

ABSTRACT

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There is nothing worse, I think, than paraphrasing a poem, much less a whole manuscript of poems. Doing so wrongly implies that poetry exists mainly as *ideas*, and not, as it truly does, as words. Thus, that an “abstract” should summarize the writing in this thesis seems to me not only impossible, but also undesirable. Instead, for an expression of my methodology I offer the poems themselves, many of which take the form of the *ars poetica*; they discuss what I try to do when writing far better than I ever could here. All I can say to introduce the poems, then, is that I hope they speak for themselves.

THE CHIMNEY

by

Patrick Phillips

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ONE

PRE-DAWN

This time I am a Danish *landsman*
working a dairy farm near the Jutland coast.
It is not strange to wake, as I have,
at 4 am, pull a jump-suit off the pegs
in the mud-room, and crunch across the yard,
moonlit and snowy, to the stalls
where I attach a glove-shaped milker
to each pink udder of the Holsteins,
who scrape their hooves on the concrete
and swing their heavy necks as I pass.
Through the dark hours I watch for Venus,
transparent over the heather. I listen
to the sound of a car on the highway,
skipping a gear: someone not used to the hour,
someone anxious to reach the first ferry
to Odense. I stumble over a tractor's muddy,
frozen imprint and catch myself without terror.
I am used to the pre-dawn stillness,
the quiet of the birds. The blue tint of the world
does not frighten me as it did just now,
when I woke in the dark and saw headlights
moving through the trees, crossing the wooden bridge,
throwing the shadow of a window
across my childhood bed in Georgia,
where I woke already groping for the light.

DISHES

At home the sun is settling down
in the pasture brush and cow paths
on the hill, wading into the horizon,
watchful of the hours as the last rays
called home run back to it, snatched
from between my mother's dripping fingers.
Moments ago she stood absent, stirring
amber dinner dish water, eyes up the hill,
to the sun again, to the narrow sky
pushed almost out of sight by Billy's
lower pasture, the green hillside sown
only with salt-licks and tractor paths,
lingering signs of a long departed herd,
and below the open gate a driveway:
potholes and weeds for Billy to cut
on Sunday. All that is visible hangs
in the window-frame, draped in sunlight
and the wandering vines of house plants,
lanky and awkward in their pots.

THE BODY

All this time I have tried and not escaped
for a second. All my life I have watched
for the chance. I've felt my right ankle
ache under the weight of my leg. I've seen
my blood on my hands, my hair
on the living-room floor. All night I've
pushed pieces of myself out the door,
all month I've found remnants of hair:
the hair in the pie-plate, the hair in the sink,
the hair in the crease of this notebook.
I've thrown myself out like a white bone
for the dog, only to hear a light breath
in my ear, as my hand plants a tulip,
as my foot comes down on the shovel.
I have buried myself in the backyard
and stomped on the mound. I have found
my body in a corner of the shed, propped
where I meant to put back the rake.

BAPTISM

So often have I heard it,
I can name the poker-players at the table,

all dead now but bald Fred Hall
and famous Dan Vitali.

I can see their cans of Pabst
sweating rings into the wood,

and smell, in the first room I remember,
the sweet blue smoke of their cigars.

Over the humming fridge, the clacking Kenmore dryer,
I can hear their chairs scrape the floor

as they turn to face my father,
standing by the kitchen sink

in his long black robe, arms spread wide,
blessing the basin of rusty county water.

I can feel his thumbs in my armpits
when he lifts me up near the glaring bulb, for all to see,

and in the silence after I am touched
the third and final time, before he sets me down,

I can hear him shouting ghost,
then the others, whispering amen.

LATE AUGUST

and the brown-skinned men in the park
are tending their camps, setting bricks
around the edges of tarps, gathering milk-crates
and dragging old blankets in from the dew.

