

Scatter the Ashes

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Creative Writing at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2006

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a psalm for aids

The angles now, they are
more defined than ever, they
are carving away his cheeks.
His skin, once the shade of
red clay, has faded into
ashes-just a dusty sheet
spread out over bones.
Although always thin, he's
caving in and still refuses
anti-retrovirals.

He cannot love his own
blood, but will not fight it,
either. He says sometimes he
looks at his body and sees a
tree standing even after it's
died, after it's rotted inside,
waiting for wind or fire. He's
still alive, he grows yellow
tomatoes and roses, the kind
that feel like velvet. He
writes letters home but will
not visit. There are those
who've told him he has asked
for this, that somehow he
deserves it. "Imagine" he
says, "some look at me and
they see justice."

circles of stones

Ruby refused to move when
the earth shook underneath
her feet.

The mountain must
have shuddered, cast
some stones down, sent them
rolling

towards the creek, dirt
cascading with the velocity
of waves.

The whole landscape was in
motion and then all was still
again.

The mountain had shifted its
weight claimed a little more
of her

backyard. There are
still scars on its
breast from this, just north of
the pine grove

where light never
reaches ground, on
out past the ancient
unmarked graves.

Before the pasture fence
stitches the ridge closed tight
against wilderness

are crevices etched deep,
like earth slid out from
underneath the oak tree,

scattered the dirt packed
around its roots, left them
stiff and sprawled mid air

like shocked fingers
reaching, seizing vacant
space where rock had
cradled ground.

Ruby refused to to
move until the shudder
of death claimed her.

Now, all that's left
to be unearthed of
hers are circles of
stones

buried beneath overgrown
grass, concealed by trees,
briars. Creekside,

mountainside,
every side of
this house, these peculiar
arrangements,

jagged stone, quartz stone,
smooth creekstone,
intentional, meditative,
circles.

It's Ruby and her
strange circles,
circles and circles
of stones.

Adam, Sunday Morning

Wilted on the couch, body
curled around a coffee cup
breathing steam, bringing
warmth to the hollow core

orbiting between chest and
stomach. Barely blue, rooms stir
before sun's settled in.
Descending stairs, Adam

sneaks a smirk my way and I
decline its aim. Adam yawns
with arms outstretched and turns
his interest elsewhere.

He goes on to load splintered
logs into the wood stove, blows
onto stubborn coals, returns
dusting ashes

from his eyebrows. My cheeks
still burn from the stubble of his
face. "The coffee's weak," I say,
"too weak, you don't know

the way I like it.. .dark."
"Darlin'" he replies with an
accent steeped in Suwannee
River swamp water, "You-

you don't know enough to know
what you like just yet." With
that, Adam returns to stirring
ashes, urging

a reluctant flame.

Ode to the injured rooster

There is a primitive
pecking order, battling egos in
barnyards. Arrogance can strut
about on four gnarled claws and a
spur, pride sways like palm fronds
in the tail feathers of a rooster.

He is a charmer, seducing
the hen with cocked wing, ruffled
neck, and an oscillating lopsided
dance. He does not go
unhallenged-another rooster cuts
in, another dance begins.

With a sudden dart of beak,
the intruder plucks the charmer's
pride, that single hind feather
iridescent green, hoisted like a flag
above his head.

His diminutive kingdom
invaded, assailed, defamed. He
sulks away dragging his wilted
feather through soggy hay and
snow.

Oh, injured warrior
you will conquer again, you
will have your hen. There are
plenty of other chicks in the
barnyard.

"coal miners typically don't carry ink pens "

"It wasn't bad" inscribed on
the back of an insurance
form. "I just went to sleep"
tucked into a lunch box. "Tell
all I'll see them on the other
side", signed Junior,
chronicling his own slow
decline. Carbon monoxide
widened the loops of letters,
in the coal dust dark he could
not see to circle back, join
lines, close an open "o"

"A tragedy- not because hope was abandoned, but because it was embraced"

Church bells rang, proclaimed a
miracle. Baptist Church doors
burst open, joy scattered the dust
of silent streets. The families'
answered prayers were later
explained as a minor
miscommunication-static, a bad
connection-All of them
survived? Everyone had died?
Perhaps there's one still left
alive? A few lost their faith
right there and left, the rest
couldn't bear to be alone.

"Quietly, efficiently, the rituals of comfort and solace were set in motion "

All the Red Cross could offer
were cots and aspirin, some
stayed to pray and accepted those,
others just walked home. A bowl
of potato salad marked the
moment between miracle and
mourning, followed by baked
ham, a pound cake, a grown
woman screaming into the deaf
belly of a teddy bear.

Hellen

I'll holler at Helen
stand on that lurid mountain,
call her name three times, "come forth."

Maybe she'll grace us with a
vision, her apparition. This
local legend is too

enticing to be left
unexplored. A woman
hung herself from a footbridge

above the road, her ghost
a curiosity
that can't be left alone.

Lingering beneath the bridge,
we all are wondering
what white dress will come waltzing

up the road, what spirit
will spread her sad lost shadow
across our path tonight?

We eye the dangling vines wanting
to see some specter swinging to
sate

a morbid thirst, and I myself can
say the taste of blood was rising in
my mouth.

It was not long until
I looked up to see a star
shoot straight out of the galaxy,

drop without an arch or
flaming tail to follow. It
fell from the horizon

without its due supernoval
glory, just plunged right out
of the heavens,

and I thought of Helen,
how unremarkable
her leap must have been,

how dirt reserves the final
dignity, how quick it is that
gravity drags us down to earth.

That night those distant city
lights flickered between the trees
like fireflies in July.

I imagined those woods
deeper than they were, to be
a wide river reflecting

starlight, it was clear that night
and those celestial bodies
that would have drowned in city

lights were undaunted,
unobscured, were infinite
luminous points in a

nocturnal sky, the moon a
waning crescent eclipsing
from our sight.

After Hay Gathering

Fever ascends
 from the dry earth
of this acre.

 Pasture gasping,
field's share fibers
 thirst for a feel

of midnight's fallen
 fog. Absorbing all,
even the shock of night-

soaked-grass on skin is good, the
press of sunburned flesh to dirt-
nourishing.

We count the bales
 by moonlight- enough to
keep the horses fed

all winter. The generous
 earth of August
will get us through

the winter.

Know that my
silence does

not equate
consent.

Bite your tongue and
say that five times fast,
asshole-find out what it
means.

Since you could not
hear my voice, you say,
over the music-I
vanished. I let
my absence shout
what you refused
to hear. Do not say I
didn't tell you.
I shouted with
my absence, left
an echo wailing in
the empty space
long after words
had failed us.

Haunting the Harvest

Tobacco is bowed, baking in rows
across arrowhead fields and strangely
resembling tee-pees. The tan hides of
native tents rise, resurrected out of
dirt. The scene signals September is
descending upon us and with it, soft
stepping ghosts haunt the harvest. A
forgotten people have now been
spotted crossing the creek, and
coyotes heard howling on hillsides
while the tasseled, chest high corn
stalks whisper a dry voiced rustle and
hush.

what was it that gave us away?

We escaped to trace constellations but
found a vacant sky, so obscured by
clouds even the moon was reduced to a
ring of blue smoke orbiting earth.

As if that fog
might hide us from the ever-present eye
who would consume us, see through skin and flesh,
find some fertile need growing like a seed
in an apple core,

we pressed into
the sharp edged woods, still unaware of our
bare feet. As the brittle briars bent to bear us
in, they etched their warning in our skin-
pervasive marks

map our uncertain
passage in and out of Eden, and then the
consequent unveiling. That infamous Apple,
the first taste, the fall, it all unfolded in

the wet wood's vapors that rose to bear the old
bones of oak, dismantled branches, sturdy spine,
the enduring dignity of pines,

never laying down
their decorum. Ripe and unraveled from
first taste we could not cover or collect
ourselves, we felt

with a shy
and undeniable touch, a slow persistent
pressing hand, the lavish grass insatiable for
the honeysuckle

hysteria of summer night to fall into the aching
earth of that acre. Leaf tangled hair, blistered
soles of feet, dirt embedded heel, we

wore that landscape
well into morning. With the fruit still fresh
in our mouths, we felt the familiar cool gaze
descend upon us,

enveloping as fog-then the creaking gate into the
pasture, the rusted lock that would not latch,
disheveled shock, indignant rage-

what was it that gave us away?

Mourning

As I leave, the urgency
of my departure is suspended
in particles that cloud above
the dirt road to my home.
Dusty pines cling to ashes
scattered in my hurry,
I cannot look back without
choking in the very air I breathe.

Prayer

Barefoot, for weeks I have tried to get
a foothold on this place, folding
fingers into foreign soil, sowing seeds
with a growing need to make this place
my home. Finally, I find comfort in
the dirt that has gathered beneath my
fingernails.

Grace

I seek communion with the sunflowers
as they face the setting sphere-
the raw honey of its essence
that sweetens the apples of autumn
and draws the garden from the ground.
Standing strait-spined among them
in the evening hours of late summer,
I envy the grace in which they face
the turning of the seasons.

Holy

The old man with the crooked stick
kneels with his back bent to the sun,
sifting the soil of his field in search of
the ancient- arrowheads. When he
finds one he turns it between his
fingers, letting it rest for a moment in
his palm before dropping the artifact
into a plastic grocery bag, then
delivering it with quiet pride into my
eager hands.

Atonement

I was the one up at
dawn searching
shadows in the rain,
stepping softly, light
as the dew I knew the
night before-1 was
there for the fall.

I was the one pacing
circles in the
moonlight, wet from
wandering and awake-
always awake. I was
the one in need of
atonement.

December 2001: Revival of Nationalism

Shop-n-Save sign reads- God
Bless America Cheap Gas Cartons
starting at \$11.99.

Two more miles into city, The Hop
black disc neon bleeds God Bless
America. Now hiring smiling faces.

cheap God

gas now

hiring smiling faces-

America.

He looks just like her father

Thirty-three, anticipating a second
puberty, she steps out onto the front porch and
calls her dog in tones that move lower
down the throat, deepen, sink into some hard
place in her chest where he is learning to
speak from. Every morning she must find his
voice and hold it, conscious of how
he coughs, laughs, silent when he fears his
pitch will give her away.

In his room, door closed, shades drawn, he stares
at her bare chest in the mirror. Red rivulets,
swollen, streams of seething heat circle her waist.
Gauze bandage forms a grid against the blistered
skin of her back like ravaged land, leveled,
scraped from shoulder blade to shoulder blade, raw,
each square foot mapped and planned for construction.
She tucks one end of a binder under her
left arm, pulls with the right, wraps around,
feels it compress her rib cage, breathes a deep
breath before fastening the fanged clips.

He walks with heavy heel, shoulders squared, bent
slightly forward, hands in pockets with just
the thumb exposed. Jaw tight, head down, posture
pulled upright by the binder shrinking her small
breasts into pecs, a hard chest underneath
his white t-shirt. He is learning to take
up space, make a place for himself.

Head tilted, she checks the thin hairs beneath
her chin, the eager beginnings of a beard,
scattered, concealed to all but her by shadow.
For now, his stubble is stuck on with spiritgum, a
bottle of thick liquid the color
of maple syrup. She dips a hard bristled
paintbrush in, lifts it coated and sticky,
reeking of fingernail polish remover
and bourbon. It tingles like windburn.

She clips inch long strips of hair, held against
the scissors edge they are ground down to
the consistency of sand. Stubble
impossible to grip, pick up, it sticks
in the swirling ridges of her callused thumb.

He taps out sideburns down her jaw line
one finger width at a time then angles
a squared edge brush, gives two short strokes beneath
the bottom lip and pats on a patch of stubble-just enough to
pinch between his thumb and finger.

He evens the left sideburn level with
the right, scrapes off the excess with a dull
blade, the skin raises in response. With careful
pressure, cheek inches from mirror, he shapes
a clean edge. A reflection catches his eye-He
looks just like her father.

driving out the copperheads

Adam, I've been thinking
of how you burned down
that woodshed,

all the oak, poplar, pine
inside- a winter's worth
of warmth

you exhausted in one night-
how you heaped piles of dead
leaves,

sawdust, bark, struck a match,
stepped back and gave a
glance my way.

I stared at the first flames,
fire-lighted face, heat blazed
my cheeks

like a rush of blood brings
blush. Your glance, pressing
as a hand

on startled flesh, confessed
your reasons. Even if a
moment's

honesty could extinguish
our destruction, you'd
rather have

these ravaged ashes than
you and I exposed. The
tin roof

raised up, wavered in a gust
of wind, peeled back and
bared black boards

before collapsing, as if that
woodshed undressed, revealed
it's flesh

then scattered every bone.
Remember how you were
surprised

to find snakes, how you traced
the flattened path of
copperheads

through grass back to the woodshed?
Do you remember the babies-how
they could thread their heads
through crevices in warped wood
planks

and you accused the walls
of dripping venom, feared
fall's leaves,

their hiding place. Adam,
its no wonder snakes laid
their eggs

in that woodshed. We met
many nights in there once
our lovers

went to bed. You walked through the
shadowed pasture, I, afraid,

would wait behind the briars where
your woods were thick-never caught.

We never thought of poison. Do
you remember that October-

barefoot in the woodshed
sawdust on our skin, leaves
tangled

in my hair. There were no snakes,
back then. Even we were
forbidden.

You can keep on lighting
fires to reduce us down to
dust,

the smoke will rise and when
it passes, Adam, your
obsession

lies exposed in all these ashes.

Charmed

The creek coaxes stones
into sleeping nude by its
side. Bare skin can sense
its breath pass over backs
of rocks-washed of dirt,
stripped of root, carved
out, corners rounded
smooth without force or
fire, only a current
quickened touch, the swell
of rain water, only fluid
meditation-a source ever
replenished.

Who would not want to
soak bare skinned in that
prayer, omniscient as dirt,
divine as the night chants
of crickets?