Down In The Valley

by

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A Thesis submitted to the
Graduate School-Newark
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

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And approved by
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Newark, New Jersey

May 2017
Acknowledgements

Thank you to the editors of the following publications, in which some of these poems, sometimes in different versions, first appeared:

Day One: “A Boy Prepares Himself For Therapy”

Forklift, Ohio: “What’s Left”

Foundry: “Dear Darkness”

Horsethief: “Now You See It”

The Iowa Review: “A Waterfall Could Never Be Still”

Nashville Review: “Back Home” (as “Going Home”)

The Offing: “Words of Warning,” “Whatever Vehicle Gets You Through”


( as “Dead Inside”)

The Rumpus: “After My Mother Calls”

Scalawag: “Border State of Denial,” “And Just Like That River, I’ve Been Running” (as “Ohio River”)

Vinyl: “How Does It Feel?,” “No Angel,” “Last Night in Louisville”

Washington Square Review: “Re-Run,” “Dying is a Song The Body Learns”
Thank you to the Squaw Valley Writers Workshop & the Fine Arts Work Center Summer Workshops, where some of these poems were first conceived.

Thank you to all my friends & peers who have ever looked at a draft of a poem, recommended a book, invited me to a reading, or just kicked it with me when the last thing I wanted to discuss was poetry. If I ever finish a book, it will be because of you.

To Nadia, Amy, & Colin, my poetry cohort at Rutgers University-Newark: it has been a truly wild ride with all of you. I have so much respect for each of you and the ways you refused to let the world keep you from your work. I feel lucky to have had your eyes on my work, and lucky to have been witness to the work you're doing, both on the page & off. Can't wait to cross paths with you again on the other side.

To Rigoberto González, A. Van Jordan, & Brenda Shaughnessy: I came to RU-N knowing only that I loved poetry and wanted to write it. Each of you deepened that love, and gave me the tools I needed to ensure I'll be doing this for much, much longer. As literary citizens, you are models for how I want to move through the world. Thank you for making this experience so much more than what I thought an MFA could be.

To Vievee Francis, Gregory Pardlo, & the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop: You were the catalyst. You were the ones who put this idea in my head, and put your faith in me. None of this would be possible without the lessons I learned from you. Thank you for instilling in me that there is something at stake every time we sit down to write.

To my family: There have been many times I believed I was only able to write these poems in spite of you. But the truth is that I write these poems because of you, for you, & to you. Thank you for allowing me to insist on my own path, even when it seemed, at times, like this path would only lead me further from you.
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For my brothers:
Joshua, Jaymason, & Javontae
Don’t ask me why
I came down to the water’s edge—
hell, I was young, and I thought
I knew life, I thought I could
hold the darkness the way a man
holds a cup of coffee before
he awakens

— Philip Levine

In the water, our reflection
trembled,
disappeared
when I bent to touch it.

— Natasha Trethewey

You don’t have to understand it
but you will carry it anyway.

— Rick Barot
Back Home

All signs point toward the heart of the woods. Enter & you’ll come across a makeshift fort of branches, blankets. Lost to the weeds: ripped magazines, baseball cards, a juicebox half-buried in the dirt. Somewhere in the woods, a creek waits for rain. Somewhere, a boy says, is a good place to go. From afar a train sounds its first warning. Follow the boy who holds his brother’s hand on the highway & when headlights approach, walks at the light’s edge. Listen: forgo the road for the glass-filled shoulder. On a porch a woman holds a child between her knees & braids her hair in the dark. A man admires his car’s clean whitewalls & soap suds coat the rosebush, obscuring its thorns. Here, even an oil slick beneath a broke-down Buick knows something of iridescence. Having fled a pack of kids wielding bats, a rabbit’s safe below a car whose lights were left on. Soon, its battery will die. Go inside. Shine your old flashlight in the flooded basement. See anything left in here for you to salvage? The family who once lived here smoothed menthol on their children’s chests so they might breathe.

