

2014

# THUNDERSNOW

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THUNDERSNOW

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A Thesis  
Presented To  
Eastern Washington University  
Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Masters of Fine Arts

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By  
Krista Marie DeBehnke  
Spring 2014

MASTER'S THESIS

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# Thundersnow

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Poems by Krista Marie DeBehnke

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank Jonathan Johnson and Christopher Howell for the knowledge, support, wisdom and patience they've showed me throughout my time in this program. I also want to thank my colleagues Lindsey Jones, Casey Guerin, Megan Charles and Joanna King-Yost for their unwavering encouragement to keep writing.

Thank you to my family. This thesis would not have been possible without you.

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I

## I Break Hearts like a Tornado

You arrived aerial,  
a heap of a white Ford barreling into view,  
a cumulonimbus darkening,  
a bottle of whiskey, a few cans of beer  
and my low-pressure *goodbye*.  
Somewhere between driveway  
and clouds at 110 miles per hour broke every window  
you held open and raged  
for seventeen miles of contempt.

I hope you find something useful  
in the wreckage. In time, I'll be that small glitch  
in the perfect summer sky, that little terror  
you thought would kill you.

Tornado in Menomonee Falls, WI, 1997

Evenings came like watercolor paintings. We sat with popcorn bowls resting on our little legs crossed Indian style, waiting for the moms to bring scratched plastic plates of chicken nuggets and cooked carrots. We cared only about *The Wizard of Oz* that flickered its way through the television. Watercolor dripped everywhere—Dorothy’s dress, the storm clouds saturated in gray and blue, the front lawn illuminated with each gulp of rain. How I wished the tornado would hike up the house and take us to castles of emerald, fields of golden corn or a terrible forest with impending adventure beneath its spiny branches. But as the moms stormed in like soldiers, scooping us two to each hip, the sky turned black. We slept on blankets pressed on concrete basement floors as the moms guarded us. Our forever protectors. Storms are funny like that. They kindle our urgency. How I wish in all moments of darkness, as I sit here years and miles away with only a fraction of my watercolor hues left over from memory, someone might rush in. They might say, *I just had this feeling*. They might say, *I just needed to know you were safe*.

Tornado in Oshkosh, WI, 1974

How long before trauma becomes little anecdotes  
we tell to our family with a smile years later?  
Is it measured in relief, shards of glass, and sighs that say  
*I'm so glad nothing happened?*

I wonder if the dog saw the sky saturate in green  
and darken before he got sucked up  
and some good samaritan found him  
days later, two streets away. Maybe he ran.  
My mother says the dog was never quite right after.  
In those moments before the tornado touched down  
my grandmother hung homemade lace curtains  
in her living room windows, and I wonder why she didn't  
run too, before the storm trespassed through glass  
but she said she never looked up, felt safe in her home  
until the blast of wreckage awakened her from that Midwest  
calm. Her head spun, thinking  
where is the dog and  
the kids are at the bowling alley

## Tornado Face

In the Kansas plains and the farm towns of Mississippi  
they talk about a tornado  
like it comes for revenge, they think  
that finger of God knows something we don't.  
They say, *look at that twister! It sure is angry*  
as if it has any choice.

I must be lucky that tornado alley has to stretch its fingers  
to touch me here, but I know chaos is beauty from far away,  
especially when I gaze up from the garage in July  
to the sick yellow-green of the sky  
as if it moans, *I don't feel well, something's not right*  
and it spits out the angry wind-soul that has sucked up  
all of the uttered woe from the people's breath below.

The silver spoon, the cracked locket  
and the blue front door found in the lawn  
don't mean anything.

We Were Rolling Stones

*For Sarah*

Somewhere in Alabama, I gasped while she laughed  
at the tornado forming on the side of the highway.

The great, black funnel lurked while thousands of raindrops impaled the car  
with every intent to stop us. She said it wouldn't get us

*I'm gonna fade away*

and sped faster, laughed harder, gripped the wheel tighter

*A storm is threatening my very life today*

and the boys slept in the backseat,  
their mouths lolling open with each swerve of the Corolla.

