

UNDERGROUND CITY

by

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Content warning: mentions of drug-use, violence, death, sexual abuse, and gore throughout this work.

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ABSTRACT

UNDERGROUND CITY

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UNDERGROUND CITY is a book of poetry about a number of people living in or around Harrisonburg, VA. Told from varying perspectives, but mostly focusing on the life of one James Miller, the book attempts a novelistic approach wherein characters and perspectives are linked together and fade from one to the next based on a sort of plot-based flow, but with ambiguous chronology and narration (it is often not clear who is speaking, at least at first). I had considered titling this book MEN OF HORROR, but I realized that it was more so about one man in particular than it was about men in general. That being said, much of what this collection focuses on is how men can become corrupted by drug use, violence, toxic love, poverty, trauma, etc. By examining this, I am attempting to highlight part of what haunts American culture today, and the toxic assumptions that Americans have that perpetuate these very problems rather than helping them.

There is an underlying reading wherein this book, which is about a character named James, could be compared to the Book of James from the bible—but that connec-

tion is loose. More so I am attempting to take influence from books like *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* by David Foster Wallace, dramatic monologue poems by Edgar Allan Poe, T.S. Elliot, John Berryman, and Robert Browning, as well as work by poets who have written about incarceration, such as Etheridge Knight and Reginald Dwayne Betts, to create a totally fictional book of poetry.

The book begins at the end, with James Miller living as a homeless man in Harrisonburg, VA. Then, the rest of the book shows us James's life and social circle, either directly or indirectly (for instance, it is not said but it is implied that Officer Wilmot may be the police officer who arrests James Miller in one or more of the situations involving arrest), and leads toward the final poem, which is in the voice of James Miller, after he has gone to prison. It is not clear when he goes to prison, or what happens after, but it is implied that eventually it results in him leading a homeless lifestyle. Who narrates the poem titled "Underground City" is never made clear, but he could either be a rat, or a burglar—either way, the perspective shown in "Underground City" is meant to represent a true evil, whereas, in contrast, the rest of the book argues that James's evil is more complicated than that, and that much of what makes James "evil" is how society views him, not how he actually is. This calls into question assumptions about drug addiction, mental health, poverty, violence, and masculinity that still plague our country today.

SUNDOG

Now see Charlie Chase, he
isn't much to look at. He's
got this face, see, that's all
bent and cracked at the edges.
He's got this smile—no teeth—
but his gums are pink and green,
cancer-patched from the chewing
tobacco.

But he's not all bad. There's
a subtle kindness to the way he begs.
To the way he wanders from streetlight
to streetlight to sidewalk to park grass.
The way he slides down the orange tube,
lies in the shade of the rope bridge,
swings on the swing set until the sunlight
drapes over his face for the last time
each night. He smiles his gums
at the moonlight.

He has a way of walking,
with this stumble every left step,
limping like a pirate, no cane,
his spine yanking his waist
to keep his legs moving;
I tell ya man, if you
saw him in a bar,
and he knew ya,
he'd buy you a drink
with the last coins he had.

His eyes,
they are either light blue
or slight gray;
tucked beneath eyelid shells;

hardened by winter;
held tight shut like
a clam's gray ligament hinge,
against the wind.

When I first shook his hand,
and felt his fold-over mitten fingers,
they were cracked, like crunched ice,
or dropped glass; Charlie once smashed
a glass between his bare palm and a drunken skull,
and the glass cut his hand into jagged sections
of interlaced skin.

Oh right, back to how he got the limp.
Cerebral Palsy, I believe. Spastic diplegia.
It made it hard for him to go anywhere fast.
He'd drag that leg like a task, all up and down
the Harrisonburg streets, like a rigor mortis limb.

Occasionally I'd see him
hop the train, ride it through town.
People always wondered how he'd got on,
and stayed on the back of the caboose,
arms clutching iron bars, occasionally
letting go and leaning out to wave;
he'd hop off at the other side of town.

At some point last year, he started wearing
purple everywhere he went. All his clothes
were purple and gold, the colors of
James Madison University;
and I saw him less and less,
as he spent more time sitting
at the corner of Carrier
Library and Hillcrest
House. He would drink
coffee and chat with students.
He got to know a few of them.
Called them by name.
He'd even wait for hours
just to see them. His
coffee growing cold
in his hands.

One late night in December,
outside some bar downtown,
a drunk JMU student
started insulting him,
calling him an ugly fucker,
calling him deformed;
Charlie swung a fist
at the face of his anxiety,
and it ducked, and punched back,
and kept punching, and soon
poor Mr. Chase was lying
in a puddle of his own flesh.

It was I who found him,
hours after the fight,
with miles between us
and the nearest open hospital,
and the night wholly empty of other souls,
I brought him back to the place I was staying—
a nice dry spot in a tunnel beneath a bridge
beside interweaving trains tracks—
and lay him down on a blue blanket
on the graveled ground,
and hoped for the bleeding to stop.

In the morning, when his wounds had dried,
aided by yellow newspaper and old-sock bandages,
I left him lying in the tunnel, to go get some food;
he'd be needing it soon.

When I got back, I found only
the indentation of his body
in the bloody snow.

I follow the footprints,
traced in red-white crust.
I thrust through slush
with feet in hole-strewn shoes,
feeling my toes numb and tingle
as I traverse the pink snow.

And what do you know,
I find poor old Charlie Chase,
lying on his back where the old

tent used to be. His arms clutching
upward, rigid frost coating his hands,
fingers shaking with icy shivers. His face,
already cracked, now looks like an iceberg
about to break into pieces. His smile,
stuck to his face like tape, quivers
so slightly, his gums tucked tightly
beneath lips. I watch him try to move,
ever so lightly, once he finally sees I'm there,
I help him stand, but his left leg gives out
beneath him and he falls back down.
He must've gotten scared
alone in the tunnel,
near the little fire I had set,
not knowing where he was, and
ran. With none of liquor's warmth,
he succumbed to winter's bite,
his eyes shut tight against the wind,
his scarred hands held together
as if praying. I see him
struggle to lift himself—
one last time—
and collapse on the weak leg.

I can still see him riding that train,
waving at the people he passes.
I can still see him wearing purple,
drinking coffee with students.
I can still see him bleeding
from between his wounds.
I can still hear him breathing.

BURNT

I stand outside
the On the Run gas station
and wait for someone to stop
and ask me for something.

I stare off in the direction
of a collapsing sunset
and plead with my eyes
to stop the bleeding.

I'll wear
however many layers of flannel
it takes to hide the weight
I've lost since you last saw me
standing in this same place,
in these same stained denim jeans,
my scarred face hidden by a Redskins scarf—
the scarf of a team I don't even watch—
maroon like the clouds in the sky;
the petals of a wilting rose.

I suck back the smoke of a Camel
from a pack that the kids gave me
as payment. I blow rings,
and rings that float through
those same rings.
This is the Friday night
of what is quickly becoming
the rest of my life.

The slamming of the station's door.
The reflection of the ceiling light
off the silver of the freezers, like
a flashlight in thick fog. "Skelly,"
they say. "Skelly, get us some cigs!"
A bunch of fucking kids.

