

I



The Song of Talmon Tew

June night in this wrecked roadhouse  
a jacked-up jukebox, and I'm a thirsty crowd.  
Come, Ralph, drink with me.

Liquor whispers, whiskey lingers.  
Come, Ralph, drink with me.

Jesus was a maker of spirits,  
mingling water and miracle  
to sate the thirst of his disciples.

Stifling night in this teeming bar,  
whiskey is love, and liquor is memory.  
My father, driving home one night,  
*Come,*  
grew wings—  
*Ralph,*  
just flew up to Jesus.  
*drink with me.*

Spirits are the sad gift of Jesus,  
and they're hovering, hovering  
in the rafters,  
spirits resurrected by spirits, my dad  
was filled with spirits and I was  
                                  in the car  
and  
                                  saw him grow bloody wings  
and  
                                  fly, fly, fly.  
I saw my daddy fly, Ralph, drink with me.  
                                  This liquor is roaring and I want to know  
what it's roaring  
                                  but it all sounds like car  
                                  engines  
                                  revving and revving  
                                  and, Jesus  
                                  slakes the thirst of this disciple,  
Ralph, drink this last one  
                                  with me  
Ralph, Ralph, he had red rusting  
                                  wings that smelled like iron,  
                                  just flew up  
                                  to Jesus  
                                  Ralph, Ralph, Ralph,

we'll grow our bloody  
wings  
and  
fly.

A Desert in One Part of Australia

A desert  
 in one part of Australia  
 has fangs.  
 Precipitating,  
 calcium-carbonated,  
 acidic  
 fangs  
 that gnashed and gnawed  
 the bedrock of the earth  
 until the ground's blunt teeth  
 were sharpened  
 to ragged, deadly points  
 and the desert  
 became a great set  
 of jaws—  
 decaying, rotting  
 spreading  
 their  
 ancient tartar  
 across the wasteland  
 and yellowing  
 the very dirt of the place  
 until all of it  
 became the hue  
 of jaundice.  
 When there is no rain  
 the tall, frayed teeth of the earth  
 are forgotten  
 amidst the short, rounded  
 protrusions  
 which make the land  
 look like death,  
 as if every cadaver on the  
 continental island  
 could be buried  
 in the yellow earth.  
 It is a cemetery  
 with headstones  
 made of seashells.  
 In the desolation  
 of incisors,  
 in that place  
 of dust

the color of wilted marigolds,  
 there was once a sea.  
 There were azure swells  
 teeming with plankton,  
 krill, fish,  
 and, somewhere along the bottom,  
 the creeping things which made their homes  
 on their backs. Homes that would,  
 in centuries,  
 turn to limestone,  
 homes that would lay buried  
 under barren soil  
 until the rain grew its fangs,  
 tore the dry earth asunder  
 to whet  
 some edges  
 and round others,  
 creating a sea  
 of yellow  
 instead of azure,  
 a desert of teeth  
 and tombstones  
 rather than mollusks  
 and all other sorts  
 of life.

In a Half-Plowed Field, 1944

(Elegy to a German Farmer Caught in Crossfire)

I wish you hadn't died.

I would say, "*guten Tag.*"

But you have died

I say, "*auf Wiedersehen.*"

What were we to you,  
us boys who kill across the fields?

Did you think:

*It's for my lebensraum.*

Did you think:

*Maybe they'll clean the mess my country is.*

Did you think:

*Goddamn kids, can't they see this is lebensraum?*

There's no telling what you thought,  
so, for right now, ignore  
(and I suppose the dead can best ignore)  
the bullets,

the explosions,

and I will keep the decay of your hand in the decay of mine—

at least until the peaks surrounding this valley become

the honed edges of knives and tear

the sun to pink and orange shreds

so that night can more easily devour

and erase.

Jazz

Steel wheels keep beat,  
and the coal train blows its horn  
three languid times.

That is the refrain.

Before it will come again  
there will be eternities of echoes  
off the West Virginia mountains.

Men at lunch, arm-strong and  
murky from the dust of their swinging picks,  
hear the train's blasts  
and trumpet some shouts  
back to the black  
rocks they played out from the dank dark  
of Earth's forbidding underbelly—  
calling out to that which is meant only  
for incineration.

