

Sweet Gum Bridge

Brother

You went to war in September
And ever since I have dreamed of guns:

Shotguns, machine guns, pistols stacked
Like dominoes in the bedroom

Where I keep our mancala board,
Where Monopoly pieces spill across the floor.

I never liked your hunting rifles, but now we talk
Like old friends. They are like me;

They know death only for purposes of survival.
Your new guns you bring me with haunted eyes:

Sister, the bedroom is no longer safe;
Hide these in the yard by the sycamore tree.

I scrub the blood away and bury them, thinking
This, this is love. But when I wake

I think about the children:
How they will be the first to find them

While searching for buried treasure in the dirt.
They will cry at first for the old days

When digging yielded only deer bones,
When there were not so many things to hide.

But these tiny patriots
Will protect their uncle at all costs,

Will soon learn to sort weapons
From board games in the bedroom,

In their devotion
Will eventually bury both.

Diamond

Up the mountain roads surrounding Dante, VA,
My father and I once searched
For those cabins in the hollows that he remembers
From when he was a child.
I with the passion of a budding anthropologist,
He with the measured interest of a local,
Unconvinced by the romance in leaky ceilings,
Porches caving in. We never found them.
It was different now, my father said,
Pointing to the shiny gas station on the corner
Where the old baseball diamond used to sit,
To the coal mine closed off and abandoned.
On our way home, we passed a string of cabins
Along the railroad tracks like cheap beads
On a necklace: some breaking off, some broken.
This, my father said, is the problem with
Appalachia. It has all changed, and it has all stayed
Just the same. This, I might have added, is the
Problem with anthropology: its ruthless search
For diamonds among fields of coal, its thrill
At the discovery of a necklace unraveling
Around its owner's throat.

Carolina

They talk her up
Slide her three by fives
In their back pockets

Drink a beer for her
Fists thrust skyward; how they love
Pledging allegiance

She is a woman, they say
These men in Nascar jackets
Cigarettes tracing lines of smoke

Between antlers on the wall
Yes, a woman: mountain curves
Salty wet kisses

A lot of soft flesh in between.
They make her out to be a lover -
Men do this even

When she is not one,
Even when they're not. Probe closer,
Though, if you can take

The wooden bench and honky-tonk,
Budweisers pressed into your
Palm; ask these men

How does she love you? What does
She do to you? What are the things
She whispers in your ear?

They'll spin their beers in silence.
You will think the drink has gone
To their heads, but in truth

For the first time they are thinking
Straight. That flag on the wall, the map
Above the bathroom

Her slender silhouette, she holds me
They will say. You will see in their eyes

Not fierceness, not battle scars

But boys
Overgrown
Tender still.

These men have been taught to hide
Their soft spots, to douse their love
For dogwood, whippoorwills

In gun racks, carcasses
Skinned, homophobia
Xenophobia

As if by naming all that love is not,
They will one day zero in
On what it is.

Do not forgive them this transgression
But witness the one love
They grant themselves

This mother
Watching from the walls
Knows when her children are lost

Is waiting
With a will that withstands
Even hatred, even sin

To guide them home.

Sweet Gum Bridge

My daddy went to Mississippi the summer of '64. Main street smelled like iced tea and cigarettes, took him back to growing up in Appalachia. When it rained, hot grass sighed like a frying pan under water, and he could feel Earth's heart rising when fire burned into his car mirror late at night. He pumped the gas to seventy, eighty-five, eyes staring into darkness and prayed their pick-up trucks could not handle the speed. Sometimes the nearest inn was run by blacks only for blacks their heads made silhouettes in the upstairs window when he pounded saying I am fighting for you. By the end he wondered what anyone was fighting for

in the low beams nails rusted porch out front with two rocking chairs though one is always empty now his wife is gone, my daddy took the empty one and wondered how she'd rocked herself, how many times she'd sunk into that familiar frame and cried. The old man would not tell him. In the yard grass green and overgrown, weeds laced with dandelions in a yellow web. The old man said there's thistles underneath but I never do recall where, they'll spike you good if you're not careful. They drank iced tea and watched clouds pile against magnolia trees. The old man said you ain't seen nothing till you seen it storm in Mississippi big fat drops warm as tears and soft as butterflies, you ought to sit out the rain no sense driving back to town in this. My daddy said I'm sorry sir to repeat myself but let me tell you once more I am with the Justice Department we are here to record injustices against you the people of Mississippi I give you my word whatever you say I will write down send back to Washington maybe make your life a little better, the old man said don't it move

quicker than anything, look there. Narrow strong the river flowed around his yard and down into the woods, and sure enough there were drops in the water, pinpoints of something happening. Sky black above the trees my daddy said I have never seen a storm blow up so fast. The old man said then you ain't from Mississippi though you talk like you are and my daddy said he wasn't from so far away. He said sir have you lived here all your life and the old man grinned tobacco and holes where teeth should be saying not yet not unless you've seen me die and go to heaven. My daddy laughed and drank his tea watched wind whip across the yard grab hold of the laundry and shake it like a woman's skirt, the old man said she always got the laundry off the line before a storm not like me I just wear wet clothes ain't so bad once you start. Drops like bullets on the tin roof and my daddy sat up said sir I appreciate your time and I'll be going now as long as there is nothing you want to tell me, the old man said wait a minute

but the minute stretched out and out until it nearly popped and my daddy saw fear washing out his eyes. The old man looked out at the laundry and down at boots splitting open against the dusty boards. He said I don't have anything to tell and my daddy said well it was a pleasure to meet you and he put on his hat and jacket and said don't you laugh at me when I get soaked by this rain. The old man tried to smile but there were only holes where teeth should be. My daddy stood at the edge of the porch breathing damp woods and all the thistles in the yard, and he walked through warm pounding down to the bridge across the river. Soft boards nails

bent from how many thunderstorms and not a bit changed he took a step and another felt the bridge shudder gathering strength and he heard

wait. The old man clutched the porch, boots fumbled to reach the yard then overalls and hat soaked through down to the bridge. He met my daddy in the middle. Daddy's eyes mockingbird gray and the old man saw that he believed in being there in that minute stretched to breaking above a river rushing to get somewhere else. Old man put a hand to the soggy rope and said this here I built it when I was seventeen, keeps fixing to break but it still holds on I call it Sweet Gum Bridge. Cheeks smeared with rain he said I'm sorry seeing pickup trucks shining into windows late at night disappearing too quick for his old bones to get up and find the shotgun, heart beating fast as he wished his legs would go, seeing yards gone up in flames the shape of Christ Almighty and men sitting all day outside the barber shop watching the voting booths seeing daddy and granddaddy not much changed and water rushing under his feet. He said I'm sorry but

you haven't seen the way these woods can listen, you don't know what it means to say injustice on this bridge. I'm sorry. And daddy felt wetness through the bone and said maybe we're not supposed to speak today, maybe that's the way it's supposed to be. Said write your story I'll write mine too and someday when we're dead and buried in magnolia sweet gum woods, maybe the stories will meet up on this bridge shake hands and have a real talk. Old man said yeah or maybe they'll just fish together, look over the edge and down as the river flows on by.