The room still has the faint scent of incense, & in what light shines through a window the size of a cinder block, dust is a galaxy of dead skin you brush aside with your palm. Before you’re done, a voice calls from the stairs:

Come up for air. Come see the strange lights in the sky.
American Museum of Natural History

You’re only allowed to visit
the rooms I let you see.
Fur on the models so lifelike
they appear freshly killed.
Grass that appears wind-swept?
Bent by hand. A man
dead in the street expects his kin
to find him. If you step in
something wet, hard to see,
don’t think blood.
Some lose their kids
no matter how watchful
their eye. Don’t wander off.
You are here. Here, everyone
flocks to the skeletons
for photos. Not just any,
but our biggest. Stand back:
try to get it
all in the shot. Wait
for those people to pass. Wait,
haven’t you’ve seen this?

Isn’t this the way
you came in? I know
there’s more you want
to see, & you might,
but relax. Don’t run,
but hurry. Go

find your father. Tell him
what you learned today.
You’d better hold tight
to his hand—
you’re about to leave.
This way? No,

this way,
back where the extinct
welcome you in.
Memory

It’s the fallen tree limb
dragged to the highway shoulder.

The radio signal I pick up
entering the city limits.

What’s in the distance:

an air traffic tower,
a plane beginning to taxi,
a Ferris wheel that no longer spins.

Or it’s everything that blurs
as I gain speed:

a clothes swap.
An old storefront sign haunting
a fresh coat of paint. A corner

store fashioned in the hull
of a fish house.

These streets I haven’t driven down
in twenty years.

Backseat filled with unread books,
brochures, receipts.

The dark stretch of road a man walks,
his head down.

The mouthful of wind
as I roll down the window,
ask for directions.
Louisville Slugger

Because *summer* is slang
for *another friend gone*,
    boys here step up to bat,

    aware how many ghost-
      runners they have on base.
    In a church parking lot,

    or on a practice field
    stripped of grass by years
      of cleats, grief

            burns the face and arms
          of every kid. An afternoon
            of hitting pop flies

             isn’t a wasted day
           when there aren’t any fences
              to swing for.

            Because there’s no sense
          in chasing what doesn’t stand
             a chance of being found,

            no boy’s fool enough
          to chase a foul ball bound
             for the creek:

            at best, he’d climb back up
          with ruined shoes, empty-
             handed, nothing

            but mosquitoes biting
          at his ankles. Out here,
             one learns to love

            a sun going down,
          the cooler air caressing
             one’s skin, the bats
swooping in to feed.
Nobody ever thrashes their arms, afraid
one will fly too close,
knowing it’s not what they see but the echo of their voice
that directs the bats away from harm. Out here, not even the dark
forces anyone inside.
Just before he loses sight of his own feet,
the boy at the plate doesn’t bat an eye.
He shouts instead
into the deepening night, “I’ve got two runners on & all it takes to bring them home
is one good swing.”
How Does It Feel?

Outside, a blizzard reduces the skyline to suggestion. Snowed in, I try to peek at my stepfather’s mute television. Through the grain he watches what might be a hand caress what might be a thigh, but the image scrolls higher & higher up the screen. In a month,

I turn ten. I press against the television & beg the camera, lower, lower. At the song’s climax D’Angelo sings, *Let me take off your clothes & I’ll...* If words won’t go further, I want to know what image his mind is fixed on, so that from within surges not a word but music, a moan, something forced free. I’ve seen what older boys did or said they did on school buses.

I’ve heard through walls my mother’s moans & screams, skin against skin, a boot crunching through snow. The night I enter their room & see why the bed sighed when I sat on its edge, what I have to say I forget. What’s scrawled on the bus seat sometimes smears before it dries. The screen fills with snow & my stepfather smacks the set to bring the image back.
On The Front Porch

Where entire days slip by
like water beads down
a plastic cup of iced tea.

Where neighbors trade
the hand-me-down shoes
their infants outgrew, recipes,
gossip. Where one learns to deal
cards & pass joints to the left.
Where children play in summer
sent by parents wanting to get some
peace & quiet in the house.
Where one can find refuge
from the swelter inside,
ic a bee sting or tweeze
a splinter from a toe.

Where ants get a taste
of spilled juice. Where kids
wait for the school bus,
or the church bus. Or the mailman.
Or the police. Or for their father
to come home from work. From
prison. From his other job. His other
woman’s home. Where lightning
bugs trapped in mason jars
slowly dim & at night, moths
gather around porch lights
like storm clouds.
Say That The River Turns

Louisville, 1937

The river’s slow rise out of itself begins in the west, the lowest part of the city. Its first breach of the bank is subtle: a thin film of water over the land, like two hands coaxing a child to sleep.