Monks, they descend again  
into the catacombs  
with lonely lanterns and prayers.  
Chanting fractured memories of melodies,  
they ask that this not be the day they die.

Come dusk, the men,  
breathless and sweating,  
hear the whistle  
and take it all home.  
Trudging through the sunset  
they hear the coal train  
blow its horn  
three languid times.



The Death of a Country Husband

The nexus of all stench  
 was the smokehouse. Pork, shit,  
 hickory smoke, seared skin.  
 She had come to tell him  
 there were molasses  
 cookies in the kitchen,  
 and had not expected  
 a marionette, blue  
 and purple-faced as if  
 painted, split skin as if  
 whittled with a blunt blade,  
 he was draped from a cross-  
 beam by a rope he must  
 have tied himself. The man  
 she had been a virgin  
 for hung among the hogs,  
 looked beatific in  
 the morning light somehow,  
 and smelled of loose bowels.  
 At dusk, she buried him,  
 and bade Christ: "Stay home.  
 You allowed death to take  
 you, and now, to take him.  
 Whether a man is hung  
 from a smokehouse ceiling  
 or some sad crucifix  
 he could have avoided,  
 it's suicide to die,  
 it's cruel to make women  
 feel grief. And I do not  
 need reminding that I  
 know no necromancer that  
 could will a life to him

again, could will a life  
 to me again. Leave me  
 to the empathies of  
 Mary. Only Mary."  
 The Madonna might have  
 come, might have stood, wistful,  
 beside the ruins of  
 the woman. And, sifting  
 the rubble of the wife  
 through her saintly hands, she  
 may have recalled her own

demolition from some  
nineteen centuries past.  
But, three days of grieving  
does not know three decades  
of it, and thirty years  
of solitude was the  
wife's cross to bear. And so  
Mary might indeed have  
come, but was uselessly  
ethereal, and so  
the wife never saw her,  
and all the world offered  
was a deadened sun, the  
empty promise of a  
new moon, the haunting taunt  
of late summer honey-  
suckle smell infusing  
the breeze, gilding every  
thing, but not enough to  
inter scents of freshly  
turned earth, or hickory  
smoking all divine skin.

Bones

that night  
I had a shovel  
and knife  
and I dug up the  
bones of  
my mother to find  
them dull  
as the cream of the  
late moon—

with the knife  
I carefully whittled  
the bones to  
eighty-eight keys and spread  
them six feet  
across on the lip of  
her open  
grave and they shimmered as  
cannibal  
fangs shimmer amidst the  
solemn meat  
of a meal which was once  
an enemy  
yet still familiar, dear,  
nutritious—

my fingers willed  
a song from the bones which was  
penetrating  
and my mother's skull rattled  
its teeth but had  
no tongue and I struck the keys  
until my fingers  
were nubs and I was crying  
and there was blood—  
my cries knocked loose the dreary  
cream of the moon,  
filled mom's barren bed with it,  
and as the last  
echo of my song whispered  
itself into  
nonentity, I crawled in  
and suckled from  
mother's solemn, creamy tomb.

Nightmare

A panther, black  
even on his teeth.  
A solid beast,  
all sinew, all muscle,  
a stalker in the periphery  
of the circle of dim,  
silver trees I stand in  
whose branches are dull knives and  
the clouds form the anxious lips  
of an orange and ravenous sky and  
from the ground come cicadas  
awakening from seventeen years of sleep  
to swarm up and up  
to eat this world bare—  
their ever-growing buzzing  
is the voice of something.  
Endless solitude?  
Something predatory  
with a thousand teeth  
and a hunger.

Migration

Winter snows come and  
cover the dead ground,  
but still there are birds.

All the juncos and  
chickadees--black, white,  
gray--fluffed up, stoic--  
blandly perching on  
bare, frozen branches.

Righteous citizens  
spurning transience,  
they have watched their chicks  
grow up and still know  
where their nests are. Next  
season, when warblers  
wander back here to  
their summer houses  
sporting those brand new  
summertime feathers,  
the locals will all  
scoff and then go on  
with their enterprise  
of making lives from  
familiar twigs, lives  
not meant for export  
but for staying put.