I am sitting on a bench
listening to Spanish voices soften
behind walls of wet cardboard,
as the sky cools from violet to blue,

as the night draws fishermen
to the bridge, a thousand miles south,
where, I know, they are baiting for shad
even now,

watching for the first star in the sky.
Someone casts into the dark,
the whine of his reel carrying over the water,
to the dock where I used to watch Venus rising in the west,

where the tree frogs breathed their two notes, in and out,
and brown moths dove at my flashlight.
The house up the hill must be quiet now,
the porch screens silver with rain.

A motor dies far off on the water,
a wave slaps the side of a boat.
In the dark, a fish jumps so loud I expect it
to flop down beside me, here on the grass.

THE CHIMNEY

Inside the chimney that my father built
with stones we hauled from Six Mile Creek,
underneath the soot, above the flue,
is a penny that I watched him press into the mortar

before he hefted into place another slab of shale,
another brick of fractured gypsum,
so that when the pitched roof falls,
when the shingles and the cherry rafters crack

and burn in someone else's fire,
on that morning when the chimney stands marooned
in the clearing in the woods, and later falls,
smooth stones sliding down the hill,

when someone, a young man walking to the creek mouth,
stops at the glint of light from a rock, mica or quartz,
and finds a coin so old
he can barely see the year,

then, my father said, someone will think of him,
long ago pulling the penny from his pocket
and pressing it against the drying chimney,
leaving his long thumbprint swirling.

PLATE

How many matching, patterned plates
were bought and broken
in the kitchens of my childhood?

This one from Kroger's
my mother, years ago
put underneath this fern.

I moved the plant
to move the sofa
to try to fix the stereo

and there: my father's fat wrist,
the face of his watch facing down,
passing me the plate as he speaks,

as if it is 1975
and my mother is going, any minute,
to smash the dishes on the sticky floor.

THE FIDDLER

Grab your right wrist with your left hand
and that is how they hold the rounded stocks,
in a circle bristling

with banjo and guitar necks, mandolins and fiddles,
the uncut ends of metal strings
nodding like hazel-rods bending over water.

We sit on coolers and loose-slung lawn-chairs, waiting
while they tune and pick out melodies: *Omie Wise*
and *Georgie Buck*, *The Gospel Ship*, *The Old Home Place*,

everything returning—openings and runs and breaks,
serenades and waltzes, dirges played
the way they heard them

sixty years ago—the cross-picked banjo,
the fiddle wailing like the dead.
We listen to the stories

of the drowning bride, the rocky field,
the rebel soldier dying,
and the hobo's stream of whiskey,

no one able to jig or clog
the way their fathers stomped their heels,
the way their mothers, gathering long skirts into their fists,

waded through the summer grass...
We sigh our understanding sighs
and nod as if we know what it means

to shake their hands when it is over,
to hold the fiddler's delicate hand in our hands,
and squeeze his bones and brittle tendons.

U.S. STEEL

The brick stacks are cold and quiet—
nothing like they looked when I'd wake
under the window, on the ledge over the back seat,

and watch the chimneys pass,
pumping clouds of sulfur, staining the sky
the yellow of his palms.

The strip-miners are gone,
the water-cannons that scrubbed the mountain,
the explosions that sprinkled dust on the windshield.

I taste Birmingham's clean air
and leave the car and walk toward the mill,
crossing ruins blanketed with clover,

concrete slabs and low walls left by the wreckers.
I climb a familiar stoop on a corner lot
and step into the kitchen on Coke Street:

there was a buck's head over the mantle,
a broken air conditioner in the corner,
a window where I am standing,

where for forty years she watched him
walk the path I follow to the mill,
where he stood over the ingots

like Vulcan, squinting at pools of slag.
Inside, I climb over a charred ladle,
and stand in the cold furnace,

my white sneakers planted on the floor:
Armstrong's boots on the moon,
a bird on the wrinkled skin of an elephant.

This could so easily be a dream, something he imagined
walking through the dark, eyes on his boots,
not looking up until he reached the parking lot

and found the roof intact, the sooty windows whole,
the kudzu cut away from the door.
Standing in the cracked, cold crucible,

holding a pair of rusted tongs,
I pick through the black ash,
inventing his unknowable dream:

a doe on her side in the leaves—
he bends to stroke her white belly
and pull out his arrow.