Within hours, it reaches the first homes: a girl shakes her mother awake & points at a puddle growing beside the bed.

Years later, describing to historians how water seeped in the window,

she says, *I was so confused, I could have sworn the house was starting to cry.*
Dying is a Song the Body Learns

Never has it occurred to me to sing of the parking lot & the locked car

& the possum in the driver’s seat with matted fur, whose ribcage heaves

like the boy too concerned to question how it got inside, who again yanks the door handle, so sure he can avoid this one death. Around him is a circle of others who only point & scream, excited by what they get to witness,

who want it freed despite their fear of its freedom, how hostile one can get after finding itself close to dying then spared. Weeks later in his living room the boy turns to face a gun barrel hollow as the eyes of an animal the heat began to rot. With a grin as steady as his aim his stepfather says it’s just a joke. Over the sound of the toilet’s flush his mother hears him scream,

& with her hands dripping wet she runs into the room where she finds him pinned to the floor, trying to get free of the grown man—please get off him before he gets hurt—who begins to tickle his ribs, knowing the tip of a finger is all it takes to make him squirm. With both heels
the boy kicks but even his gasps are ignored. Unable to blink

tears back, he laughs himself hoarse. That night his mother sings him to sleep then gathers her shadow from beside his bed, sure to leave

his door ajar so from the kitchen she’ll hear him stir. She fills

a pot with water for tea & recalls how wild the boy’s punches were as he made it to his feet, his fists only finding the walls of his room,

how she tossed in the trash the toy soldiers she’d bought him, the ones he set about breaking: she heard the limbs snap off

in his fists after he locked her out of his room. She curses the man who staggered off to sleep himself sober in another’s bed. The stubborn pilot light on the stove clicks & clicks & nothing. All night she’ll scour

her home for the gun. She counts how long it takes for the flame to spark.
Wild Thing: Jimi Hendrix at the Monterey Pop Festival, 1967

It isn’t enough that any pop tune I touch
becomes cinder, is re-born with its plumage
smoldering. No, the moment demands more:
here’s my guitar’s broken neck. Like smoke signals,
a Stratocaster soaked in lighter fluid
sends a message: I didn’t return home
to be an upstaged fool. But forgive my borrowing
of that old American trick. Whether crosses
sparked in front yards, or neighborhoods
from Omaha to Harlem blackened by plumes
of smoke that spell uprising, this lineage lingers.
I’m just what happens when the blues stick
a fork in a light socket. Looking back,
if what you remember best is the threat
of chaos, that second you were afraid
flames would soon leap from the stage,
don’t forget how well I could wield an axe,
how I left an endless ringing in your ears.
Boxing Lesson

*You & your brother are gonna kill each other*

*anyway, my mother said the day she gave us*

*boxing gloves, the day she gave us*

*permission, protection for our hands, to soften*

*the blows, a care that taught us*

*to throw a harder hook.*
Border State of Denial

Louisville, Kentucky

As if there were no North Star.
As though beneath the white oak one might find shade
& not find oneself
dreaded from the branches. If the truth were
just a myth, would that make it any less true?

In the front yard, on cinder blocks
the scrapped hull of what'll get fixed
one day, one day...

as though the air won't keep its promise, can't turn steel
to flaking rust. As though light doesn't still fall
from something dead long ago.

There are some who like to think
this state was never divided,

as if here we don't have brothers
with eyes & barrels aimed,

as though the distance isn't the measure of everything
between us
and what we can't see,

as though dread isn't what sways the trees,
as though one could turn away from that,

as if this wasn't the enslaved side of a river.
No Angel

after Gabriel García Márquez / for Mike Brown

Does it matter if he wasn’t? Chickens pecked his feathers loose. Like the water keeps its quiet lapping, strange eyes visited at night to see if he slept. If awake, his eyes were star-latched & his fingers laced the cage’s wire. The other children skipped their nightly gossip, whispered, It must end soon. Each day, more feathers lined the floor. When the time comes, bury him close to the sea. Let each grain of sand be his. From my window, I’ve seen the wind force seagulls back to shore.
Re-Run

