinese through religion. Similar to the "Hearts and Minds" wars in both Vietnam and Iraq, the only way to defeat a Chinese economic victory over the U.S. was by liberating her people. Thus, the more Christians in China, the more people to rebel against the system, the more people to rebel against the system, the more effective systemic change would be, the more effective systemic change would be, the more workers rights given, the more workers rights given, the more expensive shipping overseas jobs would be, the more expensive shipping overseas jobs would be, the less overseas jobs shipped. Or this was the idea anyway. It was a war of "Hearts and Minds."

And it wasn't a war of hate. Whether Bible Distribution is good because it assists people in worshipping the religion they want to worship, or whether it is bad because it helps precipitate deaths through executions in intolerant countries, from a Christian perspective volunteering any time, effort, or money into these programs is an honorable thing to do. These persecuted citizens of China and the Third World are the modern-day Paul's, Luke's, and Matthew's, willing to pay the ultimate price for their faith, becoming unnamed martyrs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*

But after Obama's election, that third of The Cross' program changed from Bible Distribution to anti-Obama Christian talk shows. The hosts always had country accents and

spoke with aggression, each vowel hitting hard, rattling my head harder than a shovel. Obama was always the “Antichrist,” these times were always the “End of Days,” and Michelle was almost always, “Lucifer’s Little Helper.” I could never understand this attitude. I still don’t. Many aspects of Obama’s platform seemed Christian to me. Help the lowly and the meek. Obamacare. Love your neighbor as yourself. Gay rights. From a Christian perspective I can’t see him as an evil man. Especially not the Antichrist. The only explanation I can come up with for why so many fellow Christians hated him was because he was a liberal. And politics does evil things to good people.

\* \* \* \* \*

Homosexual behavior in the *Ovis* genus, also known as sheep, is actually quite common knowledge to animal behaviorists. Goats are part of the same subfamily as sheep, or *Caprinae*, and express similar sexual behaviors. The most promising biological explanation as to why sheep and thus goats exhibit homosexual behavior deals with something called the sexually dimorphic nucleus. This nucleus lies within the hypothalamus of the brain, and conducts male sexual behavior by incorporating sensory knowledge from the peripheral nervous system (which is a system of nerves not part of the brain or spinal cord, including the sensory nervous system which processes sight, smell, touch, balance, and sound) along with knowledge of hormone levels. It was discovered that rams with a smaller sexually dimorphic nucleus tended to mount males almost exclusively. However, it is unknown whether this homosexual behavior is the result of a smaller sexually dimorphic nucleus, or if the nucleus is smaller because of the homosexual behavior.

And at this point it is not possible to find out. There is no technology precise enough that is able to locate and measure the size of the sexually dimorphic nucleus in living rams. The

sexually dimorphic nucleus' size is about a speck of pinky. Scientists do not know what causes sheep or goats to be gay just as scientists do not know what causes humans to be gay. Many arguments state that there is probably some genetic predisposition to homosexual behavior that interplays with the environment, but this is still highly speculative conjecture.

Is it possible that these goats and sheep act out homosexual behavior because of love? This is another speculative venture that almost borders upon the fringes of what scientists call "anthropomorphism," or the positing of human traits and qualities into something nonhuman, such as animals. One example of how this term can be used is by observing African Elephant "mourning rituals." African Elephant mothers tend to hover around the bodies of their dead offspring. Many lay-minded people as myself would view this behavior as the mother grieving the death of her child, just as us humans view the soulless body of a loved one in an open casket before one more last "Bye." However, to scientists this is a no-no. A behavior is exhibited because of a stimulus, but the reasons behind the behavior is unknown and impossible (at the present time) to measure.

But I can't help being anthropomorphic when it comes to my two goats. They were more than animals to me. They were my family. I fed them, watered them, petted them, stepped in their aqueous defecation so I smelled like them, and we would play games together. Fido and I would play pin the horn on my balls, and Billy Bob would always let me wrestle him. I would hug the base of his neck and clamp my hands together at his brisket. I would try to drag him to the ground, but he would always jump up sending me flying on my back, smearing my T-shirt in dung and mud.

So, when Fido died, and I saw how Billy Bob acted, there was no other way for me to explain his behavior other than that Billy Bob was grieving for a lost loved one.

When Fido died, my dad was going to drag his body out of the pen while I dug his grave in our backyard. But something inside me told me that I wanted to go out to the pen first. I realize now that I wanted to see how Billy Bob was handling the death of his lover. When we arrived at the pen, Billy Bob was lying down next to Fido's stiff body. Billy Bob's eyes were closed, and his head rested on Fido's neck. When Dad opened the gate, Billy Bob opened his eyes. Dad walked over and tried to grab Fido's nose, but Billy Bob butted him in the chest, causing him to stumble over. Then Billy Bob turned to look at me with his soft honey-colored eyes.

"He wants me to do it."

My Dad stood to the side, rubbing his chest, as I walked toward Billy Bob. I knelt down on one knee and lifted Billy Bob's muzzle with both hands. I closed my eyes and leaned in, feeling Billy Bob's horns as they gently tapped my forehead.