Nothing makes you feel like
a piece of shit more than buying
cigarettes for kids who you know
are going to grow up
to be pieces of shit
just like you.

HERE SKELLY LIVES

Where Skelly lives is a sort of shack that he's built over the years with things he's found in his travels. He hitchhikes all up and down the East Coast, but always seems to end up back in Harrisonburg.

He brings back souvenirs, though. Mostly junk. Scrap metal, broken furniture he swears he'll fix, other memories of civilization. He brings it all back and slings it together with whatever adhesive and rope/wire he can find and then sits back with his ass in the mud and looks up at what he's done, satisfied. "A Natural Spirit cigarette goes well with this moment," he says as he lights one up with a match and sits back further into the mud, dirtying his tweed britches.

Skelly is a storyteller. He got the name some years ago from who knows and has been going by it ever since. Of course his real name is James but no one knows. They all call him Skelly. "Warm your hands around the barrel fire and listen this one right up," he'll say, a Natural Spirit stuck between his dried-up lips, his hands held out over the fire.

WHAT IT MEANS TO FLOAT

Rory never thought
in his whole life
he'd be where
he is now.

I don't suppose
you know the reason
why Rory decided
to kill himself?
I don't think
anyone knows.

It went like this:
Old Ror, man,
he ran up the side
of Port Republic road,
wearing nothing but
tightie-whitie underwear
and flip-flops, and he was
high as shit man, the highest
I'd ever seen him. The bowl
of the crackpipe we smoked
was full of white crystals,
which fizzled brilliantly,
like the endorphine receptors that—
once dormant—
were now electrified to life.

People were honking like crazy:
like a stampede of idiotic elephants
blaring their trunks at a hyena
that had just slipped beside their herd,
wearing nothing but a rabid smile,
running down the sidewalk like a track star,
sweat dripping down his head as his teeth
chattered and his eyes shed tears

of hallucinogenic joy.

Have you ever seen
a man on his mind's
last leg? It's sad. I wish
there were more in the world
that had tied this man's feet
to the ground. I wish the real
world knew he existed, because
I don't think there was ever anything
as brilliant as what I saw him do today.

Earlier, he had waited in line at the soup
kitchen, watching that phantom ladle
steaming upward, like when you combine
vinegar with baking soda: a tiny volcano
erupting in the face of a sweaty Mexican
man in a toque hat scooping slop like snot
from a bowl so wide it looked like
Odysseus's own cyclops's gooping
eye socket following the mutilation.

And now, Rory's own eyes are streaming,
leaking, like a cracked pipe: a cracked mind,
which he wore like a weird hat atop his head—
and that was why people stared at him right then
as he sprinted past them, his flip-flops slapping
against the concrete sidewalk, his wrinkly skin
flapping like a sail in the wind, like sand dunes
wrinkled by a Saharan gust. He was like
one of those horned lizards that can squirt
blood from their eyes on command—
as if fear and sadness could bring
blood into the eyes. Like my eyes
when I first heard
that Rory had climbed
the rubber-coated green fence
that lines the bridge over Interstate 81,
and, wearing a cape tied around his neck—
a blankie which he'd grabbed while sprinting
out of his meth dealer's house¹—he vaulted
over the height of the sky-slicing fence's

¹ The dealer's name is Sparky; we later found out that the blankie belonged to his son.

octagonal gaps and fell past
the horizon, where
the roads that form the forearm bones
on either side of I-81
disappear beneath
the valley sunset.

They found his body
several hours later
splattered atop
some semi's trailer,
the driver as surprised
as the news reporter
who showed up
just in time
to splatter Rory's memory
all over the public television
in the window of the TV store
I walk by every day.

SECOND WIND

When this body
breaks down into pieces
sometimes there's only one thing
that brings me back
to the surface of the earth.

Floating like plastic bags through the air,
my flesh—expanding, a parachute
of meaninglessness, dragged along
by the will of the world around me—
is nothing more than garbage
to my neighbors—the ones
with houses, cars, families.
They have homes, but frown
when they see my own
cardboard-boxed shelter,
lined with tarps and blankets.

And it's often that I feel just like my home:
drenched, sopping, ripping apart when you grip me.
Could another's love ever hope to sip this liquid heart,
which drains away with each syringe's insertion?

I will be alone for as long as I'm alive.

At least I will until another lover gets entranced
by the lie of my good looks, and get pulled in,
and there—when as close as a razor—they will see
the truth of my life and my body and my teeth:
It's heroin, yes, it's heroin for me.

THE DOUSING CANDLELIGHTS

Broken shards of glass
lying in the sun; a wave
rising up in a crest
to crash (flush with
sea wasps) flat against
the shore: the lives
of two heroin addicts
calmly burning away.

There're moments
of excitement, yes;
but they're brief,
fleeting.

So now we walk a little ways
past denigrated houses
and some baseball stadium
purpled with sunlight along the grass.

I've slept there before. Yes, I have.

And certainly on days like these
I am a kindly soldier. Gathering
supplies for my girl and myself,
so that we don't fill with sweat—
boil over. Age broils overtop
this head. The hair is losing
its brown; gray against
the grain, like ash after a fire.

I wonder how much wood
has burnt for the time
I've wasted on this earth.
Who else has suffered
so that I may thrive
beneath this sunset;

I swear I'm flush
with the thoughts
a demon should have.
I'm a demon placed
inside a microwave:
where goes the smoke
of the being when blood
always sets in the forehead?

I look at you and wonder:
Who are you, right now?
Who will you be tomorrow?

Worry not, young bird,
those wings will not
break. Those hollow
bones in the wings
will not snap. I think
there is life in the gaps
between when you and I
put those needles in our
arms and find reasons
to join our bodies.

I am inside of
every word you've
whispered in my ears
over the years; I am inside
those promises you've made
to me. *I*—this everlasting word
of abandon. I cannot be the reason
you stay here.

You must decide that.
No I do not want you
to leave. No, I want you
to stay. How can love exist
without light. I am not lying
to you here under this sun.
The morning is come and yet
you still benumb like the sky
to a storm and I'm left wondering:

The sound ignites a listener

to look and see the striking
bolt: cast down—by Zeus,
perhaps—to sting like
the broken glass
of the mirror
she smashed
against my head;
to burn like a sea
wasp's venom,
suturing the skin
with seizure, a grip
like a bladed whip
around the leg;
and this, my lady,
is the result. This
spike in endorphins:
this is yours, and mine:
together here we'll find
no light, no tunnel, just
lifeless bodies lying—
softly—dead against
the carpet.

The saliva
travels slowly
from your mouth.

I watch it gather.
I watch it. I make
a sound; you don't.

THIS FROM FIRE

I love smoke.

I love how it just fills up the room.

The way it drifts off to somewhere you can't follow.

It's like my life: I can just sit and watch it burn and float away.

LET ME BE BLUNT

Greg passed it to Tweezers who passed it to Randy
who passed it to Andy who passed it to me. All this
time is wasted unless we smoke all this right now.
Let's not be nihilistic but I think it's un-sadistic
to consider how we can each see each other's pain
fading away, like ghosts from our skin this smoke
drifts across the space in this room, in every room
we fill with our bodies: so limp and limpid and lucky
to be alive and not behind bars, and not
beneath the fate that awaits each of us like
an anvil hanging behind an unopened door.

Tweez had sprinkled in some coke.
I laughed to myself when I saw we
were also drinking Coke. Caffeine,
you slay me. Love, you betray me.
Anger, you bring me from this night
to the next moon that waits above
my eyes; cocaine, you spray me
with bullets of exhilaration;
I will not I cannot receive
any more stimulation;
I am not just a conduit
for murdered exultation;
I slice each section of life
like a pie into corners and bury it
in my mind's backyard using
no crosses to mark the graves—

And shouldn't you be reading something
else than some dumb poem written
by a slack-jawed imbecile
who's drinking Miller Light
on this hot October night,
wondering if the weather
could ever reflect the present

state of his mind?—it would have
to be a tornado tearing through
cookie-cutter houses;
it would have to be an eruption
of lava that soon dries in a coat
of black rock along the inside of my lungs:
soot to root the deepest breaths I'll take.

Tweez had his usual syringe-
hidden-in-a-glasses-case,
whipped it out like a policeman
does his badge, unraveling
the bag of brown powder

I left.
Went into the other room.
I stood alone with my head
beneath the ceiling fan. I felt
so fucking hot, I swear
I had all the sensations
that I would ever need to feel:
too many, too much, too often—
what can the veins of this mind
provide but blood? red thoughts?—
visions of myself with the body of a spider,
of myself lying on an angel-shaped bed of spikes,
of myself getting flayed alive:—
they say well just don't think like that.
I'll think the way I think because these thoughts
are all that feels real in a hellfire world.

First Andy, then Randy, then Greg. Tweez had already
shot himself stupid. He was sloped over the couch
like an unconscious Cupid, an invisible bow clutched
in his child-like hands, shooting his arrows down
at the table where all the drugs were laid out.

THE TRAVELING CIRCUS

Tweez here. It was another
day with the boys. Randy
had gone home early.
Andy and Greg and I
were watching Robin
and Annika dance in
the light from the square
windows, the lint on their
clothes reflecting luminescent
color that my eyes ate up like fire:
like the logs in a campfire.

We had met them inside
the 24-hour Walmart.
They were shopping for
a Beta fish, and had chosen
a blue one with bladed fins,
and were walking to buy it
when I saw them and thought:
hmm—*I like*—I'll try that;
and I said to them, you're
getting one of them Japanese
fighting fish aren't you?

We're gonna name him Snapper, said the blonde.
Look at his little fins, said the redhead, whose skin
was tight against her jawbone. Her freckles were as if
painted on. It was like her face was too small a mask.

SCRATCH THE BRICK

They first started talking at the Wal-Mart.
They were looking at each other in a way
that made me and Andy and Annika feel
pretty awkward, but we three made eye
contact and acknowledged the awkward
feeling, and soon we were all friends.
Friendships form like chemical bonds:
they seem to just link up, form together,
independent of the individual desires
of each component friend, the bond
forms and hardens and learns to exist.

Tweez lit a cigarette by scratching
a match off the brick wall we were
leaning against outside the house
where Annika and Robin were
dancing in the window light.
Morning light is refreshing,
except after a night of
ignoring blinking.
We'd each hate
to miss these
moments,
as they
forge
themselves
in our memories
like plagiarists—
we are all plagiarists,
thieves, usurpers,
contrivers, hipsters,
haters, lovers—improper.

What is proper, lover? do
you know?—as we stroke
each other like the monkeys

did ten thousand years ago
and will do ten thousand years
from now, do you know? Or
maybe propriety is defined
by pseudo-propriety...
making it an illusion?

Well anyways, Andy
and I were not hesitant
to pop a few round white
ones and float atop the clouds
they ignited within us—as we
watched these young cute girls
dance in the morning light
and felt invincible.

THE TRAVELING CIRCUS, 2

These two idiots' heads keep nodding.
Nothing says amateur like an early
crasher—babies can't control
their sleep. Adults manipulate
their minds and stay awake.

Sleeping bags: sweat-inducers, bringers
of discomfort in the heat, of regret in
the cold, of mixed feelings in neutral
weather; these feelings are not mixed.
These signals are switched on
and glaring: *Go*.

Hesitation is just another way to fail.

This girl's smile
has me weak.

I don't like to feel weak.
I don't like to be vulnerable,
to be versatile in my openness:
I am so utterly closed, all the time,
but this clam now has a knife stuck
between the lips of its shell,
and it's prying, trying,
oh so hard, to open.

“So why ‘Robin’?”
“My parents met
under a cedar tree,
or at least that's how
my mom described it—
she's a big fat liar—
and singing in the tree
at that time was a little
robin. So they named

me that, and split up,
and now they're gone.
But the little Robin
remains, singing."
"That's a pretty thought."
"I'm surprised to hear you
use that word."
"What word?"
"'Pretty.' You wouldn't
expect it from someone
like you—with those
dark eyes."
"Are they really that dark?"
"Not to me they aren't."

I don't remember the first
moment we kissed. That's
what drugs can do to you.
But I do remember we kissed
all night, and into the morning,
and by then Robin was stricken
with this humorous light-hearted
glee, and her and Annika were just
so damn *alive* that I had to learn
everything about them, so I started
inviting them along on our drives,
on our pranks, on our nights where
we sprung like the tadpoles we
were from the water
and look at us now,
kissing behind the house, on
a hammock; and yes, I'll
use the words "pretty,"
"cute," and "adorable,"
if there's truth in
their usage.

Tonight there
is so much truth.
So much sweat, like
the dew on the grass
of this fall morning,
as we awake and find
the sun like an awkward

intrusion from a parent
on our bedroom: but
there are no awkward
intrusions to a heart
in love—I can't fall
in love. But I can
pretend real well.

And in this world,
that's all that matters.

DIG

Sammy told me
that she really dug
the way DXM made
her feel. She said it
fills you with energy,
a heated excitement,
and that your mind
expands like a balloon,
so that soon you feel
like a leaf on the wind,
like a feather off a wing,
drifting down.

So, I went to the 24-hour
Walmart and stole all the
cough syrup that would
fit in my coat pockets,
and snuck past the blue-
vested employees, out
into the parking lot,
and began the long walk home.

And in my recliner
I sit back and read
forums wherein
losers cite their
experiences
and explain
how DXM
is ingested.

And earlier,
when I was
walking home,
I saw on the ground
a reflection, of orange

light from a street lamp,
which seeped between the
tree branches and leaves
onto the wet asphalt
in front of me.

I have allergies.
To cats, specifically.
Now, when I get cat hair
in my eye-hole, it hurts
so much that I punch
the wall in my closet,
and now it's full of holes.

So I've got a habit of itching.
Scratching. Irritating the skin
with impulsiveness. A perfectionist's
inclination: to eliminate discomfort
in all forms—like the intentions of
any cruise ship—to bring you back
to the time when you were a baby
and all you had to do was suck
a tit and all of a sudden you were
all good again, because they were
gonna clean the shit and piss for you;
isn't that what you want?

