

WE ARE THE RAIDERS

Josh Crummer

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ABSTRACT

WE ARE THE RAIDERS

by Josh Crummer

We Are the Raiders is the start of a collection of poetry that focuses on two areas of the poet's life: the town he grew up in and its history, and the emotions of growing pains and nostalgia that separation from a small town can have. These general categories cover wide arrays of specific topics that are elaborated further within these pages, like history, animism, memory, subjectivity, time, tradition, the ebb and flow of industry, love, death, social barriers, and acceptance of the passage of time. Through these topics, the city of Zilwaukee assumes multiple voices and shapes. My hope is that one day, this will be the first book of its kind for this region.

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INTRODUCTION

In many ways, *We Are the Raiders* began years before I ever set foot on CMU's campus. Condensing my personal history of twenty-four years into a paragraph, I lived in Zilwaukee from birth to my twelfth year, and have resided in close proximity to the town ever since. Conception on a collection about Zilwaukee started during my sophomore year as an undergrad, during a period of my life where I found myself attempting to reconnect with my roots after six years of commitments to high school, college, and girls. I arrived at a conclusion that, due to pressure from society on teenagers having to pick a career and get into “the real world”, I never had a chance to truly enjoy the natural beauty of my environs. A common issue I noticed with my friends is that they felt rushed through the whole scholastic process, and that the demands of a 40-hour work week siphoned what little energy they had to appreciate it themselves. I reasoned that the best way for me to change that trend in my life was to return to Zilwaukee and recreate days of time spent outdoors, wandering the town, and seeing its sights – while I still had the chance.

From start to finish, I had two goals in writing *We Are the Raiders*: to create the ability to move beyond my childhood as well as connect with my origins, and to create the first poetic document ever created for Zilwaukee so that others may enjoy the images I have seen during my time spent in this area, both as a resident growing up and as a neighbor today. Having lived in the area known as the Tri-Cities (Saginaw, Bay City, Midland) for my entire life to date, I feel as though I am a very credible source regarding each city's unique traits. Nestled between these three busy cities, Zilwaukee is very quiet, and it is this mood that I tried to capture in the

beginning of this manuscript. At first, I assumed that the entirety of my work would be about myself and the experiences I had as a citizen of Zilwaukee. Upon reviewing early drafts of such themed poetry, I quickly realized that my perspective alone would not be enough to tell any meaningful stories about the town itself, and a blend of confessional and nature poetry began to emerge. In fact, the title '*We Are the Raiders*' is a statement taken from Zilwaukee School, the school I attended from pre-school to 8th grade. In the writing process, I discovered that there is more to this small town than meets the eye. Upon light research about the area of Saginaw, I discovered that Zilwaukee appears sporadically throughout its records. Preliminary research of Zilwaukee also yielded a common response from the people who lived there: that there was nothing in the town worth writing about, and that there wasn't any history to find. This only spurred me more in my quest to find out what this town's story was.

Because of the desire to illustrate different styles and formal approaches throughout the collection, I had studied a fair number of poetry collections – many of which were required reading as a grad student in CMU's poetry workshops, while some were collections I already owned. Two collections emerged as a starting point for framing what this project could be like: Sherry Fairchok's *The Palace of Ashes* and William Olsen's *Sand Theory*. Upon reading both of these collections, I noticed that both of them followed a three-part scheme. In *The Palace of Ashes*, the collection's first section is a subtle history of Taylor, Pennsylvania, mixed with poems about Fairchok's childhood years. The second section almost exclusively details Fairchok's adolescence in her hometown. The third and final section covers both her life after moving out of Taylor as well as her interactions in a city nearly opposite of Taylor (New York City). In contrast, Olsen's *Sand Theory* followed a much more abstract approach to depicting the northern

parts of the lower peninsula of Michigan. In fact, the imagery of the Traverse City area is interwoven with observations of language and social activity.

Both poet's approach to structure were very important in creating my manuscript. While some poets might not favor order in their collections, I feel that creating some kind of zoning in collections, especially those regarding place, is necessary for reader accessibility; without it, readers may lose interest in the miniature tour the poet is responsible for providing. Early in the writing process, my Thesis advisor mentioned that Zilwaukee could be any town in America, and that unless some kind of detail is given that makes this town special, no one will know – or care – what I'm trying to say. An example of my response to this idea is in the poem “Daniel Johnson Sets Foot Ashore.” It is a speculative poem; there are no memoirs to speak of that Johnson kept, despite historians depicting him as an ambitious businessman. Though we have no real record of anything he said verbally or otherwise, this poem speculates about this historic event and what he might have thought. It is my understanding that many small towns might have recorded the name of their founder and little else. The poem opens with the founding of Zilwaukee, and I set out to write in a linear format. As the writing process continued, I opted for a more organic approach in illustrating Zilwaukee's history.

I divided the collection into three sections. The first section attempts to do two things: like Fairchok, I attempted to create a framework where the town's history was exposed. Again, there are few surviving documents from the 1950s and earlier regarding Zilwaukee's history, so I had to make do with what I had available at City Hall. Some of the information I gathered was granted by talking to lifelong residents and regulars at the town's only bar, Expressway Bar. The second section is wholly devoted to poems about my personal experience as a child growing up

in Zilwaukee. The third and final section is devoted to the present day, where I reflect on what has changed in Zilwaukee as well as some of the more inconvenient traits of the town. In this way, the reader can witness for themselves just what Zilwaukee is to me, as well as what it was and what it could be – for better or worse.

My initial poem referencing Zilwaukee's founder is not the only source of Zilwaukee history by any means. In “Upside Down Club,” I catalog both the town's racing history and my own exposure to racing culture within my own household. “Gods of the Riverfront” makes passing statements about notable events in Zilwaukee history involving the Saginaw River and what changes the city of Zilwaukee made to the river. In this way, I attempt to establish myself as a credible source regarding Zilwaukee, while also painting a dusty image for readers to read. Based on my observations of Fairchok's work, I had initially assumed that the poems themselves could only focus on tangential and peripheral parts of the town's attributes. However, for my collection, I took a more direct approach. Poems like “Upside Down Club,” “Village Hidden in Leaves,” and “We Are the Raiders” attempt to place the reader directly into the town during the beginning pages of this collection. To me, one of the best ways to begin illustrating these statements was to order the manuscript by creating a loose timeline or mini-era containing historical highlights and thoughts to feature themselves in.

My goal in an organic (yet studious) approach to style and form in *We Are the Raiders* was to utilize as many different styles as I could in order to illustrate different perspectives while keeping characters to a minimum. To accomplish this, I studied what contemporary poets did with convention – and how far they deviated from these norms. The easiest compilation I discovered was the *Best American Poetry* anthology – I purchased all of the books from the 2005

to 2012 collections. I discovered that, often, poems had no discernable structure whatsoever outside of consistent syllable counts per line, and that even the amount of lines in a stanza seemed to shift constantly. I took this as a sign that formal patterns in contemporary poetic craft might be irrelevant, which must mean that poets now have the freedom to use the page any way they see fit. Due to this, there were certain poets that I emulated sporadically: Stephen Dunn, Theodore Roethke, Terrance Hayes, Mark Doty, and Robert Pinsky were among the many poets I read for ideas on formal approaches and structure. For example, in “St. Matthew” – structurally, I borrowed the form and tone from Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl.” I used a similar voice of desperation and mania to speak of the eventual closing of the Catholic church I belonged to, as well as the social identity of a religious community. In lines like these below, I attempted to fuse the high-energy delivery of “Howl” with the types of Catholic sermons and extreme Black Gospel sermons I have become accustomed to in pop culture:

Our Father,

Who I stare at into the night who watches me shiver in foggy shadows

Our Father,

Who art in heaven, who I can’t see past the night sky to see behind the veil; I can’t see the gossamer for the transparent cloak tracing breasts and ass down at the Vu and I’m getting impatient waiting for it to fall

Our Father,

who heard shots fired down the river, lift the shady East Side trees, see what young thugs are growing from the red and green like Christmas in the Wild Wild West in an ant farm in a backyard where no one can breathe

This linguistic barrage, wherein the reader is bombarded by long lines and large amounts of text, is a deliberate choice. While some have the skill to depict entire ecosystems within a few short lines (i.e. William Carlos Williams), I felt that an attempt to force the reader to confront the areas of sublimity is important to both establish myself as a credible poet and a personal one. The words could not be contained, and readers both astute and casual may enjoy wandering through the page. Sometimes this confrontation with language and imagery can be somewhat confrontational (as evidenced in “St. Matthew”), yet other times the language becomes surreal, like in “Village Hidden in Leaves”:

I feel like I am one with the tree whispers
even though my body blocks the wind, even though
the breeze sifts my fingers like newlylovers implying

let's go; even though the Sun drops rays like late bills
or some bad news, but I still understand. Each tree
translates to their masters' wishes –

but then the masters aren't even home;
great Chevy trucks and minivans leaving vacancies
in the driveway until six or later in some spots,

and the message is lost for a day. Or more.
It doesn't matter which summer day it is, really.
They're out mowing lawns, out at work, out watching kids...