"Don't worry. I'll place you right beside him when you go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Billy Bob lived for a couple of years after Fido's death. But Billy Bob was stagnant. He stood at his feed and water buckets and never moved. He stood there silent even when our neighbor's bulldog escaped their pen. He stood there silent as the bulldog climbed over the mesh. He stood there silent as the bulldog tore into the flesh of his neck. We wouldn't have known he was dying if it wasn't for our dogs' barking. Mom, Dad, and I charged the bulldog with baseball bats and ran him out of our yard. All our neighbors did was say sorry.

We lay Billy Bob down on a couch cushion and placed him in the sunroom. He died the next morning. Dad was off that day. I told Dad to wait. I would bury him once I came back from

school. Dad didn't wait. Dad buried Billy Bob on the opposite side of the backyard from Fido. I didn't keep my promise.

I wonder if Dad buried Billy Bob so far away from Fido because he didn't want any ghost goat copulation. Fido's ghost would probably still be fat, too fat to walk across the length of the yard to get to Billy Bob because of all the extra energy required to be a ghost. Dad probably didn't want to wake up in the middle of the night to hear a ghostly and orgasmic *wutwutwutwutwut* outside his window.

But Billy Bob's burial still bothers me to this day. Sometimes I think that if I really loved Billy Bob, I would have dug him up, dragged his body across our yard, and reburied him next to Fido. But then I remember how much I loved my dad. I didn't know exactly how he would have felt if I reburied Billy Bob, but I knew he would not have liked it. Maybe he would have disliked this because it made all his work burying the goat pointless, maybe he would have disliked this because he thought that the dead shouldn't be dug up, or maybe he would have disliked this because he didn't want the two goats to be close even in death. I didn't know the reason why, but as his son, I knew Dad would have not approved. This is why I didn't rebury Billy Bob, and also why his burial still bothers me. I had to choose between who I loved more, even if the one I loved more's wishes had nefarious intent. I choose a more hateful form of love, and sacrificed someone else's love for my own. Protection. I wanted my relationship with Dad to stay protected. Even if this meant doing the evil of doing nothing, I would embrace the evil for my own benefit.

\* \* \* \* \*

The once upon a time goat pen is a garden now. It is a fortress; the inner greens are surrounded by wood and mesh. Where Fido died grow watermelon plants; where Billy Bob died

grow string beans. Dad and I never entered this garden. The garden is Mom's. She uses her trowel and toils away at the moist black earth. The plants have become one with the pen; their leaves and vines hug wood and metal. It is Mom's promise to the two goats to keep the pen living after their death. If Dad tried to grow things here, it wouldn't have worked. The green warmth would still be brown, shriveled, and cold. His trowel would've made the earth turn to clay. But he never grew things here. Mom does. It is a garden breathing with life. It is a monument, a labor of love.

## Fooling My Son

My son has a bad habit  
of chasing around  
frogs and crayfish  
in the front yard  
and dropping them  
in the sunroom's spare aquarium  
which once housed  
the freshwater fish  
he and I caught  
at Jeffries Creek.

The trips to Moore's Pet store  
to buy crickets and pellets for these critters  
take an hour of my time every week,  
not to mention the hole burning through my pocket.

So, I'm telling him this fake story  
about a one-legged woodpecker  
that I shot at 12 times with my Remington,  
but the bullets  
bounced off of its yellow feathers.

"Now, what I'm telling you son  
is that not all critters need to be caught.  
Some serve a higher purpose."

I rock back and forth on the loveseat,  
my hands reaching heaven like I am praising Jesus.

But he looks confused.

"What was the woodpecker's higher purpose?"

I take a swig of coffee to contemplate my answer.  
He leans forward, anticipating my wisdom.

"Not to get caught by me."

He runs to the aquarium, slings open the front door, and rushes to the ditch.

15 crayfish, 3 frogs, and a few crickets land in the pink water.  
Guided by the stream, their luminescent bodies disappear from my strenuous life.  
For a second, I am fooled by my boy's smile.

## The Lost Space of My Youth

when tree frogs and crickets converged in my too small hands,  
when my two obese goats munched on a pile of pine leaves,  
when a football bridged the distance between Father, Brother, Little Cousin Eli, and me.

when Father planted the backyard magnolia tree  
whose arms now recline over the roof's gray tiles.

when life was added to my mother's garden, the inflatable pool, and the concrete driveway.

when my limp arms dragged my deceased father's puppy-eaten recliner to the burn pile,  
while the rattling, country voice traveled from somewhere beyond to say,

"I don't want no more damn dogs."

you have always been there,  
my little garden hose,  
washing the weight of worry off of my bedroom window,  
spraying rainbows on a summer day.

## Spiritual Awakening

A Tiger Swallowtail floats over cigarette smoke in Uncle Levi's barn,  
beating its wings against the steam of a newborn foal.

Uncle Levi's gloved hands are folded over his knees, the red cord limp on his boots,  
the mare's deep breathing shaking the hay.

A tear or a drop of sweat lingers on his cheek as he rubs the babe's neck with a towel.  
He turns to Father and I with a tired smile and says, "The old girl made a miracle."

Another miracle:

Catching crayfish with Brother in the drying ditch a few feet from our yard,  
his doe-like expressions as he points and names their terga, telsons, and uropods,  
their pinchers so calm in his hands.