So when I finally had cooked the DXM,
when I had melted it down and sloshed it around
and made my Kool-Aid-like fluid,
and drank it down like I would
an iced tea on a thirsty summer day:
and from me exploded a thousand
tiny thoughts and phrases which seemed
to frame every insane reality that had ever effaced
the shape of my smile: I was a cloud,
floating, watching the world from a height
so high it was a bird's-eye-view: I look down
and see Sim City—the game I used to play
when I was young and would build cities
just to crush them down with a bulldozer.
And isn't that what I do now,
after all, with words?

Subversion, such a subtle calamity
of dissatisfaction: America,
such a repressed superstructure.

“Leap!” says my heart.
“Control!” says my brain.
“Keep the strain within reason,”
say the muscles in my face.
I’d like to see me try.
I’d like to see more than half
of any one thing.

Oh right, back to the itching.
An impulse, insatiable, imbecilic,
and a few more i-words that
represent the irritable half-blind life
I’m forced by my past self to live.

It was a fingernail that did it:
got stuck in my eye, while I
was clipping my nails—
now when I do it I shut
my eye with each loud
click of the metal, to keep
it safe from the harm
I didn’t even know
existed—I was
looking closely
at my cuticles as I
clicked the clipper,
wanting not to clip
too far, and I didn’t;
in fact I made what
surgeons might call
a shallow incision.
But the nail flew
through the air
and scratched
my eye and might
as well have been acid
for the damage it did
in the end.

I think back; I think that back then

I thought the nail had slipped
beneath my eyelid, beside
the culvert of my tear duct—
that it might be cutting my eye,
might keep cutting it,
that my eye might start bleeding,
might look terrible to everyone
who saw me.

Oh how right I was.

Seeing the color of my skin's pigment
flipping back and forth between pink
and white and red and purple and blue
and visions of you, I began to scratch
at the strange bit of invisible
skin that turned out
to be my eye's lining,
which, by the end,
was so loose around
the ball that I could pull
on it with my fingernails
pressed together like pincers,
and pull it out from the white ball,
and snap it back.
Turns out the nail just bounced off my eye.
Just sliced it a little.
I found it on the ground later—
that was when I punched my first hole.

Hello self, said I to the mirror.
Hello bright red Irish-bred skin;
hello sunburn, hello regrets
and drug-masked pains:
I'll ignore you some more,
I will. I'll ignore any gore
I see on the news, because
I need only shut one eye.
I'll ignore any itch I feel;
I'll prepare myself for
the worst possible curveballs
my mind might throw my way—
I'll ignore it, I will. But some itches
just can't be ignored, some scabs

must be picked off in the end.
Sometimes to scratch the end
of an itch you need to dig
deep down inside yourself
to find what you're looking for
and rip it right out of your head.

THE RANDY STORIES

Randy kicks off his shoes
in his house at the end of the
lane, where the cars stack by
the curbs like soldiers in line
for some great battle that's
coming quick over the mountains—
and those shoes fall to the ground with
a bump that murmurs its way through
the fibers of the carpet and down into
his mother's room where she sits
watching her square TV with
her legs up on the ottoman
as if it were the back of
some small slave child;
she wishes the times
were still like that.

“Ma!” yells Randy from where his ass is sat
in a wicker chair—you'd think his mother had
stitched it herself with how much she bitches...

Ask Randy and he'll tell you
everything you need to know
about everyone he knows—
because Randy has a tendency
to ask too many questions.

Pete, for instance, has raped
two girls, and has been accused
by three more, and still he walks
from place to place, from street
to street—out with his friends,
drunk, going from show to show
to see his favorite punk bands—
with a stupid smile on his fat face.

“Then there’s Andy, who’s certifiably insane. I think. He cut out his own eye, on one particularly stressful day, and has since gone without it, not even seeming to care that it’s gone. And so now he sees society like a panopticon prisoner might view the idea of having one guard in the middle of the room, who can see him but can’t be seen:— the world, the government, *the man*² is out to get you; and there’s nothing you can do but rant.”

He’d tell you about Kirk, who Tweez once called Kirkus Maximus, and who Tweez once solved the problem of by scraping his face along the sidewalk, so that he lost four teeth on the front-right side of his mouth. He had called Tweez’s mother a whore, just in passing, as a joke, not even knowing that Tweez’s mother was a whore, and that Tweez had known it, since he was a young child. Nobody talks about Kirk when Tweez is around.

And John-Paul, the least Pope-like Irishman Randy’d ever met, was a common topic of conversation. JP was in prison, and would be for the next twenty years, for robbing a liquor store—for falling victim to a stereotypical idiocy: a cliché; and as with most cliché art the state was making him pay for his most dire cultural sin. Tweez had told him, before he went behind those bars, that if he squealed at all, to anyone, even his prison celly, Tweez would have his cousin—the leader of an Aryan-Brotherhood-associated-gang in the Rockingham County Jail—murder him; and Tweez himself

² This was actually an early phrase of Andy’s—he has now since moved on to more advanced subversive language, now seeing (with one eye) the phrase “the man” as a teeth-grinding cliché.

would murder his mom and dad.
Of course it wasn't true. But who
can objectively determine truth
where familial violence is concerned?

“Should I elaborate further?
Need I? The man's got one eye
but he's somehow my best friend.
He sees the world in a way that
no man living sees: he is half
wise old blind-man, half young
crazy Anarchic subversive dynamitist;
watch these words and phrases and rants
explode with intelligence, simmer with anger,
burn with knowledge of bloodshed forgotten
by the mainstream American media. Andy
is a fucking mutant of a mind. He's one
of a kind. And he's fucking nuts.”

Randy screams at his mom,
all the time. She screams back.
This is the life they have together.
And as with any family, the one piece
of advice his conscience, his peers,
his extended family will give him is:
Get used to it.

THE RANDY STORIES, 2

Randy walks outside and sits on the iron-grate chair nearest the grill. It is a stone porch, the stones like little gray amoebas frozen in time. He puts his legs up on the table and listens to the birds in the trees. The sun comes through the leaves and feels its way up along his face, dousing the shadow beneath his eyes.

His mother's TV blares through the open window. It blares with the birds, combines with them—but it tells stories the birds can't rightly understand. When they hear it they figure: just noise. What else is noise but more noise. Randy can't take any more noise. He can't take this; take that; take a story and spin it back out twice as good, lies thrown in like paprika. No, like garam masala—"garam" of course referring to "heat" in the Ayurvedic sense of the word, meaning "to heat the body"—raising the body temperature and the heart rate with excitement, releasing endorphins. Oh those precious endorphins.

Randy smokes a cigarette and watches the smoke trail up from the tip as he holds it between his index and middle fingers with his palm prone on the table's glass, his hand the shape of a smoking gun.

OFFICER WILMOT

Kurt Wilmot was not the most willing police officer to have joined the Harrisonburg police force. It'd happened out of necessity—his wife had gotten pregnant, their bills had needed paying, and what was Kurt, a Veteran of two tours in Afghanistan with not nearly enough military pay in the bank, to do? He did what needed to be done. This was his way.

