

Playing War

*for Val, Suter, and Xieng Khouang, Laos*

Dusked May nights we three armed with gnarled sticks  
from the woods behind my parent's house. We  
were fourteen, too old to play war but scared  
of rum-sticky parties across town—  
adolescent spring promising first sex.

We found fallen branch bazookas,  
awarded false honors, increased rank,  
tracked beaming firefly pulses as Viet Cong  
machine gun blasts rising from dry grass fields.  
One of us would always die—landmines strewn

across creek beds, snipers in high pines placed  
precariously in Southeast Asian jungle.  
Aware of horror, our deaths not quiet  
or peaceful, we walked home stinking war sweat  
to drink root beer and mom-ordered pizza.

Stepping twelve years later onto rained out  
paths in Laos, the bomb-murdered Xieng Khouang  
hills stripped into naked humps, I hardly  
recalled playing war to fill those vacant  
May New England evenings, how no bullets

flew from strange spots as the woods fogged  
with sundown, how each relished his chance  
to die perfectly for friends, how in some lands  
far away, they still plant rice hoping bits  
of an old, real war welling in the ground

don't turn their useless fire outward.

Will Makes History  
*for Val*

Sixth grade study hall on Wednesdays:  
ninety minutes quiet in the chorus room,  
two gym classes worth of preteens  
sat every other chair. The chorus teacher  
Mr. Kaweiki vigilant, staring silence  
into our awkward skulls and bowl-cuts.  
Will was extra awkward—glasses, braces,  
long-sleeved shirt tucked into khakis.

I was the loud fat kid, quick with a joke  
or a well-timed fart in the library.  
Conor, our Korean friend, stoic  
and socially inept rounded out  
a misfit trio (who wasn't a misfit  
at twelve years-old?). One Wednesday  
the study hall packed in twenty more students,  
another gym class cancelled—near sixty kids

swelling a room made for half that.  
I could hear the wheezing of my fellow asthmatics,  
whisper-then-hush, whisper-then-hush  
from popular girls, some still in gym shorts,  
a page turning breeze from Kaweiki's grade book.  
Will tapped me, his acne-stained face pulsing  
some fire, some force not to be contained  
in a fragile body, the encompassing quiet

solidified the air surrounding his chair  
as he elevated his ass slightly—hell-bent  
on recompense for my discretions in the library  
earlier that day—and he slaughtered the silence  
of study hall. His fart ejecting from soft  
body to plastic public school chair, rising  
and reverberating off the acoustic  
chorus room walls, pushing higher into the ceiling,

knocking over doors to swing open lockers  
in the hallway, echoing echoing echoing  
until it became part of our ears for what seemed  
minutes, and when the sound dropped  
so did Kaweiki holding his stomach and howling;  
wonderment distilled—laughter. An entire room  
cackling as if there were no other farts,  
no other rooms, no other day but today when

one pimple-pocked nobody stole the sound back.

Ruby Throated Hummingbird Mates and Leaves His Love

Not so much  
an airdance  
as a falling  
a wingbeat  
dropping  
for once  
to that slap of dirt

we are not gentle

it is brief like us  
pattering but the air  
doesn't respond

I take liberty  
to imagine  
this moment stretched  
our lifetimes  
belly-to-belly  
wing-on-wing

and I finish  
and the sky  
inhales you

## Manatee and Her Mating Herd

*“When a female manatee goes into estrus, she is soon detected and pursued by numerous male manatees throughout the cycle (perhaps for a duration of up to three weeks)”*

weeks later they're spinning  
in my stream

rising with me buoyed by me  
each finding me

where the heat flushes where  
calves crown

each gives something others can't:  
fast swimmer big eyes

long whiskers perfect tail strong nostrils  
when sea blackens

moon purples all mute & tide-still  
they cover me hold me

one body in a dozen bodies  
and we are everywhere

I Imagined Montana

*Jim Harrison (1937-2016)*

At seventeen  
having never been, I steeped  
in humble geographic poetry,  
google-searched *Montana rivers, trout,*  
*Absaroka Range,*  
*Bears Paw Mountains,*  
*Badger Hills,*  
*bison, grizzly, bighorn sheep, lynx, elk, moose.*

Plain-silence-desperate,  
I fantasized a farm full of foxes  
below hulking Rockies, field-green so green  
English failed it; with a beard never  
realized I'd hotfoot through stone creeks,  
my red-tailed pack in tow. We'd drink rivers  
or slay solitary deer peaceful  
on far-out edges of our land. I'd take  
visitors, sure, people from cities lusting  
for Westness, for Montana— footprint-weight,  
water thirsting through it, peaks  
demolishing grass-skies—they'd  
join the herd tasting true Northern  
drafts, zephyrs, thesaurus words created  
only for Montana where *wind* and *air*  
spoken, are injustices.

Montana—my quiet revolution  
wanting nothing, a false future  
free the grid of days and speech,  
a never-time which was not,  
has not been; one decade later—  
the deep-chest-hurt longing  
of not-Montana—but there are words:  
*Pioneer Mountains,*  
*Beartooth Mountains,*  
*Bitterroot Mountains,*  
and in my *Crazy Mountains* head  
I am running four-legged with foxes  
feasting on daylight, brushing bellies  
on wildflowers.