And another:

Dropping seashells into the mason jar at Myrtle Beach,  
my feet sliding down wet sand, watching the sun through Mother's sunglasses,  
listening to the waves at dusk.

My mind is interrupted by the sight of the mother horse kissing her baby's blaze.

It is my clumsy first kiss inside Liz's 2001 Honda Civic,  
the hum of the lamppost in Julia Theater's cracked-black parking lot.

It is the delicious taste of a used car smell.

### **Self-portrait from a Hospital Bed**

I wake up to the picture of vines intertwined with dew glistening from the camera's light, the night almost distant behind slender raptures of green. Nurses speak softly in the hallway with a country twang. I can just make out the melody of "The Way You Make Me Feel" by Michael Jackson coming from the handheld radio at their help desk. Mother's mouth is drooped open and her dyed-red hair slides up and down the off-white wall. I now notice the numbness in my neck, how it stings slightly when I turn to look at the light coming through the window, the pale blue sky.

This is not the first time I have been in this room, but it is the first time I have lain in this hospital bed. Mother's hair was a different color 3 years ago, naturally gray from stress with no time to dye it. When I passed the nurse help desk with Mother's Subway Meatball Marina, the nurses spoke the same, and some classic '80's song played on the radio. Father's charcoal-brittle body was wrapped in striped sheets, his skin-tight eyes barely open, his chest small with every breath. I stood in silence, watching Dad as Mom left to work her 3-hour shift at the ABA clinic. She fumbled the car keys out of her leopard print purse, dropped them at the doorway, and forgot to hug me goodbye.

My only living Grandma died from colon cancer while I was in college, and Aunt Bessie had her ovarian cancer treated before I was born. Everyone has family members who have died from cancer, and many people have survived cancer, which must be why it feels so normal to be lying here listening to Mother's snoring and to the beeping machine behind me. It seems like the surgery to remove the precancerous tumor in the left side of my neck was successful or Mother would not be sleeping beside me, so I will not bother to wake her up.

What feels abnormal is the thought of returning to my Creative Writing MFA program for the last semester in January. These three years have gone by too quickly. I have spent too much time on the stools at the back of Blackbird Coffee drinking peppermint tea, staring at the laptop screen at another failed revision for my thesis while students from the college talk loudly about their workaholic professors and favorite sports teams. I have spent too much time on the living room couch in the apartment grading student papers online while my roommate blasts K-pop in the kitchen, the smell of burnt popcorn and garlic giving me a migraine.

I have been writing and reading too damn much. It almost seems as if the beauty of words has been lost to me. I remember my favorite books from childhood: *The Giving Tree*, *The Class Trip from the Black Lagoon*, and *The Rainbow Fish* all plucked from my 3rd grade classroom's mini-library while the other kids were screaming in the playground right outside the window. I was infatuated with how inanimate objects, plants, and animals could all speak their truths within these pages, how their levels of communication seemed to subsume the human element to make every aspect of my daily childhood feel magical. After reading these books, the small stones on my dirt lane seemed imbued with ancient life, the crickets chirping at night on the front steps seemed to sing of mysteries, and the wind which rattled the chain link fence in the backyard was its own angry entity.

But now nothing lives and everything is dying. I hate the sight of this fissured hospital ceiling tile almost as much as I despise the click-clack of my laptop's keys as I scrounge up another inadequate essay.

I decided to be a writer for the rest of my life back in high school. An English teacher pushed me toward writing, and though it has been over 8 years I still remember everything about her. Josie Stratton only wore suits of the ugliest pastel coloration. Every time she strutted into

class it was as if a dolphin bloodied by a killer whale swam ashore. Her brown bobbed hair shook violently whenever she spoke with a loud country accent.

One day after midterm, she handed out the essays, then stood next to the SMART board, clasped her hands behind her back and said:

*You all do not have the God given right to be writers.*

Back then I was not in love with writing. It was just another subject like history or biology that I excelled in, not because I was exceptionally smart, but because Mother forced me to study at the kitchen table until 6 every weekday. However, my stubbornness and hatred toward an instructor who berated her students caused me to head to the English department offices during my first month of college. I sat across from the department chair who squinted behind his A.J. Morgans and I filled out paperwork with an almost dry BIC pen. He shook my hand to congratulate me on joining the department when I did not know any of its professors' names.

I came to love my English professors though. Joni Tevis filled up the classroom with her love of life. She brought in pinecones, old postcards, and other various knickknacks to write about. Laura Morris' plain-spoken Appalachian humor helped all of her workshops feel less critical, and when she slipped into an accent the classroom felt like home. These professors made every late night spent in one of the Furman Hall classrooms revising the short stories, poems, and essays that none of my classmates liked, while groups of drunken college students vomited in the bushes outside the windows, feel worth the effort.

But now I feel as if Josie Stratton was right. I do not have the God given talent to be a writer. I feel less exhausted in this hospital bed than I do every morning before driving to campus to teach my uninterested English Composition students. I am tired when I read and respond to

my fellow graduate students' poems and essays before workshop. I am even tired when I feel the magic of a first draft flow from my fingertips, or in revision when I know a poem is starting to breathe.