Other times, my approach to style and content is very direct. A prime example of this is in the poem “Zilwaukee School 1993-2003”:

Preschoolers turned on play faucets and play gasoline spilled on play carpet.
Kindergarteners wore plywood boxes and clear garbage bags
for Halloween costumes.
Walk was a school song sung by hall monitors,
second only to the Pledge of Allegiance.

The cliché “stranger than fiction” has never found a better home than in “Zilwaukee School 1993-2003;” all of the events described in “Zilwaukee School 1993-2003” are completely autobiographical. Reiterating the main reason why there is such variation in style within this manuscript, there were many instances in the writing process where elevated language and formal approaches to form simply couldn't do justice to the image I wanted the reader to have in their heads. Additionally, I felt that if I wasn't introducing characters into the poems and introducing difference voices in that way, then differences in style would have to fill that role.

Aside from poems like “Daniel Johnson Sets Foot Ashore,” “Last Thought of the Old White Pine,” “Neighbors Watching Neighbors” and “Plastic Swords”, much of the poetry in this collection is very personal and voiced by the same omniscient speaker. This was a tricky balancing act on my part: on one hand, I did not want the reader to simply read the manifesto of some strange man wandering through his hometown, yet I also didn't want to distract the reader by placing random characters within the narrative that don't necessarily have to be there. This is not to say that I didn't try to explore different speakers, however. Taking cues from legendary Saginaw poet Theodore Roethke, I thought about ways to give multiple long deceased people and inanimate objects voices with which to give the misty past a voice. From this exercise, poems like “Last Thought of the Old White Pine” and “Marsh Lights” were born. For example, the original poem about “The Old White Pine” was an advertisement for a lumber mill based out of the west side of Michigan, and it promoted the idea that white pine was ripe for the taking, and would be the boon of the region, economically and financially. Historically speaking, we know that the lumber industry starved itself out within a relatively short period of time, and part of the sadness (and irony) of “Last Thought of the Old White Pine” is that the White Pine hopes

that his brothers will find use. However, much of the land around Zilwaukee (and the Saginaw Valley region) has become a cocktail of spotty trees and farmland. In addition, “Village Hidden in Leaves” grants personable qualities to one of the least talked about beauties of Zilwaukee – the trees that are alive today. With these poems, animism becomes a tool that is helpful in granting Zilwaukee an identity that could be its own, as well as creating a subtle web of names and items that subconsciously make the reader associate these names with Zilwaukee itself.

This association manifested itself in other areas, and nearly every time, these recurring subjects and themes were not intentional. One of the most common themes in this collection is the concept of light in various forms. “Marsh Lights” depicts the teetering street lights all around the town, and the air of mystery that surrounds these lights at night. “Bridge Lights at Dusk” captures an evening moment where the lights on Zilwaukee Bridge begin to shine as the sun sets. Even the sun itself is highlighted in the third section of “School Playground Saga”, as that section is a snapshot of 'the magic hour' – a time where the sun sets, but it's not quite dark yet. Elderly people are a consistent theme as well. “Eleanor” is perhaps the most obvious in that the entire poem is driven by the memory of my great aunt Eleanor. “Bridge Lights at Dusk,” however, fuses both of these elements:

Bridge Lights at Dusk

prime themselves cautiously
like an old man batting his
bedroom eyes upon waking,
through familiar bedsheets and fan
blades. The Sun trusts each bulb
to handle themselves after the door
closes quietly. Bedtime for sleepy
children. Clouds shed their red

and purple gowns. Rush hour traffic
thins into casual skiffle up and down
the interstate. Then, and only then,
do the bridge lights shine
until morning.

We know that light has often been used as a symbol for power, warmth, and holiness. Visions of the elderly both compliment and contrast light; on one hand, with age comes the idea of experience and wisdom. However, 'elderly' can also mean senility, forgetfulness, or passiveness until death. Later in the writing process, I discovered that this duality could mean the bridge lights itself take on qualities of either divinity or a River Styx-esque feel. Given the mysterious nature of the Zilwaukee area's early history, either identity could be the case, and this attention to symbolism fueled poems like "The Zilwaukee Bridge", and dualities between "Beautiful" and "Saginaw River Mosquito". In fact, in poems like "The Zilwaukee Bridge", "Village Hidden in Leaves", and "The View from Sherman," the sun is capitalized, and takes on qualities like a silent arbiter or deity daily patrolling Zilwaukee. In this way, the sun gains a title, almost as if Zilwaukee depends on the Sun for its identity. While this is not a new concept in metaphor and poetry, this association is still important in identifying recurring themes in the manuscript.

Early on in this project, I decided to approach the construction of this manuscript a little differently than other MA candidates around me: many of these poems are brand new. Only a handful of these poems were written during my time as a student in CMU's poetry workshops. Poems like "Village Hidden in Leaves," "Yes, Another Poem about 9/11," "Upside-Down Club," and "Advice for the Little Girl Living in My Old House," among others, were written exclusively during the thesis hours. As a second-year grad student, I lived in Mt. Pleasant during the academic year, and as such, my time in Zilwaukee was limited to the little hours I had in

watching the sunset from the school playground on the weekends. This was a pastime that I retained from my time before moving to Mt. Pleasant, and while distance didn't necessarily keep me from maintaining this ritual, time did. With the Spring/Summer of 2013 came immense amounts of time to immerse myself both outdoors in Zilwaukee's various parks as well as the local watering hole and my own base of operations, Expressway Bar. Given the motivations behind this collection of poetry, I felt that it would be a greater show of what I learned as a grad student to write and edit mostly new works while writing in my element – a sentiment that I hope reflects well in this collection.

Another topic I wanted to explore with this thesis involved the concept of the Raider in school history when juxtaposed against the actual history of Zilwaukee. This area had a somewhat heavy Native American presence before the white man arrived. While I found no evidence of hostile takeover on the white man's part, it could be argued that a foreign presence did indeed 'raid' what was there before (the Ojibwe natives and swampland). Perhaps not so coincidentally, the Zilwaukee School mascot is the Raider, a graphic that features a profile shot of a Native American. The concept of raiding in Zilwaukee is one that can be applied to all sorts of areas in the town's history, ranging from corporate presence in the Bridgeview Center industrial park on Sherman, my own “raiding” of the town when I'm alone and feeling nostalgic, mother nature releasing natural disasters upon the town and raiding homes and pocketbooks with floods and fierce storms, and many more metaphors. One such example is in the resignation of the White Pine in “Last Thought of the Old White Pine” – resignation not just to the rise of the lumber industry, but to the next age, the next wave of immigrants, the next anything. “We Are

the Raiders,” the title poem of the collection, explores on the history of 'raiding' in Zilwaukee. One message endures throughout *We Are the Raiders*: all must yield to the forward lurch of time.

I learned a hard lesson in the process of writing these poems – overcoming by bias against confessional writing. During my high school days, I was always afraid of my poetry being too cloying – I was very familiar with emo music and my generation's use of cliché. How could I connect with an audience when I was too cloying to make a powerful statement? Grief poetry of some kind had to be consulted, and I used Kim Addonizio's *what is this thing called love* and John Rybicki's *When All the World is Old* as consultations for approaching hard topics related to my time in Zilwaukee. Addonizio's technique of simply stating what the situation is about proved helpful. Though not directly related to the same kind of losses I experienced, John Rybicki's *When All the World is Old* showed me that, sometimes, raw intensity on the page and 'just saying it' is sometimes more powerful than elevating language in the poem. Inspired by those poets, I directly face loss in poems like “Eleanor” and “St. Matthew”; both discuss losses of innocence and faith, respectively.

Late in the writing process, I realized that many poems were almost too nostalgic or reminiscent. In fact, the overall mood of the collection was too negative at many points in the revision process. The third part of my manuscript was designed to do two things. First, I wanted to reassure the readers (and to a degree, myself) that I wasn't looking at the past or present with rose-tinted glasses. Specifically, I recognize the fact that anybody could tell a story about the past and that everything seems simpler compared to the now. Current social media shows my generation as longing for their childhood, regretting days when they said they couldn't wait to be

an adult, and I found myself feeling similarly during the research process of this manuscript. However, I wanted to condense that observation into one section instead of the entire collection – early drafts of many of my poems were too morose, and this was not the overall message I wanted readers to take from my manuscript. Poems like “Neighbors Watching Neighbors” is just one example of how Zilwaukee, like everything else, can have a side to it that may not be welcoming. “Neighbors Watching Neighbors” is a gratuitous nod to childhood hyping of anything involving authority, paired with the harsh reality of what neighborly conclusions of strangers might be. Another poem, “Homewrecker” is a generic poem that depicts marital infidelity as an everyman – something that is almost impossible to prevent. While I did not hear about any affairs during my studies in Zilwaukee, “Homewrecker” is meant to be a nod to small-town gossip and drama. The character in this poem could be anyone, and the bravado that the speaker has in this poem is reminiscent of some of the bar talk I have heard from a distance – though not biographical in any sense.

