

A DARKROOM

by

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by

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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

To Sarah, for seeing me through.

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ABSTRACT

A DARKROOM

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George Mason University, 2017

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A Darkroom is a poetic exploration of memory and loss within in a family unit. The backbone of this thesis is centered on a crown of sonnets that relies on film and innovation of the sonnet form to tell the story of the speaker and their relationship with their family.

ONE

Letter to Ghosts Before

What is there to speak of? I can tell you that the apple trees are still thriving. November is fast approaching, but the heirloom red delicious seem to love to cling to the cold. They remind me of you in that way. Recently, I have been thinking of departure and how that couch back home doesn't matter—time and air are finally eating it to dead. I could go back, but I would say nothing. An old teacher told me yesterday I should read Dickinson. I read two poems. She was sad and I am ignoring the way the world claws downward at my cheeks and twists through my chest. The convulsions aren't worth mentioning. I am seeking advice and thought you might have some. I could go to Boston or stay home, I suppose none of this really matters. I am not mystical, but surely you hold some answers. I have many papers etched with musings to you. I hope you respond. I place them under my pillow at night and pressed between pages of my favorite book by day. When I say *field*, I mean home. When I say *dirt*, I mean death. When I say *you*, forget you ever were. I thought you should know these things.

-M

RR 2 Box 141

I.

In Spring you were constantly running—
speaking of land, how it must not remain
unturned, how it would profit us (God & rain
willing). The process would go first plow,
then planter, then pray & spray against the plague—
remembering the way last season your crops disintegrated.
There was the evening you hit that opossum
with a shovel over & over. I think of you often,
arms rising, falling, striking—repeat,
repeat. Your face covered with sweat,
nails with dirt, the dorsum of your hand with grease
& gasoline. Night moved in with the threat of
a freeze. You opened a beer, poured salt in,
you thought you could hide anything with your grin.

II.

You thought you could hide anything with your grin—
a farm boy in plaid, freckles on your skin.
Under the cover of night you moved
eighteen wheels across asphalt—out of place.
Another semi passed: a flash of headlights,
a hiccup, window rolled down, radio turned up.
You said to me with that grin *I remember
one son of a bitch stuck behind me one night in Georgia
flashing his lights at me. I stopped my truck, got my bat,
went to their pickup and knocked that light out.*
I laughed, looked on through forest—
night vines growing. A CB staticing through dark,
breaker breaker one-niner...watch out the Smokey Bears.
The way they came for you I will never forget.

Cracks

1st

That man slid his tongue through
55 years—a real smooth talker
with a shit grin. He would come
and go always leaving his Stetson
smell on skin.

Now, in prison, he exhales
thinks about farms he knew,
cracks the gravel in his neck—
how he built his own
tomb.

2nd

That little bitch called the parole officer on
me, told ‘em I was headed too far
North, told ‘em I had a snake
between *my* teeth.

Them boys fried chicken
in a trashcan, you never sent me
no money for commissary, and
I gave your last known address
to that mouthy Mexican fucker
who I was always yellin’ at
in the dinner line. Twenty-five years

of being your father and you don’t trust
me none. Your aunt is full of bullshit
and Daddy ain’t ever callin’
you again.

3rd

You could say it was true, speak words, name yourself. For now, I am forgetting your face
and reinventing names from stories I am told: molester, embezzler, thief, my mind calls you
a murderer—I have seen it in my dreams.

At night my teeth grind and remind me of our gravel road—the grate of tires touching rocks,
your tongue touching theirs. I am trying to recall it, the placement of your hands and an

instance in which you spoke truth. I am trying to forget the language of your smell—
Listerine and Stetson.

By day, I sweat you out; realize I am of your blood. The escape has failed.

Patrician Vigil

Still
awake I was born
of your veins, a cold blood running
through—the sleep I have lost breathing
in and out
waiting for the return
the departure.

Still
awake, still
awake. The roads were
open and you were
made of dust, asphalt, and salt
to protect you from the snow—
A home seven hundred miles away,
same sun, a daughter
awaits.