Am I just burnt out? Am I just too old to not feel exhausted every day? I do not know, but I do know that writing has kept me sane after all this time. Even though Grandma and Father are both gone, when I place them in my thesis I can feel their calloused hands, I can hear their thick accents telling me everything I need to know.

## The Family Reunion

Uncle David's chicken-greased fingers shake on a paper towel.  
He slaps my knee, leaning his chest over the wheelchair handle as if to whisper a secret.  
For a while, he says nothing. Alan Jackson sings "Silver Bells"  
and Mother and Aunt Nancy fight over the last slice of fruit cake  
while his grip softens my leg.

He picks another KFC drumstick off of his paper plate  
and sneaks it past the oxygen tube,

cackling about the pleasant smells of 'Nam:  
the ixora flowers which look like, "little pouf sponges colored with Dove soap,"  
marijuana laced with crack under the shade of a Huey's propellers,  
the frayed leather of the King James Bible sagging his chest pocket,  
and stir-fried water spinach with the sweat of an infant  
gripping its mother's breasts.

Of course, there are bad smells too:  
the Agent Orange bouncing across his alveoli like a bright child,  
the smoke from an M2 surprising a sleeping pangolin,  
Charlie from Caneyville, Kentucky taking his last shit in the rice paddies,  
along with the usual fragrances of war.

## Sunday Supper

There is no room  
for me here.  
I sit alone  
at the dinner table.  
I can't escape  
the smell  
of floured chicken  
sizzling on the skillet  
in Grandma's double-wide  
on a Sunday evening,  
the crashing football helmets  
and Troy Aikman's chuckles  
trailing out of the TV,  
Father's head sliding  
off of the living room's couch,  
Aunt Sally's highlighter  
running down her  
crossword puzzles,  
Mother's crochet needle  
weaving through a rainbow  
afghan, the A/C unit  
duct taped to the window  
humming over them.  
I sit alone  
at the dinner table,  
playing on my Gameboy,  
waiting for Grandma  
to plate the chicken,  
to fill the glasses to the brim  
with sweet tea,  
to call the family  
in for supper,  
saying grace.  
Grandma died  
hundreds of miles  
away  
along with family  
Sundays.  
I swallow a spoonful  
of Hungry-Man mashed potatoes  
and listen  
to the icebox in the freezer,  
thinking about Grandma's mashed potatoes  
mixed with canned milk,

her collards  
swamped in butter,  
her calloused hands  
beating the cake mix to death,  
her voice – darker than a cave’s echo –  
humming “Amazing Grace,”  
how everyone smiled  
passing the pots and pans  
around the table, my momma  
scooping mac and cheese  
onto her son’s plate,  
Grandma at the head of the table  
talking about her favorite pack donkeys  
and learning me how things were  
before plumbing – when chopping logs  
was the only way to survive winter.

## Nightly Routines

He sharpens the butcher knife on whetstone  
while the little mutt snores on his rubber shoes.

He puts the knife back in its handmade box,  
setting it aside to open yesterday's newspaper.

His head occasionally connects to the kitchen table and bounces back up.  
He takes another swig of coffee to keep himself awake.

Around 8, he moves into the living room to watch grown men argue about football.  
Sometimes he even watches football games. When watching football games,  
he always wears a Miami Dolphins cap, even when the Dolphins are not playing.

He bubbles in lottery tickets and scratches off cards for another quick debt  
in various rooms of the house. He has been known to fill in numbers  
on the toilet tank cover and the arm of the bathtub.

Before going to bed, he takes his shirt off in the living room.  
He decides whether or not to brush his teeth this night  
and walks down the hallway in silence.

He never leaves his bed before 7.

## **Acknowledgements**

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To my mother, you really don't get paid enough for the thankless job of raising me.

## Copy of Critical Essay

### *Proclivities of the Common Southern WASP: Notes on Unity, Imagery, and Other Goals*

In trying to create a successful hybrid manuscript, three main questions arose. First, what is the necessity of blending prose and poetry together in order to accomplish the collection's thematic goals? Second, what are the unifying elements in the disparate genres which maintains the reader's immersion and enhances their experience when genre is switched within a collection? Third, what ordering/pairings of poetry and prose maximizes reader understanding and enjoyment? These two latter questions are easier to answer than the first, and for these two questions I found inspiration and understanding from many readings of Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Eduardo Galeano's *The Book of Embraces*.

Finding threads to unify a reader's experience of a hybrid collection at first seemed somewhat daunting, especially since poetry and prose have fundamentally different reading conventions. The narrative and concrete elements of prose at first glance do not mesh well with poetry, which prefers musicality and understatement. However, upon working on the manuscript these concerns lessened overtime. In *Cane*, I noticed how Toomer used the collection's setting to establish image sets which wove the disparate genres and narratives of his hybrid collection into a unified framework of experience. Similarly, the truths I uncovered while writing about the Carolinas led me to reemerging images and characteristics of the rural South, which helped me tie the different genre conventions together as a wholistic experience rather than a distraction from the collection's overall thematic goals.

*Cane* has numerous images that repeat throughout the collection as a byproduct of the work's setting. Here is a quick list of some of the numerous images which occur in both the fictional vignettes and the poems in *Cane*: fire, dusk, cane, lynching, dirt, trees, mud, moon,

stars, blood, and Black gospel music. One of the most subtle, yet powerful image connections is the use of pine needles/trees in the poems “Song of the Son,” “Georgia Dusk,” “Nullo,” and the short stories “Karintha,” “Becky,” “Carma,” “Fern,” “Blood-Burning Moon,” “Bona and Paul,” and “Kabnis.” Toomer initially takes this common image from rural Georgia and establishes this image as a symbol for the negative consequences of motherhood in the collection’s first short story “Karintha,” stating, “A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet” (5). The description of this birth immediately contrasts with the description of her returning home, where “the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in the water,” though she was described as a girl of “vivid color” and “like a bird that flashes in light” before the birth (3). Thus, motherhood turned a girl with a bright future into a woman who must taste the heaviness of this burden for the rest of her life. The pine-needles were the only sweet aspect of that child’s birth.

The implicit connection between the tumults of motherhood and pines is further supported in the next story “Becky.” Toomer repeats this paragraph at the start and at the end of the story, “Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She’s dead; they’ve gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound” (8 and 11). Here, the pine trees are the only creatures who pray for Becky’s solace, an ostracized woman who had two mixed children. Thus, when we arrive to the first poem which mentions pines, “Song of the Son,” these two previous stories have implicitly trained the reader’s brain to connect pines with the negative aspects of motherhood, and the reader will continuously find other instances in the collection where this connection holds true. We see the suffering of the son’s ancestors in this poem through the lines:

So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,

Now just before and epoch's sun declines

Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,

Thy son, I have in time returned to thee. (17)

In this poem, the souls of slave descendants have been claimed by their ancestors, and the use of pines resonate back to motherhood, fatherhood, and ancestral suffering in general.

Some of the repeated images of setting which appear in both my poems and nonfiction essays are: old cars, unhealthy foods, guns, sticks, and animals. My favorite repeating image is the arrangement of unhealthy foods which appear in many of the poems and essays. For instance, there is fried snake in "The Serpent," Jack Link Beef's Jerky in "The Camping Trip," Jack in the Box in "The Football Game," KFC in "The Family Reunion," and an assortment of heart stopping foods in "Sunday Supper." Unlike *Cane*, which has repeating images to subtly remind the reader of the collection's thematic goals, much of my repeating images like the unhealthy foods above have more of an explicit and pragmatic purpose. Most of my repeating images such as old cars, unhealthy foods, and interacting with both wild and domesticated farm animals indicate the speaker's/narrator's economic class. Thus, all characters and occasions should be read as products of the poor rural South. When a reader finds a repeating image, they are reminded of the cultural and economic stressors each character endures as a poor Southerner, which helps unify all of the characters, locations, and occasions of every piece through the collection's broader setting even though the forms of each work are sometimes completely different.

Repetition of image sets is not the only way to make a unified collection of different genres. Many times, the order of the pieces themselves has influence over the immersive, entertaining, and interpretive qualities of a text. If even one piece of a collection is ordered

improperly, this could change the reader's interpretation and enjoyment of this piece completely. One strategy I learned to handle this issue from both Toomer's *Cane* and Galeano's *The Book of Embraces* is something I like to call "theme stacking." This strategy involves taking pieces which espouse similar themes and stacking them on top of one another in their own sections to amplify the implicit undertones involved in every piece. For example, the poem "Face" immediately follows "Becky" in *Cane*. The death of a beautiful woman is mirrored in "Face," as the speaker states:

Her eyes –  
mist of tears  
condensing on the flesh below  
And her channeled muscles  
are cluster grapes of sorrow  
purple in the evening sun  
nearly ripe for worms. (12)

Even this idea of ripening hearkens back to a previous short story, "Karintha," where the narrator states, "This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her" (3). As implied earlier through the repetition of pine imagery, this whole first section of *Cane* is all about different aspects of womanhood. There is a ripening, a maturation of girls into women throughout the beginning poems and short stories of *Cane*, paired with the literal and figurative deaths (of the woman's childhood) caused by motherhood. These specific aspects of womanhood do not explicitly appear later in *Cane* though certain image sets repeat throughout the collection and subconsciously remind the reader of these themes.

Galeano's fictional vignettes are also paired off by thematic order. Galeano makes his intention of the ordering extremely apparent by giving vignettes the same title. For example, "Theology/1," "Theology/2," and "Theology/3" all come immediately one after the other over the span of 4 pages (88-91). The first theology is the narrator's meditation on his relationship with Christianity over time. The second is the narrator's judgement of God. The third is the narrator's extremely personal and almost sacrilegious interpretation of scripture. The book jumps from topics of hunger, war, television, love, and other almost random topics, but it is these abstract titles throughout the collection that inform the reader on the proper way to read every microsection.