AT CHICKAMAUGA BATTLEFIELD

It is not my great grandfather or his uncle,
not the great-grand anything of anyone I know,
not a Phillips, a Glasgow, or a Miller who I see
walking through the unmowed pasture,

coming down the hill from Summerville,
out of the woods that run unbroken north,
through Rabun Gap, to Tennessee.
He does not grab a switch of grass

or wad of rabbit weed to chew, does not
break sticks or sing or count his steps to pass the time.
He does not hook his thumbs through the straps
of his faded overalls, or wear a hat,

or look at the chiseled mile posts
with anything you would call fear,
as he moves closer to the Dairy Queen
off Highway 12, east of 59,

where I have stopped
after the long leg of Virginia and the Carolinas.
It is Labor Day weekend—the restaurant full of vacationers,
minivans and Winnebagos headed home,

inching down the mountain,
creeping into the foggy parking lot.
High over my head, a vast cloud moves south
and the shadow on the valley turns to silver.

The moon reveals faint trails worn into the hillside,
and a shallow stream beside the road, below the guard-rail.

It is easy to imagine the road as a footpath through the woods,
a bald strip smoothed by the feet of Iroquois and Creek.

It is easy to see the wigwams standing,
the fires burning again. Sitting beside Highway 12,
sipping coffee from the Dairy Queen,
it is easy to imagine the war fought here,

the tents pitched on the level field
a hundred years ago. I see
the bodies hanging from the giant oak,
the illegible gravestones sliding into the creek.

It is easy to imagine a man
coming down the hill from Tennessee,
secretly hoping he does not reach the field,
hoping that somehow he will fall behind,

or learn the fighting's over
before the hawks and rhododendron disappear.
He peels a handle off a walking stick
and looks back the way he came.

By daybreak,
he could make it to the beginning of the woods,
to the place where yesterday
he stood and shoed the dogs back home.

I stand at the edge of the parking lot,
across the level field, a cool, late-night wind
brushing over the grass behind the dumpster,
and imagine his body stretched on the ground,

pale face turned west, toward Orion,
tilted high in the black sky over the Dairy Queen.

We are in the same dream: tomorrow
I will hear the nurses ringing out their skirts,

and see, in the early-morning torch-light,
the muddy field, the bodies heaped behind the hospital-tent,
the tents by the stream, and the stream by itself,
rippling where the road was.

In the halo of the restaurant, I hear myself talking,
talking like this, like the man who came down from the hills,
when he woke, as I have, covered in sweat,
from the last dream of his life,

the recurring dream of this place:
the ground suddenly gone underneath me,
I jerk awake in the dark,
from the oldest dream, of endless falling.

TWO

WRONG

Here on the jacket is Dizzy Gillespie
at the foot of a grand marble stair.
Tuxedoed, hamming for the cameras,
he's made it—the clothes,

the smile—everything perfect
but the bell of the trumpet he holds,
bent by a mis-step in a dark apartment
in Harlem, years ago: it veers off

wrong-angled toward the ceiling,
like something invented
to sound exactly the way it sounds
now, on the record.

And here are the cheeks,
the famous, gigantic cheeks
puffed to the eyes
and down the loose neck as he plays

the way no one can teach you, not
with the strong abdominals, not with the diaphragm,
but through the cheeks, all cheeks,
everything about it beautifully

wrong... The way Junior Wells
bends a note on the harmonica,
invented for Bavarian oompahs.
He plays the blues

scale that rose from the harp like a genie,
when a black GI first played

a 10 pfennig Hohner: the sound carrying
across an Allied camp, to the barracks

where a defeated German sat
listening, hating him for playing it
wrong, though longing to be nearer...
The way, even now, as I write this,

getting it wrong, failing to say
what I mean, I pray to the spirit
in Gillespie's cheeks, to the air
vibrating the reed of the harmonica:

that I may be so wrong.