But the routines were getting old already. He was getting old, or at least *older*. His leg, where he had taken a bullet in the thigh in Afghanistan during an ambush on the road to Kabul, often hurt as he walked between James Madison University off-campus housing and run-down Harrisonburg neighborhoods, where families well-off and families with parents addicted to crystal meth often lived side-by-side, with only a few having enough money to afford the bigger houses on the other side of town.

Wilmot was off duty now, sitting on his porch on a lawn chair with several rips in the seat's bright red webbing, drinking a Pabst Blue Ribbon and hoping that tomorrow's shift wouldn't last as long as tonight's did. But he lived this life knowing that the routine would crush him, was crushing him, and as he sat here on his porch he felt a fear flood up within him and come crashing down over his soul.

WATCH

He waits.

With his chest held tight in close bombardment,
he waits.

With his hands held high in the humid air,
his fingers reaching through a day of slobber,
through a hot mist that somehow doesn't fog up the windshield
(glistening mirror droplets falling down my skin),
he waits.

With voices shouting in his direction, with
my voice—shouting—to him, at him;
his hands in clear sight, he grabs a knife
to drop it on the ground but some young guy—
some new guy from Tampa who'd transferred,
to whom we'd just issued a brand new Beretta—
he let loose a round with a twitchy finger and it
went BANG and the blood of the guy with his
hands in the air who'd been waiting all that time
splattered on the concrete partition behind him.

THE WINTER BELL

The man stands
with his collar white
overtop the Adam's apple,
the surrounding black collar
like a clasp of sadness on this
cold December morning.

Tombstones have a way
of seeming ominous,
yet brave. Death does
not scare the tombstone;
the tombstone is death's
business card: the graveyard
is death's place of business.
So many debts. So many
costs now exacted through
indeterminate debts—Karma,
you cruel cruel idea: stop making
this job seem ironic; Father Henry
Naples does not like it when this job
seems ironic. It makes it harder
to do.

1945-1987.

1970-1990.

1991-1992.

It's too much to think about. I'd
like to wonder more than frown,
I'd like my faith to be tested like
all the rest; I'd rather not have my
faith bested by most every reading
I give. I'm not saying I don't like
to give them, but I don't like sipping
wine too heavily later that night, the sips
becoming more like gulps, the gulps becoming

more like chugs of the Dry Red Syrah or Port: corked
savory gladness left waiting on crosswise slanted racks.
I wonder how many attacks from my lips to the neck of
the bottle it will take to break the vision of anything but
the empty green of the bottle's bottom's last liquid bit.

The bells of the church's highest spire
ring out over the surrounding streets,
neighborhoods, houses where certain
atheists sit waiting on their decks or
porches for the noise to stop. "Oh God,
make it stop," they say, most ironically.

The shoes in the morning: they are a chore.
The sight of the collar wrapping my neck—
a vision in the rapt/rapped mirror; at times
such a source of joy; at times such a source
of overwhelming misery. God, look down
at this soul, look down at this crucifix hanging
from my neck: is this not the symbol of your love?
Why then, does it not fill me? why then, does it not
thrill me, anymore? I used to fill with gladness at
the thought of a homily, a quoted psalm, but now
I think all I've got left are the apocalyptic visions
of the Book of Revelations: Dear John, mad John,
please tell me something worth hearing, something
worth knowing, worth learning; I'd like to see you
say something that makes any kind of interpretable
sense. What sense is there in screaming: "THE
WORLD IS GOING TO END! THE WORLD
IS GOING TO END!" What sense is there
in that. And this whole Antichrist business—
show me a man capable of murder not also
worthy of the title? show me a man who
would take a little kid, rape him, who
isn't also a religious monster? Father
Rembrandt, you are a demon if I
ever saw one—what you do is
Karma from the devil to the
Lord: *Look now, great Jesus!*
Look now at your pouring vision,
through tears, through slaughter,
look now at the fire I bring upon
thee! Look now upon the populace

*I've wrapped in the blood-wires of sin:
Unwrap them, young prophet. Unwrap
them, watch their flesh tear off
in the process.*

Winter's bells ring...
and I am filled
with terror.

CHRISTMAS EVE

We had just left a tiresome evening service
at St. Robert Bellarmine's, a small white church where,
since we were late, we waited outside on stone benches
and listened to them through the glass, singing with strained voices.

When we got back
our tree was adorned as before with the lights and
ornaments that had been gathered and gained
alongside years of hot chocolate, stockings, and candy canes.

And in the dead of night
I remember waking to a sound
and looking down the stairs
to see my oldest brother,
drunk as can be, leaning forward, hiding his head
between his knees, and staring at his
feet with his hands steel-braced behind his back
and two police officers holding down his shoulders,
explaining to my parents how he was breaking into cars
and had crashed one into a neighbor's house.

So when I saw him there,
sitting on that wooden bench
with that beaten angle at which he held his head,
my childhood leapt from my chest,
and followed him into that jail cell.

I SEE THINGS

The light that creeps like fingers beneath
the window blinds, the lamp shade,
the doorframe. The lights that swirl
across the ceiling above me before
settling back into the lamps
they jumped out from.

The lights that sit like eyes,
burning eyes, watching.

The lights that reflect
off every shining surface,
making me not want to clean them.

Mirrors, mirrors, all the walls:
the metal, the tile, the glass lamp—
show me not what I hide from myself.
Myself is what I hide from myself.
Hide that.

The lights that hum quietly beneath
each wall's blurring whirl of white.
The lamps that short out with
a vzzzzp. The bulbs that
disappear with a spock!—
fade like eyes, when
blinking; like moist
air clearing before
a rainstorm.

Crash!
The bolt slashes
the sky's flesh
like a tortured
stretch mark.

Snatch
the old lashes
from these eyes
like a paranoid
schizophrenic.

Swap these dollars
for chocolate and gumballs
and other such things from
my forgotten childhood:
baseball cards, yo-yos;
things I use for a day
and discard. This job,
this Dollar-General-
bullshit-job, this decaying
building where people parade
their bodies like spirits through
a graveyard: This is my excuse.

This place of refuse, of chaotic
arrangement and rearrangement,
of sporadic engagement with the
public eye—hide this, hide this:
hide that which itches
at the conscience.

WHEN DUSK PLACES ITSELF LIKE A SLIDE OVER THE PROJECTION OF YOUR LIFE

Handcuffs. Behind your back they frame your shoulders and place you in a vulnerable shape. Your breastplate is exposed, your ribs left hanging, the skin on your wrists complaining, and your sweaty glass-bead forehead gets wiped away by a wet palm—each bead pops and spreads like a cyst over your flesh. I've been in this cage. I've been framed and photographed. I've been exposed and left hanging, complaining reality is unfair when fairness is a social construct and bears no resemblance to a science as harsh and ruthless as a mortal existence on earth. And we mortals put our animals in cages and ourselves and each other in cages and we lock our minds in cages and we live caged lives in vain pursuit of concrete and steel. Where are they taking me, I'd ask if they'd let me. In the back of my mind I know where they are taking me—but that's far in the back, and currently in the front are four police officers and two EMTs and the frightened faces of my two parents, and the face of myself sitting in that Windsor chair in the kitchen, my cuffed wrists tucked behind it.