A Step to Nirvana

Dress your dead brother in white,  
 decorate him with sandalwood and lotus flowers,  
 and lay him upon the twigs you have gathered  
 into a pile beside the Great Kali River.  
 He has been washed in soaps and water, yes,  
 but you cleanse him with Brahman,  
 the god who comes in fire.  
 Push his corpse into the river.

No longer a vessel,  
 the body sinks to where the devil catfish waits,  
 a creature (as you well know) whose hunger stirs  
 at the sound of pyre-making.  
 Six feet long and covered  
 in the gray muck and rusty mud of the river,  
 it feels its way to what was your brother  
 with tough, long, slender whiskers to  
 bring him to its mouth  
 that is the size of the river's,  
 to its teeth,  
 of which some are jagged and broken and  
 others have points that are the ends of scythes,  
 all are crooked and all  
 point inwards to the throat, that place  
 with the eternity of a universe,  
 that black place that is perpetually expanding  
 just as the stomach it leads to  
 is perpetually expanding and,  
 as this fish devours the cadaver,  
 rends skin from tendon and tendon from bone,  
 after useless flesh and charred blood  
 have blended with the bacteria of an esophagus,  
 the body will disintegrate in digestive acids,  
 be reconfigured as it passes  
 from throat to stomach,  
 from stomach to intestine,  
 from intestine to river  
 with all the other excrement.

Visibility

A light switch was flipped some hours ago.  
You can't see the three walls,  
so I will tell you  
that they are burgundy-painted wooden planks divided by black lines,  
that there are  
photographs taped up on those walls  
of the Forum, the Coliseum, the Spanish Steps,  
that let you know that this room's resident has been to Italy.  
Out of sight, a one-year-old female cat prowls the room and rustles paper.  
A new dehumidifier cuts on and off at its whim and is also hidden.  
The frayed spines of books line a tall, wooden bookshelf.  
The fourth wall is made of brown bricks  
and used to be a fireplace.  
In this darkness  
you can't see the bed but I can let you know  
that a deep green fleece blanket  
covers it, that  
those under that blanket are  
a woman with freckles  
and a man with a beard.  
I will tell you of  
the paleness of the woman's skin,  
(though I shouldn't because she's a private person)  
and the bronze of the man's.  
Their eyes are blue and brown,  
oval shaped and almond shaped,  
large and electric,  
and were shut off when the light was.  
It is sad that you'd never be able to see  
the way their legs and arms,  
her dark, ringletted red hair and his straight chestnut hair,  
are not tangled,  
but willingly intertwined,  
and so I relate it to you  
because there is something like happiness here,  
visible and fleeting:  
the spark when a match is struck.

Cristobal and the Sea

On the day Cristobal paddled out to sea,  
everyone who came down to the surf to see  
him off dressed as if it were the Sabbath.

They had all independently come to  
the conclusion that this man was a prophet who,  
when asked about his reasons for braving the ocean

with nothing but his clothes  
and a small oar-boat,  
had quoted lines from a poem no one but him knew,

*“Yo veo, a veces,  
Ataúdes a vela  
Zarpar con difuntos pálidos, con mujeres de trenzas muertas.”*<sup>1</sup>

They did not know  
where he planned to go  
or if he had any plan

other than to disappear  
behind the horizon, perhaps to return here  
in a few days, perhaps a decade, or perhaps to die

in his little boat,  
so that his ghost  
would not be tied to a town,

but be free  
to wander the entirety  
of all the oceans.

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<sup>1</sup> I see, sometimes,  
Coffins under sail  
Weighing anchor with pale corpses, with women of dead tresses  
-Pablo Neruda, from “Sólo la Muerte”



# II

## *Background*

In 1999, when I was eleven, Hurricane Floyd hit North Carolina. Though only a category two, it dropped enough to rain to flood most of the Coastal Plain as well as some of the Piedmont. Many families lost their homes and some lost their lives.

My dad's side of the family (his parents as well as his three siblings and their spouses) all live in Tarboro, NC, a place hit harshly by the storm. All of their houses were flooded and ruined. My dad was the only one of the children to have moved more than a mile (about 30 miles to be exact) from my grandparents, and our house was relatively unchanged. We were the only ones who were able to help other people in our family without having our own mess to worry about.