STRAWBERRIES

The Haitians are pulling down the market
on Eighteenth, unscrewing c-clamps
and passing two-by-fours to someone in a van.
The sun falls behind the church-spire,

the neon signs buzz on in liquor stores.
I walk past the fruit-seller with the blue-black tattoo,
who smiles and mutters in Creole
and hands me an egg-crate of strawberries...

Through fields of lilac and yellow mustard,
on the island of Fyn, in Denmark, I rode a bicycle,
pedaling hard despite an axle that skipped on the down-stroke,
despite a hole it had worn in my shoe.

The hay truck carried men and women, hands
pushed through the wooden rails, legs swinging from the back.
I never knew where it would stop,
which rows were ready on what morning.

I watched the women with their kerchiefed heads
and hinged hips, bending like ostriches,
stroking the leaves,
shuffling berries into their aprons...

Not even the Creole knows who filled this carton,
back bent in the middle of a row,
head turned up to watch the glint of an airplane
passing over the quilt of fields.

Say it was a woman. Say she is finally leaving
the rows, as night comes,

as the light turns on Eighteenth,
as the sign over the bank flashes the time.

I walk home, thinking of the swinging scale
her hand touched, the dust in her eyelids,
the silent ride back up the hill. I carry the bowl to the table,
as she lifts her dripping hands from the sink,

and holds them up, trembling in the light of a kitchen.

SPRING

Sometimes I stop at the crosswalk, engine idling,
and watch the cold wind sweeping dust into the doorways,
scattering wax cups and cigarette butts, lifting
a blue plastic bag high in the air. Sometimes,
very early or late, I drive right through the light,
across Georgia Ave without even looking:
there is no one to see, out in that bone-cracking cold.

Now, as I sit watching the bright sun
reflected in a store-front, I think of ice breaking
over the creek, water flowing under the thin, clear cover.
An oak leaf that fell on the crystalline surface is released
back into the current and floats to the mouth of the river.
Along the shore, mudcats wake in shallow graves
and break through the softening earth. Stabled horses
gallop into the pasture, bending their necks
to the wet grass, swishing their tails at the flies.

Before the light turns, a man wearing three sweaters
and a pair of unmatched boots steps off the curb,
a paint bucket and wet rag in his hand. He leans
over the windshield, silently working, chapped face
inches from mine. He sloshes the glass with gray water
as I watch him, jaw clenched against the wind,
through the small circles he is scrubbing.

MICHELLE KING

Michelle King is the BIGGEST cunt.
I'm sorry to say it says so
on the wall where they play stickball after school.
Ten feet high and twice as wide,

the words are scrawled in yellow spray-paint,
like home-plate on the asphalt diamond.
The hulking grade-school
spilled its children across the playground

for the last time last July,
so there is no shuffling janitor,
no sulking boy kept late
to scrub her name away.

There is only me,
cutting across the blacktop,
gazing, amazed that they got up there...
wondering,

if she's become a target,
what a tennis ball is worth,
that soars the empty schoolyard,
and caroms off Michelle King, in short left field?

Home-run or not,
it's gonna take
a hook-and-ladder fire-truck
to save her reputation.

THE REST-STOP

Past the line
of traders asleep
on their wide-awake mules,
I come to the oasis
promised for miles,
the last gas, food, phone
in New Jersey.

The crocodile sunning
in the booth next to mine
says love is knowing
and being known.
The wart-hog snorts,
the elephant sighs, the giraffe
blows smoke through his nose.

Outside a turtle
who stopped for a drink
and fell asleep
with her lights on,
the radio playing,
and the windows
half-open to the night,

wakes up
in her broken-down Nova
too weak to lift
the thin bone shell
on her back
and walk away.
I see her

reflected
in the fish-eyed mirror,
her long face
watching mine,
her stretched neck saying,
shed your skin
and move on.

COMMUTE

Out the dirty window of the 42,
beside the cracking cover of the river,
the wind clacks through the branches,
and the over-burdened tree trunks groan.

I am dreaming again,
holding a new-born calf in my lap,
trying to calm the boy,
who says over and over,

“It’ll never live to Spring,
Paavo, it’ll never live to morning,”
until I wake, too late, my hand
hanging from the chord,

the snow out the window
turned to rain.

AT THE DINNER PARTY

The man in the seer-sucker suit says words
will live longer than Lascaux. His wife believes

Castro lives in their house, in the picture
with the palms and marble lions.

She says they lack everything they need:
eat fish with a spoon, tempt fate

with one set of keys. As she speaks,
the General steps through a door in Havana,

into the garden, grown higher than she would believe.
He scratches his long beard, walks under the stars,

under the tree where her father once sat,
high in the limbs, legs swinging.

At the dinner-party, we stand
on the patio, watching the yellow moon

through the leaves, our many thoughts
all turning toward home.

THE MOBILE

Half-way up the stairs,
at the little landing where you turned,
a mobile hung from an eye-hook in the plaster—
stained glass and mirrors,

small holes strung with fishing line.
In the morning, as the sun rose,
the bright pieces turned on faint currents of air.
At night, as you slept in different beds,

on soft sofas and cold floors,
across the three hard seats of a train,
it hung in the dark,
in moonlight slanting through a window,

casting shadows on the wall.
There wasn't a day in your life it didn't hang there.
Somewhere a place you know
is bull-dozed to the ground: this is how it starts.

You still smell its smell, and hear its empty sound.
You feel yourself shuffling down its stairs,
eyes cast low, unaware of the mobile
turning behind you in the dusty air.

MOTION

A beach at high-tide—
waves breaking and running up the slope
onto dry sand, touching the skin of a sea-turtle
as she drags her huge shell back to sea.
A street-corner where you once stood,
where you stood many nights like tonight.
You sip your coffee, read the same words over again,
as the wind rattles a stop-sign, swirls in a doorway,
lifting paper cups and stubbed cigarettes.

A river flowing over stones, jagged slabs
in the middle, old boulders
broken into rubble near the shore.
The river tears itself open and lets the air in—
turning white even in the dark.
No one could see it on this moonless night,
if there were anyone out there:
a fisherman gathering his gear,
an angry boy hurling rocks at the dark.

You know there is no such thing as silence—
a clock always ticks in the background,
floorboards bend and creak over your head
Someone or something raises its voice
deep in the woods, so faint and distant
it is not so much a sound as a silent reminder:
the world continues outside your senses,
the world has responsibilities besides you.

A woman stands by the river,
in a place deep in the woods.
Far from the hot car on the shoulder,

she cannot hear the trucks passing,
the man cursing over the open hood.
Her flashlight cuts a circle out of the dark:
jagged rock, white foam. She kneels
over an eddy that curls in from the current:
tadpoles in the light, smooth leeches
flat on the bottom, a cloud of gnats over the pool.

The world is made of such small eddies.
The world is the world because it repeats—
millions of cells move like a woman.
Particle after particle breaks on the rock.
If you hold your head still, there is a river—
follow a spot in the water with the flashlight,
where a leaf floats downstream,
and that river is gone forever.

You look absently, for the first and last time,
at a knot of wood in the table where a girl sat,
listening to her father, tracing the whorls
with her small finger, while someone, somewhere else,
stands in the room of your conception.
Someday, you will return to a house
having shed every cell of the body
that lived there, that climbed the trees
now encased in the bark of ten springs.

Say the woman on the bank hears a sound,
far outside her, something insistent.
Let her return to the dark path,
lifting the branches away from her face,
as the man in the car bumps the horn with his fist.
Let them drive off into the imaginary future,
their faces lit by the green glow of the dash.
Let them go—we don't need them.

the emptiness
Better they are gone,
the simple truth:
need us, that the river
s.

They existed only to fill the emptiness
of the place by the river. Better they are gone,
better we are alone to face the simple truth:
that the world does not need us, that the river
without witness, continues.