THESE HALLS

Each glimpse like shock left in the eyes
by a camera's flash: so white, pure in the way
it sucks the color from your mind. I'd like
to find my way between column and column
and walls all around—like a kaleidoscope—swirling
in circles, like the inside of an engine's moving parts,
curling in a spiral that I'm walking to the bottom
of the stomach of: oh find me here at the darkest
part of the well—swim alone, in this deep black,
treading on the efforts of your muscles,
watching your breath dwindle away
and your mind sink into wet decay.
These are happy days, *happy days*;
so lift your shoulders and smile.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING INSANE

My skin crawls like a centipede
as the body slides seamlessly
over the moss-flesh ground.

Watch this sky twist.
Watch this life take brisk
strides toward loneliness,
watch these clouds strangle
each other with mass, watch this
sun burn the world to a crisp,
watch your eyes turn around
in their sockets like the reel
of a film, spraying stimuli
at a white wall, the images
just glimpses, never long
enough to see the truth
of a single day, so it's
all the same. It blends
together like minerals
in soil, my mind
covered in black
like an oil-soaked
animal: suffocating
in the grasp
of a grave mistake.

RAMBLE

I'm not insane I'm not insane
I'm not saying this is the only
time that I've fallen beneath
the lens of the eye of a sun—
distant in the orange sky—
I can feel its stare against my
bare skin. It burns like the years
that shed from my waking mind
as I bury my past by getting to
the bottom of each orange-tinged
bottle. Such upset disappointment
at the results of this night, of this year,
as I look out through the wire-laced windows
that flank the end of this room in glass.
Behind me are the tables where we sit
during the day and eat our portioned meals.
A collection of white-clothed body-shakers,
spine-leaners, finger-tappers, nail-biters,
lip-suckers, hair-yankers—all wearing
slippers and some wearing disposable
paper gowns; others wearing white smocks
and wheeling in carts bearing trays of food
and handing them out along with plastic
cutlery. Each wrist has a white band
wrapped around it. Some people sit
together and some on their own—
alone for a reason obvious
to everyone but them.

WITHIN THE WHITE ROOM

Asleep on a mattress.
I am unconscious
but aware of the light
across my face. There
is a slight sting in my
left leg, and in my
buttocks. On the
wall is a blood
stain, and my
hand's knuckles
are crushed to mush,
swollen, like mashed
potatoes beneath skin,
throbbing with an off-beat
repetition, the fissures lightly
healed but ready to split back open.

ACCEPT

The word “accept” is a breaching of the ego.
An admission of placebo: these thoughts
are in my head.

BACK HOME

I'm back home
in this silver city
of broken-glass streets
and angry growling buildings:
concrete skulls, plateglass eyes,
steel-railed balcony cheekbones,
the cul-de-sac paths that weave in
asphalt streaks across the landscape,
like a lazy boring painter drew up
the whole thing in one afternoon.

And did any one of these realtors
stop to fucking think how much
money they're sapping from
honest folks who live in homes
no more valuable
than those that dot
the nearby countryside;
but the government's hide
is bristled and stretched beside
a Potomac blood stain; that short
white city: columns and marble steps
and courtrooms—
monumental whiteness—
broken only by streetlights
and stoplights and car-lights
and the veiny limbs of winter-
torn trees—all that, but a stone's
throw from where I first breathed
the days of my life that now stack
like stones atop my shoulders;
and I, I don't think there's much
left to hold onto. I don't think I'm
worth worrying about, for another
to think about, I don't think it's
a wonder why I'm alone all the time...

and when I'm back home,
when I'm surrounded by the houses
of those I've known and forgotten,
I realize: *They've forgotten me.*

A RIDE TO CLASS

When I first packed this car
full of the things that would burden
my back with their weight as I made
the trip up four sets of stairs to my
third-floor apartment, I did not
think that I'd be needing a ride
so soon.

Most of what I brought
were groceries my mom
kindly bought me; and
my backpack and laptop
and clothes; and this old
fucking rocking chair
I found on the side of the road,
which I stuck in my trunk and drove home
with, the trunk hanging open atop the chair,
the screws of which my mom later tightened,
and which we stored on the passenger's seat
of my navy-blue Volvo 850; I did not think
this would be a problem.

And I suppose it wasn't, but you know
how it is in school: you give a shit about
things that are of no importance, and which
later in life you forget about, but at that moment
you're a slave to the threat of transgression;
so when I was late on typing up my responses
for my Advanced Creative Nonfiction workshop,
and had to ask Nate for a ride to class,
and since Nate doesn't have a car (or a license),
we took mine.

Roll through concrete landscapes, chauffeur.
Roll beneath an electric blue sunset.
With a rocking chair beside you

and nothing but cars all around,
Nathan, my good friend, roll
this car toward my class and
this next blunt in our minds
as we imagine later tonight
right now, and hope that
that future comes true.

I look from the backseat window
of this blocky sedan, and watch
the faces of students younger
than I, walking with cheer,
spring in steps so innocent,
so light, so free from the weight
of experience and reality.

Chauffeur? To Burruss please, chauffeur.
—I'm just kidding I didn't call him that.
It's just the image, you know? Of me
sitting in the back as we pull up to
the university where I've spent
five years of my life trying
to blend in so that things
like this rarely if ever
happen, and I get
out from the back,
having unpacked
everything but the chair
from the car, and sprint
to my classroom.

Later that night,
I had a date with this girl
I had met online, and I was
running real late, since I had
spent so much time on those
workshop responses, and so
I was right out the door,
my keys in hand, when
I got in the old blue 850,
and noticed the yellowed
wicker seat and wooden
bones beside me: such
an obstruction. And

that's why I pulled
up to your house
like a limousine driver,
and you had to ride in the back,
behind the rocking chair,
and that's why you and I
fell in love, using aluminum
baseball bats to destroy that
piece of shit in a field somewhere,
who knows where, who cares,
because there we were,
and thanks to the baseball game
I played earlier that day,
we had what we needed
to splinter the tension
that separated us right then.

BONES

I open
the mail
with the edge
of the mail key.

I tear the yellow paper
aside like raw animal flesh
and find inside the bones
sent by someone, kind
and faceless, from somewhere
called Falcon Point Drive
in Kissimmee, Florida.

With each new book
I rebuild myself—
my white-bone frame—
from when it was crushed
in its most youthful state.

I am an artifice of reconstruction.
I am a scaffolding
of the soul.

BOOKS

I enter the classroom and find my students
tired and haggard. Their faces like tombstones
of the mind, projected. Their eyes dead
in the sockets.

We settle in and try at discussion,
and it's good at first. We start
with the shortest story and they seem
to like it. But the problem is that when
we get to the longer ones, they go silent.
They flip through their books
as if searching for something they cannot find,
and I look
around at their faces
and wonder if they did the reading.
Ask them if they did the reading.