The second goal was to provide closure to myself on a deeply personal level. During the early stages of my writing process, I used Expressway Bar as my base of operations to write and edit. My impression of the regulars that I had come to befriend is that, while they have their own lives and struggles to deal with daily, they continued on with their lives without skipping a beat. Personally speaking, their example served as fuel for other poems that lightly touch base with moving forward. “We Are the Raiders” that was initially the first poem of the second section. Instead, it found a home as the last poem in the collection. This poem is meant to be a manifestation of my feelings regarding leaving Zilwaukee behind and facing what life may have in store for me after that stage of my life is over:

And years after all this is over,
we're coming back to retire, scoping real estate that'll allow us to

partake in small lawn mowing with our neighbors. Nothing big,
just enough to spend an hour on a Sunday after church.”

This is a very relevant passage for closure because these lines imply that I may one day return to Zilwaukee to spend my final years. I can only assume that others in Zilwaukee must have felt the same way in choosing to live here. From this, “We Are the Raiders” attempts a final token of camaraderie with readers of all walks of life both in the Zilwaukee area and with those who may be considering a move back to their roots. If this level of understanding can be reached between poet and reader, than I will consider my manuscript a success and leave Zilwaukee, proud.

While this manuscript is by no means a completed manuscript, I hope it is a positive step forward for both Zilwaukee and for myself. There aren't a lot of records left regarding the history of the town, and many of the people living in Zilwaukee who I interviewed maintain that nothing ever happens there. *We Are the Raiders* is a humble attempt at making something from nothing, and hopefully something surprising and fresh.

PART 1

“They say it has no memory. That's where I want to live the rest of my life. A warm place with no memory.”

-Andy Dufresne, *The Shawshank Redemption*

Daniel Johnson Sets Foot Ashore

“A large German migration was occurring in the United States in the 1840’s, including a large German population center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To attract more local settlers, the Johnsons’ named their establishment “Zilwaukie” to confuse the settlers into thinking that they were going to Milwaukee.”

– City of Zilwaukee Home Website

This I promise you:
I will smolder charcoal in white pine
and smoke the obscurity
out of the city I envision before me.

Every great enterprise began with dreams –
bold men stumbling drunk towards the future,
sipping candlelight, scratching quill
manifestos. And I, before Empire State skywalk,

before Sandburg’s Chicago;
while Honest Abe navigated Congress,
but before the Civil War –
among swamp and mosquito,

timber and rolling cloud, and
foliage green as these shanty boys
floating on logs and boats,

I’m stealing the only solid object
I found in this fog mirror forest,
sawing a town
out of this thick smoke.

The Zilwaukee Bridge

This is the concrete Wall of China in our backyards. That stoic gray mountain.
That cap on the eastern skies.

The Sun can't rise unless it pays the toll to Man's tollbooth,
scraping avian playfields with uncompromising presence.
Morning traffic skitters across its back, north and south –

varicose vein of Interstate on America's thigh. Only after
that hundred and twenty foot peak and nadir is overcome
can the day begin. High enough for casual drivers to overlook
that little town below, to separate men from closet acrophobics.

On the ground, its gait spans the Saginaw River dozens of times over.
An engineer's rainbow dropping beams of impermanence on
forgotten ponds and backhoes stored under its shade.
Fences green with neglect, stone docks and stories,
rusted as original bridge ruins just below the river's surface.
Above the gray, crowning all of this

is the view. No higher spot exists for common man
to relive Lion King fantasy – everything the light touches
and even shadows littered across Crow Island,

unknowable swamp land, is ours. Listen:
pulsating bug buzz and robin chirp, rustling dryleaf,
electric wire hum and one lone car roving down Jones –

life is happening at the feet of that giant like ancient Greek
festivity. That foundation of tomorrow's routine hustle.
That dome volcano – that solid, silent sentinel of motion.

Upside-Down Club

Sepia spectators dropping farm field pennies
to watch Davenport, Roberts, Chasnis, Fairchild –
last name incantations from fans blanketing grandstands
and green surrounding the dirt oval. Blue Ten Coupe,
Red and White number Two, NASCAR kings of a fifth-mile,
invoking speed in inert metal. Flagman waves the green
leaps the walls, and the race is on!

 If a car flipped, they say,
the driver joined the Upside-Down Club, flinging dust
on his back like a defiant turtle. Slight jostle in pride,
an exclusive group reserved only for blue-collar elite.
What is the sum of hours spent in intimacy with a man and his
vehicle, tools and bolts tweaking their speed machines to
maximum pleasure? How does one bottle the catharsis of pedals
and wheels?

 Today, all that remains is the weeds.
As I grew up, my father filled the garage walls with trophies,
my bedroom with stock car drapes and bedsheets. It was impossible
to miss the rage of ten-horsepower engines, screaming quad runners,
and in winter, distant whines of snowmobiles ripping the white
with sound. Maybe some flipped their sleds, spun their bikes,
no one knows for sure.

 Dust and mud on plastic and metal
were a yearly summer ritual. Over the years, in other racetracks,
they get better at keeping dirt out of the grandstands
until one day, whether through track talk or drama, the dust
settles on the walls for good. I never saw anyone flip
their kart, not even once, but even my father stopped racing
at some point, and I fell upside down in disbelief.

Last Thought of the Old White Pine

in response to "The Old White Pine," an anonymous poem written in 1879 on the back of an old ledger sheet used by the firm of D.P. Clay, lumber manufacturer and merchant in Newaygo.

I hoped my end would come with use
like the brown bear's last breath –
living decades without contact from anyone
but Ojibwe praise. And they praise the bear

upon its death; their hide for warmth,
bones for craft and tool, but the skull is
center of dreams, for ceremony and reflection.
Today robins and blue jays flutter through

our leaves and bring news of the mill,
towering behemoth betrothed to the river,
its wheel keeping time with the sun.
We are wood, and not even wood stands

before wind and water for long.
But it matters not. Soon, the men will multiply
beneath the branches, creating more
buildings of oak, brick, and pine. I will be

drawn, quartered, spread across the globe.
All I ask, now that I stand before the axe,
is that
some of my brothers preserved
in these hills
survive what's to come.

Gods of the Riverfront

This park wasn't here a decade ago,
not in this form. Brown weeds and breaker rocks
litter the shoreline, freckled with benches and fishing rod stands.
Rare bumblebee activity.
Mountains of stone docks across the way.

I am projecting Theseus onto this river;
there's no way this is the same one that Johnson saw.
Man makes what man wants,
like those two steel towers
hoisting wires across the Saginaw River – so tall,

you could drive down Tittabawassee for miles
and still see them.
Today, not a trace remains. This was only a few years ago.
Not as close in time as the Flood of 86',
where all the sandbags and Samaritan aid

couldn't save the dollies and toys
from sailing out of the basements en masse –
not the first time the water met the woods instead.
Today there's cars filling the parking lot;
Bennetton ads in casual dress and sagging near-naked men

casting their lines into the wet.
Pavilions of grill goods and beer (don't tell anyone!).
Some days our reverence ends at the shoreline;
others, we're reminded of our creations.
This red green tugboat, for instance –

used tire dress, pushes a rusted barge southbound,
I bask in its passing like salty royalty,
the closest I may get to sea legs. But sometimes,
all advancement of our species approaches
that magic combo of low effort, high reward,

and is suddenly declared irrelevant:
for instance, these two fisherman floating in the wet,
steady autumn rain on a Sunday. Just two men,
leaky aluminum, casting lines with old poles

like their fathers before them just floating and sitting

and floating and sitting and waiting
and floating

and floating

and floating

and floating

Marsh Lights

In Zilwaukee, street lights
lean against ground walls.
The roads sometimes sprout our state flower –
the orange cone – but these wooden poles
still tilt on their own whims, and have for years.
We drive by these glass will-o-wisps
down Westervelt, past the abandoned
racetrack, down Sherman and Kochville,
slightly removed from the Interstate.
On Melbourne, near Crow Island,
many things spy on us as we pass.
No one knows how many lumberjacks still
linger in the marsh, how many
ghostly Indians still dance beyond
the *No Public Allowed* sign
at the end of the drive. Come July,
fireflies mingle in the cattails and fog,
spin the white pines and willows
hovering over water.
How fireflies and fog hover,
white on speckled green,
as if light was always present in this town –
as if we never needed a bridge
to see through the smoke
of yesteryear.

Plastic Swords

We'll find holy relics anywhere. One summer some
homeless guy in brown cargoes and a green hoodie
laid on the bench underneath powerlines
with the breeze and seventy degrees. Was he sleeping?
We rode bikes like sharks without training wheels.

Now he's awake. His eyes know we're here. He
stretches skyward and he's gone, leaving his walking stick
angled like a thin shield for the bench. *Hey mister, you left* –
We shout for hours; anyone can
be summoned if we just believe hard enough – but he's gone.

For all we knew, this was a stick from God. Moses made serpents
out of rods, a plain wooden cup
housed the Holy Grail for Indiana Jones. So here's us,
Lord of the Rings in wooden form. We're superheroes
swinging The One Weapon that can blow away entire planets,

crack the galaxy in half, break Joel's shield
no questions asked. And tomorrow everyone will try
to steal the stick, wield make-believe hacks
in real life, stiling all outdoor play into us vs. them.
Harpie shrieks *go share!* But no one can stop us.

At least, not 'til tomorrow when Mike brings the plastic sword
his Mom bought for his birthday
and suddenly there is balance; The One Weapon that can stop
The One Weapon. Synthetic gray force of the Sun,
The stick, forlorn in a ditch, until another stick manifests.

Saginaw River Mosquito

Wicker light burns in every home and yard.
Two Wal-Mart lamps versus a Thousand Cloud.

If angels and insects are all that survive –
no, the numbers are too great. I'm not proud

enough to think divinity could hinder
these mosquitoes, black dot tornado, hiding

in concrete chips, river water, old cellars
and atmospheres. Their time a binding

contract to blood and water – vampire bats
of breeding-rat scale. Not even all the bug spray

or swatters can contain centuries of buzz,
not that brute force can crush wind anyway.

Village Hidden in Leaves

Rustles like a whisper-conversation foreign
except to trees and breeze, content to leave the
landowners below in ignorance; impermanence

in gentle northern wind. Here, this is the way
nature prays for progression to compromise,
the way it blows its flyers through the parks,

the pool, the populace, the picket fence graveyards,
the pine and willows, the spontaneous fields of
grass and corn and beans, how it cools a sweating man

walking down Shepard and Adams –
this is the way third generation timbers translate
the language of lake effect, by planting themselves

in every yard as we lazily waste a Tuesday afternoon;
scooping telegraphs made of aether and science.
And we are more sensitive than we think:

see the young lady standing on the diving board,
dripping wet with water, how the wind nearly pushes
her into the warm pool – and then she jumps. See

the old man on oak swing, lulling to a windchime in midday
siesta – and then he sleeps. Times like these,
it comes down to the cooling, the *chill out*,

the meander through responsibility and misanthropy
into something neutral. Something quiet, something
quite silent, something right on time with zero.

I feel like I am one with the tree whispers
even though my body blocks the wind, even though
the breeze sifts my fingers like newlylovers implying

let's go; even though the Sun drops rays like late bills
or some bad news, but I still understand. Each tree
translates to their masters' wishes –

but then the masters aren't even home;
great Chevy trucks and minivans leaving vacancies
in the driveway until six or later in some spots,

and the message is lost for a day. Or more.
It doesn't matter which summer day it is, really.
They're out mowing lawns, out at work, out watching kids,

out at Expressway Bar, out to lunch, out making lunch –
all day every day, life is happening. Cotton pillow
clouds are hanging on the wind's every word like

aging ushers, and even this procession of tuft
can't compare to the flora clutter at our feet, at our
hungry horizon. The Sun is jumping for cover

behind the trees; the sky is at war with dandelion
seeds sprinkling the green. Every season has its
precipitation; rain, seeds, leaves, and snow. The next

day, mostly cloudy. The breeze bites a little, yet
I'm sitting under the pavilion like I live here.
I live in the past, sailing a time machine made

of grasswhistles and shade. Time is moving, though,
just like these leaves, branch by branch, unseen
forces move them thusly. And even if you never heard

of wind before, all that matters is physics. I've broken
more than one appointment just by being here. And then
come the phone calls, the text messages, the *where are you* –

I might as well be listening to the trees at this point,
and why not? After all, I barely understand electricity –
it's inscrutable, and I am not the Sun. I project nature

as something Man can never know, and my only recourse
is to accept the wind as something that cools you,
keeps you in line. In this town, lines are there

if you look hard enough – there's chainlink fencing around every yard
and park; even trees not residing near the street

mark themselves for their masters saying *This is mine*.

At once, the bikes zip up and down the sidewalks
and everyone's a pencil, tracing their spatial trail for
brief seconds, and they're gone again. The DPW

lawnmowers run in slow motion down the streets. White
and brick in vogue on homes like colored stew arrangement –
and someone must have splashed yellow on these leaves.

The Sun can't be this generous, but it is. The only impermanence
in this molasses town is Nature with a capital N;
the concept, the big idea, the *given*. There's chemicals in

the river, there's toxins in the air somewhere,
but right now, so what? The Earth will still be there,
even after we ignore the warning signs and burn ourselves out –

PART 2

“You can look back, babe, but it's best not to stare.”

- Big Weekend, by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

Zilwaukee School 1993-2003

after Mary Ruefle's "Middle School"

I went to Zilwaukee School for ten years.
Preschoolers turned on play faucets and play gasoline spilled on play carpet.
Kindergarteners wore plywood boxes and clear garbage bags
for Halloween costumes.
Walk was a school song sung by hall monitors,
second only to the Pledge of Allegiance.
Our gym a remarkable imitation of a gym, produced
by the ruins of what was once the second floor,
over a pool whose existence is uncertain to this day.
The playground had a double slide that hid golden mulch and friction burns
at the end of its rainbow bottom.
Teacher of the Year was Bill Nye the Science Guy.
Our Christmas pageants dilate seconds into hours, which
could make us immortal, if only our fathers didn't fall asleep.
Our mascot was an Indian in profile and no one cried *racist*. Yet.
The principal locked himself in a portable jail for a school fundraiser.
Even eighth graders got recess.
Our ten-year reunion was notable by the drama leading up to
its cancellation. You've seen us on Facebook,
posts about babies and blue-collar money.
But every fall,
another school in America carries our school spirit
and repeats the cycle in BFE, USA.

Beautiful

When I was younger I ripped
the wings off a moth
believing it would become a caterpillar
and live a second life again.

We get our fair share of creepy crawlies –
bumblebees, butterflies, beetles and mosquitoes
and in the fall, caterpillars trace their homes
onto their bodies for winter like trailers

made of silk. Everyone's acquainted with bugs –
A jar with a one inside, airholes poked at the lid
is cliché Americana like apple pie and baseball.
One day I watched in wonder as a nest of wasps
climbed on themselves for hours,
all over their budding nest. During evenings,
clouds of flies appeared out of nowhere,
a twister of black dots. Life is happening,

even when we expect *life* to be synonymous with *perfect*,
with *human*. The grub that lost its wings wiggled onwards
on my rope ladder as if it never had wings before.
Once I was judge and executioner

of a smiley face butterfly tattooed on an indoor vert ramp,
Smash the bug! written beside. Not even in jest
could I smash an inanimate bug anymore.
It didn't matter that I didn't know how to say no.

All that mattered was this time
I let something beautiful live.

Bridge Lights at Dusk

prime themselves
slowly
like an old man
batting bedroom eyes
to his coffee
upon waking,
sheets and fan blades
stoic as prison guards.
The Sun trusts
each bulb to handle themselves
after the door closes
quietly. Bedtime
for sleepy children.
Clouds shedding red
and purple gowns.
Rush hour traffic
thinning into casual skiffle
up and down
the interstate. Then,
and only then,
do the bridge lights shine
until morning.

The Liquor Aisle in Meijer's

was as foreign to this five-year old as second grade.
Featured proudly, yet modestly, was that red sign forcing a pause:
You must be this old to purchase –
It was impossible not to wish for twenty-one,
an age so distant from me.
I remember glass; brown eggshells draped on a wall we weren't allowed to walk past.
Dirty vocabulary:
Hot Damn, Pucker, Jack Daniels –
I assumed only manly men got a drink named after them;
burly renegade in cowboy boots, black leathers, thick beard
wrestling bears or beating up bad guys.
I visited once a week like a stranger with candy.
Each time my mother warned me not to touch anything.
Fourteen years later,
at a wedding reception,
I finally sampled the wares of the liquor aisle –
free-flowing beer and wine like an endless
tavern in my stomach. At some point that night
my mother tried saying something,
but her words were as foreign to
a nineteen-year old as second grade memory.
My sober innocence was gone for a night,
and the liquor aisle allure gone for good.

Gotta Catch 'Em All!

For your insolence, prepare to enter a world of pain!

Oh wait there, the road's closed.

Hi! I like shorts! They're comfy and easy to wear!

You can use that PC in the corner. The receptionist told me. So kind!

Hehehehe...this gym is great! It's full of women!

Right. All boys leave home someday. It said so on TV.

Fork over all your cash when you lose to me, kid!

That poster in the GAME CORNER is nothing special! There's no switch over there!

I did my best, I have no regrets.

It's \$50 for a child's ticket. Would you like to come in?

You're light years away from facing Brock!

Yo! Champ in making!

Your POKEMON are fighting fit! We hope to see you again!

It's super effective!

Excuse me, do you have a ticket?

SNORLAX woke up! It attacked in a grumpy rage!

The elevator doesn't work? Who has the LIFT KEY?

This is my grandson. He's been your rival since you were a baby. ...Erm,
what was his name again?

You won't live long in combat, that's for sure!

Hey! Wait! Don't go out!

You should take a quick rest.

You're from Pallet Town, right?

We, TEAM ROCKET, are Pokemon gangsters!

I'm an artist, not a fighter.

Why aren't you wearing shorts?

Smell ya later!

There's a movie on TV. Four boys are walking on railroad tracks.

I better go too.

PIKACHU.

Expressway Bar

Darts and pinball, dim brick panel,
hair-nation jukebox cranking out classic rock:
sloth-walking bass in a static rainstorm
rattling the walls. Blue-collar brethren
drown baby blues with Jack and Morgan:
bottles and Keno an outstretched arm away.
I scry cigarette aura well as regulars draft cold brew.
Tall tales, children moved out to Anywhere USA,
Silver-tongued barkeep rebukes with facts –
crashing pool cues crack across the din.
Come on Eileen, enjoy sports on the screen,
waste hours away in yesterday glory ‘til two AM
sneaks creepy like a warm bourbon hiccup.
And I, old enough to drink,
child enough to feel sleepy around eleven,
soak flashing red blue neon at the threshold.
Sober stars and orange streetlamps
splash cold morning air from the North.
East, concrete bridge hushes whispers from
traffic aimlessly stalking the dark. West,
elementary school sleeps silent amongst
snug Halcyon homes from prosperous times,
and I’m spirited away to childhood memory
when spying this dim brick building from afar
I wondered what the bar was really like –
if Cheers montage truly captured every nightly
recycled gossip, each with a different daily twist.
South, muffled chatter and laughter above last call,
punchdrunk patrons, bottles falling to the ground.
Stumbling into rusted cars and trucks,
us regulars will arrive again next Saturday.

I'll Be That Fad

I am your Power Rangers
I am your power buttons
Power cords power supply and

Nintendo Power. I love the
Power Glove. It's so bad. I am your
Ninja Turtles, I am your

names of game shows, your very own
Nickelodeon. I am your
AOL 4.0, 90210, Giga Pets and

Nano. I am your Tamagotchi,
I am your Furby,
Teeny Beanie Baby crazy,

I am your Tickle-Me
Elmo. Yu-Gi-Oh!
I am gel pens and pastels

on your notebook, yearbook,
bookbag and binder. I am your
PDA reminder. I am recalling

the yo-yo. Walking the dog.
I am your Disney Channel Movie,
I am your blockbuster movie,

I am your disposable camera film.
Scrapbooks, Santas and skateparks.
I am your pre-teen heart-

-throb. I am his poster on your wall,
your drywall seams. I am everything you need
til the wallet's gone – empty dreams.

Yes, Another Poem About 9/11

because I was just a boy
 when it happened.
Middle school. I rode my bike that day,

rare trust between my parents
 and stranger danger – I *think*
leaves were falling that day. I don't

remember. That's what's strange
 about memories,
they're never the same, appearing

like a radio remix, like a game of
 telephone. And everyone
tells a story about falling down;

the drop, impact – as for me and my
 classmates, let's face it,
none of us wanted summer to end.

But just like those jets,
 like crushes and free pop
and pop music, it came suddenly.

Even in this town,
 hundreds of miles from
Ground Zero, splash damage rippled

to us, and still ripples
 today. Here's my memory:
It went unnoticed by most,

at first. Summer wasn't done
 with us yet (it turns out) –
heat waves whipping our backs

with anger. Roasting in fear,
 bike racks began to rust;
No Child Left Alone policy. We didn't have

any students from the Middle East,
but if we did,
surely they'd be ablaze, too. Figuratively.

A day later we prayed for war; PT
became PR; folding chairs
and plastic forks became sporks and bench,

red, white and blue in vogue.
Any other color
was un-American, so we were lucky

to have blue and white school colors.
Rock radio stations blared
electric guitar rallies as the recruiting station

down the street swelled with men.
They all went.
Shelby wrote a poem ending like so:

You'll be sorry for what you said.
You'll never want to start a religious war.
Let freedom soar!

The View from Sherman

Geometry before any schoolboy lesson.

The Sun wanders into Waukee Street like a rambunctious boy,
wanders into field corn graveyards drawing boundaries into tilled soil.

Westerlies opens a cowboy sunset of blue, orange, and red every night
like a reward for living in today. Sky ablaze on Venoy,
where cars roam lonely, headlights waving *I am here*

as darkness slowly wraps its bathrobe around me,
stars teasing their bodies through the afterglow.

Wanderers and Wal-Mart scavengers under parking lot floodlights.

The night is Groundhog Day in clear vision. Same view
that my parents must have seen when they bought this house.
Same view as the night before, and back, and back.

There's comfort in repetition.

There's an American Dream somewhere beyond the light pollution
even if I can't find it yet. Sunsets are funny that way,
like bonfires and candlelight. Reflection and reiteration.

I fear the day that I'll look to the Sun and see those twin towers
as just tall radio antenna. That Glas Tender is closer than
I thought, and just another company of many.
I fear that a duplex will claim this final place of open sky,
evening news window in its place. Why,

three of them went up down the street over the past few years.

The air is cold and the night is old. I'll see you tomorrow. Don't change.

I Can Be Center Field

Had this been any other summer evening
this green yellowing grass might not have been cut
and pregnant dandelions would whiten with seeds.
And if that had come to pass,
these Raider fields might not fill with pickup trucks
dispensing rust and rusted star players, local.
Yesterday's youth, clean-up batters swing long drives
and swig Stroh's swagger, braggarts of glory days renewed.
The Sun sinks toward fieldside bleachers during dinnertime;
did they eat or is hot greens and meat their reward after
running bases, catching balls slung so high
it seems they could never come down? These men, forties,
kids and wife distant in demands,
separate for a couple hours. Or maybe men at a certain age
don't wish to be other men; maybe they love the game.
Sweatpants older than myself, faded caps and cans and
sprints across turf so quick they might be hovering.
No apple pie Americana summary, just field and cage –
an outfield; no boundaries, on a Tuesday at seven.

Paddy's Heroes

Paddy's was a store, like many on Adams Street, that closed its doors before its time. It was a car wash, a storage unit, and a hobby shop all in one – its greatest draw being Games Workshop products.

1.

Roll the dice, good sir.
Morning mist and lazy sunrise are
picture perfect clichés for a Middle-Earth battle.
Before ragtag militiamen rank-and-file
into rectangles of province colors and shield,
check the battlefield. Survey the scenario.
Even though there's no telling what
lurks in the underbrush and stream,
knowing is half the battle.

2.

Roll the dice, or don't. Take your time.
There's a dozen armies to choose from,
give or take some that no one plays.
The Empire are all humans, but you're a human,
and this is a fantasy world – go wild! We've got
three kinds of Elves, Dwarfs,
Daemons, Orcs and Warriors (of Chaos),
Ogres, Lizardmen, rat people and Beastmen.
Now ask yourself: are you here to win or to have fun?

3.

Roll the dice. Tonight, we're gonna game.
We could go to Flint and find a place,
but that's pretty far. Detroit is even farther,
and those guys are pretty hardcore. I just
wanna have fun. Well, I heard of this place
called Paddy's in Zilwaukee. It's a little
small, but I know the owner and he's pretty
legit and they like to have fun.

All right! Let's go there!

4.

Roll the dice. Sir, take a good look
at your odds. Six sides;
seventeen and a half percent
to roll the right number. Think of Craps;
seven is a good number to roll.
on two dice. Now roll that every time.
Sometimes the rolls won't go your way, and you'll
lose. Your army will break, buckle, and pile
with dead. Luckily, they're made of plastic and pewter.

5.

Roll the dice against stranger danger
and let's get some snacks next door.
Dimly lit den, candle scent surveying
the product on shelf,
masking obese ogre odor (no judgment).
There's a male/female ratio of 25:1,
Rapturous bragging about
painting style, prowess –
like every general since the beginning of Man.

6.

Will you roll the dice, good sir?
It never lies, it doesn't care if you're expecting
3s and up and you get more 1s (misses) than
statistically possible. Ones are bad,
as these men will tell you. They're heroes
of a different sort, ones who wage wars
on tabletops, at hobby stores and conventions,
but most importantly, at this shop under the bridge –
green metal gable of combat, strategy, and fun.

Raider Brawl, Seventh Grade

I remember it like a hazy party several years ago.
In sunlight, in summertime, boys swaggered
like bulls in heat on a catwalk,
itching for horns to gore anything
in schoolgirl eyeshot. I don't remember
why we came to blows,
but the school bell rang like Round 1,
contemptuous snort of the steer
charging my turf. And my scream
summoned a Taurus of my own;
totem hormones armoring my
feet and fists, harder than stones,
breaking his stick frame. Trees,
playground field, blue sky, white clouds
condensed into a ring of peers
silently watching our bull oversouls
become Roman gods of war,
blow after blow bestowed
until an adult split us up,
and summer heat cooled our
nostrils and fists.

Homewrecker

I am Peter Gabriel's
sledgehammer
smashing your glass
house. A slip of
the tongue at midnight –
on the phone bill, a number
you didn't call.
A folded letter in
the dresser, envelopes
ripping faintly
in another room. I
occupy that space given
 reluctantly
when she demands space,
and on occasion,
the space itself.
I am the concierge
and her boss, living
below you, next door,
beneath you. I am
a greasy smile,
standing around a bonfire
flicking the Bic
in one hand,
wrapping my love
around your dame
in the other.

Eighth Grade Relic

after Dorianne Laux's "Books"

We're standing at the precipice of grades Nine through Twelve
at a ceremony held in the cafeteria for the last time,
blue and white streamers and long brown benches some kind of

Last Supper in June – we don't know it yet,
but this is not the last ceremony in our lives. There's still high school
graduation, first marriage, first child, sweet sixteen,

but none of that matters now. We are casting faux-innocence aside
like a wet raincoat as the slideshow cycles on the wall.
The strawberry lip gloss and brat-pop is disappearing.

Everyone's crying now. The sleepovers, the Surge and Cherry Coke,
weekly crushes and shifting friendships all halting by next Fall,
but tonight we're awkward as prom dresses at McDonald's.

The Saturday school dances,
chaperones standing vigilant at the folded bleachers,
shadows in a photograph. We may never see some of us again

after tonight. In my hands, I'm holding a stolen copy
of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Hardcover, digest print
small enough to fit in my backpack pocket.

Her, a pre-teen eluding Nazi regime,
an abrupt ending to her book and all I can think about
is her face on the cover. Whether I would have asked her out

had she been sitting a couple rows ahead of me last week.
A passing thought, tiny and sheltered
as this book between doodles and gel pens, nestled

in my brain as the slideshow closes. Today, a first girlfriend
sits next to me, the question *what next* the elephant
crushing us and everyone else. Nothing makes sense

except this book in my hand –
I consider it evidence that this part of my life existed,
an Exhibit A I freely admit to the prosecution,

a sentimental photo that never faced the scrapbook.
Yes, this is a milestone in pulp, plastic and glue –
something cool and smooth while everyone else becomes rough

with hugs and tears. By next year, our hormones will spike
like school spirit at a pep rally. Our lives will hustle
to the music of block schedules and basketball games.

So much drama and daring to come in four years,
so much to ponder after tantrums and heartbreak –
trapped in a classroom, I will write a diary for a student to steal.

Nineteen Ninety-Nine

for Ashley, after Bowling For Soup's "1985"

Ashley just hit the wall
She thought she had it all
Five figure student debt
Husband a democrat
Her socks thrown off her feet
Apartment, Franklin Street
First baby swelling fast
What happened to her past?

She was gonna tour with N'Sync
She would be a dance machine
She was gonna choreograph
every Backstreet Boys routine
Her Napster logged PC is now the enemy
Looks at her housegirl life
And nothing has been alright since

Christina, Lou Bega,
Before Lady Gaga
There was Mewtwo and Hadji
Hey Arnold still on Nick TV
Her two kids in high school
They tell her that she's uncool
Cause she's still preoccupied
With 19, 19, 1999

Woohoo
(1999)
Woohoo

She bought VHS film
She watched every tape
like Fight Club, Star Wars, Matrix
even The Boondock Saints
She rapped like Eminem
forgot 'bout Dr. Dre

Stockpiled some water and cans
Prepared for Y2K
Where's the diva shirt made of rhinestone
And where was Prince now that his year has finally gone
And when did gangsta become geeky?
Whatever happened to Real World, Road Rules
(on the game show there was)

Christina, Lou Bega,
Before Lady Gaga
There was Mewtwo and Hadji
Hey Arnold still on Nick TV
Her two kids in high school
They tell her that she's uncool
Cause she's still preoccupied
With 19, 19, 1999

Wooohoo

She hates time make it stop
When did Linkin Park become classic rock?
And when did Timberlake become an actor?
Please make this stop
Stop!
And bring back

Christina, Lou Bega,
Before Lady Gaga
There was Mewtwo and Hadji
Hey Arnold still on Nick TV
Her two kids in high school
They tell her that she's uncool
Cause she's still preoccupied
With 19, 19, 1999

Christina, Lou Bega,
Before Lady Gaga
There was Mewtwo and Hadji
Hey Arnold still on Nick TV (whoohooohooo)
Her old friends from high school
They tell her that she's uncool
Cause she's still preoccupied
With 19, 19, 1999

PART 3

*“The purest forms of life / Our days are never coming back...
The cannons of our time / Our days are never coming back... “*

- 'Highway Song' , by System of a Down

This Is My Zilwaukee

for Crystal

she says
as we drive through
pine trees and private trails
near a cabin community
at Indian River.
She was telling the truth;
she had the same sky as mine.

At The Point,
you can tell Man trod here.
The cold river flows
shallow and deep;
driftwood and dead branches
congregate in shady stillwater
on the shore.
The raised plank walkway
is cobbled, but sturdy;
trustworthy.
Clouds are moving fast –
Storybook wood vacation.

If you focus, you can see the slope where the river flows to Lake Burt.
It's not a deep slope, but it's there.

I imagine her childhood
spent running through underbrush
as children might,
hoping to glimpse a deer, a bear, a moose,
projecting driftwood
as wanderer in soggy form
exploring Northern Michigan
as he pleased. I imagine
these woods call her home
when it's nighttime
in the city. During the drive,
Midnight Rider plays
on the radio.

Only a poet could capture her nostalgia now;

memories revealed by
yearly visits, random pillow talk,

photo albums, and that feeling
like a bridge between innocence
and maternity
when a baby introduces itself
by bump.

The next morning,
we sit at a round table
surrounded by coffee mugs
and family.

We're discussing Nature
like our definitions
are the only things giving its beauty meaning.

We're saying goodbye before
our long drive south
to the city. I imagine

Gladys Knight's Georgia Train
on opposite tracks –

me living in her world,
bending timelines like the river:
two adults swimming in Yesterday.

It's not the way it really happened, but it's not too late
to change – she has the same sky as mine.

Advice for the Little Girl Living in My Old House

- 1) There is nowhere to hide if you should upset your parents, not even the closet.
- 2) The closet next to the bathroom is your best friend if tornadoes, strangers, Jehovah's Witnesses visit.
- 3) On a hot summer day, you can just barely hear *The Joker* by Steve Miller Band on the wind.
- 4) A small house doesn't mean it's a prison. There's time to get to know your parents before you work twelve-hour shifts.
- 5) Leaving the windows open at night will lull you to sleep.
- 6) That fence around the backyard is training grounds for the field beyond. When you mow that grass, you will find peace.
- 7) Both those sheds were there when I lived there, and both are perfectly good playhouses.
- 8) That bedroom is way too small for slumber parties. I barely managed two people, not including my brother, and we had bunk beds.
- 9) You might see the tear in the neighbor's window blind, but he's never behind it.
- 10) When you reach ten years old, you can ride your bike to school, and if you do, go straight there and back.
- 11) That loud noise is the fire alarm, even at night.
- 12) There's a high chance you will know a Metiva, Jolin, or Bourdow at some point in your life.
- 13) Sometimes, when the night is quiet and the stars are out, look westward. The lights from Kochville are calming like a promise that tomorrow will come.

Neighbors Watching Neighbors

I.

Neighborhood watch!!! It's the most awesome super club an adult can join! Tall fences make good neighbors, but when riff-raff slips through the cracks, the Neighborhood Watch kicks into high gear! We got lasers and binoculars and two-way radios and stuff! We can post our turf logo on a sign and it's totally legal! And the coolest part is anyone can join! Everyone on this block is in Neighborhood Watch! We get to hold meetings and talk about things and have parties and go to people's houses! It's like a tree house, but with a basement and satellites and army copters and guns and stuff!

II.

In a quiet bar on a quiet corner, a young man types a young poem. Some locals paid weird looks as he paid for a drink. Contempt wearing background noise. *What is he typing, anyway?* An old man is staring; high ground of time and seniority; dues paid to this town. What does this young poet do? He puts away his laptop, reveals a pen and paper, and writes:

*This town owes you nothing.
These people aren't your friends.
Well, some of them are.
But just a few.
That wave of nostalgia you feel
is something we all feel at some point –
but look at you.
You haunt this town and you're not even dead.
You're a young man at Monday Bingo.
Spooking kids and kindred families alike,
ones who built this city on rock and
stone. You're scraping by on paper scraps and ink.
Here, we're all exorcists,
dispelling you from this hallowed ground.*

The Last Full Year

And this was one the UN labeled “International Year of Forests and Chemistry” – after 7 billion people born,
after earthquakes and tsunamis smothered Japanese tenacity,
after spider webs draped drowning trees in Thailand,
after my midnight cram exams of Plan B emergency.

We're Born This Way said the second coming of Madonna.
New York legalized gay marriage, and while not related,
art school numerologists crunched 99s and 1s in Zucotti Park.
Every state sued the government over Obamacare and bailouts
as I bailed out of college and rejoined in the fall.

No snow fell during Christmas time.
We viewed a comet's trial by fire as it flew straight through the Sun
and past, while the Euro smoldered in recession's wreckage. Meanwhile
Bouazizi set himself and the Arab Spring ablaze months before
my father returned from surgery: scattered ashes, paternal invincibility.

The announcement ending the War in Iraq did not comfort us.
Bin Laden, Gaddafi, Jong Il – their deaths, no consolation.
We feared next December thanks to Mayan misinformation.
I remember sitting alone in Expressway Bar when the ball dropped.
The building was packed; I married myself at last call.

Modern Whiteness

No one orders vanilla ice cream over a
Banana Split

Banana Slurpee
Black Bear Chocolate Thunder
Blue Moon
Strawberry Shortcake

Birthday Cupcake
Neopolitan
Moose Tracks

Our words, Shakespeare pop music
Rolling opium with Dickens and Poe and Hemingway,
Nationwide eyes gouging out by dead white canon haters
Promoting boycott over Breyer's Anthology –
Jim Gaffigan standup; he walks into a market and people think
That reminds me, I need milk

While I'm taking my kids to the market,
My little girl wants to color a picture for Daddy
And in the art section in the crayon box at Pokey Oaks Kindergarten

White retains its unused sharp shape over
Midnight

Mauve
Goldenrod Fuchsia
Olive Carnation
Smoke
Sunset

Chartreuse
I ask you: *What's brave about coloring a sheet of paper white?*

The Beatles released a blank double EP
And it was dubbed *The White Album*
(first of theirs to never release a #1 hit)
No one sees ghosts for the shape
No one rides a highway to Heaven
No one doesn't piss their name on the snow in winter
No white shirt survives Day-Glo unscathed.

So I jump head-first into the paint. I close my mouth
and don goggles whenever someone slings a paintball
at my cheek, and we welt, and the canvas strains to hold
all of the colors and shapes

Garage Sale

My Uncle RJ once told me
when you die, all that's left of you is a garage sale and fifty cents –
imagine haggling a widow with that on your conscience

\

School Playground Saga

I. March 1970

This is the thought a seven-year old will never have. This is logic only young men and old husks measure in cans and bottles decades after the fact. This is innocence nestled in a spring jacket, opened only in a park bench a million miles away. This is the memory only two photos captured back in the day. This is why it doesn't matter what day it is. This is a shard of summer during the fall, a whitewash in the winter, a promise of summer in the spring. This is the view of spreading grove trees down Sherman, the baseball diamonds on Tittabawassee. This is looking towards the West.

Children, this is your half-hour recess, spent under the sun, stomping grass, stomping snow, stomping puddles and standing against the wall. This is your cloud covering the sun long enough to play shadows. This is your King of the Hill, peering over the rainbow steel twisty slides. Let there be light, let there be shrieks, let there be swings.

II. August 2001

The time for you to grow up is now, you get an hour of study hall

III. September 2009

This hill steepens no longer
around surrounding fields
shining like an Irish knoll –
no longer do red kickballs
sail from tectonic concrete
courts to the south. Come sunset
the clouds are tired of running all day,
so they drop their light to the pavement,
and the ground glows orange for a minute.
old friend parades climb the jungle gym
long vanished; schoolyard crush
swoops down a tall silver slide that no longer exists.
I am a cornstalk in a field of cabbage.

Come darkness, boys and girls
dressed in 80s throwback
walk dogs, ride bikes, smoke cigarettes –

volatile sonic youth. *What are you doing here, mister?* they ask, and I tell them.
Sanctuary made of metal and spiraling
Rainbow steel once king of this hill.
I tell them the swings once were all
Colors and not painted gray,
And scratch speckles of color underneath.

Atop these ruins, a transformation –
from melancholy to sage.

IV. January 2010

freed skies empty and white
as excavation progresses,

leaking brideveil snow like grains
from a sandbox stacked and splintered –

ruins under a cooling Vesuvian mudslide.
Steel dinosaurs dragging their feet,

shallow trenches in the earth.
struck from Genesis, they hibernate

on an old field, cells dividing into a
parking lot. Rubble and rusted pipe

are double-wide mounds like obese men
playing hide-and-peek, gray swings wrapped

defeated around a telephone pole.
a small courtyard nestled in a small corner

sits surrounded by fence after snow fence,
stone benches and pseudo-Gothic design –

The wake can only last so long
before Spring arrives with the hearse –

V. October 2011

Tonight I'll drive with my window open –
semi-truck traffic a leaping sheep
flock crooning lullabies Sinatra-style
while blocks away, a mother closes a book –
her children have heard this Snow White
story a million times. But here's a new one:
some nights I look up and see the static of Beyond –
a television screen between sky and space.
I fear that nothing is real, that lit living rooms
are pseudo-fire, and there is no God.

You're thinking too much again.
There's nothing to worry about.
Now get on home before someone sees you.
It's not every day that someone gets to romp around
at night. But when they do (and it will be soon),
let them draw conclusions in No. 2 pencil –
they'll boil to perfection in late-night nostalgia.

The Continuing Story of the School Pool

To this day, debate continues as to whether or not a pool existed at some point in Zilwaukee School.

Chuck Beyer

i remember when i was attending there the gym still had i guess i think it was swim records up in the right corner on a big sign..Never knew much about the school before i attended there..was there a pool and or locker rooms at one time..think i remember locker rooms although we never had access

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Drew Fuego

no pool locker rms where left of the bleacher then they put the a new boys locker rm under the stage around 1970

[March 26 at 4:21pm](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

Penny York

Pool used to be under the gym. When we went there it was still there but not in use.

[March 26 at 6:03pm](#) · [Like](#)

Chuck Beyer

that's where i remember the locker rooms being at..that would be cool to keep the pool open and make it part of gym class like they did at AHHS

[March 26 at 6:10pm](#) · [Like](#)

Sherry LeRouce

Sorry, but no pool under the gym!! When you were in 7th-9th grade you had gym class every other day. We had to change into these awful green outfits. The girls locker room was to the left of the stage. The boys and girls had seperate gym classes. The boys locker room was by the old (kitchen). Left of the door going to the back of the school.

[March 26 at 9:28pm](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

Andrew Gambino

Didn't they block in the whole pool area? I dont think it was there in the 80's. I vaguely remember those track and swim records in the gym (there was no track there when I was there) and I think the last time they updated those were the late 60's or early 70's.

[March 27 at 3:36pm](#) · [Like](#)

Drew Fuego

I was there in the early late 60's there could of been a pool don't know for sure

[March 27 at 5:28pm](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

Chuck Beyer

i was there from pre-school to 6th (except 4th..i went to Liskow) so that would of been (1976-1984) if there was no pool then where did they swim at?

[March 27 at 5:55pm](#) · [Like](#)

Drew Fuego

Practice at arthur eddy off washington and river rd the east side use to bus us there and swim meets there I was in the last class at the jr high

[March 27 at 6:02pm](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#)

Charee Schmidt Reibold

Yes Lou that is exactly where we swam. Gosh! What memories! LOL

[March 29 at 2:35pm](#) via [mobile](#) · [Edited](#) · [Like](#)

Tarah J. Martin-Ventes

glad to see the pool debate still lives strong. when i was in school, we were told it was filled in and haunted. some rumors never die:)

[June 5 at 9:52am](#) via [mobile](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)

Eleanor

was a hundred and a half when she breathed her last at the nursing home, claiming she saw her husband offer his hand upstairs. She told no lies, not even as Deja Vu stood tall against trees surrounding her yard. No ill will as credit unions crept across dying grass to the north. No hard feelings as the Carriage House received pension check after pension check. The morning we buried her, the first morning of my eighteenth year, distant relatives flew from Texas to claim what money was left. My mother spent the rest to bed her body next to her husband, quietly sold her house, and spoke no more.