She turned to me but I couldn't return the smile, I was done for, this was it,  
our feeble attempts to outrun adulthood caught us; we couldn't postpone  
growing up

by thawing our Wisconsin bodies in the Florida sun.

She said she couldn't see anything and laughed again,

*I'm gonna fade away*

and I closed my eyes,

hearing nothing but "Gimme Shelter", clouds colliding and her humming.

If we made it, I don't know. I won't open my eyes  
to see how close the tornado is, if there's time left  
if we just sped a little faster,

*If I don't get some shelter*

*I'm gonna fade away*

It'll be okay

*it's just a shot away*

*it's just a shot away*

someone's got the wheel.

## The Eye of the Storm

The television was forgotten pictures  
after the satellite went out,  
and I was the eye of the storm  
as the movers took my father's desk  
and books and loaded them onto a truck  
headed to some upstairs apartment  
a lady with six cats rented to him  
on short notice. *You have to know how hard this is  
for me*, he said and I nodded *it's fine, it's fine*  
until the rain was too impatient  
and the trees bent to sweep him around the block.

## Watching for Tornados

We're on the couch again  
under the weight of the summer's chardonnay  
and the plants are drowning with their roots toe-up  
from the flood of rain, green with water gluttony.  
Green like Mother's dress,  
and we should get in the basement  
because Waukesha County issued a tornado watch  
and her voice is small, the violent wind  
and all its life forced through the small crack  
under the door that fills the empty rooms of our home,  
the melancholy howl drowning all noise  
as she asks what we should do.

## First Snow

Silent, a nighttime visitor,  
it's been waiting as you pour your morning coffee  
to notice today is a little bright brighter,  
a little colder. Pull out sweaters  
and boots that somehow survived; don't complain  
about wet ankles and eyelashes, stray wind  
in your coat, a frozen steering wheel.

Don't forget to thank it. When sidewalks become  
slush footprint massacres and driveways fill up  
as soon as you turn away, thank it. Once,  
it made you stop. Once, it made you  
want to be the same: silent, determined,  
beautiful.

## Thundersnow

I trekked through slush, a carnage  
of footprints leading to and from bus stops and taverns,  
the wind pushed me inside as he tried to tune the radio  
but it was just the dead voices of white noise.

We sat in the dark after the power went out  
and laughed about the end of the world,  
yet still, I wanted to run outside  
to the places where thunder met snow,  
where the roads and sidewalks were hidden,  
where he didn't look at me  
like I could save him, a halo  
of snow dust still clinging to life in my hair.

It was the moment when soul and body understood each other,  
the supernova warning that I was no savior.  
I put on his boots and walked until morning  
while the sky turned red like all truths  
that bled out overnight.

II

## Endings

Take me to the time we lay on the air mattress  
beneath the curtain-less window until  
night bled into morning and we rolled  
into each other to avoid the sun          avoid  
getting burned until we couldn't take the heat  
anymore      until sweat clung to the roots  
of our hair    I would pretend to be too tired  
so you would drip cold water down my back  
and I would turn to see your blazing  
morning face

Now your head rests on my legs in the backseat  
of a Volkswagen and I can count  
the snowflakes still clinging to your hair  
and you're telling me  
you're damaged    you're telling me this song  
on the radio is your favorite  
and reminds you of her today

### The Cold Shoulder

When I catch myself humming  
that country croon,  
I conjure up imaginary conversations with you.

A mother loves the rough cut edges and colors outside the lines  
like you used to think I was funny  
when I got mad—

but these little chats sit on my tongue  
until they are bitter and become  
some things I could never say.

So I light a candle  
and as it turns black with soot  
I imagine your hands, dirty from working in your yard  
or on your car  
and I think you're just too busy  
thinking of all the things you want  
to say to me.

## Bee Problem

September is trying to sweat out summer and the bees have gotten in through  
the walls,

they buzz between blinds in office cubicles and sunlit strips on the floor.