Later that night, I lie in my bed
beside my sleeping wife and try
to fall asleep. But I can't. I can
only think of what my students
must have wanted to say to me.

*Of course we didn't do the fucking reading.
Do you think that's how we want to waste our nights?
Reading sad sob stories about rehabilitated fuck-ups
preaching their past down our throats?
Do you think
that's what we want to think about
on these nights when our lives are so quickly unraveling?
We don't have time to read, you fucking hack.
Now walk yourself back to your house
in the woods and let us talk about
drinking and think about fucking
and go about our miserable lives
with no fucking clue*

*as to what's miserable
about them.*

I am not a teacher I am an awakener said Robert Frost.
I want to light my students on fire says Harold Faust,
who stands with his hands like opinions at his sides,
and stares down at everyone when he teaches his class,
and when he sleeps in his bed, his feet stretch over the end,
and he cannot seem to get comfortable no matter where he is,
and they all must wonder whether he's married or happy,
and if they asked he couldn't tell them.

LIFE LIKE LINES OF COKE

The mountains beside this road
have their faces coated in snow;
blasted by explosives, the road
cleaves the land in two; the way
we've gone is shorter than where
we're going; the mountains rise
and lower, in rows like only
the best lines of coke; this is
the way the teachers tell you
not to use semicolons; and yet
what the fuck do I know about
writing a poem?

I think I know nothing. I've always
thought so little of myself. But it's that
crushing feeling I inflict on myself
that drives me with you toward
this remainder—this last bit
of our love, a spark soon to explode,
like the dynamite that cleared this road.

Style
is not the thing I'd say
I've got much of.
Nor grace. This face
is no Mount Rushmore.
Gashes like blast sites.
Like the little man, crouching,
his elbows poking outward
in little bony triangles,
and then
as if thrusting a sword
downward,
the little round man pushes
the steel T-shaped handle
of the detonator, and sends

that rotten impulse that makes
all things go *boom*; I suppose
it's the same thing that makes
me want to be a writer, to be
a lover, to be your husband,
and you, to be my wife,
what were you thinking—
It must have been love.
Otherwise you're crazy,
I'm crazy, this is all
so damn crazy, these nights
that flash their faces across
the window glass with each
light we drive beneath—
and when the daytime comes, it's
almost ironic, because our minds
are nothing but shadow, dusk,
dark consciousness sent into
sunsets with each sniff of
this rotten impulse that makes
all emotions go *boom*; I suppose
it's the same thing that makes
you want to be my lover:
I think we are in love with
this fuse: with this line
that slowly burns away.

This bag empties of white
and our life strips down to the bone.

BOTTLED

Every day
back when I was in middle school,
my mom would pack me a bag lunch.

I used to eat that lunch, the same lunch
I'd eat every day, until it became like
second nature. And then when I had
my trash all in front of me, I'd jam
it into the smallest container I
could find: the little bottle of
liquid yogurt, a few inches tall,
I'd jam it all, so that at about
halfway through, you'd see all
the trash sticking out the top—
like a plume of fire
above a Molotov
cocktail.

Somehow I'd get it all in there.
And when I was done I would say
to my friends, I would say, "Look,
look all, look what I've done.
Look at how much
I can fit in this life."

PHILADELPHIA BILLY

My hair stands tall
but I slouch beneath
the weight of my sins.
My shoulders turn into
a bitter mist, drifting higher
and higher the spire of my body
burns into batter and my thoughts
scatter like mice, like when I used to
swallow more bottles than any two men, when
I used to be Philadelphia Billy, the champion binge
drinker, not William Francis Kemmler, not son, immigrant,
drunk, husband, murderer, prisoner, or dead man. Not well done,
not a delicious last meal's steak before "Wet the sponge, wet the
sponge," into unconsciousness can one's mind plunge.

Like a meteor
soaring bright
as a smoked-drenched
sun, moving and crashing
and popping and smoldering,
booming in the ears and
boiling the eyes and singeing
the flesh with 2,000 volts of
"wet the sponge, wet the sponge,"
into the ground does the
fireball plunge, into the
brain does the cold rain
press, into the blood
does the shocked iron reach,
latched by leather onto the
skull, to pull out the fibers of
my soul, to bash into the depths
of the holes in my face, of the holes
in my life, to solder and scorch
(like God's thrown torch)
my existence to a crisp.

UNDERGROUND CITY

I.

The red shelves
rise toward the cupboard
above the sink, locked shut.
A gun inside waits to be unleashed
yet won't. There's a subtle sound
can be heard emerging from where
the bullet pierced the window.

The soft sounds of night.
The insects, the rattling
power lines, the wind.
Outside tonight the world
is rising toward some kind
of bitter conclusion. Illusions
are all that keep our eyes pointed
inward, and inside the skull there
is only darkness; black.

The warmth of the heart
is not enough to keep the brain
thinking. I blink my eyes and look
between the sliding black of my eyelids.
The images feel like they were trimmed
with bolt-cutters and these sounds feel like
they're growing into me;

like the legs of a crawling insect,
I feel your eyes look up and down me.

I focus on your neck.

You are the shadow of the rose.

II.

How well do you know it.
Imagine the rose's shadow
and for a time do consider

yes please consider how
the petals of the face
of the rose appear like
jagged teeth in this light.

And still, those shelves:
The blood had gotten
all over the fruit.
There is a strong
smell to the room;
the burnt gunpowder—
and the heavy weight
of the event itself,
pressing its face
into thought and word.

Later, down the line,
the detective who found
the bullet charged a burglar.
 The burglar lived
in Rockingham County, and after
what he did, he disappeared;
they never caught him.

The burglar lived
a very subtle life
finding reasons to
escape the basement
in which he lived
silently
thoughtlessly
and

in truth,

deep down,

hopelessly;

but the rat must still emerge...

III.

The rat emerged from his hole
and made his way outside. He

ran from one side of the garage
to the other, and then peeked
around into the backyard.

Large creatures, humans,
were arguing about something
expensive that was stolen. Who
now who would steal this here our
object. Stop taking our objects, world!
These humans have plenty of objects—
enough to throw at each other.

Sick and tired, the boy says. Fed up.
No excuse anymore. The man says,
Strange, strange world we live in...
dumb boy! pissant, foolhardy scoundrel
of a son! get me all the things I'll ever ask for—
now, *goddammit boy*. Get it. Now.
The father keeps talking to his son
in this way.

The rose sits in the windowsill;
that window—behind the sink
and beneath the cupboard—
through whose shattering
birthed the hole of a bullet.
If only the bullet could
be put back in the gun.
If only the rat would
let us follow him into
his hole. But the darkness
of his hideout is the darkness
that putting the bullet back
in the gun would reveal:

If the identity of the man
responsible were unveiled,
there would be armies
of fingers not lifted.
There would be masses
of police badges, entire
huge golden piles of them,
who wouldn't be able
to forego their other

obligations to pursue
the investigation.

Imagine all the wheels spinning in the dense air
that encircles this sunken town. Imagine all the
headlights lit, all the horns honked, even just
imagine all the many different ants and spiders
and cockroaches that are *thriving* right now,
in your head's imagination, they are thriving.