THREE

PORTRAIT OF BELA WALKER WITH BICYCLE, 1898

This is before they laid you in your long hole,
before the women whispered your name like a psalm
and walked away. Before the worms
burrowed down to your curved jaw
and circled in the sockets of your eyes.
Almost a century before my grandmother
pressed your picture in my hand and said
we favor in the face like brothers.
You still don't know to walk in the coal mine
staring at your boots. Don't know that you are not
the fastest man in Ensley, Alabama.
You have not seen the crimson birth-mark
on Bobby Taylor's thigh, have not felt
the buck-shot that will tear holes in your neck
as you walk, three years later, through the woods
between your father's house and town,
certain you can make it home
before he wakes and finds you
slouched against the porch-rail,
suffocating as you bleed to death.
This is 1898. You are nineteen.
Half a second from now you will break this pose
and walk away, letting go of the bicycle,
handing back the borrowed coat and tie.
You will leave this room forever,
walk out into the busy street,
squinting up at the too-bright sky.
You will notice the rain clouds coming,
the black umbrellas opening a few blocks down.
A trolley-car that pulled away,
moving slow enough for you to run and catch it,
just in time to beat the rain, is waiting at the curb.

You just looked out the doorway,
saw her passing in the street,
then turned to face the camera,
as she smiled and looked away.
This is where the photographer crouched
beneath the velvet curtain, this is what he saw:
my true smile just breaking across your face,
my thin lips drawn tight,
as you think about her body, the smell
of her bare breasts, the pores in her skin.
This is when the flash dust sparks and rises,
when the ashes are frozen in the air;
the shutter opens, and light pours into this room
from a room in Ensley, Alabama,
where your rough coat-sleeves
hang down around my wrists,
where your white necktie is tight around my neck.
My back is stiff from standing,
my tongue is dry against your teeth,
and your fingers, curled around the handlebars,
brush the soft skin of my palms.

THE LAST DAYS

There were more every day the water rose,
sitting as you know they do, if you've seen them—
in the highest branches,
patient as priests in black robes.

They came from the hollows,
below the water-line, where the trees
not cut and hauled to mills
were under the Chattahoochee,

branching in the green water,
lifting the bright backs of their leaves in the current,
moving as the wind had blown them.
People hardly had time to notice, much less

to find a rifle and shoot one. They were busy
carrying things out into the yard,
loading furniture and pictures
and bundles of clothes onto the truck,

praying against the rising water.
They tore the house apart
with a crow-bar and a sledge,
making a stack of lumber for rebuilding,

a stack of lumber to be burned.
Because they didn't know what else to do,
the children skipped rocks
and combed the muddy bank for treasure.

From high above, you would have seen them,

a small boy washing a rock at the river's edge,
and a skinny girl, talking to herself,
wearing a black feather in her hair.

TWO DREAMS

Beside me,
you lie back down,
your voice creeping
back into the room
from a dream.
Your moan turns
to thunder in my sleep,
your face
into a snow-cloud
high above me
in the winter sky,
and your pulse
the steady crunching
of my boots.
In the morning,
as we lie together,
I will sing the tune
they're playing
by the fire here,
a slow waltz
that fills the room.
But tonight, dear,
I must hurry home,
across the frozen lake,
chancing a jig on the ice,
as the sad fiddle
that echoes
through these woods
starts up again.

CATCH

The catfish,
that summer,
sucking air
thick with heat
that drove us
to water
and him to
our line, set
deeper than
usual,
did not look
much like a
cat to me.

My Granddad
did not let
me see his
old grin when
he left me
watching the
bucket of
fins and slick
skin and long
black barbs, to
get the cracked
ax handle
from the shed,

which he came
back squeezing
in his fist.
He kicked the

churning pail
and spilled the
fish out on
the soggy
river grass,
and I knew
they both knew
more than I
what came next.

