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FIRST SET

by

Alfonso Zapata

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

First Set is a collection of poetry by Alfonso Zapata, with poems contained therein from as long ago as 2015. This thesis and project examines art, especially music, and its effects on memory and emotion. The world that these poems explicate is charged with passion and drive, spurred on by the continuous exposure to art in its characters both fictional and autobiographical. The goal of these writings is not just to portray how people can be affected by art, but to give art its own agency. In the poetry's efforts to demystify the subject of art, art becomes its own living individual, capable of manipulation and humanity just as much as the people who view it.

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INTRODUCTION

When, as an infant, I cried inconsolably and seemingly for no particular reason, my mother soothed me not with common lullabies, but held me in her arms as she played D'Angelo's album *Brown Sugar* in its entirety. As reported by my parents, something about the enormous bass and mid-tempo tunes always elicited a dumbfounded expression on my face, stopping the tears and leading to furrowed eyebrows. The lyrics were of no great concern to this baby, though looking back it is amusing to think about my infant self being calmed by the song "Sh*t, Damn, Motherf*cker," but I still find myself rather connected to this young-self, enamoured with the mere sound and ability of a musician to achieve this sort of reaction, even from a child less than a year old.

This musical infatuation wasn't limited to my infant-self, but was nurtured by everyone I knew. Music was always playing in the house growing up, whether from a CD pulled from massive stacks of jewel cases, from the radio, or from visiting family members. Seemingly everyone in my family had been touched by music; On my mother's side, the Kowalkas, her parents performed in bands in their 20s (as well, my grandfather, at the age of 65, has recently joined a KISS cover band where he dresses, makeup and all, as the guitarist Ace Frehly,) her brothers played in their own bands releasing the occasional homemade album, and my mother herself played instruments recreationally. The Kowalkas, while supportive, were not very close and the family was spread across the Midwest.

My father's side deserves a bit more context, however. The Zapata family is from Mexico, and made a living tending to their small cattle farm while taking odd jobs. I have been told that my grandparents, while not in bands per se, often sang and played

accordion whenever a party was nearby. This holds true even today, as every party with this family, either Quinceanera, first communion, or even a birthday party, relatives all show up, instruments in tow, ready to play for each other. In 1980, running out of options financially, my grandfather made the decision to cross the border into the US illegally. To this day he does not like to talk about what drove him to cross the border or the experiences he went through at that time. He spent months doing whatever work he could in Texas and sent most of his money back to his family in Mexico. Eventually he was deported, but was able to return, family in tow, on a work visa. They moved up to Toledo, Ohio because of its then strong automotive industry, and within a few years all of them were legal citizens. It was there that my parents met, and these two families intersected. The Zapata family has always been tight-knit, a massive portion of the family living within a ten-minute drive of each other, and the stories and music they produced had an enormous effect on me.

This thesis is a collection of poetry. While the preceding paragraphs may not have shown much indication of this, the information contained within them has been paramount to my growth as a writer and my decision to write in this medium in the first place. Ever since I can remember, writing has been a constant and enjoyable pastime for me. One early memory for me was when I was seven years old, and my English teacher instructed us to write a one page story. I tried writing at that length, but I instead found my writing lacking with that limit, and expanded the juvenile monster story to four pages, complete with numerous plot twists and attempts at character arcs. My writing was not limited to classrooms, however, and much of my free time, when I was in elementary and middle-school, was spent writing detective stories and superhero comics. When I was at

that young of an age, I wanted to make a living writing stories like those of King and Patterson, and I was content with writing stories that were simple and enjoyable.

In 2010, at the age of thirteen, I was admitted to the Toledo Early College High School (TECHS) program, where I immediately began work in college courses at The University of Toledo. One class was assigned to read “Good Country People” by Flannery O’Connor. I was pulled straight into the world that O’Connor portrayed from her Andalusian fortress. Not only was I enamoured with the strange and sometimes deplorable characters that she penned, but moreover, I was greatly taken with the world of the south that she wrote about, the strange air that hung about every description and image she displayed, “Christ-Haunted,” as she has said (O’Connor).