The one at my desk doesn't want to hurt me, it just wants to get out  
just like every boy has said to every girl, time and time again. The wings are tired  
from trying to fly away; all the times I watched you drive home are nothing  
compared to now. The paper-thin wings carry the bee higher and higher,  
and I hope you found what you were looking for—high on a mountainside,  
or high on new breath. Too high, I can almost hear it scream  
as it catches on a wisp of web—and maybe you screamed, too,  
when you realized you were stuck. It's only struggle, struggle, struggle,  
as madam spider approaches and cradles it still in her arms.

I can almost see you out there,  
middle of nowhere town, thinking you did right by going back,  
a sigh of relief like a sunset passing behind the mountains  
until the weight of all the things you gave up  
consumes you.

## Arugula

“Hand me the lettuce,”  
you say, only I prefer  
*arugula* because it  
sounds like something  
decadent, and I pretend  
it spills from the bag  
like in a commercial  
as the fake-eyed-fake-smile  
mother — who probably  
isn’t even a mother —  
acts like it’s the  
greatest meal  
ever.

Fake like that smile  
you sometimes give me  
when you lie,  
as I’m static at the kitchen table  
watching,  
and you tilt your head,  
back facing me,  
but that purple vein  
always throbs  
in your neck  
when you’re nervous.  
It’s getting fainter  
now.

Can you feel it?  
My eyes move  
to the back of your head  
and I wonder if you notice  
as I notice  
the way you move your hands  
under the cold water  
for seconds longer  
than necessary.

I grit my teeth  
at the expectation—arms  
and legs not with nerves—in the  
moments before you turn  
around, but you don't.  
Your back is facing me.  
I'm trying to fish the lies  
out of my teeth  
that I can't swallow  
because my body  
rejects the poison,  
but it's just bits  
of arugula,  
and you're still  
calling it  
lettuce.

## Narrow Escapes

Your truck was angry,  
or maybe it was the way your hands  
gripped the wheel, the whites of your tendons  
popping up like steam heat in a kettle  
because I didn't apologize.

Mom always said I was old  
beyond my years, yet fifteen  
was too young for twenty-one  
and when your body pinned mine  
against the shed behind your parent's house,  
the paint chips that nipped my thighs  
were breezy compared to your fingertips  
digging at my forearms—  
it was a faint alarm.

The snow was too heavy that afternoon, like your sigh  
when you gave up and drove me home,  
but when the lurch of the truck made me smack  
my forehead into the dash, because a young  
buck appeared, a mirage among the flurries,  
the blood was nothing compared to your eyes,  
and you didn't hesitate to shoot a bullet from your father's  
gun into the eye of the stag, a tangle of antlers in the grill,  
"because it was faster that way," and you said  
it would bleed to death anyway—  
it was a siren.

You were a killer and you didn't know it,  
and I could have been a tangle of limbs  
pinned against that shed door,  
the dead gravity in your eyes, the crosshairs of the scope  
zeroing in on my neck, chest, thighs  
hunted of the hunter.

How lucky the snow was heavy that day,  
and I could be the misfire.

## The Weight

I thought it would be easy  
to leave this place,  
but perched on a rooftop  
overlooking a solitary willow,  
wind crept around my elbows and knees,  
trailing its fingers with the softness of breath.  
Yet the pressure of it collided with my bones  
rattling that heaviness in my chest like the feeling  
I get from that back road turn taken too fast.  
As the sun slid into the place that makes it bleed  
violets and sunflowers  
you said, "you'll be back,"  
and so I breathed.

The Day You Said You Wanted to Leave and I Swear I Felt Absolute Zero

I learned once  
in a science class  
that everything  
is not as it seems:  
solid—but instead,  
constantly moving parts  
are held together  
in gravity's womb.

The way I held you  
today will not  
last. I see the way  
you yearn for absolute  
potential, your hand  
slips from my grasp,  
molecules of the same carbon  
now alien.

## Flight

The squirrels have brainstormed the best strategy  
to conquer the red birdfeeder. They flash their white bellies  
as they leap from the yard's low-hanging maple branch,  
offending a nearby cardinal in their feeble attempts  
to interrupt her breakfast. Her bright mouth has a song to sing  
but I don't hear it from this side of the window, her sounds  
are suffocated by your footsteps that make their way to me. The squirrels  
circle around the base of the birdfeeder, keen to invade.  
You're trying to be sweet as you ask how I slept, but your arm  
around my shoulders is too heavy, I wish you had hollow bones;  
I wish the cardinal would fly away  
and stop standing her ground. Oh, flighty bird,  
please teach me a lesson in leaving.