Still
awake, still
awake. In the spring, diesel fumes
and a motor moves the wheels
of a John Deere, you leave
before harvest.

Awake still, awake
still. When Fall comes, as it always does, how do I harvest
the darkness with you
gone, father I am
never asleep, never
awake, still

awake.
Lessons you are learning: bars are cold and you
have lost—
When night hits I don't
sleep or
think of all you
leave.

To Ms. Ewing, Gorin, MO, 1886

What happens when the body revolts inside of itself,
bones grow big as headstones? I suppose darkness

was always approaching. I suppose as death
always is. I've always believed

museums were more for the dead than anyone
else, and way back then you were

a living exhibit—if only I could ask
that docent to define you,
your life. You didn't mind the gawking, the money
you got went home with you, and you gave it

to your mother and father who labored long days to pay
for the house you were growing out of, the special shoes

you needed, size 24—three pounds of leather
on your feet. You just kept growing Ella, growing

distant from the ones you loved. And I
can't help but think how I grew from the same land as you:

those clay hills, patches of dark dirt
wrought with worms, how we are

not so different, how your heart was too
small for your body—the constant ache.
Are your bones are too heavy for your ghost to carry?

Homemade

Her father's only success this week had been in the beer he bought her and even then, she wasn't sure he bought it solely for her or even for them, or whether he bought it for himself and she was just an almost silent afterthought. He called her out to the shed as an evening rain moved in and holding a sweaty glass bottle said, *here!* then smiled. She knew he used to smile like that more often but not in her lifetime. A dead man lingered inside of him.

She said, *Thanks*. And then they sat in silence for what could only have been a few moments, until it began to rain. She wanted to look him in his eyes and say, *things aren't like they used to be*. But, she realized things had never been like they used to be. She blamed him for the stasis and then the exigency over 782 miles. She blamed herself for all things failed. She almost disappeared once. Her therapist told her she should never drink.

Either way she took a sip of her warming beer, leaving her dad sitting in the shed, she headed back to the house, with an aching in her bones for drunkenness. She opened the door and walked inside, her mother laughing in her recliner.

After Life

"How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it..."
—Virginia Woolf

I like to think of the tree
or rather the abandoned well
the tree sprouted from
—roots take hold

*the one I photographed in younger years
in black and white,
those old bricks, it just kept growing
and even now it still lingers by the rusting swing set.*

It must seem
your labor never progresses

*we haven't talked in years
even though I know you must still wipe the sweat
from your brow and blow your nose
into your blue handkerchief,
and I wonder what you place in your wallet now,
besides the smell of dirt and sweat.*

At a place you may or may not still call home,
*outside, a child bangs on the door with her fist
begging her parents to let her in
before she realize they are behind her.*

I hope today the sun will animate the tree's leaves

*in the pasture, cows swish their tails,
stir the flies. And in winter cows will walk to the
middle of a frozen pond seeking water, then fall
A bulldozer will pull out the wasted meat
before it taints the water.*

Afternoon is hot.
In absence, I have been gathering

And this is what we have grown to consume.

deer skulls, letting their carcasses rest
in a field, empty.

I am thinking of you. I am still writing to you.

TWO

Guilt from Three Angles

"Guilt, I discovered, is like back projection in film: a nocturne in broad, indifferent daylight, cast on a blank screen. You can see it, because you are inside the trauma."

-Peter Conrad "The Hitchcock Murders"

Pick a side, time is not stopping / for us anymore. / We could sit here and wait / for the
final slice of the scythe, / surely you understand by now, / someone *is* coming / for us. We
can divorce, / but we can not divorce / definitions—divide the force / of this planet's
spinning. / Quiet now, watch them, / watch him. We should know by now / he is
somewhere liminal /and what we see /isn't truth. / He keeps descending / down steps /
then reappearing / in a flash on screen, screaming. /I remember reading ghosts /get stuck
/in loops / like this.

RR 2 Box 141

III.