I had first come to the medium of poetry in 2013, when I took a creative writing class. At the time I was still hoping to write stories, though following the lead of O’Connor, I felt drawn more to the direction of short stories. However, I was dismayed to find out that the class was greatly focused on poetry, something that I had a difficult time working with in the past. However, the instructor, from Mississippi, was able to bring my attention to much more accessible and narrative methods of poetry, of heated images and cynical tones of authors like Rodney Jones and Larry Levis. I had finally found the one medium that I could be in constant awe of, and from that moment, I wanted to write something that could have the same effect on someone else.

The only problem I had, then, was deciding what to write about. My early poems were weak attempts at copying other writers that I wanted to emulate. I had badly attempted renditions of landscape poems of places I had never seen. There were ill-fated stabs at the surreal that, embarrassingly, used phrases like “some kind of Lynchian

nightmare.” There were sentimental attempts at writing about loss from a writer who has lost very little in his life. There was even a send-up of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* that I wish I could forget about. By this point I knew I liked poetry, but after so many failed attempts to find my own voice by emulating others I wasn’t sure if poetry liked me. The instructor running the workshop gave us a prompt: write about a family member that has done something important to you. Until this point, perhaps out of fear of doing a disservice, I had avoided writing about anything personal or related to my family. Back then, I felt unworthy of writing about these people who were so important to me; I thought that rendering their stories in my own voice and poetry was disrespectful and couldn’t possibly live up to the standards I had set for them. Still, pressured by the prompt, I decided to write about my grandfather’s experience of crossing the Mexico-US border, which now appears in this collection as “Southern Ellis,” the title drawing the comparison between a Mexico-Texas desert and Ellis Island. It was my first stab at writing something without a ravine of separation between me and my subject matter and I was happy with it. Not happy enough to put it down and never attempt to revise it, but the reception of it, from my peers and myself, was a vast improvement over my older work. From that point on I started writing about other topics that interested me: food, movies, literature, history, and above all, and unsurprisingly, music.

Always the pop culture addict, I plumbed my brain for various interesting things I had read about and attempted to incorporate the histories and lineages of these cultural artifacts into my writing: an article about an old bluegrass musician, a book on a curse-believing bluesman, and stories I was told about relatives taking place long before I was born. Poetry, for me, has always been about the effort of piecing errant ideas and abstract

concepts together with the palpable and familiar. To refer to Larry Levis' "The Poem You Asked For," "The poem demanded the food,/ it drank up all the water,/ beat me and took my money,/ tore the faded clothes/ from my back" (Levis). This poem has always been a lighthouse for me when writing my own poetry, a beacon to return to. Levis' endeavor to not only personify an abstract concept, but to demythologize in such a way to write a poem not just about the art, but how art affects its subjects and participants, has continued to be one of my guiding influences. Here, poetry isn't portrayed as a beautiful muse or a romantic god, but as a flawed and difficult person. In my poetry, I seek not just to chronicle and bestow meaning upon things that exist in a world with very little conclusiveness, but to give these subjects the agency they deserve, out of respect for whatever person or story I am writing about.

As I continued to write, music became a frequent topic that I sought to work with very often. In my childhood I had the habit of over-personifying inanimate objects, afraid of playing with one toy more than the other for fear of their jealousy. This desire to do justice to everything and not disappoint or inconvenience appears as anxiety and tension in my work. My writing frequently self-criticizes, questioning its worthiness of telling the story of its subjects. This anxiety, I feel, is most apparent in "Body of Work," where the speaker feels unsure about their worth in relation to people who put their bodies and minds at risk to make a living by working in jobs that sustain the lives of other people. In a similar manner, my focus on music poetry partially stems from this hyper-focus on the celebrity of these musicians, and in writing I found myself constantly attempting to go deeper into the lives of these famous people and understand who they are/were beyond the televised interviews and memoirs. I branch out, occasionally, to examine the person

behind the “about the author” section in such poems as “Andalusia,” where I explicate the death of Flannery O’Connor and the prospect of memorializing the farmhouse she lived in. I quickly focused on the myriad of ways that music can impact people and reflect the worlds that they come from, as well as the things it can reveal about celebrity and fame. In a majority of these poems I write about what music can do: empower, conquer, degrade, perpetuate facades, reflect loss in the lives of their subjects, and in the end, rehabilitate. In the music section of my collection, frequently tagged with the year that the events therein took place, I contrast the impact of this music upon those around it with stories about my family in the hopes of drawing connections and understanding personal events both tragic and wonderful through the constant presence of music in my life. Above all else, I believe that this strong focus on music comes from a place of respect, even when the subjects may be deplorable and unsympathetic. Music, as I have discussed to an absurd degree, has helped me through many stages of my life. Even now, as I write this introduction, I am listening to music. I feel that, with all that music and its creators have done for me, my poetry is written in the pursuit of paying respect for the amount of impact these songs and artists can have on their audiences.