## When You Said You Would Never Write Again

You told me once that people can't create  
art and still be good. Maybe that is why  
you took your notebooks full of your "mistakes",  
ripped them in pieces, pages of your life

gone. Maybe it's the way you grew  
in shadows of your parents' wishes, trying  
to make them proud somehow, now to begin  
to pull away from poems and writing,

things that won't put food on tables, and things  
that men don't do, you quoted your father  
as you sat across from me, and my limbs  
knew before you spoke, I knew the answer

to my question: Why are you doing this?  
*Let go of things you love and you'll be missed.*

## Nomad Story

I should have known because the tea was cold;  
maybe you weren't coming back anymore.  
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

From a distance, I watched you paint a wall  
in poppies and ivy and you were alone.  
I should have known because the tea was cold.

You once told me bruises were an art form,  
an ugly reminder to do better.  
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

I never asked how you broke into pieces.  
You would have shrugged and smeared pain on your hands.  
I should have known because the tea was cold.

I waited for you to come the next day,  
a mug clutched in my hands, an offering.  
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

But you took a Greyhound to Chicago,  
leaving me alone with the paints.  
I should have known because the tea was cold.  
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

## Haunted

I wish you were a stranger  
but today you're on the walls in sugar packets  
on which you wrote haikus  
for me and you're on my desk  
in a dried purple flower  
I once put in your hair  
on the way to the gas station  
because I needed the gravity  
of smoke in my lungs  
and you didn't get mad  
and I didn't get mad  
when you didn't get that job  
and you didn't tell me you were hungry  
but I cooked for you anyway  
because I like salt on my fingers  
fried eggs and the ease  
of too much peanut butter  
spread on too little bread  
eating while overlooking evergreens  
that one tree is still you  
isolated between abandoned  
church and house

## Meeting Again

Crows weave around an abandoned lot  
and the autumn trees are jealous.  
The nights are getting longer and colder  
but nature's wise survivors  
put on their best faces of red and yellow.

I'll be looking to disappear on the wing  
of the closest bird  
when I see you again, I'll try  
to smile despite the shame,  
try to survive one more winter.

## After College

In Spokane International Airport,  
I carefully seclude myself  
in rows of chair islands. Who knew  
it would be raining today  
as I fly over mountains that separate  
me from you?

I picture myself  
running into you at some college bar  
where we slung back  
rail whiskey like rascals  
I'd wear my old leather boots

and you might say  
*so you're a writer now*  
and I might say  
*I'm just free-falling*  
and you might laugh  
because poets say those things.

But you won't notice  
the way my chest bends, a rubber band  
pulled and snapped back  
as you walk away—  
because you've forgotten me.  
I don't blame you  
because I'm the kid with a butterfly net  
spotting the first monarch of spring  
determined to run until its mine,  
and you're the kid in the park  
with a baseball glove  
waiting for a friend to show up.

III

## Train Girls

A girl with fire-blonde hair grew up next to train tracks  
so it messed with her hearing. She told me the quaking house  
and the propelling whistle filling every room of the ranch-style  
home wove into the fibers of her dream world  
and never tried to interrupt. Across town,  
I tried to let the sound lead my eyes to sleep.  
I could always depend on the steady beat and the soft, distant echo  
of the whistle to be some kind of comfort  
and pull me back down from out-of-control insomnia  
to my bedroom above the kitchen.  
After dark we sometimes put pennies on the tracks  
and thought we were brave to stand on the rocks behind Nixon Park  
to scream as the train screamed with us  
because it was always going to be there  
and we didn't understand how the monotonous  
will always long to break free from ritual.  
Now, at twenty-two, I lay in bed and hear the train from across town,  
I think about how it was different, and my father  
still lived at home, and I wasn't visiting from across the country,  
and that distant train whistle was comfort  
instead of loss.