What’s on television is a re-run. You’ve seen every episode. You know when the new ones air. Homework is hard to finish when you’re sandwiched between your brother & two other boys on a leather couch. Each bead of sweat slips past the waistband of your shorts. You’re still in school clothes. You’re still not sure when you’ll be home. When your stepfather picked you up from the bus stop at 22nd & Bolling, you erred on the side of silence. The woman whose house you’re in wasn’t the one in the front seat. She was different. Seen her before. The shows you watch are situational. The cast always returns. From offstage you hear a coughing fit, sharp inhales that let you know you’ll be here awhile. Focus on your lines. Spell, pipe. Spell, hunger. Spell, pawn, not lawn. Smell smoke as it seeps beneath the door. You call that handwriting? That’s not how it’s spelled. Your eraser’s chewed up. Your stepfather’s in the bedroom doing what he does in rooms where you aren’t allowed. Look at the graphite smeared where the words should be. At least the paper didn’t tear. The audience laughs when they’re told.
Grief

No, the night sky isn’t empty. Airplanes circle
as if something in this city’s gone to rot. See this
gnawed inner cheek? Who says each day isn’t a spiraling?
Who hasn’t had a fog obscure their mouth’s runway?

My folks once lived beside an airport. Now,
I never glance up. I know what passes over by its shadow.
A Boy Prepares Himself For Therapy

Tell them no one did this. Don’t say, *I don’t know my real father*. Don’t say you have a tongue even you can’t decipher. Don’t believe in blank lips, pill bottles, the pull

of pathology. How easily they slap a label on a mouth. Don’t explain family as a train you hear coming between you & home, no matter how much you fear

its lurch. Who knows why you sometimes mimic the sound of boxcars rattling back to life.

Tell them he’s been good to you. Tell them they’ll understand if they lay a finger on your Adam’s apple. If they ask, *why,*

don’t say you’re a walking root.
A Short Film About a House Party

The power’s out. No one knows who brought the booze. Seven candles, white carpet, four different shades of nail polish passed around a circle.

On the balcony, smokers ash cigarettes in the neighbor’s flowers. Nobody here is over twenty. It’s summer. No way to keep the beer cold, they drink fast.

Soft strumming of a badly tuned guitar. There’s a long piss between two parked cars, a 40 oz. bottle smashed on the ground, three starlings asleep in the gutters.

It’s Saturday. It’s Wednesday. It’s every day feels the same at seventeen. The moon rising like a tank-top taken off in a bedroom, everyone in the living room cracking up at a joke no one will remember well enough to tell tomorrow. Empty cans pile up in a black trash bag. A hand slides under a waistband, comes back wet. Blue polish dries & stains the carpet. Someone wanting to swim leads the others to a nearby pool with a fence low enough to jump. The cops arrive & everyone scatters, laughing into their hands.
Independence

Come morning the ants will find what traces of mango drip on the sill. Oranges, reds, & blues bloom above the rooftops, disrupt the dark. Given history, it’s hard to enjoy such spectacle, since my people’s skulls kept their papers in place when storms swept through the study. Sorry, I thought the door shut behind me. America smiles as I eat. Thinks love is the word for how clean I lick my palm.
Words of Warning

Before a screw in the rail broke the skin
on my hand as I told my brother not to open
the door for anyone. I mean before I left

him there alone. Before I told my friend’s
mother I can’t explain why I need
to leave & she said be there soon.

Before I crammed my backpack full
of yes, a change of clothes but also
CDs, black pens & paper I could use

while in the living room, my brother lowered
the television’s volume. Before he sank
back into the couch & before he crawled

from beneath the bed. Before I yelled
Lord I can’t take this or whispered How
long you think we should wait until we

move again. Before that. Before the thud
of footsteps down the stairs receded,
& even before we could hear nothing

but our own held breath, our hearts
beating like impatient fists against doors
as we wondered if the quiet meant

he was gone. Before I began to wonder
if a cough or the way my brother winces
as he tongues a cut in his mouth might

give us away, give a man an idea
of where to aim a gun as he raps his fist
against the window, as his shadow stains

the drapes. Before my brother muted
the television when I said I can’t explain
you just have to hide and urged him
under the bed. It was before I peeked through the blinds thinking I’d see who knocked on the neighbor’s door, & locked eyes with a man in a black hat who waved a pistol in his free hand. Before we died laughing at a cartoon hunter foiled again by a rabbit. Before we heard the deadbolt slide into place. Before our mother said to us, *Don’t answer the door* for anyone & left with the woman who begged for her help on our porch. Before that knock on the door. Before we were sure to close every set of blinds to keep the house cool. Before the news said it’d be a hot one today. Before drops of blood appeared in the peaches my brother ate straight from the can, its serrated edge snagging the inside of his lip when he tipped it back to down the juice. For him, that was the best part. Before he went to the fridge, he said he was in the mood for something sweet.
Uninvited Guest

During the 1937 flood, a black bell captain at the Brown Hotel catches a fish in the second-floor lobby.