TO MY BROTHER, REMEMBERED

It is late,
the moon floating on the water,
the warm breeze carrying the voices of men
fishing under the bridge, the lanterns
rising and falling on the
horizon...

I remember
my brother treading water,
just his face above the surface, impatient
for me to jump from the mud bank
as he has done,
just now,

holding tight
to the knot on the rope,
skimming across the water and rising into the sky,
his big toe touching the leaf on the limb before he let go
and flips like a hatchet,
down into the
water.

The black lake
takes the wet clay under my heels,
and again I am rising into the air, the rope tangled
around my waist, the burn snaking
across my skin as I fell
through the deep air,
down into the
water.

I imagine

the sun throwing spears of light
into the dark, imagine the old dock above me,
the thin beach towels, the radio, and the bottles of coconut oil
lined up beside my sister, squinting into her book.
I can hear her

squealing at the splash
of my brother diving in, as I lose my breath
and pull towards the light, meeting half-way up his boyhood face,
smiling into mine, blowing silver tubes of laughter
out into the water
as we pass.

CHATTAHOOCHEE

1

The fish moves like a spirit
through the flower of moonlight
hanging in the water,
through the depth that never warms,

where bass and catfish wallow in the dark,
where you can almost see
the impossible bottom of the man-made lake.
The black bass with the burning tongue

dives, dividing the green dark
pressing water through the feathered tissue of its gills.
Curl after curl rises from my reel,
the glowing filament pulled

through the square
of a window frame, around the rotten bowl
of a tree-stump, over the rusted grill
of a '53 Lincoln, half-buried in mud.

Below, clear fins fan the water,
and above the long note of my voice
whispers to the dark, asking the fat bass to rise,
as I wind in a foot, give back a yard.

The fish sends messages in faint vibrations:
from a landscape darker
than the moonless night over the water.
With one finger on the line I feel

the whittled shape of things
dropped by the living, and the flaking remains
of the dead. My rod bends
over the water, near breaking—raising

a dented mailbox orange with rust,
a muscle-covered fence-post,
or the limb of a pine where a tire once hung,
barely moving all afternoon on the breeze...

And then, what was lost is gone again,
the fish swimming free, the sunken junk-yard
increased by the size and weight
of an old lure from my tackle-box,

its silver spoon spinning to the cloudy bottom,
as I wind the snapped line back
onto the dripping spool,
slack as a fallen kite-string.

2

The ribbon of micro-film whirs
from one plastic reel to the other,
and the summer of 1953 passes
in a moment. It is September.

Sorghum Crowe stands in his yard,
turning an iron crank,
raising a bucket through his reflection
at the cool, round bottom of the well.

In the distance, the afternoon sun glares
on what can only be the Chattahoochee—

before the dam, when the river snaked
between tall hills, deepening the valley.

The gaunt face in the foreground is white
as the projector's bare bulb. He wears the stiff clothes
and stubbled anger of a farmer,
looking sideways at the photographer, frozen

as if half-listening to us still.
In the next frame, at a table, he signs the deed
to the last tract of land in the flood-plain,
the last acquisition required. He scratches his name

and the future is silently born
outside in the bright afternoon. Soon,
the absurd churches, jacked onto flat-beds,
will inch down the narrowing road, out of town.

The concrete gates of the dam will close slowly,
and the men will begin their vigil over the river,
marking its rise on the thick stilts of Brown's Bridge,
gathering at the widening edge,

their shimmering faces reflected: quiet, compliant.
But nothing in this dead face says
he ever mourned the past—though the living deny it—
nothing says he knew the meaning of his life

any more than I do, the importance
of its moments as they happen. He sold everything
and built a house up the mountain, where he sits in his age,
gently rocking, watching the calm surface of the lake,

so smooth and opaque on summer evenings
it looks frozen in the light—perfectly still

until the wet slap of a jumping fish
breaks the water's wide silence.