## Ring Finger

My mother's hands have always been smaller than mine,  
and when I reached out to catch her hand  
to admire the row of diamonds  
swimming in gold, a constellation on her skinny finger,  
she paused between kneads of sourdough,  
standing in the kitchen that was once  
pumpkin spice orange  
and said *it'll be yours when I die.*

But now I picture it bleeding in a box,  
as if a knife-wielding surgeon who drank  
too many chardonnays at lunch  
tried to fix it, puncturing the skin one too many times—  
It's counterpart, a gold band, a single North Star  
on my father's hand, disappeared  
two cities west.

Now when I hold my mother's hand  
and feel the blank space on her finger,  
invisible scar tissue, we laugh  
about selling that old thing, taking a plane to Mexico  
or anywhere with a beach.

## Morning Fog

I cannot remember a more perfect fog,  
a kind rain strokes its fingers  
down my window as I burry my head  
deeper in blankets while little puffs  
of feathers wake from their warm  
sleep and swirl on the edges of my skin.

I remember cold March mornings  
like this, when the Midwest  
could never be anything but mine.  
The house would stir below, clockwork—  
Mother and Father arranged dishes  
in their perfect routine and poured  
coffee in the usual mugs worn with stains  
and sat in their matching plaid chairs.

I would finally peel away blankets  
and wander silently into the kitchen  
because I didn't want to break their space.  
Even the fog was tired of the monotony  
and slipped away quietly with the sun.

Now when I wake alone in my own  
apartment, I know the coffee is mine  
and won't grow tired of my favorite mug.  
But mostly, I'm glad I won't wake  
to find it pressed to another strange man's mouth  
as I know is happening somewhere back in the Midwest  
while my mother puts away dishes  
and sits in that plaid chair,  
trying to make mornings as normal as they can be.

## The Sound of Silence

The last time I heard it was

After summer

After sleep

After father and stepfather passed each other  
on the driveway

After hiding photo albums that were  
land mines

After answers stopped being excuses

After the white hot buzz of anger  
turned into a lull of rain

that pushed one hell-Summer out

to welcome Autumn's chill

to kill every memory

I didn't want to survive.

## Divorce

A flash of light dissolved in night,  
gray stones submerged  
and forgotten by a stranger who lovingly  
skipped them one summer ago.

A catatonic winter approaches like a plague,  
an echo, A hunger for the release of water  
rushing around rock, a prayer for too-thin ice,  
for anything to burst through the surface, for anything  
to call forth life.

## Entertain Solitude

I entertain solitude like a scientist,  
I study the refrigerator full  
of too much food  
just like my mother  
who cooked for a family of four  
long after us kids left for college  
and my father walked out.

I studied my mantra  
*people leave people constantly*  
with no conclusion, no analysis,

I wanted her to be like me  
and my walnut heart  
but she's always been a beam of light  
feeling into blind corners of empty rooms  
while I remain an echo in a cave  
made by someone searching for another  
who is long gone.

IV

## Myth

Holiness is a silver hook in the lip  
of a bleary-eyed walleye caught  
while I sit in a canoe  
as August closes its blinds on the sun.  
Holiness is air thick with mosquitos  
that wither in the bonfire's smoke offering  
to the sky. Holiness is the echo of thunder  
in a log cabin built by someone's  
great-great-grandfather. Holy is a place  
we believe in, existing behind April's blood-moon,  
out of sight, but waiting  
for the right time, month, year  
to show its face.

## Innocent Trees

I set fire to the trees sucked dry from August's thirst,  
their skeleton hands clawed up to the sky and reached  
for one last raindrop. I watched to see if a little chaos  
might make them sing,

but their patience is much too great for vengeance  
and stood rooted where I wanted them to fall, cracking  
down their spines and silently clutching down  
into their earthy home.

These trees don't remind me of Christmas,  
full and heavy with pine needles, they can't hold me up  
in blizzards and ten-below,

and once the storm shows its fangs, a crack in the wind,  
a ghostly creep of dusk,  
I could see myself on the next plane south—

running away has always been easy for me.

Song to the Thing with Feathers  
*after Emily Dickinson*

“Hope” is the thing that beckons—  
no matter how many times we’ve yelled  
into night when daytime hauntings  
can’t be quiet any longer,

it comes invisible, sudden  
on the wing of a sparrow  
perched in a shady grove  
keen to bask its body in approaching light—

it says come, stand with me,  
it’s coming, we’ve all seen the sun,  
who’s to say  
it won’t come again today?

Poet's Sun Salutation

In the library,  
he might as well be stone  
the way white fists  
ball up under his chin, his body  
hunched forward in The Thinker's pose—  
aching contemplation, a thought—  
and he slowly lifts his back  
into a yogi's mountain.

As the light settles in his eye,  
pencil paused at his lips,  
his mind's isolation thaws in the sun—  
ready to write some kind of truth,  
whatever truth seems worthy  
of the paper.

## Life Lines

The chained marks on my hand  
begin between thumb and index—  
they are strong, wild and intersecting at will  
as if they own that space  
and descend to the center of my palm  
losing momentum, narrowing, straightening  
as if the effects of age have beaten out all  
spontaneity. An inch later, the lines disappear  
into faintness and flatness,  
melting into the waxy surface  
of my palm, into another line's path.

A palm reader says you can see  
a person's future in this line.  
Somewhere beyond atmosphere,  
these lines reflect some unknown  
constellation in the sky. I lift my palm  
to the sky to collect rain.

Are you a warning?  
Don't tell me.

## Grievances of an Antipode

Somewhere between Antarctica and South Africa  
lives my antipode, existing only because of distance.  
We orbit in a dance, two poles of a magnet  
knowing the other is always there  
but will never touch  
because we have to understand the unreachable.  
Theoretically, I understand the science.  
I understand the fullness of the Earth  
like the fullness of my hands  
reaching for something I can't have.  
Would it be so terrible  
if antipodes wouldn't be so lonely for once  
and could exist for something  
besides knowing they're only there  
because a land more important  
is furthest from where they stand?

## Writer's Block

I sometimes think about jumping trains;  
my father told me his friend from school  
did once, but drowned in a boxcar of coal.

In this café, a train passing a block up  
looks friendly, maybe my words bought tickets  
to some far-off city  
and forgot to tell me—

I hope they're not drowning too.

How hot is the metal of the fire  
escape across the street  
and could I climb it to wait for my words  
to pass by, see them playing cards  
and laughing about the disaster  
they avoided by leaving me?

It's easier to leave  
when a place gets desolate—

A small bird on the sidewalk  
eats the leftover crusts of my sandwich  
blown over by the wind  
and it must be hard to rummage  
for scraps in this hollow body.

I think my words were hungry—  
I hope they find what they were looking for.

## Insomnia

That night I was thirteen and didn't read *Island of the Blue Dolphins*  
for school I smelled him before I heard him,  
a sour reek of regret as his gravelly voice spelled out  
everything about to go wrong. He's always here  
to tell me my bank account balance  
or how I forgot to buy milk for cereal in the morning,  
and just as I'm drifting into something resembling rest, he's there  
next to me with rough hands hard enough to get under my skin  
so my arms and legs twitch with exhaustion. I'll tell him  
I need a glass of water and detour to the couch, but he's there  
waiting to replay my failed relationships and memories of dead friends  
and he'll smile and turn on the television  
until the sun blinks into the room  
and I'm stale like food left out overnight.

## Ballerinas

Their toes press into little wooden coffins,  
perhaps bloodied, their tangled feet  
bound in pink satin bandages.

Oh, how they bend in a backwards  
half-moon hunch, arms spread like birds of prey  
or an angel, their chests rising  
and falling, heaven's heartbeat—

and this must be why poetry is written.

V

## Thirteen Ways of Looking at Beer

I.

Eastbound on highway 94,  
yeast wafts through the open window  
from Miller's brewing paradise.

II.

"Poetry is like beer," he said.  
"It fills you up  
and makes you warm."

III.

Alone  
I am lonely,  
Alone with beer  
I am perfectly lonely.

IV.