Rondeau of the Hurricane Runner

Floyd came to be in the African sea,  
slow at first but then with speed,  
he stretched, warmed up to twist the sky  
and wind and clouds counterclockwise  
so that time itself would cease

having consequence. Everything could be  
reversed by the storm, the athlete  
with that calm, cyclopean eye.  
Floyd came

to Tarboro in late September. He,  
exhausted from his marathon across the sea,  
ripped apart at the stitches in his sides.  
The rivers overran, the highways had riptides.  
Fifty-seven died who didn't flee  
when Floyd came.

The Storm Like Cancer

The screened-in porch's floor  
 squelched under the work boots and old tennis shoes  
 my parents and I wore.

I couldn't believe  
 there had been a long-past Christmas Eve  
 when, out here, standing on sturdy floorboards,  
 I had gotten to choose  
 my first puppy.

Once, the front door would  
 have opened onto my grandparents' house,  
 but I knew it could  
 not after the hurricane's  
 endless pounding of granite rain.  
 I knew it would  
 be a stranger's house.  
 No tins full of sugar cookies shaped like flowers,

no bologna with red tape on the sides or milk made from powder  
 crowding up  
 the refrigerator  
 with off-brand soda.  
 No, what was behind the  
 door I couldn't gather.  
 But that Christmas pup  
 had recently been made skinny and tumorous

and despondent and dead;  
 so I knew devastation even in my youth,  
 understood what it said  
 in its language of floorboards  
 warping under stagnant water behind a door  
 hanging crooked  
 and heartbreaking like a tooth  
 rotting in the gums of a beagle dying of mouth cancer.

Collections

The snow shovel a gloved hand holds  
is gray plastic, enormous, new,  
and full of  
ruby-red high heels,  
dark blue flat bottoms,  
a scuffed pair of Mary Jane's,  
and gargantuan flannel night slippers  
that all came from yard sales  
Grandmother attended on Saturdays.  
The shoes are flung in the wheelbarrow.  
We fill the shovel thirty times more.  
Covered in silt, debris, and bacteria-ridden water,  
each shoe is tossed in  
with the rotting hymnals,  
ripped religious pamphlets,  
and mildewing devotionals  
we cleaned out earlier  
from faltering bookshelves.

We line the road  
with flimsy black trash bags  
filled with collections  
of useless soles  
and unanswered prayers.  
We return to the house  
to salvage furniture.

Cleaning the Flooded House They Are Not Alone

Cottonmouth lounging in a corner  
with the flotsam, still  
as the lake that lingers  
in the kitchen and living room  
on a bed of warped linoleum.

The snake has hollow fangs  
its poison could course through,  
a jaw that could unhinge to swallow whole water rats,  
but it never bites at wet, passing ankles,  
and they never know  
it is there with them  
in that ruined house,  
its iridescent skin shining like a covenant  
in the weak sunlight leaking  
through the windows.

They see dull rainbows littering the floodwater,  
there because of oil and  
only God knows what else.  
They see shadows of tree branches  
covering watermarked walls with spindly,  
warding fingers.

My Mother, a Thief, Heathen, and Poor Girl with a Big Mouth

My mom didn't say a word  
as my dad, her, and I cleaned out  
my grandparents flooded house,  
but she was drowning.

*They never liked me.*

*They think I stole their son and moved him  
30 miles away because I hated them.*

*Maybe I just didn't want to live in hollering distance  
of his parents like all their other kids and in-laws.*

*Maybe I did hate them.*

*They hated me more when we stopped going to church.*

*Thief, heathen, poor girl with a big mouth,*

*They never once—*

Somehow  
there was sincerity in the way my mother  
lifted a shovel,  
genuine generosity in the gift of sweat  
she gave that day.  
Hatred has its duties,  
family has its own.

We piled, dirty and exhausted,  
into our minivan  
and my mom turned off the radio.  
Driving home,  
we counted each mile marker as a blessing.

My Father, Who is a Man of Few Words, Upon Seeing His Parents' House With Watermarks on the Walls Up to His Waist; Mud Covering Most Every Surface; Soggy, Mildewing Furniture; And Smelling of Rot and Turgid Water

“A little messy in here,” he says, then gets his shovel and digs in.

My Grandfather, Who Was Once a Mighty Empire

When I see his face,  
I see emaciated Rome  
being decimated by some  
lackluster barbarian horde  
which has taken lazy centuries to come,  
but was inevitable. All things move forward  
with an ebbing pace.

I sail from the failing capitol city  
on the Tiber, the river that is his long  
cheekbone, but no consolation tarries among  
his skin's thousand tributaries, and, as I look  
into each weary eddy, I know the throng  
of barbaric men took  
on the laborious slaying of this empire out of pity.



My Grandmother, Who Was Once Loved and Pretty

My grandmother would say,  
"Everyone called us the handsomest family in church,"  
when she recalled the old days

when her kids all stayed  
under her brooding wing, perched,  
my grandmother would say,

like little birds right before they  
leave and forget who first fed them. Now she searches,  
when she recalls the old days,

for the company of those young faces praised  
by her once fellow church-goers. Searches,  
my grandmother would say

only to herself, in the dark, after she had prayed,  
for the company of her own face, lovely, and not yet much hurt,  
when she recalls the old days,

by the pockmarks and liver spots. "Each day  
comes and none of my chil'en care that I'm closer to bein' dirt,"  
my grandmother would say  
as she forgets the old days.

Conversations at Night

My grandparents slept at our house  
in a bedroom across the hall from me.  
At four in the morning I heard their arguments.  
Yelling because their ears  
were deadened by time, they said,  
“What’s the matter?”  
“Indigestion.”  
“I told you not to eat those beans.”  
“Yeah, well, I ate ‘em Hester.”  
“You always do, Ralph, anything I tell you not to  
you go and do it.”  
And at times like these my Grandfather mumbled  
low enough so that she, grown deafer than him  
through the course of their over half-century union,  
could not hear,  
“Well, I married you, didn’t I? You never  
told me not to do that.”  
“What?” she would say.  
“Nothing, go to sleep” he’d reply,  
and there’d be silence for a time.

Triolet of Avoided Damnation

Satan didn't eat us whole  
when we did not go to church that Sunday.  
My grandparents quavered in their souls,  
but Satan didn't eat us whole  
as we leisurely ate fresh-baked cinnamon rolls  
in the free morning air of that Sunday.  
Satan didn't eat us whole  
when we did not go to church that sunny day.

The Town Burning

We never missed the Christmas lights,  
took the long way to the highway  
from my grandparent's house in the cotton field countryside  
to go through the town burning

in technicolor.

Santa Claus on the roof  
waving, smiling, his cheeks  
red in the light of Rudolph's nose.  
Fake snow in the yards  
covering and consoling  
brittle December grass.  
Life-size nativities  
where the saintly glow illuminating  
Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the Magi,  
the ass, the lamb,  
came from floodlights connected  
to long yards of orange extension cords taken,  
no doubt,  
from a box labeled  
"xmas stuff"  
and put to use  
before the Thanksgiving leftovers were  
anywhere near gone.

We never bothered with town  
during the day,  
and why would we?  
To see thousands of light bulbs hanging  
like empty promises  
from rotting eaves covered  
in chipping, lead-based, olive green paint?  
To witness reindeer teams stand stiff  
on rusting tin roofs that couldn't even  
glint in the gray winter sun?

We never missed the Christmas lights  
so much as we did in 1999  
when the hurricane quenched  
almost everything that shined.  
Almost  
because there were houses built  
with government money  
that shimmered in new vinyl siding.  
Almost

because we noticed a few houses  
where solitary electric candles cast  
soft light out the windows.

Today...

a fallen fall leaf drowns in a puddle.

some people run between buildings  
because they don't have umbrellas.

the Wicked Witch of the West has cancelled  
her prior engagements and stayed inside  
her castle playing crazy eights with the winged monkeys.

the mountains are clouds.  
I'm not running  
because I have an umbrella.

Gene Kelly put on his finest pair of tap shoes,  
had a great date,  
and sang a ditty while dancing down soaked sidewalks.

dawn, noon, and dusk are the same.

some people don't run  
because they don't mind being wet.

I wrongly remember 1999 like a movie,  
like the hurricane never happened  
and rain never hurt anyone.