POEMS FOR BOYS

By

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Poems For Boys examines how the proliferation, absence, or destruction of male influences — fathers, grandfathers, sons, friends, and coworkers — work to establish or disfigure masculine identity, a composition welded together with feigned strength, emotional silence, and an often quiet love. These poems travel along copper creeks, hover over miniature trains, stomp in football fields, hold chainsaws, and churn in the cannons of sunken battleships. With sincerity, patience, cadence, both lyrical and narrative, these poems hope to edge the reader closer to Burns’ depiction of masculinity.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reeling in Big Silver Fish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I Knew I Would’ve</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Dog. A Truck. And Two Kids.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Father’s Bow</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building a Poet (Tearing Him Down)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look At All These Things I’ve Written</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s Remarkable</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Towards, Away.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Kitchen with Lauren’s Mom</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Can’t, I’m Sorry (or, Awkward Sex I’d Like to Forget)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Square</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Organized Sports</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Moving Your Grandfather</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Train. A Mountain. My Father’s Love.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big John and the Garden Center</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All I Know of Egypt</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grime</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like the River Stone</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Albert, Whom I’ve Never Met</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t So Bad</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Boy’s Father Was Murdered in Mexico</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Morning Flower</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through My Father, Through His Garden</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Earth, A Man</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reeling in Big Silver Fish

It’s raining and my Dad’s been at sea
reeling in big silver fish all morning
in a windbreaker, grey and dark blue
rain is on the deck
and I’m here
in the city
looking at my breath rise
hood up
gloved hands in my pockets
gold and green ginkgo leaves
streets and small shops
— everything in the rain.

I walk to the bar
where I work most of the time;
we call when we can
we meet on Wednesdays
over two brown ales
and two sandwiches
as big as our heads

to talk about the fishing
the hundred n’ forty pounder
that nearly killed him
nearly knocked him flat
when it burst from the deep

to talk about the Jeep,
our five-speed deathtrap,
with a fuel leak
and a stiff clutch

to talk about Neil Young
long-haired at Massey Hall
playing Heart of Gold
for the first time, fumbling
with his harmonica.

Across from me
my father
his sleeves rolled up
his arms on the table
his eyes so close
I can see their blue
their few brown flecks
and it is hard for me
to maintain, to look at him
certain I’ll ever return
all he’s ever given me
beyond my simple life
which fills my body

— it’s love, it’s love.
If I Knew I Would’ve

For Frank O’Hara

It is morning in the new kitchen
the clean window is up
the new light places itself on the painted cabinets
and I am trying to write love
into everything
despite feeling tired sometimes.
I choose to write my poems in cursive
I like the way my \( f \) whips up to touch it itself
sometimes I touch myself
in the new apartment
you know, really rub one out.

I don’t know
what I am doing
or what this poem will be to me
when I’m done writing I don’t
know what it will mean to me tomorrow;
my shirt is too big and I’m too thin
and change rarely makes me happy.

If I could, I’d stand still
before the microwave and wait for instant dinners
watch the terrible news anchors
and let the seasons come as they may
they will, they do
and many times I feel lost
on my Japanese bicycle
wind in my face going downhill dodging potholes
or on the El
with all its blue seats and its people.

Often I wish to shake hands
with someone new
often I fear the whole hairy human race.

I don’t know what to write some days;
If I could I’d write monotony and kiss the words on the page
until I felt closer
to my longing
wherever it might be but
between you and I
I don’t know much, really.

I hold my poems close
at the kitchen table,
then I walk down the hall
its one lightbulb bright above my head
down twelve steps out the door to the street.

When I hold my poems close
I break my heart;
I smile and hardly mean it
but I do.
A Dog. A Truck. And Two Kids.

When is going to a diner with you ever going to stop being more than going to a diner with you?

It’ll be easy. Two coffees. You’ll get something with egg-whites because the yolks have too much cholesterol and I’ll drown a short stack in syrup (which you’re jealous of and I gently gloat).

Sometimes I’d like to stop thinking. Thinking about my hands. Where they are. Arms. Crossed or uncrossed? Posture. And your hair’s dark your eyes are bright and you look so good just being here.

Dangerous as you are, as this is, you’re warm; my eyes wish they could place you closer. Slide the crummy table aside. I forget how this works —the romance part— when I say something you like and maybe make you fall into memory:

Once we ran through acres of evergreens. Scattered from our picnic spot because a big rust-red pickup truck rolled up. Crabgrass crunched under its wheels and we were too busy planting lips and fingers places to see so we scrambled and you got stuck, silly,
on a chain-link fence trying to
t hop into my yard and the neighbor’s
German Shepard howled, wild

the pickup wheeled ‘round,
engine roaring and
you were still
there. Stuck.

I remember running back for you
even though you swear, smiling,
I didn’t.

But now you’re here,
goofy in your olive coat,
all of your rarity, here
your lips on that porcelain cup.
My Father’s Bow

Was given to me
with a leather shooting glove
soft from wear
bow-string still taut
limb curvature still solid
he killed only once
when his hair was long, like mine
when he rolled the sleeves of his red flannel
when a small black lab followed his brown boots
after my mother came and went
when things changed
and things changed
when he pinned a small fox in the fall of ’70
my father regretting the day
he loosed his bolt
from the nock
and caught something sharp
in his heart —
a single drawing
the end of a love
brought by a bow
and given to me.
Building a Poet (Tearing Him Down)

Would rather give something back
something heavy, hard
like iron ore
even a drum of oil.

Would rather be a multi-socket extension cable
a hammer’s claw
a diamond blade
a bolt head from a packing case.

Would rather make all the fixtures
in the house plumb
make the lights bright
make the water run
quick
through the pipes.

Would rather be a column
on the veranda
of my mother’s Cape Cod
just off Vermont Ave.

Would rather be a machinist
like my stepfather,
be all ball bearings, plugs
fabrication and coils,
be his paws, genuine leather
keep my mother’s house together
her car on the road.

Would rather rig crab traps
over blue ice
feel lonely and look hard
into the Arctic.

No. I’d rather howl
far out
on four padded feet
in the tundra deep
snow slowing my heart.
Look At All These Things I’ve Written

There is a yellow sign on 45th street
above the laundromat
that I can’t read,
an Indian market lined
with grains, vegetables
I cannot prepare
a thrift store
marked by a bright mosaic
that’s always closed
and suddenly
I wish I knew
I couldn’t write you away
beside the Ben Franklin
you return, westbound
just when I thought you wouldn’t
disguised in graffitied billboards
in *Joe loves Melissa*
in the struts of my broken docks
in steel cargo containers stacked atop
each of my thousand ships
in the chambers of my cannons
fixed to frigates long sunk
in my churning pearls
in all of my waters
as they rise and fall as rain
then gather between brownstones
burst from gutters
drip from my apartment’s ceiling
and onto my wooden bedroom floor
where I lie alone, think:

I’ve never really left the ones I love.
It’s Remarkable

It’s remarkable
how the hurt creeps
into your life despite
the neighbor’s tidy flowerbed
lovely girls in shorts
handsome boys, clean shaven
the occasional two dollar slice
pineapples, ham, the whole bit
of cream in your coffee.

Hold the door for a stranger and
receive a quiet thank you
(a nod of the head too, hat titled).

There’s hardly enough time to know
anyone long enough to know them.

It’s remarkable
how the hurt creeps
into your life
the whole house
apartment
kitchenette
smothered, overrun
it’s remarkable
how arguments
swept beneath forty year old rugs
and beaten against trees
become bodily, glued to your guts
we breathe in the dust
doc says breathe
there’s a sadness coming
cold stethoscope on the chest
sickness, the hurt
it cuts us
right in two
there’s blood
discolored arguments
threads of rug
in your parent’s cough.
Pigment empties from the heart and
it becomes an organ again
becomes just an organ
— not a sound.
Moving Towards, Away.