It’s true, the hotel would have closed if not for us. The first floor flooded so bad that yesterday someone paddled in one door & out the other. Imagine that.
This morning, a shadow caught my eye, swimming between my shoes. Can you believe I bent over & snatched up an honest-to-god white bass? You now have a better chance of finding live fish in the second-floor lobby than a black face that isn’t on staff.

We bellhops run up & down fifteen flights, a bucket of water in each hand, just to help white folks flush their toilets. We cobble together makeshift charcoal grills, so not a single guest goes hungry. And none remember better than us the beauty of these ballrooms, we who escort everyone through these halls, & carry the luggage, & flash practiced smiles as we answer every call.
Dear Darkness

Forgive me & all
my missed calls.

We are living
in what old

folks call trying
times, I mean

it’s Monday,
it’s that season

of the year the sun
sinks sooner

than I like.
I love most

about sunset
how it suggests

distance, a further
place where the

world curves
beyond what I see.

Before I knew
what to call you

I knew you. Dear
darkness, are we

headed someplace
new, someplace

not already in
our bones? I still

have those books
you said to read,
the ones I haven’t bothered with,

too busy with what my folk swear

is a phase, a spell, some sort of down-hearted song. Dear darkness, is that

you at the piano, you who troubles

the keys? Is another word for sorrow consistency?

How we water from our eyes

and call it anything but persistence

beats me. I love most the waiting

rooms, their still dying flowers.
The Body Keeps The Score

You think it will be easy.

You strip to your trunks
& in line behind the others

you wait your turn. Three years
since your last attempt to swim,
you think, *I got this.* Of course

it seems easy—
who wouldn’t believe
they could carry their body

from end to end at least once?
Doubt would only drown you
quicker. You dive & soon

you’re reaching both hands
toward the surface, each attempt
to scream allowing more water

into your mouth, but later,
when the lifeguard’s hands
pump breath into your lungs

you remember none of this,
not the sinking, not even the dive.
You have no idea

how long they’ve been there,
the others, bent above you,
waiting for your eyelids’

flutter. Don’t ask. It’s better
to assume you struggled,
that you didn’t give up

too easily, that you swam
even a few feet before
everything went black.
It will take ten years for you
  to understand why,
    when you stand beneath

a shower & the water
  pelts your face, you must
    remind yourself to breathe.
After My Mother Calls

Without a word to anyone
I clock out early & stop

by the record store. I fumble
for a cigarette & D knows I don’t

smoke, but doesn’t ask. He prices
new arrivals: the counter’s covered

in this week’s releases, bootlegged
concerts, out-of-print imports

he had to hunt down. Outside, a meter maid stuffs another ticket

under a blade. On the stereo, Blind Lemon Jefferson sings—

*I’m gettin’ tired of sleepin’*
*in this lowdown lonesome cell—*

Some blues I know by name. Others, by ear: last night

my brother led a boy down Grand, eyes scanning for someone

lost in a song. Ahead, a woman in work clothes,
purse slung on her shoulder, alone. The boy nodded, knew

she was his best shot. Quiet as the safety’s click

he crept. My brother stood back. Against her skull the cold

barrel of a gun, a nervous kid fingerling the trigger. Now, I thumb
an empty lighter: My brother
got locked up, D. The song’s skipping

sounds like a cry that won’t come
until later, when I try to adjust

a sign in the window
that’s been crooked for months.
**Last Call**

Like many weekends, I stumble home tonight
in the arms of another. It’s 4:00 AM,
& before I can even empty my pockets
she removes my belt,

this woman I met at midnight, who like me
dislikes small talk. Smiling, she whispers *there’s no point*
in *exchanging names now* & I too have no desire
to be remembered. Yesterday, a man