IV.

Blue beautiful glaciers in red blood waters,
floating like the bones of dinosaurs too big
for this planet; beautiful icy monoliths
to the process of freezing to death.

It's become a bit sad.
The unfortunate reality
of these legs is that they're
only going to prop me up like
stilts for so long; for really I am
a shark, a bottom-feeder with far
too great an appetite for my life
to fill. The blue crushing flash
of the police lights, painting,
touching-up the neighborhood
with a little surprise, a little
pizazz: Look what we've
found here.

He walks with a burden in his stature,
the posture slightly bent forward, a bit
of fat making him less fearsome, but
nonetheless, he's police. He runs up
to the house and finds the door
ajar. The yellow of the doorway
drips on the shoes of the officer
as he enters slowly, pistol raised,
other hand on the radio and saying
I need backup, saying
the address.

Fixing a problem
is worse than tightening

a bolt: Oil on the hands
of the burglar as he changes
his jeep's—the black liquid
has always seemed vaguely
religious; he longs to see
how it looks when mixed
with blood. What color
does that become.

Blue and red flash through the window
with the bullet hole and across the face
of the woman lying dead on the ground
whose shadow cast—from where she was
propped up in her chair, as if she'd just
been reading the newspaper—out over
the family cat, Larry, who was still
sitting beside his owner in hopes
that she might fill up his food
before she goes to sleep.

She won't go to sleep, little one.
She won't wake up.
She won't anything ever again.

V.

Amidst the stars there are
invisible wires holding it
all together; and those
wires could make
sound, a great
limitless cosmic sound—

THWOM

I cannot hear anything anymore.
Despite the strumming of the universe,
I am indifferent in my numb existence.

But the rose, in the way its head droops,
seems to care about something that's been
lost. It seems to know what's been lost,
and wants to mourn for it. How does the
rose mourn, when it feeds on tears? Look
now at the way the color leaves the face

of the rose. With no water, it withers,
and becomes like the face of the woman
in the chair, lifeless, slumped back, her
shoulders pressed against the chair,
which had grown old long before
this all happened, and now
had jagged splinters
pointing upward,
little teeth to grab.

I stand over the woman,
briefly, and find no reason
to look away. Things that frighten
others intrigue me, and I dare not
ask why. Never ask why. To ask
why is to beckon the moon to leave
us dark during the night, to taunt
the sun into holding back one
August morning, so that the
sky never burns from orange
to blue and from me to you—
When they catch me,
twenty years later,
I will say that there
were other reasons
than the jewelry
that you died.

VI.

The view of the city
from the sky is a vague one.
The clouds are whispers, telling
lies as to what lies below them.

Look close and maybe you'll see
the hookers lining the outlets,
the dealers with their elbows
in car windows asking about
amounts desired, and then of
course you'll see the addicts:
so many addicts addicted
to whatever fix struck
their fancy in that
cruel time long ago

when they first got
hooked. Like a fish—
got hooked—kept swimming
with the hook deep in their
mouth, down their throat,
piercing in.

A RIVER OF CONSCIOUSNESS FROM THE VEINS OF JAMES MILLER

I open my mouth to shout and out flows
The many million bricks and bones of this city
Metal skeletons, crumpled and gritty
Unwrapping and unbending,
A great amorphous blobbed contortion
Scattering and settling
Into shapes like
Great stone limbs that weigh
On steel bones and tin tendons
Sturdy unnerving rapid and swerving
Bending into my eyes like pliers
To grip the image of a black necropolis
And press it deep into my brain
Yet I keep my love for this same
Old battered bunch of crumbling castle memories
Broken buildings and shattered glass and murdered chivalry
Unwoven fences and razor wire remembrance
Where meth heads' dry skin cracks in the fickle weather
Orange guarded by blue, steel chain tethered,
When I get out I know I'll find
Life around every corner
That's neither bought nor stolen
It is here and there and around these sidewalks
That crisscross with train tracks and highways
And downtown porn shops that fill holes in the wall
They're all holes in the wall but I like that about them
The stacked books in the bookstore, all used and discounted
The Midtown Market with import beers and wines and the ciders
That taste like a childhood of apples falling from a drunken tree
Warped and twisted, with thorns around its knees
It festers until I can't but want to lessen
Myself and whether I've found
A reason to stay alive
But I can see that quilt museum
Downtown Books
The Rosetta Stone building

Those sights from behind a great stone wall
Give glare to the razor-sharp wires
That slice experience and sever love while
The sight of a tall stone wall towers
Over the risks of wrists clasped in steel
Knives through the skin, our lives are peeling
Like the fruit of a red orange split and splattered
With the blade dug in, pull it off piece by piece
Piece by piece, until only a bit of its warmth
Remains and I'm left to stand
On a cold concrete beach

Like a bold,
Bald spot bane
While waves
Of electric
Sunsets
Burn
Hot
In
My
Brain

You, holding it over me, obtain
While my legs stay wrapped in silver
My wrists, clasped and clamped to worship
The world that walks free outside these walls
And clothes me in Halloween orange like a ghoul
Like a werewolf a freak a frankenstein monster and
Shouldn't you be reading something else than
Some sob story from a slack-jawed idiot
Who ruined a family one pick-up trucked night
Drunken and bloated in the hot October moonlight
Slurring my wheels and revving my words to find
My body acting different, grabbing for the stars
With my feet pressing down to the floor, what floor
Remained beneath the pedal of a pedigree killer
Coming to wreck the front door of your family's home
With a note to the neighbors with news of your tragic demise
That might just have earned a tear from my eyes
If I could just see past these damn prison walls
If I could just name one star certainly and know
That the shapes I trace have meaning, that the
Words I match have grace, but I'm a weakened
Form birthing softly, finding desperate reasons

To stay alive, like wondering why my family still
Writes letters for me to receive and ignore and never
Respond to because that family I killed would
Never approve of that advantage on my behalf
For I am a monster, I am, at least I feel that way
The world sees me that way and I fake caring for
Bloodshed and drug use and crime successes and
Past murders and gambles and maybe once in a
While I might like some goddamn butter in my
Mashed potatoes, but they know that my misery
Is what the state must see, so I suffer quietly
Beneath a sheltered black sea of shining stars
That flip the horizon on a swivel and my eyes
Spin with it, they spin the fiery anger that has
Built in my hearth of a heart and I wonder so briskly
How my shattered history earned a place in real history
Such a disgusting allowance my name has earned and
My family my family they've ruined for me and still
Defend our family name, they defend it for me
And come visit every month to share
For a while and learn that my life is
As menial as bile and wouldn't
You be interested to learn
That this book I've read
Twelve times has been
Read by men like me
Men who sought truth
In printed words written
By other aggravated men
Men who realized that
In a steel-gripped hell
The truth of the world
Is in concrete ballads
And metallic words.

BIOGRAPHY

Tommy Sheffield was born in 1991, in Fairfax, VA. He is a graduate of James Madison University, where he studied poetry with Laurie Kutchins. He currently resides in Fairfax, VA, where he works as the Poetry Editor for Stillhouse Press and studies poetry in George Mason University's MFA program.