Later that night, my friends ushered me to that strip club next door; closed black doors and black closet figures shuffling around a stage. A starlet in name only gyrating around a steel pole, breasts pulling away like a tantrum child unwilling to leave. I was unwilling to stay as the PA streamed *Haven't felt the way~~~I feel today~~~ in so long it's hard for me to specify~~*
-- and after a thirty dollar lapdance and drink, that day, I felt a little gypped. Ashamed as a little boy-- no, a man who helped bury his great aunt that morning. Meanwhile, the adjacent white house was cold as a headstone. Dead.

Sestina for Zones and Commerce

“The City has a number of characteristics considered as strengths which distinguish the community from others in the surrounding region and offer local economic development opportunities such as: centrally located within five miles of the City of Saginaw, quiet community, home of the Zilwaukee Bridge...10560 linear feet (2.0 miles) of Saginaw River frontage, and Access to I-75.”

– City of Zilwaukee Website

Rainbow-fish cars are swimming southbound I-75.
Sunday afternoon; a traffic jam. Humid engine roars
and road rage are crossing that invisible border
between Zilwaukee and Bay City. These people
have tunnel vision; down a concrete rabbit hole
they go, crawling in steel towards apartments of steel.

To their right is land entrepreneurs had to steal.
Commerce was Johnson's dream and the people
in City Hall replied with Bridgeview. The whole
point was revenue, the endgame was a Roaring-
Twenties age for the town. Today there's roughly five
major warehouses or so nearly straddling the river border.

But the smaller the town, the harder to define borders,
especially when lifelong residents and families of five
or more sit on an otherwise prime location. People,
elected committees both must make a decision: will a whole
community allow tracts of land to develop? Who will steel
themselves for delivering evictions, soundproofing roars

of anger, roars of shame – I remember Promet and the roars
that caused Hatfield/McCoy feuds for a time. After those steel
girders grew overnight, after handshakes and five-
figure deals, what next? Right now, there's imaginary borders
drawn between certain blocks. I'm one of those people
who believe in mood shifts from place to place, whole-

heartedly. Example: Bridgeview feels different than the whole
of Zilwaukee, like adult work, machines and boxes. It shares a border
with Sherman, where trees and duplexes mingle. Further south, steel

machines in Carrollton ooze with bygone time. I was five when the sledding hill on Westervelt disappeared to the roar of excavation. Who remembers that hill? And the people –

After a time, the visuals of industry are routine to the people. At least, no one talks openly about it. Not quite the whole eastern horizon, but half, is filled with the hushed roars of Interstate traffic, electric wires like webs, steel power towers, and midlife trees fighting on the border of skyward and convenient gazes, save four or five.

And this isn't an anti-Capitalist roar or a slam on City Hall people. Not by any means. But I walk the town weekly, border to border. I take five, I hear trees fight for space as much as the steel.

St. Matthew

I.

Father forgive me. I have not been saved.

I say it again,

I have not been saved, and it's been a hundred and fifty years since my last confession. Despite your best efforts I was

dipped to a pool of water blessed by Christian medicine men in the River of Jordan, children cannonballing into holy water like slow-dancing snowflakes at war,

oil-marked by kind fingers on an aged hand, ten years later accusations of child molestation and infidelity with a God unforgiving of even hetero sex deny deny deny,

stark naked in water under the moonlight in a makeshift pond in the Tittabawassee Park, getting my blessing from a woman I met a couple hours ago, baptized by original sin,

honestly studying, writing a thesis whatever the hell a thesis means to a second grader, studying in dallying brick catechism learning Jesus is Love and no one else,

walking down Sherman to the local game store with allowance money intended, to go to the church in yellow envelopes printed "I feel good when I thank God!", and I do, but I

was smart, too smart, making three equal four, Holy Trinity into Holy Quad: Father in Church, Son babysitting children being children on a Monday night, Spirit in the Parish Hall frying fish every Spring at seven dollars a tray, Holy Human smashing your two-story brick house with scandal, I can't pretend

shock when Father admitted he fucked several women in his day yeah it was blown out of proportion, but that's against the rules and that was enough to get my juices running for my own secret rendezvous and I'm standing in the dirt fishing for stars at midnight in the school's blacktop for

well

for what?

II.

I'm talking to you,
Matthew!

I visit your aging house once a year or twice if lucky; no one knows who I am anymore unless they wrung their brains for a time before Twin Towers falling and voting recounts,

I know where you live and I've seen where you sleep your address is 511 West Cornell, and I was born on May 11th and I believe in numerology and patterns so this may be a problem,

Matthew! There's a number of news stations and politicians passing guilt onto *Right-wing nutjobs* like judgment above, wanna bash that wooden cross against the rocks and watch the splinters wash away in the rain of a lonely atheist in his parent's basement on an online rant on a Saturday,

Matthew! Diamonds are a girl's best friend and we're all gambling in your halls, balancing checkbooks and baby bottles in cry rooms across the country making a three-ring circus out of your Trinity; white elephants and monkey business twenty-four seven social hour at the Parish Hall, same ship sailing around and around the room,

Matthew! Doesn't it piss you off that so many people are hedging their bets, placing their chips on black and red?

Matthew your eagle's wings are two doves flying by a spire rusting at the top after years of scraping collection baskets.

Matthew I had a daydream where I snuck onto your roof and washed the dirt off your slopes your white slopes older than most men's lucky sweatpants and just as soiled, where I read the names aloud on each brick laid in memory of gentle elderly

Matthew! I'll start my own church; I'll make mad money, make the illusion of a holy place broken by crying kids, chatty adults, and more importantly, my restless mind.

Matthew! Rumor has it that you're getting an eviction notice and you'd better fight that shit, you've stood way too long, survived so many quarrels in your House that nothing short of divine intervention could end your tenure and your commitment to watch us all fumble in the dark until we find the switch.

III.

Our Father,
Who I stare at into the night who watches me shiver in foggy shadows

Our Father,
Who art in heaven, who I can't see past the night sky to see behind the veil; I can't see the gossamer for the transparent cloak tracing breasts and ass down at the Vu and I'm getting impatient waiting for it to fall

Our Father,
who heard shots fired down the river, lift the shady East Side trees, see what young thugs are growing from the red and green like Christmas in the Wild Wild West in an ant farm in a backyard where no one can breathe

Our Father,
I caught an eyelash at Expressway Bar and tried blowing it out and made a wish but it wouldn't leave my fingertip why you make eyelashes so sticky and wishes so silent

Our Father,
Tossing meteors like confetti over our heads, cosmic sparklers on a gravity pole, and I think you're getting ready for the big one, the Great Closing, the thing that will set my paper and all papers ablaze into ash, wash away the home and away team all at once in that great chess game with Satan

Our Father,
who may moderate the debate when Hell spills over with the dead and allows the Left a chance at reasoning with the hidden Eight Deadly Sin Indifference, hidden trump card of the AntiChrist

Our Father,
Hallowed be thy name, raising my baby girl and she is hungry, she who is constantly naked, she who is emaciated, she eternally on welfare, she who needs us, she who we need, she who will grow malnourished, she who we cherish even when she comes home with a positive test with salt of the earth's seed

Our Father,
I can't sit at your pews and neither can anyone else but our knees are arthritic and we're eating too much host drinking too much wine at your garden party

O Father,
Your son's cross is borne by vagabonds wandering the nearby fields praying you never close your doors, glass thin doors, you are a lumberjack in a prairie, just stumps and stumps and

shoots. Ladders. Never give up, never shut the shed away from us.

We Are the Raiders

Pink, orange, gray, purple, yellow and blue.

Tonight I'm getting down with pad and pen like a teenager
soaking the rag with testosterone on Make-Out Point

like cheesy 50s TV. I'm parking my car on Melbourne Street
like my parent's friends once did when they wanted some *alone time*.
I assume that's what happened. A time before cell phones,

before Consumers planted their steel tower blossoms
on the River. There's always something raiding this town,
drawing lines like Jerusalem in mid-Michigan. Commerce of salt and

sugarcane bumped by electricity – and before then, that grainy whiteness
won attrition wars with sawdust once no more trees could be cut.
The Native Americans of this region sold Crow Island to white men

in the 1910s, and their face is profile on school logos – even victors
remember their foes in war. Tonight I'm floating down Tittabawassee
tree shadow and starlight, signing peace treaties with childhood dreams

on slideshow repeat in the fields. I'm wearing eleven PM as my cloak,
lighting cigarettes with stars, playing foursquare past houses
sporadic with living room light. There's cars in the school parking lot,

blue and white ID at an age where everyone's choosing sports teams
to graduate and join. And years after all this is over,
we're coming back to retire, scoping real estate that'll allow us to

partake in small lawn mowing with our neighbors. Nothing big,
just enough to spend an hour on a Sunday after church. Our feet,
our wheels and title deeds, our woods meeting the water of our time

as we drift idly for the rest of our lives.