In light of these discoveries made from reading *Cane* and *The Book of Embraces*, I tried to order pieces together based on theme, and tried to make these pieces' titles reflect this decision. Furthermore, I found that when pairing a poem to an essay that expressed similar themes, the genre switch did more to enhance these works' implicit undertones rather than detract from the reading experience. For instance, having the poem "Hephaestus Visits South Carolina" follow the essay "The Camping Trip" establishes multiple thematic connections that could not be as easily made if these pieces were separated. Both titles are similar because they imply movement. Hephaestus cannot stay in South Carolina no matter how beautiful it is because of its history of racism, slavery, and violence as the speaker states, "Do not forget this /is the South. There are bloodstains hiding in / every bag of gold rice, in the slumber of cricket calls" (41). In "The Camping Trip," the father and son illegally stay on park land overnight, and there is an implicit, criminal violence taking place when the narrator meets two strange men at night by the restroom (39). Furthermore, human interference corrupts nature in both pieces. In "The Camping Trip," the narrator's discovery of a condom though he is too young to know what it is

(29-30), and the litter at the stream (34) negatively affect the narrator's enjoyment of the park. For "Hephaestus Visits South Carolina," the human blood spilt on Southern land causes the gorgeous landscape to become grotesque.

The most important question for a hybrid collection however, does not concern ordering, nor does it concern how to unify the genres of the collection to enhance the work as a whole, but asks why is a hybrid collection necessary, and what can a hybrid collection do that a conventional book cannot do? I found my answers to this conundrum in *Cane*, and interestingly in *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje, which is technically a fictional novel, but is certainly not written anything like a conventional novel.

Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* contains multiple vignettes that are close to prose poetry in their delivery due to their lack of narrative exposition, use of understatement, and particular focuses on image and musicality. Ondaatje uses these vignettes to provide context, characterization, and the historical and political undertones necessary for understanding the broader implications of the novel, which its present narrative arc cannot supply on its own as a plot driven story. For example, the train assassination vignette showcases how the Sri Lankan government is a democracy that has already died in darkness, and will continue to cover up all of their war crimes, as "In the darkness he yanked him forward by his hair and wrapped the chain around his neck and began strangling him" (31). Ondaatje's other vignettes like the genocide of an entire village convey the pointlessness of the narrative murder mystery arc, where just like the miners throughout the novel, Anil will ultimately come up empty handed because the corrupt government is too powerful for any citizen to fight against.

In my collection, I could have done a strategy similar to Ondaatje's. I could have added micro essays to provide context, characterization, and the historical and political undertones

necessary to understand the broader implications of the collection, yet I chose poetry for this task instead. The reason for this decision is that poetry has the ability to say everything that a narrator/speaker does not know. Instead of a narrator relying on the confidence of bodily experience, a poem requires the speaker to dismiss the boundaries of internal and external. Instead of a narrator interacting and being affected by his environment, a poem showcases how the speaker and his environment are the same living entity, and this connection proves useful when trying to convey the unknowns of living in the poor rural South. For example, in *Cane* we have already seen how Becky's "Face" is both human and inanimate, is both beautifully alive and morbidly decayed. A nonfiction essay cannot handle these types of contradictions, yet it is only through these contradictions that the entirety of Southern trauma can be explained. For example, my first poem, "How to Listen" informs the reader of the contradictions the speaker's father experienced as a child, which helps explain why this character flips from being affectionate to standoffish almost sporadically in the nonfiction essays. The real meat of this poem comes from its title "How to Listen," which implies that the father's parents taught him how to listen only through violence as conveyed here:

as it bounces straight back. "Listen to this,"  
Father whips the brown blur through the air quicker  
than its whistling can keep up. "Hold out  
your hands." He lifts the switch a foot above  
my palms, flicks it, and a stinging,  
fresh pink line forms on my white skin. "You'll never  
get my scars." Father throws the switch into the shade. (2)

The father asks the son to learn of the abuse he experienced as a child, abuse that the son will never experience, but to the father this abuse was just any other day. The title of the poem asks the son to listen to the father's plight, but the son will never truly understand since the switch ultimately ends up back "into the shade." If I were to write this poem as a micro essay, the narrative elements would cause this poem to lose its intensity. Explaining the why's and how's of the father's behavior for this scene would undermine the power of this scene's contradictions. Furthermore, the poem's caesuras and enjambments are necessary to fully understand the scene, as these jagged stops of rhythm mirror painstaking breaths, and the futile struggle of the father trying to encapsulate the span of his trauma through words.

On the topic of poetry, I had two main goals for my poems. The first goal was to make all the characters feel like wholistic human beings living in the South. The second goal was to incorporate Southern language and musicality into the poems in any way I possibly could. For this first goal, I took major inspiration from Rodney Jones, most specifically his poem, "An Errand For My Grandmother."

I learned two strategies for creating well-developed characters from Jones. First, give characters objects that are more than just props. All objects that characters wear, hold, or use should be symbolic representations of that character's traits. For example, in "An Errand For my Grandmother," the speaker states:

The milk she kept under a ledge  
In the spring, once lifted  
To the light, would sour in a day –  
That's why we have cows, she said – (127)

This milk is a symbol for the grandmother's own melancholy. Later in the poem where the grandmother starts, "...telling / Of the spring as it had been / In her own grandmother's life," it becomes apparent how the grandmother misses the stories her own grandmother told her about the Cherokees while she was a young girl, and the milk is a representation of her childhood souring too quickly.