When I edge towards darkness
    and it moves through me
like air through a screen door
    brushes me like the low-hanging branch
of a dying oak with one thousand rings
    when anonymous dark birds call to me
their brown, black, and grey plumage shaking
    hold me here for sometime
in the arms of your sunlit canopy
    until I recall the rose
of your best sweater.
In the Kitchen with Lauren’s Mom

At 54
Lauren’s mom stops by on Sundays
for whole wheat pasta
and off-brand red sauce.

At the kitchen table
she tells us that she lived
just south of Lombard
all her life
that she skipped school
to walk around with boys,
she hiked her skirt up
was the hottest thing
that took the El and
the Broad Street Line
north, south
east and west.

These days
she’s broke
nearly homeless.
She’s tried
and she’s tired.

At 29
Lauren is a certified Pokémon Master
a waitress
and a shoe-gaze basement rockstar.

At 25
I sell people craft beer
wash the same two pairs of jeans
twice a month
I eat too much peanut butter
and hope I’ll make an extra ten bucks
hope Wheaties will be on sale for once
hope the pipes will stop freezing
— if any of us
Lauren, me, her Mom
are getting anywhere
it’s taking a long time
and I hope all the time
it’ll mean something
when we get there
I hope Lauren’s sold a bunch of Eps
her Mom lands a better job
some money, health insurance
if we’re that lucky.
I Can’t, I’m Sorry (or, Awkward Sex I’d Like to Forget)

Every step I took
the ones leading to her room
where she keeps her things
tacked and taped on the walls
colored posters, beads
our jeans on the floor.

My feet
are meeting hers
on the bed
and I
    I can’t
I’m sorry
    I just
no I wish
    but I
you’re not
          — I’m all cold feet.

Sometimes my body refuses
to unfold before another
but I’m saying more now
    feeling brave
don’t let me stop me
from getting closer
    or moving away
    when I need to
when I need to just
tie my arms
my long arms
    around your small waist
my toes over your toes
    one finger on the zipper
    of your yellow zipper jacket
the one I like, I’d like
to try again
if somehow
you’d let me:

show
    you
how
  show
me
  let
how
show
Washington Square

We’ve been circling Washington Square
circling in the snow
with soaked socks, you’re grinning
gargantuan, something fierce;
the reading was good
Carlos Soto Roman was good, drinks
were good, you’re glad you came out
I think, you’re glad
we’re just circling the park, little
words shiver beneath our feet
things I’d like you to say like
_kiss me, stick around_
but we wander, each phrase
left behind in our footprints
you rub your chilly hands
together, close to your jacket &
you’d like to go home
            just go home.
On Organized Sports

Coach Frank’s big mouth
hounds defensive plays into the pile
his spearmint gum rolls
and his fat weepy Italian eyes
are looking right at me
only me
because I’ve been getting crushed
dragged through the mud
for nearly two hours
with a shattered wrist
he didn’t believe I had.

When I had my first tackle midseason
I didn’t know how it happened, really.
I just got tangled in some kid’s legs.
Frank asked, “Do you feel it now?”
I didn’t know what “it” was.
I said “I guess.”

I’ve done push-ups ever since

— I remember my cleats
losing ground
in the mud —
When Moving Your Grandfather

When moving your grandfather
find each pair of plaid boxers
his favorite checkered cabby cap
blue insulated shirt
all four handkerchiefs.

Put everything in a brown suitcase
and offer him coffee
(several times so
he can hear you)
say it will keep him warm
when he leaves his hospital bed
each of his one hundred pounds
for Woodbury, where there’s a room
with clean walls, a new view, and a window
where a tree’s supposed to bloom come summer.
Move him there, say
today supper’s in the kitchenette, say
the pneumonia should clear up soon
but do not say that you miss him,
miss seeing him in Sunday slacks
skinny elbows angled outward
drinking Rolling Rock
one gardner’s thumb wedged in his belt-loop
— no, no
there’s Julia there
young, framed
on his bedside table
beside his vegetable soup
with her dimples
her dark, bobby-pinned curls.
Julia, gone years ago.
Now reach for his strong, veined hand
and hold it
because so much has changed, say
she’s signed her name, say
she’s signed her name Julia, say
with love

— it’s okay to go.

in the west
a tiny farm rests:
a red barn, a white lamb
a silo and split-rail fence
made of toothpicks
held by glue
and lined with trees
my father placed.

in the east,
on struts of balsa wood
a green and gold trolly glides by
a general store, an eatery
a rancher, cape-cod;
every window lit
by the little bulbs
my father wired and set.

between this town and country:
a plaster mountain
painted grey as stone
but not as solid
no, not at all —
our blue electric engine
sleek, with its single white stripe,

skates through the mountain
through the tunnel
my father shaped;
it moves smooth
on the nickel tracks
my father whet;
it moves through the heart
of the mountain he made
with his two hands
for his one son.
Big John and the Garden Center

I lift river-rocks and volcanic stone,
shout over the walkie-talkie
that’s stuffed into my belt
that the backhoe is too close
to the greenhouse
that the whole thing will come down
if that big yellow bucket
moves another goddamn inch.

I inhale fertilizer pellet dust
and the licorice musk of brown mulch.

I tug and pull,
carry and weed,
until a farmer’s tan
divides my arms
into two shades of earth.

I travel to gated lakeside communities
in a busted U-Haul and unload
chaise-lounges, glass tables
for people with more money than me
and I know it and hope
they hand over a twenty spot to split
between me and Big John
because I admire him,
the aspiring firefighter,
his tool-belt, his steel-toed boots
broad shoulders and all
the shit he says to me about
not being a lazy shit
about being worth your salt
about looking hard
at the dirt
beneath my nails
at the sun
as it marks
the back
of my neck.
In December,
I learn to hold a chainsaw
rev it up, hear it gurgle
fat with gasoline
and slice Christmas tree trunks
then tie them to car-tops
Big John screaming
*drive the blade down!*
as bark flies
and my eyes close
behind my goggles.
All I Know of Egypt

Maha Atallah was spindly legs and frizzy black hair
I was busted teeth and a buzzed head.
We picked the good mulberries off the bent mulberry tree
flicked sugar ants off the bad
and ate them anyway. We kicked
a near-flat ball in the summer dust
until the mosquitos came. Tinkered
inside a fort made of salvaged planks and a thick stinky carpet
until the daddy-long-legs and sowbugs drove us out
or her mother, Ms. Mona, finally finished snapping raw peas apart
and called us in from the back porch
her bare feet sticking out from beneath her purple dress
her face was always turned towards us, strange
pair that we were — without any sense
of separation, distance, oceans.
Grime

Cul-de-sac shindig again we’re told so everyone shows up with cans of cheap beer, Red Stag, and stogies. A parched blue clunker parks, bleeds oily greens, pinks and oranges. Dave gave up on fixing it. Fuck it. He’s too broke to care, we’re all too broke, bound, bored and there’s a couple fucking in the pool right now. Chlorine sloshing groins, dead mosquitos and never mind ‘em. No one is surprised cause Mosley’s dick is always out and anyway her bikini bottom’s missing. Alexis says get high so we go inside Sean’s shitty white minivan: get real slow. Heavy. Low. No paint left on the sliding door. No tread on the tires. A few hits and the good bud’s all gone, all soot our minds got sucked into a storm drain somewhere with a dead cat; got sprawled among grey quarry rocks, swept up in this industrial smog, so I sober up beside Rashid, fireside a big backyard blaze and the night sky is starless, vast no revelation coming but this friendship; we are so, so dazed he and I, submerged in suburban grime.
Like the River Stone

From orange, to amber
the edge of the river drops,
and I slide my feet
over stones, cool
beside the crawfish
their ruby whiskers
taste water
in the riverbed
and I am smoothed
like a stone
speckled
like a brook trout
deep, in the dark pool
his hinged mouth open
flat eyes glistening
when the sun hits them,
hits the rocks
on the bank
of the river;
asleep on the moss
the thickest trees,
wide, with many rings
lose their bark
and go soft, slowly
their core crumbles
white grubs wiggle, eat
and the breakdown
is damp
in my hand
they do their work,
their slow, restorative work.

Way down the river
a fisherman casts
his little painted lure,
a barbed bug,
from his fly rod.
It settles on the surface
of the smooth water
— waits.
On Albert, Whom I’ve Never Met

My mother was eleven when her father died. It was a heart attack. I wasn’t there
but sometimes I try to be beside her, tiny in her patterned nightgown

it goes down to her ankles and the walls of the room are tall, a faint yellow
like the early morning light, which falls through the window

onto his bed where he lies on his back; the covers and the sheets are clean, folded over
away from his silent face and she looks at him, and changes

in ways she’ll never show, but she reminds me, now, that I have his forehead
his jaunty, sharp smile, the wave of his dark hair, which is
distinctly his, distinctly ours.

When I kiss her cheek goodbye after lunch
her pink blush stays on my lips for a long, long while.
Ain’t So Bad

Let’s kick the GOP, GDP, GMOs
in the guts
like a drum
like a meteor through the farmhouse

The automaton's fingers
are coated in Cheeto dust
and they’re scrounging for more.

Once you rule God out
you can finally start
drifting, baby, back and forth
between one another, heartstrings
suddenly in chorus, behold
the nothing out there and the everything
rocketed in our bodies.

It may be that stars are old light
that the Earth formed after a mighty bang
(or)
that the Earth was born after a series of collisions,
great big fat space-stones smashed together
several thousand times.

Please tell Sergeant so and so
all the chemical weapons have dissipated,
we ran out of pool toys — my bad
the whipping post is all tied up
for the afternoon, for forever,
— everyone’s fingers have finally uncrossed
witnessing the good fortune
of this single revelation:

your heart is the size of your fist
    is not the size of your fist.

C’mon, we’re all one mile away
from the same buggy graveyard anyway —
and the spring peepers zap them up so quick.
This Boy’s Father Was Murdered in Mexico

Israel moved food around beside the flat-top; the tickets lined up quiet as buried faces.

I watched his father follow him through the kitchen through the big swinging double doors.

The apparition billowed and bathed in the industrial dishwashing machine steam.

His reflection, handsome dressed in a collared shirt, skirted along the shining silver countertop.

Several of the servers passed through him holding trays of martinis as he watched his son still, listening to his Walkman brown eyes tied up in the barbed wire that lined the ditch in Mexico where his father rotted bullet in his back.

Hours passed this way —I watched— and no one gave a shit.
Big Morning Flower

Big morning flower,
    taller than anything I’ve ever seen,
taller than me.

I see you there
    in your slow
    still-waking
swoon:
    a breeze
    blows
    is blowing you
towards me.

    Sunlight’s in your leafy hands
and it is all I could want

    right now, in the cool eastern 8 am light;

the fuzzy seed pods that decorate your head

    are huge, it’s ridiculous
    how good
    you look with them

— and here I am, hairy
shirtless
grogy
with a cup of coffee.

I place my nose
in your soft tufts
breathe in your body
— stalk, stamen, pistil —
entirely epicene,
and in need of water

    like my father’s canoe
    which sits tipped over;
    its stern in the dry dirt.
I run my hands
along its steel keel
look to you,
big morning flower,
and lift my head
to the sky.
Through My Father, Through His Garden

His dusty finger
poked between my ribs
through my left lung
and out my back.

Look into me
and see
my father’s garden:

a cardinal’s black mask
at the painted feeder

a sunfish’s pumpkinseed cheek
in the shallow pond

a corn snake’s tail
still in the green ferns

a dragonfly’s gilded torso
humming over the lily.

Maple pods and pollen
birdsong and yellow light
curl, ring
with and against my breath
become passage —

an alpine trail
cast with dry leaves

a cascade of planted stones
marked with moss

a log laid over the creek
covered in ceps

— to my father’s earth
where his soiled hands
take root and wind,
flower a new glow,
and when I see it
   from the deep wood
from the vale
   from the wilderness
I move towards him
   in brown boots
I move towards him
   in small breaths.
Moving Earth, A Man.

Wide red tiller, rusted and spider-webbed on a bed of pine needles.

Wood-handled hatchet turned to stone in a thick stump.

Acres of evergreens overgrown hiding spots for children.

Only this remains of the farmer and his work

but his jean overalls still snap on the line.