The way they came for you I will never forget—
a knock on the door in February. The snow had left
for a spell, the sun was out. I was the keeper
of an already damaged house that year & you
were always running. I was escaping:
walking through fields as you slept,
begging the ground to thaw, stopping
to rest at a fielded combine, running my fingers over rust.
I would look out at that decaying barn, weathered red,
the stump of a fallen oak tree,
think of the lightening that took it,
an old cat rubbed its head against my leg.
I would say, *I will get out of here, I will miss this place,*
none of this should have happened.

Satu

Back then it was bare feet and Morning
Glories filling the space

between rows where crops would
grow—bitter still covering sweet. I
recall the burn of sun on my neck,
being blinded with light—eyes
gleaming, set

in their ways. Today I wake with a
chill of remembrance—a
sunflower

in late August, how it grows.

Approaching

A phonograph crackles and plays the
song of a record's silence. Dust settles
on a mantle with the resignation of a
night's burning

field. One midnight blue hand on
a pistol the other on a drink—
steady, now.

RR 2 Box 141

IV.

None of this should have happened,
I miss you, did you know that?
Are you listening to me
listen for you in the dark?

I need to stop these images.

These days, I have been smelling decay
& its products are growing
something in my mind
& on the land.

Oh god, I think it is speaking.

Worms are out. It is raining.

I am still remembering, still remembering.

What am I saying? All of this is gone now.

A Darkroom

What I have lost: a compass,
a rock painted with a map of home,

one that I might not leave.

My mouth, which cannot be buried
turns to you in twilight,

I imagine you with black sap
leaking from your eyes.

These days there is no need for me,
I turn empty fields into silence—

the darkness is too loud.

I am turning a dustcart
emptied of field mice into silk worms.

Sunrise freezes the frame,
a smokestack levitates.

Ode to Forgetting

Because that night I stopped
texting, stopped
pressing
thumbs to screen,
stopped hitting
send because you were trying
to make me think of something or
forget the way *your* fist becomes
my heart and everything
is always covered with dust
from this gravel road that was
supposed to be paved years ago
and sometimes
the dust isn't a tornado
then it is
and it wraps your truck
around a tree and you never get rid of
it because *there are too many memories*
or *trashed trucks abandoned*
I say that is cliché
you just sip coffee
because caffeine doesn't affect you
like it does me because *I'm sensitive*
to the bone and to me
it just doesn't taste right
Trakl chose cocaine
over caffeine, wrote *all roads lead to*
black decay or they lead to memories
of thriving apple trees that used to
grow
the best fruit and I know this
because I am in Missouri staring
at that patch of land that used to be
their mother and I am crying
now as I walk to my packed car
I hit unlock,
open the door—I don't think of the
setting sun or you
I just press *settings*

on my phone, make sure
music is playing, turn the
volume to twenty, drive.

A Rumbling

*"Miss Ella is growing faster than my own cornfield and sometimes I almost can't tell if it is Ella's joints cracking
or the corn growing."
-Ben Ewing on his daughter Ella's growth*

It must have been early summer,
evenings would quiet and
gentle fields nocturne. It is now a world away—sweat
drying on brows, a child growing far too big for
such a small town. That summer I would go
to bed early most nights to avoid her
face, grimacing—the smile that would
fight through. Every night, in sleep,
I would dream of waking, walking
to my fields to see if the corn stalks had booted
or flowered, but all I saw was all that leather, never feet.

In a State of Play

We tried to talk of distances and lexicons
that night among the buzz of water, its crescendo

was careless. I don't remember much,
you were cupping your face, then fire, you were always lighting

a cigarette. That night happened slowly,
you peeling the label from your beer bottle,
me thinking that this was probably another
mistake, we talked Kant, how he said *Out of timber*

*so crooked as that from which man is made
nothing entirely straight can be carved*

and how Hume wrote *Beauty in things exists
in the mind which contemplates them* and because of this

it must mean that we belong in this wasteland
where it takes 20 minutes to smoke

an American Spirit and it takes two months
to tell you I'm allergic because I'm convinced you'll stop.

RR 2 Box 141

V.