A man sipping a Riverwest Stein  
looks to the bartender  
who may as well be a prophet  
in his beer haze.

V.

Somewhere, someone dreams  
of drinking every type of brew  
to replace mind & body's problems  
with barley and hops.

VI.

Poetry is like beer--  
we swallow bitterness  
for the buzz.

VII.

At twenty-one in July  
we never felt more alive

than when we sat on the living room floor  
after spending our last dollars  
on a twelve-pack of PBR.

VIII.

In Milwaukee, someone collects a pound of empty cans  
found between frat houses after a night  
of binging  
to collect five dollars  
to eat for the week.

IX.

Beer is like poetry,  
it can numb  
or twist the knife deeper.

X.

The beer bottle that fell and broke  
when I leaned over on the hood  
to touch your arm  
was silent beneath roars of plane engines  
we watched overhead  
at Mitchell International Airport.

XI.

We connect in pints, on dark benches  
in some Irish pub  
where we've said so many honest things  
they must be etched on the walls somewhere.

XII.

Beer is the body's ocean  
sloshing in our stomachs  
like a wave's break.

XIII.

When I drank too much  
I felt poetry's hunger.

## Thoughts on How Milwaukee Would Survive an Apocalypse

Sometimes I see apocalypse in a fresh pour  
of Miller Lite, the foam peaks are smoke  
after the brewery was lit on fire,  
the yeast rises into the air, a signal,  
but the people in this city are resilient,  
they take their blue collars, their white collars  
and stand at the Milwaukee River as one,  
they watch it rise to meet the cobblestones of the Historic Third Ward,  
they know the city is falling, but they still have their  
Schlitz, Pabst, Miller,  
and when I drain my glass, it's the last light on Earth  
disappearing, but Frederick Miller's granddaughter,  
the Girl on the Moon, is perched in the sky, she raises her glass—  
the High Life—champagne of beers—and smiles,  
saluting.

## The Return

After my friend tosses my suitcase into the backseat  
and we've left Mitchell International, she'll say something like  
*God, I need a drink*

because that's Milwaukee's language. We unite in pints,  
on dark benches and under dim lights of an Irish pub  
where we've said so many honest things,  
they must be etched on the walls somewhere.

In the anticipation  
when crossing over Home Bridge,  
I see Lake Michigan on the right—it feels like an ocean  
and my skin rings, a magnet passing over metal.

How could I belong anywhere else,  
and are we allowed to belong anywhere else?

But really, my friend will say  
*God, I need a drink, but I've got to work early*  
and I'll be sitting in the corner  
of some Irish pub waiting for a pint,  
contemplating time and when 2 am  
stopped being an existential experience.

And some wise bartender will say—  
but he won't say it  
because I've known it all along—

*You can love a place to death  
but it can still live on without you.*

## On Smoking

At sixteen, I would steal cigarettes  
and roll down the windows of the family Mitsubishi  
as I drove down I-94 and pray Mother wouldn't smell it  
through sticks of spearmint gum. A frown, then a long blink.  
Fingers pressed to her nose and a small hiss *why?*  
The danger was almost as good as the high,  
but now it's bad advice whispered in my ear,  
stolen breaths and a nicotine hitch-hike.

Between pursed lips I draw it in,  
feel it carousel around teeth  
and gain speed until it lurks  
with my throat—a cough if I'm unlucky,  
a numbness in limbs, a head rush  
if I get it right. Smoke, I used to love you.  
I used to love the way  
my grandmother snuck out the back door on holidays  
for a mouthful of Virginia Slim smoke. Everyone says  
I remind them of her, but especially  
the twist and jab of the cigarette into the ashtray  
and the way we both watch its last breath spiral up  
and catch a ride on the wind.

The Last Dreamer in Farmington, Wisconsin

A small girl decorates the rusted train tracks  
with penny buttons while an overgrown willow stretches  
its arm overhead, yawning to the mundane March evening.  
A rock skims across gravel  
and sends a torrent of crows into the sky.  
Blacker shades of shadow catch her eye  
on the bark of the tree and she presses her fingers  
against two lovers' names, carved summers ago.  
The last streetlamp flicks on, her mother calls  
dinner, she turns up the unpaved drive,  
past a rusted truck. The mother drops her gas station uniform  
over the armchair from two marriages ago.  
The mother asks what she learned today. Charcoal drawings.  
She dumps macaroni  
into a scratched plastic bowl.

