

# **Scatter the Ashes**

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*By Ashlee  
Nicole  
VanMeter*

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Poems by Ashlee

Nicole VanMeter

Ashlee Nicole VanMeter

825 Chandler Creek Road

Mars Hill, N.C 28754

828-689-4249

shamanscure@aol.com

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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?