But what am I saying? All of this is gone now:
The mailbox filled with ants that sat by an old oak, The old oak
The notes left by the phone,
The gravel road (grated every summer
for good measure), The fields of sweet corn
surrounded by coon traps (poisoned bowls of coke),
The tractors, The dirt & soil, The spot
in front of the house I almost burned down on the 4th of July,
The apples trees that decayed after you
dusted crops (a strong breeze brought them death),
The drive to town where I used to ride around
the courthouse pretending to drink beer,
The dog howling to the coyotes all night.
The movement, most of all I miss the movement.

VI.

The movement, most of all I miss movement through ether on late afternoons—as if something was already missing, as if I knew then there was always departure in arrival. The heat moved west, back where you ran to & then from. I am thinking of the afternoon fireworks lit your field on fire, you didn't even notice how the wheat wilted to ash, smoke rose, signaled danger. Later, I forget that you weren't watching as an old woman removed the scales of the catfish, wrapped them separately & said, *something for your dog*. I forget there was a dog. You eat the fish, take for granted that there are no bones. As you watch TV you sniff the air *do you smell fire?* I say *it seems more like lingering smoke*. You only pray for rain. Now, I imagine you would say you are beginning to miss the work of others hands—placing fish in the skillet then on your plate & somewhere in your mind part of you might be thinking there was something to those gestures. I heard your fingers have worked past the bone & people have started calling you “ghost hands.” I am intrigued. I seem to be playing an image over & over in my head. It is the gesture of a hand from left to right across a face that is no longer.

THREE

VII.

The movement of loss is a gesture of the hand
 from left to right
 across a face that is no longer
a face, it is a memory
 of sleepless nights & screaming
 or on cold days
a scarf too tight around my neck,
 it itches & I scratch
 because I am still human
& surely you are still ether
 or something like it, you are surely
a blade of grass soaked in dew
 or the sun beams shinning through fractures
in the barn wood that illuminates a tractor
 that has spent the last 20 years fathering
the dirt of County Road 34....
 but they renamed that stretch
 after I left, *Apple Place*
 even though years ago
 I ate the last apple those trees produced.

I am still
standing, still
watching,
still pacing. I move
 from right
to left.
 Then stop.

Fragments After a Vigil

Think of what you did leave: a daughter and a wife, a house and a shed, all your machinery, crops growing—aching for harvest. What is worth the smell of a diesel rumbling your bones?

Chaos works like this: paint a gentle incline in black, let it sun-grey and then push her off of it— as if she won't notice the way gravity works to rein her, show her. As if—

reasons your daughter betrayed you: her memories rest in your departure. If she breathes in a blue-pink summer sky, she will smell diesel, feel wheels digging damp dirt. She will imagine you gone, and you will be

what is remembered: A walk through the woods with you, the skull of a calf wedged in the fork of a tree.

Unfurl your toes. Witness what you have been carrying: a broken hourglass, a picture of youth, a grain of sand waiting to return, the dirty engine of an 18-wheeler.

Fact: April breeds a cycle, creates a map riddled with veins and arteries—a body in motion.

Watch now: As night rises, flies leave the corpse of a calf.

RR 2 Box 141

XI.

I could have sworn there was more
than birds—cardinal red & sore
or soaring. Those days I would walk
through fields looking for eagles—
endangered, bald, sacred. Something
on this land should be preserved.

This is a recapitulation of a scene

near the beginning one which stands upright
and then is turned over, stage left appears
a man who moves to the center of the stage
which is a dirt patched field. He does not fall into the pond
I am sitting beside, instead he sits in tall crab grass
looking to the sky, which is now empty. I could
have turned the eagles to vultures. I should

XII.

I should have turned eagles into vultures,
raised by fingertips to the sky & confessed to him
that I believe in alchemy &
my fever has only been growing.
Most nights with closed eyes, I find myself
in the passenger seat of his abandoned truck
rolling down rock roads backward & with flashes
of light he appears and disappears.
Someday I will wake to his decaying flesh
on my left palm & a broken fever.
Now, the walls wonder why I am so silent,
I caress the fissures with the tip of my thumb
until it blisters & bursts. I want to know
his darkness.