Similarly, I used food to characterize the speaker's grandmother in "Sunday Supper." The way the grandmother interacts with food showcases two aspects of her characterization. First, she has never been able to escape from her past as a poor farmer. Second, she is still the same rough woman she was back during her farming days as a child and a young woman even though she is now elderly. The speaker describes his grandmother's rough and tumble way of cooking:

thinking about Grandma's mashed potatoes  
mixed with canned milk,  
her collards  
swamped in butter,  
her calloused hands  
beating the cake mix to death, (79-80)

The grandmother still cooks mashed potatoes with cheap canned milk and beats "the cake mix to death" as if she was still a poor farmgirl who needs to cut down on costs and rely heavily on physical labor in order to survive. This food making process helps the reader understand that when the grandmother recites how, "...chopping logs / was the only way to survive winter," at the end of the poem, she is still living during this harsh time in her head even though the world around her is much softer now.

In terms of incorporating Southern language and musicality in my poetry, I relied heavily on David Lee, taking great pleasure in my multiple re-readings of his poem entitled “The Chain Letter (An American Tragedy).” Lee writes in dialect, and though my poems usually do not go that far (except for “Etymology”), I learned quite a few tricks to bring the Southern out of the speaker and the other characters in every poem. First, Lee abstains from using highfalutin words, preferring a simpler way of speech. Second, Lee uses multiple plosives and strong vowel sounds to give his speakers harsh rural accents. Third, Lee enjambes his lines to mirror pauses for breath in speech rather than utilizing enjambment for suspense or other reasons. All of these elements of regional language are expressed in the first stanza of “The Chain Letter (An American Tragedy):”

Ohdammit sez John I’m in trouble  
so I sed why John?  
John sez I got the bill for my insurance  
and I haven’t got no money to pay it  
cause I won’t get paid for swoking and bailing  
Keith Guymon’s hay till next week  
I done told him that would be just fine  
when he ast a week ago but  
LaVerne she went and opened the damn envelope  
on a chain letter and I aint got no time  
to write out twenty copies  
I got to get that hay finished  
so what am I posta do now? (86)

The speaker's most complicated words in this stanza are "insurance" and "envelope." Every other word is either monosyllabic or disyllabic. In terms of heavy hitting language, I am quite fond of the line, "I done told him that would be just fine" with its d's and long o's. When read aloud, all of the enjambments in this stanza feel like natural pauses in a conversation.

My fondness for Lee's work is most explicitly expressed in "Etymology," where the speaker states:

Let me learn you somethin' 'bout how to talk  
country. Don't say nothin' without sayin'  
somethin' first. It ain't "Where are YOU?" but,  
"Where YOU be at?" You always got tobaccer  
in your mouth even when empty. You ride  
on a *howus*. You wash your hands in the *zinkg*.  
If you talk faster than a 5<sup>th</sup> grader  
reads, the Greyhound driver will ask you what  
the hell you just said. If you say *Goddamn*,  
you best be condemnin' somethin' to Hell.  
Some 'T's after vowels become 'D's. Waddar  
you doin'? Hand me a glass of wader.  
He waded at the doctor's a long time.  
Now don't get me started on the missin' ledders... (24)

There are numerous long o's mixed with other harsh vowels, and there are d's sprinkled throughout. Similar sonic patterns repeat in other poems as well. Furthermore, this poem sticks mainly to words of one and two syllables. In terms of enjambments, this poem does end lines in

places that would not come naturally rhetorically, but this was out of necessity to keep up with the sonnet's rhythms, and I still tried to make the poem sound as naturally spoken as possible indicated by the lines, "...It ain't "Where are YOU?" but, / "Where YOU be at?" and "If you say *Goddamn*, / you best be condemnin' somethin' to Hell." Though I am not as faithful to David Lee's strategies in my other poems, as a rule I still try to keep the language simple, the vowels and consonants striking, and enjamb the lines in ways that seem almost natural when spoken aloud. Also inspired by Lee, there is one specific phrase from the Southern dialect that is used throughout a few of my poems, "let me learn you." I find this to be such a telling phrase of Southern charm that I feel adding any other ounce of dialect might make my poems sound over the top.

My priorities for creative nonfiction were different. In terms of my creative nonfiction, I had two main goals. First, I wanted to give the reader a sense of embodied experience for complete immersion. In other words, I wanted the reader to truly feel like the narrator by incorporating visceral imagery. Second, I wanted to balance my characters properly. I wanted these characters to feel like whole human beings, to make them as accurate and truthful to their real-life counterparts I possibly could, while also ensuring that every interaction with these characters added some form of dynamism to my essays, whether this was through tension, thematic undertones, or world building.

To create a sense of complete embodied immersion, I relied heavily on Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. Strayed experiences the world through tactile precision, letting no minute detail go unnoticed, as evidenced by this scene:

Small cool slimy black frogs jumping all over me.

Each one was the approximate size of a potato chip. They were an amphibious army, a damp smooth-skinned militia, a great web-footed migration, and I was in their path as they hopped, scrambled, leapt, and hurled their tiny, pudgy, bent-legged bodies from the reservoir and onto the scrim of dirt that they no doubt considered their private beach. (196-197)

Strayed starts the description of these frogs with how they felt “cool” and “slimy.” Then she precisely indicates their sizes by comparing their smallness to that “of a potato chip.” Notice the almost hyperbolic list Strayed uses to encompass the large quantities of frogs: “army,” “militia,” “migration,” and the extra care she added to detail every frogs’ particular movement through specific verbs: “hopped,” “scrambled,” “leapt,” and “hurled.” These strong verbs, precise metaphors, and compelling visual comparisons enable the reader to inhabit Strayed’s body for this scene, to feel and watch these slimy creatures chaotically travel across their own skin.