After graduating from The University of Toledo I continued my education at USM, and it is here that my poetry began to turn more toward the introspective. I am unsure of whether this slightly increased level of comfort with writing about the “I” was a result of this new group of eyes and opinions on my work, or if it was a natural extension of my writing, but either way I am grateful. While I had a difficult time adjusting to writing about topics more close to the heart for me, I believe I have become quite acclimated to writing in this way. The “I,” however, is still a work in progress for me.

Though I can pour my thoughts and influences out on the page in the context of a thesis introduction, when it comes to becoming very intimate in my poetry I feel reluctant. This reluctance can be found in poems such as “Leftovers: Goodwill Products,” in which I confront my own anxiety with writing about myself in alternating prose blocks and image couplets. I am still, clearly, working through my ability to write about myself, but I am thankful that my time at USM has been able to bring this out of me and force me to vary my poetry and subject matter in much more meaningful ways.

As well as popular culture, I am also greatly interested in the power that “place” can hold. I focus particularly on the idea of places being an extension of the people who live within. This manifests in some poems such as “Last Flight” and “The Unpicked Tree Out Front,” where I write about places and how death and loss can transform them into something far different, even when they appear to be the same as they ever were. Respectively, these poems examine the oft mentioned “Day the Music Died,” mythologized by Don McLean’s song “American Pie,” and the speaker’s loss of a loved one. In my personal life, I had much time to ruminate on very few places because of my lack of exposure to other environments. Aside from the very occasional vacation to Florida, I hardly set foot on ground more than a few miles from my home until I became an adult. My cousins, close enough to be considered siblings, lived nextdoor for most of my life, and my grandparents lived nextdoor to them. I knew these places to an absurd degree, and was fascinated with every change that was brought to houses and yards. I always questioned the reasons behind renovations; why my aunt and uncle decided to get rid of all the grass in their yard in exchange for concrete, why my grandparents were finally able to get rid of the massive satellite dish in their yard that they used to receive

Mexican television stations. It is this inquisitiveness that drives me to write about locations as if they are their own living beings as a whole. This circles back to the story of a younger version of myself being conscious of how inanimate objects felt. With this mindset I write about places as if they are people, reacting to the world around them, remembering the way things were in the past, and looking towards what the future holds.

Ever the perfectionist, I have prodded at “Southern Ellis” numerous times in the five years since I have written it, and I am sure that I will continue to come back to it and revise in the years to come. This is true for many of the poems within this collection. Some were written in a flash of inspiration in one day years ago while others were submitted to workshops too many times, but they are all the same in that, while I am happy with the work that I have submitted in this thesis, I am never truly finished with them. In my attempts at respecting my subjects and doing them justice, I always feel that they deserve more. And so I revise. I’m always revising and I will do so for the foreseeable future. I want my work to be as good as it can get because I want to feel that they are worthy of someone’s time and precious thoughts.

I was once told, by a workshop peer who was uninterested in my anxious writing and self-critical passages, that I could not write because all good writers are narcissists. While I disagree with that assessment, there is something to it; I write in these contradictions. I simultaneously find my work to be worthy of someone else’s time, (presenting it in innumerable workshops and expecting feedback from my readers,) but also write about not being worthy. However it is in this contradiction that I believe this poetry can flourish. In the same way that I give agency and power to things both abstract and inanimate, I believe that everything has a voice that is worth hearing, even if the

voice quivers with uncertainty and nervousness. It is my hope that, though I will likely never be finished revising the poems contained within this thesis, the work I present here, in its current state, does its subjects justice.

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PRAYER TO JOHN COLTRANE

O savior, Yardbird
Saint, faith in one hand
and frantic song
in the other, lend me
something, from gita
or jazz, to carry me along
just a bit longer, until another
trouble may wash over the old.

O Jersey hopper,
lend me your nerve
endings, eyes,
wild song, flicking back
and forth, morphine
beat, standing
bass jolt, impulse
carrying breaths
along waves of hands.

O siren-mouth,
ocean music, bull
with saxophone horns,
A-bomb moans
echoed through brass,
lend me the energy
that sent the man
with bullet train
eyes to sea.

OF THE DEAD AND DYING

Spark your cigarette at the door,
because what you're gonna hear
deserves the lazy haze
of nicotine filter.

It needs the candy decadence
of burnt out lighting gels
turning the center from sherbet
to ghost story glow.

Because here is where the packaday rasp
goes to play in harmony
with the voices of the wooden floor,
knot holes whining out,
pounded by polished gator-skins.
The drawls and lilts and sighed
out vowels soak into the walls
like a dark wine stain.

Behind the voice is a leaning barn;
sun-bleached panels and ailing
rafters grovel across each other,
painted on the wall like a window
to the world these folks come here to avoid,
indulge in their peccadilloes for a time.

Sex behind graffiti
sprayed stall doors.
In the epileptic
flicker of the jukebox,
boys named Sue
fight their daddies,
and ladies named Fancy
strut between
sagging barstools.

When the dancers lose their energy,
the bartender holds the drinks,
doors will open,
and they'll spill
out into the streets,
where they will be serenaded by
the huff of passing trucks,
the restrained bass within them,

and steel mill grind.
With the music still inside,
they raise their hands to the gathering clouds
above, if only to keep it all
from coming down on them.

1964: THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN OF SKIP JAMES

*"I'm gonna milk my heifer, milk her in a churn
If you see my rider, tell her t'ain't a darn thing doin'"*

How goes the story now,
you, of the accursed genitals,
bowed over and hollow

like the afflicted ginkgo
curling out of the sidewalk
in front of your hotel.

Ailing black limbs shed their bruised skin.
You run your coarse hands
across the glow of gold leaves

as refinery scented air
awakens them like applause,
but a breath of sulfur is their only reply.

Someone grabs your
new acoustic for you,
and helps you into your wagon.

The beagle next door
doesn't like the look of you,
and howls like gospel.

And those hippies and young folk,
their Newport so desperate,
light and soft, their hands collide

and go red,
as you strum steel, not catgut,
and plumb yourself

like an oil derrick in charred earth,
to live off old pains.
Then you remember that you forgot

who these lyrics were about,
which heifer you milked,
which woman was stolen

by your devil after she enacted
her erectile hex.
But still, the pile of cold white

quivers at the sight of you:
the blackened surface,
the aged yellow,

and the stink of change,
like rainwater creeping
between sodden shingles.

1968: ELEGY FOR THE LIVING MIKE NESMITH

I've seen the documentaries,
mounding suits and tired eyes
bemoaning volition, who like to leave
formulas un-fucked.

The prowler and bigmouth,
heartbroke in Glenside
and San Anton' looses
his wool hat to flounder

for a lopsided slink
into rooftop pool.
Soft execs crowd parasol
shade, contemplate a drowning,

or at least a whipsaw
clip of that fretting
hand, that threatens
their NBC monopoly.

His skin
immune to studio,
they know, I know,
will pull

this manufactured band
into another shape
meant to snap
down the road.

One producer, fired,
headed The Archies,
a group of kids who
couldn't fight back.

It's a losing game,
but Mike will shake out
thick hair and walk,
breaching the artificial
blue.

1969: JOHNNY'S SAN QUENTIN STINT

"San Quentin, you've been a livin' hell to me"

The convicted are bathed
in dark jumpsuits;
they match his undershirt.
But, he's the Man in Black,
and God help him
if he didn't keep
up the appearance:
it'd be crime to criminals.

So they sit at the feet of this suit,
captive for the day,
but when *he* complains, they listen.
Studio sunlight bounds off his brass
tuning pegs, nylon strings
and throws color in their eyes:

The guy in the way back saw the worn green
of Aunt Gina's lawn. He mowed for her when
she got old.

Stage right, someone caught a glance of the hot glow
his acetylene torch gave off in the basement.
always workin' on something, his wife would quip.

Front and center, gaping eyes pull away
when he sees the violet light
of the long gone garden he used to keep.

Johnny sips water through a far off grin,
pinky-out grasp on the tin cup
smudged by the heretical mouths of lifers.
The cup falls to the ground,
and he stomps it like a cigarette.

1982: CEDELL DAVIS, THE KNIFE MASTER OF THE DELTA

“Work hard in the daytime, rest easy at night”

The guitar a gargoyle, perched precarious
on his knee, he wedges the knife between
arches of bone and muscle,
drags it against the strings,
and scrapes out a song.

Fingers craning out
like chicken wire, he assures them
he knows what he’s doing.

But they can’t see how.
The stripes on his suit hobbled
and curled over each other
as he worked toward center
stage and took a seat for his show.

Stage isn’t the word for it.
neither is show: it’s a lecture.
But he’s not preaching the importance
of perseverance,
how even he, labored and stooped by polio
can still perfectly graze against his steel.
No, he says they’re wrong about Elvis,
the King stole music from people like him,
and that’s it.

Flanked by the brightness
of young eyes at desks, pastel sweaters,
white collars peeking out,
his assistant walks up with hands out
to give his blessings:

A yellowed acoustic, chipped but still shines.
A butter knife, gashes deep as time.

1988: THE FAÇADE OF U2 IN HARLEM

Bono's got His brogue
and tight ponytail.
The Edge's got His tall hat,
blocking the sunlight
from the cathedral window.
But in the house of the lord,
He would be naked without His electric,
rows of effects like ripples of pews.

The choir squints
silently waiting their turn.
But right now, this is Bono's stage,
slouching in the chair
with the torn cushion,
Edge's sharp strings pelting
the room like pinpricks.

The director bleeds Sunset
and La Brea,
red eyes complicated by Ray Bans.
He snaps at the choir to attention,
struts, paces, stops, picks
at his sleeves.

Bono rises like smoke,
and the choir sounds its pent up roar.

And slowly, The Edge loosens
His grip, like so many
who've felt the spirit, calloused
palms and fingertips clapping along.

1997: JIMMY MARTIN FINALLY HAS ENOUGH

The limo license plate says *KING-JM. The King of Bluegrass* printed on faux worn hats he sells like sermons to any well-groomed Lomax-types that recognize his voice, buzzing like the lights outside the venue he was never let into. One too many swigs of Seven has him putting on his going-out suit, blue enough to stand out across treelines and crosswalks as he pulls his limousine through the backlot, holding it under their stage lights: license letters frayed, oxidized fringes of wheel-well and driver-side door rub off on his banjo-tuned hands. But here he is, backstage without instrument or accompaniment, shooting the shit with Skaggs, though with his bourbon walk his aim is off, hostile, like it's the old days, only they are onstage tonight, and he's just a guest they're too nice to kick out. He listens for a while, and walks out as Skeeter Davis sings to his crowd "it ended when I lost your love." He takes that limo, rear window singing *Sunny Side of the Mountain*, back up his hill and parks it in the spot with the dried oil and sunken tire marks that only he knows, hidden under leaf-shade.

2004: NATIVITY OHIO

Between bouts of Catholicism,
my aunt, head turned to heaven
and sweaty hands clamped,

invited us to sit
amongst her flock of Christian
women, shrouded in jean skirts
and clouds of dandelion
to watch her darling
as Virgin Mary.

My uncle, bleary and bearded
in Budweiser hat bore
halfhearted hugs before finding his seat.

And as we shranked back
into the dull, wine-red seats
from the cluttered choir's
violent din, I thought of my uncle,
sleeping in the seat next to me
as his daughter warbled the story
of the newborn king.

The man who gave me my first guitar
when I was four, a jade green electric
with AJZ on the side in gold mailbox letters.

Who played in endless bands in his youth,
grinded through garages and record stores.

Who sold his father's Les Paul
because he needed the cash that day.

The play ended, and he was awakened
by applause and the air brush
of Mother Mary's canonically

blue shawl.
Eyes glowed amber and watches checked
as three wise boys bowed.

He swiveled, silent,
but his wife pinched him,

wrinkled eyes and low brows,
so he clapped too.

2015: WELCOME TO GIZZARDFEST

calls the stage-stood
yooper hollar across
his congregation, swaddled

in Sabbath and Skynard.
Rows of patented maize
and blue camping chairs

sag from the tailgate
chants of agnus dei.
For sale in ex-antique shops

and spore-choked stalls:
Fervid eagles on mesh hats,
“Authentic Potawatomi Jewelry!”

and the namesake.
Above the preschool talent
show, and my grandfather’s

swirling Hendrix riffs,
a pouch of throat carvings,
fried, diced with pickle spear,

peddled by wilting hair
and grease-licked teeth.

ON THE BACKBEAT

In the chilled theaters
with their full bars
and polished oak dance floors,
you can feel the heat.
The sulfur quilt
and smothered lungs
that brought in that stagnant
barrel house air and coughed it up
to a six string strum.

Through the thousand dollar guitars
with their mother of pearl;
the unscratched slide
and the automatic tuners,
you can see the calloused hand
frailing against rusted strings
pulled tight.

In the one-two beats
and new drumsticks
you can hear the metronome crack
of pickaxe on stone,
cries of *revelators* and *southern homes*.
The violent rap of a knuckle
on a hollow body of alder.

In the car rides home
you can hear it.
The windows down, barreling
through the unlit road's coil
around those singing hills.
The tires rolling names
off of their blackened tongues:

Yellow pine bridges that Skip
may have slapped together
along with the stories
of poisoned liquor
and a woman's curse.

Dirt roads that Patton
didn't want to set forth
on alone.

And the clean paved ground
that buried the old paths
in smoldering asphalt and tar.

In the wind before the storm
that rocks power lines
and cuts out the TV,
you can hear their voices
passed downriver
in a game of Chinese whispers.
You can hear that freight train howl,
where their hands left marks in the dust
on the flaking metal of a boxcar.

LAST FLIGHT

This is not another music poem since its tone,
curated and clipped, has turned to lie.
There were no lyrics in Buddy's sigh
as crippled wings pressed into frozen loam.
The day the music died becomes a marketing turn
that McLean tried to mythologize,
but riches and Boppers fell from the sky,
and settled in static shaded homes.

A slumping tree beside grave-tributes sings falsetto,
spine arched and twisted to hit those highs.
Dry grass sways to some unsung rhythm,
whispering their love for the show. *I used to know*
them before they were dead, the lawn lies,
and plane crash reverb quakes a hymn.

1980: SOUTHERN ELLIS

He must've seen something special,
miles east of the inviting steel labelled
Boundary of the United States of America
grilled above freedom's fine print.

Eyes gaze through chainlink diamonds:
scorning desert,
unimpressed river,
not different from where he stands.

But those eyes stare years
past sun bleached Old Glories and Jew's harp
background music.
Past down-home defenders
and Brando's fake mustache.
They see a Chrysler Plant in Ohio,
friendly neighbor,
yard-filling satellite
dish for Univision,
two more Alfonsos across from him
at the dinner table.

He grasps garden shears in bruised hands,
breaking sweat,
and places them on the links,
crushing and bowing flaked metal and wire.
The shears fall to the ground,
and he claws through the toothed crevice,
birthed onto another's spilled hourglass.

SHADORMA FOR GRANDMA'S HOUSE

She would be
furious if we
saw the house
in this state,
where dust specks star-field stainless
steel sink and TV,

still tuned to
Primer Impacto.
Novellas
up next, but
first, the turn and simmer of
our storm winds,

tearing the
rooster wallpaper,
sorting her
hen statues.
Their eyes dull, and their ears want
what they had before:

the cackle
of accordions
and boisterous
Norteño.
The lingering hiss of lime
dropped into import.

THE UNPICKED TREE OUT FRONT

Grapes and berries ferment and leak
under their own potency,

drops of nectar lose their glissando grace
to a banging rain, trailed by a breathless drought.

Their old sturdiness, broken bark marking time,
was a comfort. I liked the reliability,

the comfort of looking out the window
to see years memorialized in simple wood.

The flesh of the overripe goes limp,
bonds struggle for a grip,

as one after another drops
to the garden along with each other:

It drains into the expectant dirt
to feed the immature seeds.

The oils, deep and slick, will run,
until bold sheen grows muddied and gray.

SLEEPING WITH THE WINDOWS OPEN

The people raise their panes
to feel fresh air as they wait to
be awakened with the sun.

The insects get to work, flicking off
of a dog-scraped screen door.
Ready to seek out lunch,
they probe the newfound,

waft through dry air,
identifying the oils of human life.
Few will land on necks,
sudden as heart attacks,
and drink their fill,
then escape before daylight,
and get back in their green loungers.

And the people will wake up with an itch
that's not enough to put them off.
They'll step into the torrent of a shower,
forget to leave time for breakfast,
say goodbye to the kids,
and head off to work.

2017: LABOR DAY

I arrived in the trunk
as a surprise,
acted confused when
my grandfather let the light in,
suffered cheek pinch
and violent embrace.
Concerned, he interrogated,

Have you checked your tires?

*Niño, how many girls
have you met?*

His once buoyant voice,
that bounded and bled
across octave and pitch,
sagged, drooped,

told me the news -
he learned about college bullying,
and how his grandson could suffer.
I reminded him of the music
trapped in his attic.

Lilting between
crowd's shoulder,
we sat on the stairs
in silence.

I tuned his twelve string,
set up the mic.

The din of incandescence
and *Sabado Gigante* dimmed,
the card game
hushed to a pause
as he eyed old pictures,
of a woman from Reynosa,
and sang again

ANDALUSIA

This shouldn't be beautiful.
The land a woman set blue eyes
on the final years of her life.
The once-white farmhouse,

long patio now bruised gray,
trounced too often
by the tip-toes of sightseers.
Torn peacock pens

still occupied by a chosen few,
kept inside despite aching
chicken wire and thin,
split boards. The land wood green,

not maintained for years by Regina
or one of the hired hands.
Overgrown, thriving.
Crepe Myrtle branches grasp

out toward the roof's rusted-red, running
a serpentine course to their terminal,
earthbound point.
Reaching into my pocket

for the recommended
\$10 donation, a dime
leaps into Milledgeville air
and assimilates into mud puddle.

Behind the requisite,
the paragraph-plaques,
which chair *Wise Blood* was written in,
Pleurisy,
 butterfly rash,
 turncoat T-Cells,
 dead at 39

in her personal cage.
But through crevices
and grime, a bloom
of splinter soaked reality.

AGING

After Pablo Neruda

They sprung across blacktops pearlescent with slick.
Burned like Neruda's overturned lamp, oil seeping deep
into drowned earth, drawing giddy shouts to flecked sleep,
the flickering tip on the end of a blackened wick.
Age plays games, twists back like car wrecks.
and expanding bones shed clothes like skin sleeves,
naked, new flesh slows its pace, urate crystals ease
into joints. Corneas tessellate and outgrow old specs.

Blacktops too slick for feet, and kids forget the scrape,
clumsy hands burned by skin-on-skin, throats scratched
with laughter talk tipsy with a tinge of embarrassment.
Weak personalities are excused by youth, but the shape
that we take now was carved by our glorious past,
so the lamp is less drowned, more burning out confinement.

BODY OF WORK

I've known folks
I wish I had parts of:

stomach of the
carnival geek,

the stray hairs
on the nape of her neck,

ulna of the slide
guitarist,

the courage of vested
men on turbines,

navel of
Houdini.

I've wanted to hear my name
in someone else's mouth.

The rain turns every
surface into creature,

boilers gurgle in basements,
heavy as tongues,

and lungs stained
from the phlegmatic

cough of the
refinery on Navarre,

ours was a city
built on rust,

and who can say which stories,
scribed or lived, will last longer?

OHIO'S STATE BEVERAGE IS TOMATO JUICE

and maybe that's why I pop antacid
after digesting anything

more corrosive than water,
why a tomato's subcutaneous soft,

skin bursting and tender,
has me horrified of hematomas.

We're famous from Farr's wardrobe,
Hungarian sausages and bad baseball

but my strongest memory is being lost
in a dead mall, calling for help

through shutters to the empty Value City
where my dad used to work, but now

occupied by dead ladybugs (our state insect)
and dirt-clogged grout lines.

And I wonder if a place can be bad for me,
if Ohio is to blame for my reflux woes,

or if it's me, and that there is no place
that can't hurt because of memory.

I still, returning to Toledo on breaks,
water my grandmother's old tomato vines,

trying to keep at least something together
and control a memory.

MAN IN COMPUTER LAB

Lifelines trench deep,
forefinger twist-top torn
and scalded tips hunt and bore
into gummed keys. Resume reads:
*Houston borne, forty year
roughneck, and hoped for more.*
Slow and shaky personal lore
takes shape on LCD screen.
Do you need any help, sir? I ask.
A quick glance
suffices for reply,
and hands keep tapping,
tremored clicks and backspaces
leave a brief shine.

REPOSSESSION

Except the occasional scrape of our own steps,
we moved as if in water, trudgeon across blue
lawn back and forth from a recently empty
hill house. To manor with empty, anxious hands,
and back to gurgling truck with a refrigerator, defrosted
ice trays pooling in unplugged freezer, leaking into
boots and air. And I thought about ice; how mere
heat, as if from an exhausted body, can raze
bergs and flood their miniscule, hidden caverns.
Can rend bonds from each other so viciously
that they can never return to their old shape.
Trailing fluid over the gravel driveway,
I saw a flower bed, starved by drought,
and stepped over it.

POST-BIRTHDAY

What hour do
pull tabs snap,

or not forget
a child's helium

cackle.

What hour do grackles
ignore their young

for burrows of corn,
keel cracking seed

sample.

My voice is caught
in a balloon that

I have never known
when to deflate

UPON HER SUGGESTION

After Milton Avery

left foot slipping
beneath the azure,
the curves a bleeding
suggestion

blotch and stripe,
that imply lounge
on the sanded smooth
of arbor.

she's at rest,
excited,
dead,
or none

of the above.
with everything
she isn't, she is.

LEFTOVERS: GOODWILL PRODUCTS

Shoe sole stained
with nicotine.

I used to think that inanimate objects got jealous of each other, so I balanced play between every Hot Wheels car, kept ink levels even between ballpoint pens. *Hitchhiker's Guide* and *Princess Bride* had the same amount of ears bent to hear which superhero figure was spoken with more.

Overbleached
maternity dress.

I still feel like thrift stores are animal shelters, paperbacks and glassware putting on their mooney-est faces for sympathy. And I wondered how they'd speak to me. Idle chat about what *Pixar* got wrong? Would they sing in my appreciation? Wake me at night with furious chants?

Stylus-less
Turntable.

And I wondered about my voice. How I speak to others, and how I am heard when, like the candlesticks and scratched DVD's, I cannot talk.

Ergonomic keyboard
With no I.

COMPLACENCY: MACON WAFFLE HOUSE

Of the basest, most suppressed of urges,
of self-harm via grease trap, I stop there.
Nose stings of over-peppered eggs
and salt-stricken cracks in the booth seats.

The tin speakers call me,
playing some gospel.
Choral harmonies flow through my mind
like filigrees of creamer,
but the lyrics, of *hands of devils*
and *tongues of angels*
stick in there like barbed wire.

I count the praying flies
on the black laminate windowsill,
made stoic, either preserved in maple
or imprisoned in salt like Lot's missus.

First communion at nine, feeling off-kilter
from the goblet of grape juice in St Peter and Paul,
sermons in Spanish,
flanked by canines of jagged stone pillars
and the downward gaze of Lord
upon the unpadded pews,
CCD classes in the basement
of the empty school,
taught by mi tia.

Second attempt at servitude
drowned in the eclectic drums
and wavering balance of Rivercrest
church, hundreds of the devoted
housed in the building formerly known
as Giant Eagle.
The spirit was *righteous*, and His love
was *for all of y'all*, but space was cramped,
and He must not have had time for everyone that day.

And last attendance at Bible Temple,
earning its Pentecost from the pastor
pointing a raging finger in my direction
shouting *complacency*,
while the cumulus-headed old woman in the

front row stood, eyes shuttered,
head up, muttering in tongues
as she shook her holy tambourine.

Angels and *devils* got me
thinking of half-mexican kids back in Ohio,
baptised in the murk of runoff
and algal bloom.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSING PIECES

I have stolen spare keys, peeling back
mud-scrubbed “welcome”s for notched brass.

I have held this totem in front
of someone else’s door, as cartoon violence breathes

heat through the walls. I never enter,
but shelter the metal in my nest of missing pieces:

a roadside heel, action movie VHS found
in a sandbox, a torn dog leash,

uncupped headphones, ash blasted
envelopes.

This is not an attempt at a lesson, to keep homeowners
on their toes. I think, holding

the key to my mailbox, that these were all carved
from slabs, and wonder where the unseen leftovers went

to make this piece of metal transform, what separates
a pet rock from the un-shorn cliffside.

I think about writing about loss.
I think that I am missing very few things.