## Graduation

We sat sipping bottom-shelf whiskey  
feeling young, feeling good in what we said there,  
we were visible to the city  
but home still had our backs.

We let night fill us  
and built a grave of cigarette butts  
next to an empty bottle that exhaled a sigh,  
exhausted from our firefly bodies,  
all buzz and glow.

I could survive on smoke and whiskey breath  
and I would for just one more summer  
before we all dropped off like eyelashes—  
silent in our need to go  
and be people we didn't understand yet.

Home isn't where the heart is,  
but a monument turned to a chess piece  
small enough to put in my pocket  
and place on a shelf in a new city,  
easy to pair with a story  
to tell to someone new.

## The Holy Table

In 1945, my grandfather lay here,  
his ten-year-old face covered in a cloth of ether  
as his father cut out his tonsils with a pair of scissors  
I can still find in the garage out back. Years later, here,  
he said goodbye to his uncle who asked to hide his car  
in the garage for the next six months, the same uncle  
who changed his name from *Harnitz* to *Harn*—  
fit for a role to play as a getaway driver in Chicago  
for Al Capone. Here,  
my mother sewed clothes to match clothes  
a plumber's and teacher's salary couldn't afford.  
And here I sat eating my great-grandmother's German dumplings  
while humming a song from my own ten-year-old mouth.  
Hello again, table, scarred with years and fingerprints, constant  
upon the linoleum,  
live on, live on.

### Assisted Living

They are oxidized pennies.  
I enter the kitchen  
that shakes with a man's sobs  
as I smile, he cries into glasses  
of milk, he knows somewhere  
he sacrificed happiness  
for a family's peace-of-mind.

I want Grandmother to say *Granddaughter*  
but she forces *family* from her mouth.

Down the hall, a woman pulls defeat  
to her chest alone in her bed,  
a blank calendar on the wall mocks  
as Grandmother and I shuffle  
to the porch with a pack of Virginia Slims.

Today, she remembers how to smoke  
as she learned when she was fourteen  
so I say  
*I made your famous spaghetti, the one with the green olives*  
But she frowns  
*I don't think I'd ever make something like that.*

Hartland, Wisconsin

I remember the August air was sticky,  
and clung to our skin like nylon.

We tried to escape it, weaving  
through corn fields and barns  
off County Road H, stopping only  
to look skyward and feel the quiet  
I have not felt since.

I wonder what made us so  
restless. Moving to cities  
where we expected something better  
never arrived when I traded cottage doors  
for elevators in the city. Sirens at night  
were once horror, now mundane,  
and I worry because the worst  
had always been a coyote near the dogs  
in the yard. Maybe I could breathe easy  
if I saw you in those jeans with the hole  
in the knee, and I wonder if you feel the pull,  
the weight, the constant needle-prick memory —  
reminder that you're not where you should be.

That night when we stood  
with bare feet on grass,

I should have memorized the lines  
on your knuckles, the distance between  
our shoulders side by side, the sound  
of your voice as evening inched  
into morning.

## The Neighborhood League

On Stonefield road you could find us kids  
in a baseball trance,  
only wanting to make it home  
to the pink Frisbee dented  
with Charlie-the-neighbor-dog's teeth.

We paused at a series of rocks that were  
first, second, third one, two, three, smack  
the wiffle bat was the spark  
that told our bodies to run.

We sacrificed our knees to gravel  
and our skin rippled up like waves,  
the blood didn't faze us until  
the sky began to exhale  
and night crept in to welcome streetlamps.

One-by-one the mothers called us in,  
and mine would sit my brother and I on the edge  
of the bathtub and scrub our knees and feet  
until they were so clean they felt tight with soap  
under cotton sheets.

And maybe she read a story or two  
but the hum of summer cicadas  
lulled us into dreaming only baseball dreams.

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