In my nonfiction essays, I strived to use strong verbs, precise metaphors, and compelling visual comparisons in a capacity similar to Strayed in order to immerse the reader into the narrator’s bodily experiences. Take this scene from “The Serpent” for example:

The air whistled with the swing, but this sound came to me like an aftertaste. The crunch of scales and bones and vessels tearing. The thud of the earth. I jumped. Some blood oozed out, but not enough to make me cry. I started crying because the body flopped around. The tail smacked and coiled around Dad’s work boots. What really startled me was the snake’s head. Its dead mouth was a gaping smile. (13)

I tried to be thorough with my verbs here: “oozed,” “flopped,” “smacked,” and “coiled” all describe the movement of a lifeless snake’s body in the span of a few seconds. Even though this scene only takes place in a manner of seconds, honing the reader’s eye toward the specific

movements of the snake proved vitally important. It is this fixation which enables the reader to experience the same visceral anxiety the narrator feels during this snafu. Furthermore, the simile that starts this scene, “this sound came to me like an aftertaste,” helps to pace the rest of the imagery. Similar to Strayed describing the massive amount of frogs, this comparison provides the reader with a sense of scope. The reader’s body becomes dialed in, and every image afterward, such as the thudding earth, the oozing blood, and the snake's flopping body, turns into a whirlwind of unwanted stimuli.

For creating fully fledged characters which were both honest to their real-life counterparts and able to add dynamism to each essay, I learned much from Paul Lisicky’s memoir *The Narrow Door: A Memoir of Friendship*. While reading this memoir, I studied three aspects of characterization in order to create my desired characters. These aspects of characterization are: dialogue (not just what is being said, but how it is said), mannerisms (specific physical actions or tics), and facial expressions (not just what emotions/thoughts are being expressed but what emotions/thoughts the character is trying to repress). I was immediately drawn to this scene regarding Denise’s characterization:

“He’s afraid. Men like him – *men*,” she says, drawing out the word, frowning at me.

“Always afraid. Cowards.” She picks up her cup again and puts it down a little too hard on the tabletop. A little coffee slops over the rim. “What’s wrong with men? What’s wrong? *You*.”

“What?”

“Man. *Man* – ”

“Me?” My collar feels tighter around my neck.

“Pauly,” she says, her voice softening, her features softening, going pretty again.

“Do you think I should go up there?” (24)

Note the heat of Denise’s words, the visible irritation that comes from every italicized letter.

Denise is a fiery person, yet tender to those she cares about, able to reel in her aggression when she sees Paul flustered, deciding to softly call him “Pauly.” Her actions and facial expressions also mirror this demeanor. She abruptly changes from being too aggressive with her coffee mug to giving Paul a pretty face after he grows concerned with her behavior. Lisicky makes it obvious that Denise is still irritated by the instant and unnatural shift in her conduct, which heightens tension since she does not continue her true thoughts, leaving Paul and the reader to wonder what is on her mind. This shift also makes her an empathetic character as well, since she tries to take care of her friend’s comfortability. The intensity of this moment proves useful later, where Denise loses the ability to hide her aggression due to real life stressors, making this scene the starting point of different conflicts which ultimately lead to the narrator and Denise drifting apart.

To craft fully fledged characters, I also focused on nuanced dialogue, mannerisms, and facial expressions. Below, is an example from my essay “My Gay Farm:”

“Dad, why don’t we hold hands?”

“Men don’t hold hands, boy.”

“Mom holds my hands.”

“Two men don’t hold hands. You can hold hands with women. Not with men.”

By then we were already in the store. He took his hands off my neck and turned me around. He squatted to my eye level and looked at me with his wrinkled green eyes.

“Son, I know what I said don’t make sense to you now. But I can’t have you turn out like those two goats.”

He then placed his two strong hands on my shoulders. It felt as if he was pressing me down into the concrete floor.

“No, it’s OK, Dad. I understand.”

I understood that the weight of his hands was killing my shoulders. (59)

Here, the father tries to act as if he is teaching the narrator a supposed lesson about the world. The fact that the father softly calls the narrator “boy,” and talks to the narrator at eye level indicates that the father wants it to seem as if he is simply trying to educate his son. However, the force of the father’s hands on the boy’s shoulders conveys a darker intention. There is a threatening air of control in this moment. The father’s lesson is not just a lesson, but an ultimatum. He wants to take control of his son’s own sexuality, pressuring the son to live in a way he deems appropriate. This tension proves important at the end of the essay, where the narrator’s mother subtly takes her foothold as the child’s new role model since she is able to bring life into the goat pen, a space the father wanted to leave dead and barren for years.

For my remaining remarks, I would like to say that this hybrid collection was tricky to piece together. I meditated for a long time on how to order the poems and essays in an effective manner, thinking of each work’s themes, imagery, pacing, and rhythms. It was of utmost importance for me to bring out Southern life through the collection’s settings, characters, and imagery, all while making sure I was honest to these characters, their experiences, and the world around them.

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