

Song for a Bluebird

How is she? he asked.

His skin hung from bulldog
jowls and jiggled like
pale Jell-O in a shallow
bowl.

I knew the *She* of whom he
cautiously inquired –
a daughter.

A father's anxiety
encrypted in his eyes:
watery dull blue that hardly
hinted at a life lived.

I don't say, *you must feel helpless.*

I say, *she's good, and*

I'm proud of her.

He's proud too, but troubled.

She's been dumped and
cataloged too many bruises for
him to relax.

*Her own daughter took pictures
of them in the bathroom here.* He
points behind him with his thumb,
and sighs.

What it must be like to be father
of a woman interrupted. *She's a
fighting soul*, he tells me. *She'll*

make it. A father's hope.

She will, I say, being

the voice of his optimism.

He settles back into his chair

and whistles a tune for the

bluebird that sits on the roof

of the newly painted but

crumbling shed.

The fragile bird sings back

a song of redemption,

and I wonder if the old man

hasn't just tried to call

his little girl home.

April 12, 2014 Florida

At the onset of summer's fever

I prepare by imagining myself at

the base of a snowy mountain –

large Evergreen with frosty tips towering

over me, and I listen for the susurrations

of starry night sky or the song of dying

wildflowers warbling their own version

of the Kaddish.

I stand at the edge of our yard

my arms raised above my head and

howl, like a war cry, my elegy to winter.

I.

Devin. Little boy who asked me to play
basketball. You noticed my tattoos and told
me that your dad is a tattoo artist. When I asked
you where he works, you told me, *from home. He
charges twenty-five dollars.*

You told me with a smile (dull, crooked teeth)
that your favorite colors are pink and purple.
You like dressing in Camo and going to the ACT Shelter—
Abuse Counseling and Treatment.

II.

Boy under the pavilion,
I wonder what it's like
For you never having
Heard your mother say
I love you.
Never being able to trust
Your big brother or
His friends.
Never hearing your
Father say he's proud,
But only that he's going

The library was empty,
Not a student in sight.

V.

There are always teacher assistants:
College students wanting experience,
Older people hoping to make a difference.
This one, she was on her phone a lot,
trying to clear her name from the night
before.

I'm hung over, she said.

And I didn't steal the pot from that house--

I can't smoke right now. I have a good job.

Hush, Don't Tell Nobody

Midnight in the Kitchen of Good and Evil

- i. The light from the kitchen
beats back midnight –
everyone's asleep, but I'm
standing bare-foot on the blue linoleum floor.
The pattern reminds me of stones
in a river, and I'm talking to a
whisper of a man. I'm feeling sick, my nine-
year-old body trembling, my skinny,
pale legs sticking out of black
Budweiser shorts like Jell-O.
I think this means we're gay, he says.

Whispered prayers

II. Don't let it be, God. Don't let it be true.

Hush, Don't Tell Nobody

- ii. Hush, don't tell nobody, he says.

Confessions

- iii. After vacation with family from Miami –
Branson, MO in the middle of October,
a missed day of 5th grade, I whispered
into my mother's ear and slept like a baby.
In the still of the night when I was foggy
with sleep she woke me with a message
from Dad: He says it's not your fault.

I had been dreaming of soldiers.

Metal Mouth

- iv. I was
eleven

when
I sampled
the
tip of
rifle –
my tongue
numb from
the strong
metallic
tang –
the taste of
death.

Father's Day, 2013 Harrisburg, PA

I called you to say happy Father's Day, and we talked about the weather. You asked about the kids. As usual, they're fine. You said something about a bear, one was spotted somewhere in Pennsylvania – I'm here, so I should know. It had a bucket stuck on its head; eleven days lived in a hollow echo.

When I was little (shorter than I am now) I'd put your mixing buckets used for grout over my head and strike stick or hammer on the side to hear the clamor.

After work some nights I'd help you clean out your truck (always a Ram); paper cups, newspapers, cigarette cartons, lots of dust. It all littered the floor, covered every surface. I didn't understand at the time what all the silver cans meant – their rattling in the black Gladd bag like a makeshift tambourine – the entire percussion section of your working-mans life.