3

The story is always told as comedy:
the man who died for twenty dollars
would've done it for less. In stiff overalls
and a wide-brimmed hat, whorls of gray beard

on his neck and face, he crouches in the yard,
burying a jar under the magnolia.
He stamps on the mound, smoothes it with his shoe.
There is movement, of course,

from order to disorder: the dammed river
rising higher than expected, flooding the house,
the dusty barn, the blossoming magnolia.
He wades down the porch-steps

like a baptist, the muddy water darkening his pants,
filling his pockets with flecks of mica,
as he swims—head-up, neck straining
like a dog—looking hopelessly

for the place where he kicked the shovel,
where the light should be,
the glint of the pickle jar rising
somehow, miraculously, floating up

through the muddy Chattahoochee.
The river fills the house to the windows,
sloshes the walls like dirty bathwater.
He takes a long breath, dives, and is gone.

In the end, it is a small act,
one part of a longer story. One of many deaths
that pass each day, without stopping the flood,
his long white body

a creature of the water.
Only the living need it to mean
anything, something spiritual in the physics
of buoyancy—volume and mass.

For us, there is always a message
in the swirling eddy, a track to find before moving on.
Let the blue-white skin of the man in the river
tell us something then,

as his body, stripped bare, floats away:
that our oldest animal instinct is the need
to find the things we bury,
to come back later and dig up our bones.

4

The wind blows
through the window,
lifting a white sash
the way a mother admires a gown...

The water moves
through the lock, draining slowly,
exposing foot by foot
the slick red walls of a gorge

dotted with stumps all the way down.
In a moment, the water drops
lower than the longest drought,
and the twisted figures of pine trees emerge

like the starved prisoners on the news,
stepping into a light that blinds them.
Slick trunks and bare branches, furred thick
with algae, hung everywhere with drooping sacks

of fish-eggs, heavy fruit transparent in the light.
Like everything dying, the lake reverts
to what it was, becoming a river,
settling slowly into its sandy banks.

Like someone knee-deep in snow,
I climb down the mud-thick hill, hop-sliding
all the way down to the level bottom.
Uncut forest, under the water for years—

dead trees soft as flesh,
branches shining like black snakes.
Whole oaks bend to my touch,
their trunks nodding to the ground.

I follow what looks like a path
by the river, where people walked
from one cabin to the next. The hot breeze blows
the smell of dead fish all around me,

the layers of algae beginning to rot. In the last moment
before waking, I stand at the bottom of the lake,
hearing my breath, like an astronaut
uneasy on the surface of the moon. Beside me,

a green chimney stands as it has for decades,
simply displacing what surrounds it,
planted like the impossible flag
of those here before me.

5

I wake with my face pressed hard into the planks.
With one eye open, I can see them circling
in the blue sky, as they must have been doing
since dawn: looking for food, looking

through the black eyes set in their bloody faces
at the whole valley laid out—the crooked line
of the shore, the rolling hills quilled with pines,
and the small square of the dock,

gently rising and falling on the surface.
They have come for the bodies of the dead,
and if there are no dead, to wait for the living.
They glide patiently, more certain of their purpose

than any creature, any hunter who cannot know,
as they do, what will come,
that what always comes will come this time too.
They gather over the dead and near-dead: forming

a circle over the dog on the highway,
a circle over the calf in the pasture,
a circle over the bloated opossum floating in the lake.
They know the changed walk of the maimed,

the jaundiced eye of the snake-bit,
the unmistakable stagger of the newly-born,

because it is their life, their place: to carry us
over the water, over the trees and smoking chimneys,

to their roost at the mouth of the creek,
where the snake and the mouse come together
in their black wings, where the fox and the squirrel
become feathers in their breasts—

where even the dead vulture heaped by the shore
is changed from feathers into feathers:
the broken wing straightened, the crushed shards of beak
reassembled, the clotted sockets of eyes filled again

with the sight of brothers and sisters,
perched on the scarred limbs of the pine.
High over the rotting dock
the hungry return to their tree,

bringing the scattered pieces of the dead
back together, the black livers, torn fingers,
and vacant eyes of the dead,
carried in the full mouths of the living.