threatened to jump from the Second Street Bridge,
to make the river his unmarked grave,
but a stranger talked him down, said a fall from here
wouldn’t end his life, said he’d only be trading

one pain for another. Here, no building’s tall enough
to mask a sky so choked with smog
& artificial light, one only ever sees a fifth
of its stars. Tonight, what ensures I’ll see

tomorrow is a stranger’s breath against my neck.
A Partial List of Effects

Before me the heat rises off the blacktop.
Before me there was a man & a man
& a man, which is to say violence

has endless revisions. This lineage
I try to reject left me with a partial face,
one black eye & the other brimming

with tears that won’t fall. Black feathers
in the street, caked in blood. A bouquet of dead
flowers I don’t want to catch. Somewhere’s a car

& a driver ignorant of the harm he’s done.
Once, I dressed for school & slid
my foot into a shoe to find a mouse

had crawled inside to die. If there’s one,
there’s many & who knows better than
an exterminator the logic of infestation?

What scratched in the walls disappeared
the scraps I wouldn’t eat. Going hungry
was a silent protest, a power that in the end

wasn’t power, but its shadow. The sun
at my back turns cloth into a burden
that traps the heat against my skin

& on the news they warned of the rays
trapped in the atmosphere. Playgrounds
are empty all July. Lack turns the body

into its own enemy: without water, white
streaks above one’s brow. In the creases
around my cracked smile, salt starts to show.
A Waterfall Could Never Be Still

Laid out in a stranger’s yard, my brother’s numbed himself again. Headlights pass, white as pills on a porcelain sink.

We’re losing light. His forearms prove how dull a blade can be. Night coils around us like smoke from a snuffed cigarette

& worry wears my mother’s voice. Each breath of hers is a candle she cups to keep lit & all her sentences start: I need—

My brother’s eyes roll back. A screen door slams, a dog circles its crate, a lamp switches off in one house then another.

I wait beside him knowing it’s best not to count how long it’s been. I’m not worried when I hear the wind disturb someone’s chimes, the backfire of an old Ford. Like my brother I have a history of doing what I want to my body. I’ve let others drink at the mouth of me, wanting to cure my worry over dirt, how soon it’ll kiss us with its open mouth. Don’t leave me my brother moans. The mosquitoes get their fill.
And Just Like That River, I’ve Been Running

to the Ohio River

Loved one, hard to call you
a body, that word
for what’s still, knowing

you lap at my soles,
dare me waist-deep
into a murk the same shade

as my skin. Tell me:
if not knowing how
to swim I still wade

into deeper waters
am I brave or do I want
it all to end?

I used to think how the wind
made its way around my body
meant I had a kind

of agency. I used to think
you were only there
to keep me from a different state.

On the bank, my blood
courses through me
so hard my heart

tosses like a buoy
in a coal freighter’s wake.
Braided in the trees, balloons

& caution tape, a pair
of shoes once owned by
a boy once someone’s friend,

someone’s blood, a boy
a stray bullet made a stream.
Last Night in Louisville

I didn’t wake this morning
because I never slept. For what felt
like the final time I crawled

through the window of an old life.
   All night I laughed with a woman
who snuffed fires with her palm.

Leaving the bar, she slipped a faded photo
in her pocket. In it, I was clean
shaven, wide-eyed, not like now. Now,

   my mind’s a flickering streetlight,
a pint glass stained with the last drops
   of why my stomach is clenched. Now,

   the microphone’s off. I’ve lost
my keys, the book, & the candle I was
given. The book was one I owned

already, inscribed with a message for me.
   Raised to think I’d leave someday, here
   I sit, on layover, too drunk to see

   the wheels touch down, smoke
trailing behind. An airport toilet
was the last thing he hugged.

Tossing my keys in a drawer,
a bartender waits for me to call.
There’s Never Just One of You

We called one boy filthy
    as he scratched his scalp. Welfare kid,
    we called another, a hint

of white on his shoulder.
    Head lice, I never feared you
    the way I feared the insults

hurled at your suspected hosts.
    The day my mother plucked one of you
    from behind my ear, I begged her

not to keep me home from school, knowing
    my absence might also give rise
    to suspicion. I swore not to tell

& yes, I kept you a secret,
    until another kid never showed
    for class that day,

& when rumors flew about her
    I blurted out, So what?
        I’ve got them too—

I’ve never cried so quickly
    but what did it matter
        they knew you were there?

