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# Midwestern Mythologies

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Midwestern Mythologies

by

Adam Hubrig

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Kwame Dawes

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2013

MIDWESTERN MYTHOLOGIES, POEMS.

Adam Hubrig, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisor: Kwame Dawes

This collection of poems works toward unpacking the complications of moving from one geographical center to another. Its poems aim to work out changing and strained relationships, expectations and environments.

William Stafford begins his book about the craft of poetry, *Crossing Unmarked Snow*, with a series of insightful comments about the local. Stafford claims “it is this immediacy [of the local] that distinguishes art. And paradoxically the more local the *self* that art has, the more all people can share it; for that vivid encounter with the stuff of the world is our common ground” (3). Stafford is commenting on how it is through the local that the communicative power of poetry is established. This concept of the importance and immediacy of the local informs my poetry in that it shapes my understanding of language, audience, and the content of the poetry itself.

To begin with, the local inspires me through its dialect and use of language. William Carlos Williams has been influential for me in this regard. His aim of writing in the American Idiom as laid out in his collection of essays *In the American Grain* has proven an integral concept to me in writing. I aim to write down the America I know, specifically the Great Plains States of the Midwest where I have been born, raised, and scarcely wandered out of, and I aim to do it in the language and the rhythm of the place, too. It might be a small section of America and a relatively small cross section of this country’s people, but it’s those folks whom I know closely. I want to write in their language and on those issues that are important in their lives because it is also my language and the issues important in my life.

I’ve found, in my business of learning more about the craft of poetry, good company in taking on this project. Many Midwestern poets have opened up a Midwestern dialogue in verse. Poets like Jane Kenyon, writing both about her life through graduate school and her married life at Eagle Pond; Bill Holm writing about

life in the Midwest from Minnesota, South Dakota, and Kansas; Jim Harrison writing of Michigan; and Ted Kooser and William Kloefkorn writing about Nebraska. All of these fine writers have stirred, first, my appreciation for Midwestern poetry, and secondly, my aspirations as a writer. I hope to capture some of the honesty of substance that these authors have so strongly captured through their muse of the local. These poets have crafted into words the experience of living in the rural landscapes of the Midwest, a set of experiences that might otherwise be overlooked in poetry in authentic voices that render these experiences nearly tangible to their readers.

William Stafford's advice goes further, however, in informing both my writing and my reading habits than directing me to a rich source of language that is local idiom. While writing the local certainly makes my poetry more close to home for some than for others, it is in writing with the immediacy of the local that my work takes on a life and meaning to those who do not call the Midwest "local". As a reader of poetry, the inverse is also true. The Chicago poet Patricia Smith's book of poems *Blood Dazzler* deals with tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. Though she does not call Louisiana home, she utilizes the language of the people involved with and affected by that tragedy to bring, with full force, the immediacy of the local to her readers. At the same time, her earlier book *Big Towns, Big Talk* is able to communicate the local of her native Chicago through her same skillful use of the local. As a reader of poetry, I understand the value in reading fantastic poets like Smith who write with an immediacy of a local other than my own (and in Smith's case, multiple immediacies), and as a poet I understand that it is the immediacy of

the local that gives my poem “common ground” as Stafford put it; The common ground in which another reader from any geographic location can read my poem and approach it as vivid and approachable. I cannot, as a reader, as for better lines of poetry than what Smith has provided me through her aspects of the local. The communicative *umph* of her poetry is through her capturing the immediacy of the local.

There is something mythic about the local. By mythic, I don’t mean imaginary or make believe; I mean tied to or passed down. The immediacy of the local carries with it revelations of the past, shedding light on past experiences and relationships. By mythic, I mean that the immediacy of the local is still trying to do the work of making sense of itself. And so am I trying to make sense of it. And so are readers. By *mythologies* in the title of this collection, I don’t propose anything fallacious at all, but rather a genuine substance working out the immediacy of the local. I try to tease this mythic element out by tracing my relationships with loved ones; Relationships impacted and shaped by the immediacy of the local themselves. The relationships, just as poems for Stafford as he explains them in *Crossing Unmarked Snow*, “are regional in the sense that they derive from immediate relation to felt life” (3).

In conclusion, my poetry is informed by the concept of the immediacy of the local in its language, audience, and content. It is local in its use of language not because as a Midwestern writer I *have* to write in a certain vernacular, but because I *want* to as that vernacular is important to me. It is local in its audience *not* in the sense that my poetry’s readership should be limited to Midwesterners, but in that it

is the local that allows my poetry to communicate with people of other regions.

Finally, it is local in its content not because it is the only content I have to convey,

but because it is that subject matter which I can convey best and most openly, as it is

my own lived experience.

## Genealogy

My father, a nobody,  
shuffles the deck of cards,  
swigs Canadian whiskey  
from his big gulp cup,  
and his hands, that are likely slipping  
the aces under his elbow,

have planted and harvested  
more acres than days I've breathed,  
have built homes and churches  
pig barns and castle towers,  
have shaken the hands of mayors,  
of holy men, and have curled into fists  
that he's occasionally shaken at God.  
I, too, have the hands of a nobody.



## The Noon Whistle in Hankinson, North Dakota

sounds any time between 11:45 and 12:15, but that's always been close enough, and that's a comfort, really. A comfort to know that fifteen minutes in any direction is totally forgivable, which is how much time it takes to inquire of a mother at the post office if her child is over the flu yet; for a sipped cup of coffee with the neighbor, shut in since his wife passed; or for the dependable white pick-up with rusted out wheel wells to make its drudge from dirt to gravel to black top to town.

## The Black Crock Pot

shows up on my porch in late November,  
the glass lid still clouded over with warmth  
from the soup cradled in the pot's belly.

A note taped to the side reads: *Amy, sorry  
for your loss. Your father will be missed.*

There are no Amys in my house, nor my  
neighborhood. Just ham and bean soup,  
my empty stomach, and the faith taken  
to abandon such a gift on my front porch.

## Marriage

As they left the courthouse to start their separate lives, they told each other *go to hell*. And they did, dragging their kids with them. And now, thirty years after her diamond ring was laid to rest in her jewelry box, his hair is much thinner and so is she, as his hands clench

the black, plastic grips of her wheelchair, taking her into radiation treatments. At the doctor's office she shakes and sighs like a nervous bride as the doctor gives her the bad news. Her ex leans over to take her slender hand so she won't have to handle this burden alone.

They say

that Uncle Gussy's nose turned white  
when he was dealt a good hand of cards;  
that one time he got so unnerved that he  
hit bashed the edge of the table down, and  
the cards spilled to the floor on a stream  
of beer; that he used to stand in the back  
of the church, unshaven, and sing more loudly  
than anyone else a measure and a half behind.

Penny Slots

Bar. