

POEMS FOR BOYS

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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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.

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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
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 tilted).

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

It's remarkable
 how the the hurt
 it 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.

A Train. A Mountain. My Father's Love.

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 trolley 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
groggy
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.