I couldn’t walk around school
    as though I hadn’t seen you
        writhing in my mother’s palm,

& I can’t think of you now
    as if we haven’t both been forced
        to find somewhere new to stay,

as if my mother, sick of a man
    who’d rather blow her rent money
        on rocks, never hauled trash bags
filled with clothes to the curb.
   Never promised my brother & I
   we’d be in the shelter just two weeks.

Even then I was worried
   about how to keep quiet,
   keep anyone from learning

where we lived. Head lice,
   shame whispered between two
   cupped hands, my scalp itches

& I think of you:
   unnoticed, passing from shirt
   to shirt, from house to house,

the way you nest in a child’s
   hair, until someone happens
   to comb through his roots.
After The Rain Quits

Louisville, 1937

Because the spared are also left to wonder why me, you fashion a raft from the remnants of the life you lost, & drift through the waterlogged streets. Below the water’s indifferent face, picture this: cars, wardrobes, splintered rocking chairs, chests of keepsakes. Two girls find themselves orphaned on the roof of their home, while a catfish swims through one of its shattered windows. If crows retreat to only the highest treetops, how much do the old maps matter now? A boy, huddled in the back of a neighbor’s boat, draped in the old jacket his drowned father always wore, lowers his cupped hand into the water, which slips through his fingers as he brings it to his lips.
Unsent Letter to My Brother in Prison

How do you sleep alone
in a bare room with only a Bible

& an empty cup? Tonight, I knelt
over a photo of us at six:

our first day of school, my arm
draped around you & in our fresh

white uniform shirts, I think
we’re smiling. It’s not easy to tell

since the photo never fully developed,
or because after years of moving

from closet to closet, it’s faded.
How long will we go without speaking

before you start to believe I’m dead
to you? My neighbor says my crying

sounds like a siren. An ambulance passes.
Inside someone’s trying to survive.
If You Know The Words

For the last five Saturdays at The Tavern
a woman has spoken to no one, sipped water

until the DJ played her song. Maybe only
old heads hunched over pool cues know it

well enough to sing along, but whether you
know the words or not, if you heard her sing

until she’s hoarse, until even in the darkest
of dive bars you could see joy on her face,

wouldn’t you start to hum? I teared up,
the way I always do when I hear “The Closer

I Get to You.” My family saved that song
for Sundays, the day we cleaned house

& wore out our Roberta Flack, our Kool
& the Gang, our Al Green, my stepfather’s

vocals backed by his liquored breath. I can’t
count the number of times I’ve had to listen

to grown folks say today’s youth don’t care
for the music of their elders, for those songs

I used to hear at block parties & birthdays,
for the soundtrack to late night spades games

I heard from the bedroom where I faked
sleep to eavesdrop. The rules of that game

seemed odd but I wanted to understand,
to know the songs & jokes so funny

someone slapped the table until their breath
came back. Say the words generation gap

& I assume you mean a void my father
would have filled, or the teeth
my mother lost to the left hand of a man
whose wedding band proved he swore

to hold her for life. But given the glum folk
I’ve watched stumble off the stage,

it’s easier than you think to fake one’s way
through a song like “Love & Happiness.”
Now You See It

Moving away is an urge I once had faith in. If I could afford a therapist maybe they’d say that I was fine
to feel this way. Maybe they’d say I’m just crazy. I turned twenty-six the way a man turns onto a street
where he once lived, his slow stroll raising suspicion. Call me crazy but who’s that peeking out their blinds
as I pass their house? I’ve left whole boxes of my belongings stacked inside a room I couldn’t be bothered to clean,
so quickly I needed to leave. I’ve had a neighbor stand at my door & swing his bat as he swore the black folk living
on his street, by sunset, would be dead. Of course he called it his. Called himself keeping watch in an off-kilter rocking
chair surrounded by his own cemetery of beer cans, crushed & carelessly tossed in his yard. His piss-drunk laugh
like a kettle’s whistle, a sharp wind, a forewarning. I was warned young about men like this, how I might share
a fence with them. I moved to a new neighborhood & never went outside to mow. Weeds took over my yard, but news said
since they don’t know the warning signs a lot of folk die of exposure these days.
The Noise in New York

Next to me in this café
a man bows the invisible
violin in his lap.