Letter to Ghosts After

My apologies, these days I haven't been saying much. I have been letting the cold papers setting on my coffee table crumple themselves. They contain nothing. Even my hands are cold. Demands are not being made. If they were made I would say *bring it all back*—the Midwest saltwater of summer (sweat), the voices shredding through the air in dark (everything here is always in dark and darkness is my breath), the couch rotting its insides out, the sound of big machines in dead fields. I want to not be here. I want to not be writing. I have been dreaming again of laying myself on top of dirt for days and watching things sprout. Time seems less like the flick of a wrist now more than ever. There is no silence here and it makes me wonder about there. I am reading more Dickinson, thinking she may have had it all right. Do we need more than a room in this space? I don't think my pen hits paper for me anymore. I want to remove myself, but I feel that roots have already planted themselves in this carpet. I am tangled into complex fibers. Last night I grabbed a pen and with effort reduced it to ink and shards. The ink stained and filled in the whorls of my fingertips. I am not sure who I am.

-M

RR 2 Box 141

XIII.

I want to know his darkness—
the way smoke emerges from his hands & smile,
how weather moves underneath a door
at night. He says in his final flashes,
I brought you nightmares
and my wall becomes a screen. In my head,
I'm trying to keep my mind free of things that don't matter.
His vanity requires no response. A piano starts slowly playing
low-key down beats.
I fall, he slinks closer.
Go away or I'll kill you myself.
Laughter is lightning, & lightning strikes
outside the window behind me. I look
to the screen and watch crooked teeth smile.
His vanity requires no response.

XIV.

His vanity requires no response and so we are silent, water is dripping from the faucet and I think now he would tell me, *corpses breathe like this*. He knows the way I am now like I know the way he is. He knows the way I love and I know the way his darkness & memory consume him. She asks me if I think he will call to hear it from me, if he will want back in my life & it is now that I remember outside the sun is setting & my landscape shifted years ago. I tell her he is never coming back.

FOUR

X.

Remember, you never see everything. The winter I am thinking of,
despite the fact that the camera's flash fails to illuminate
all it could touch, is year down the road
from where this all began & there was six feet of snow.
Hopefully you know by now I am hyperbolic, even symbolic.
Language fell from our hands as if palms could ever see the future
and then articulate. This is decay, time is speaking here
while I sit idly and hit replay. What is there to do
in absence and decay? I had nothing else to do so I threw
dented corn and sunflower seed from seasons ago
onto the snow. I watched blue-jays
& cardinals fight for it: something to keep them
warm and full. You kept talking of the bird's beauty
(I could have sworn there was more than birds, there was blood).

The Timer is Broken

You are still living among the
uncompleted lines. I write to
forget, then to remember,
then to establish someplace
you still breath. I have been
trying to wrap my head
around the simplicity

of a partial death, the aching that
comes in my brow as the day grows
on, the blood flowing. The child
calls the parent

cute, the sister calls the brother
fractured, so the feeling of rotting
seeds
is more or less like a forgotten

cake in the oven. The house burns

Whispers '89

Either way I am imagining
 sunrises I have been missing
each day for the last four
 weeks, the cool dew on my feet,
 the
birds. I have been in
bed, wrapped in black
 sheets, resting my head on a pillow
 too old. I find
my eyes refuse to accept
anything
 light. The pages of this
book
 name my diagnoses and
prognoses in perfectly printed lines. I
realize
 the air is cooling; the leaves
crunching. People smoke
 on patios. Children
shiver as their parents
tightly tuck them in. My
eyes water from staring
 at this spot. I imagine
waking.

RR 2 Box 141

VIII.

Most days I move from right to left & think of films,
how once they told me *in film the villain always moves
from right to left across the screen & this unsettles the viewer—*
our eyes are so used to moving from left to right.
I couldn't go home much after that, radio static scratching through
morning, TV flickering through night. You were always walking
from west to east, tractor to truck, table to recliner. I began
to notice the way shadows hit your face. They once said, *in film
it is not so much that the shadow is evil, rather
it is that it still has to be assimilated into consciousness.* I am still not sure
what that means: the shadow, their words. I am not sure where they went
after one night & seeing where I came from
they disappeared, I didn't hear goodbye.
I never saw their movement, the gesture.

IX.

I never saw
your movement,
only gesture: one foot
in front
of its other,
in late summer,
I thought
we moved
through fields of sweetcorn.
I spent
so much time
in the sun
my hair
turned blonde &

somehow you turned
more ghostly.
In fall,
the fields
were soybeans &
you drank more
beer. I am trying to imagine
this cinematically.
Imagine triumphantly
sad music: strings &
a piano or imagine
silence.
What about the movement
of silence?

Do sound waves
ever settle? I have looked
up the equation &
I am not sure
the results can be conclusive
& I have lost
the ability to calculate.
What I am trying to say
as I sit in a chair &
try to remember
a porch & yard
of my past is that

yards are green & soaking,
after ample summer rain,

things look healthy. I think
I have lost every you
I have ever known.
I left one you
at the prison
the day they turned
themselves in or over—
I am not sure prepositions matter.
The day
started with sun
& ended
with rain.
We haven't talked
since. I want to move

past repetition
& the refusal to call
my writing a rut.
I want to think again
of science
& history. I want
to imagine mountains
I used to roam.
Are you picturing me
picture all of this
in my mind
as the music is playing?
I have not moved
from sitting

in my chair,
my hair is no longer blonde.
It is long
& I need
a haircut
to rid me of tangled ends.
Now I am standing,
picture it,
picture me standing,
a close up of clenched fists.
Do not forget the music,
its sound—

triumphant
& sad.

It makes you sigh
& your lungs
reach for light or darkness.
Your heart has craters
that are reaching
for the moon.
I lost
another you
one Winter
& somehow
I lost you yet
I can still cling.
It is complicated
& there are not words

to explain this.
You see, I have been trying to build
my own language,
although I still have years
to travel. There is another you
I want
to mention,
the one
who never was.
I will end this here.
If you reads this
you will know
they are the you.
I am just trying

to get you
to picture the past,
perhaps I am holding
a picture &
it is covered with dust
or maybe I am burning it
with a lighter as the sun succumbs
to the earth's rotation.
There are stars
beginning
to appear.
My dog is still

breathing, barking at the deer
in our garden.

This should all be
widescreen,
& vivid, although I did not paint
enough colors to explain you.
Remember,
dirty knuckles,
plowed fields,
dinner on the table
after a day of work.
Remember,
you never see everything
onscreen
& the music
is still playing.

Circa 2014

Stop enjoying yourself, the way you
smoke makes me lust. When my mind
slips

to your palm wandering underground,
reaching
an untouchable language, emerging

with something yellow and vibrant, I say
my mind is contemplative. When this was hearts

palpating you walked out into the noisy water
surrounded by forest, carved love.

RR 2 Box 141

XV.

You were constantly running,
thought you could hide anything with your grin,
but the way they came for you I will never forget.
All we had is gone now,
but most of all, I miss the movement.
The movement of loss is the gesture of a hand.
Standing now, I move from right to left and forget
your movements, the gestures.
I remember that I never saw everything, I could have sworn
I saw it all, turned those eagles into vultures,
that I knew his darkness—
Your vanity requires no response, you are never coming back.

Cartography

I have read you in the original way,
experienced the irony
of loss within a map. Here lies the heart—

alive, still gushing blood, a femur
to steady the blow, the throat to hold
it in. It will return again

and again, as silence grows
beside absence. I write this
down so I will not forget

a right turn or the shape of
it—
 your hips as they appear
in shadow form against

the wall.

BIOGRAPHY

Melanie Tague graduated from the University of Missouri in 2012 with a BA in History and Sociology her work has been published or his forthcoming in journals such as: *The Cincinnati Review*, *burntdistrict*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *Portland Review*.