Over the music in my earbuds
I make out the melody
of the song on the stereo:

it’s one I used to sing.
I’m never able to focus
on just one thing—

as I tell you this story
believe I hear in my head
the first notes of a harmony,

the first line of a poem
I’ve been waiting to write.
So much bleeds through

the walls of my apartment
I can’t separate my music
from my neighbor’s

clattering dishes, the sound
of someone yelling at their dog
to hurry and shit.

Sometimes I walk
all day from park bench
to park bench, bookstore
to bookstore, like a dog
sniffing out the spot
where he last relieved himself.

It’s hard to mark
your territory when all about you
hang the scents of others
who’ve already gone,
who came & went without
notice. I’ve walked among those

books, fifteen copies each
of last year’s bestsellers on the shelf,
& feared dying broke,

but what keeps me circling
the block, the blank page,
is the fear someone might listen

& only catch a few words
because of a party next door
& everyone in traffic honking

their horns, thinking
they’re the only one
with somewhere to be,

the fear no one has time
for what I have to say,
the fear I don’t know

what I’m drowning out
as I sit & tap my foot
to a music only I can hear.
Some Call It Artificial

My mother untangled Christmas lights & taught us more about cursing than any playground would. From beneath a box marked *summer* I pulled our tree from the closet. We were poor handlers so all its branches were bent but we weren’t a family who wasted time picking from someone else’s crop a live one. We had no car to carry it home and besides, we knew real trees shed soon after they’re inside. Daily sweeping, water, the care required to keep another thing alive? No time. What we had we could keep stored for months. After our few gifts had been given it could be stripped branch by branch & put back inside a box that’s by now mostly tape. Think of all the other messes we had to clean, ones we didn’t bring from outside. At least we had this one thing my family took apart together. The years we couldn’t count on gifts beneath the tree, we counted on the tree, the lights that hadn’t quit.
Whatever Vehicle Gets You Through

New York, NY

For months I’ve been curious about a bird I’ve seen from the train I take to class,

a bird a city kid like me might assume is a heron or a crane. Might assume is a sign. A flock appears every time—
grouped beside the tracks, or sometimes one all alone in a peat green marsh

& damn if I’m not impressed by the sight of a marsh amid all this glass, concrete, riveted steel, rust.

In second grade I dreamt up maps, designed cities & drew them inside notebooks, in folders, on any scrap of paper I could find. I privileged the streets & highways above all else. When my school bus took the interstate, my eyes were fixed on what blurred past below: neighborhoods I’d never been to, neighborhoods my family had left.

By fifth grade we’d moved so often I grew to love it, so being still felt like a trap. It was the worst in church: the endless sermons I could never follow, the stiff pews, how futile those fans were. Some leapt from their seats & some fell
to their knees, mouths suddenly full
 of strange tongues. Miss Betty said
 they’d caught the spirit. I saw proof

the church needed A/C. I never
 thought I had belief, never had faith

in faith. But before the train emerges
 from the tunnel I look forward
 to the marsh, the traffic, the birds

I now expect to see, the view of a city
 I’m speeding away from, another day.
NOTES

The cover image is a photograph taken during the 1937 flood in Louisville, Kentucky, photographer unknown. Source: The Filson Historical Society.

The title “How Does It Feel?” is taken from the D’Angelo song of the same name.

The title “Say That The River Turns” is a line taken from the poem “The Sermon on the Warpland” by Gwendolyn Brooks.

The title “Dying is a Song The Body Learns” is a line taken from the poem “Thank You Lord for the Dark Ablaze” by Steve Scafidi.

The poem “No Angel” is in response to the news article “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling With Problems and Promise,” written by John Eligon shortly after police officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri: “Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel, with public records and interviews with friends and family revealing both problems and promise in his young life.”

The poem “Uninvited Guest” is inspired by the book, Two Centuries of Black Louisville: A Photographic History by Mervin Aubespín, Kenneth Clay, & J. Blaine Hudson.

The poem “Words of Warning” is after Justin Phillip Reed.

The title “The Body Keeps The Score” is taken from the book The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel van der Kolk.

The lyrics in “After My Mother Calls” are from the song “Prison Cell Blues” by Blind Lemon Jefferson.

The title “And Just Like That River, I’ve Been Running” is a line taken from the song “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke.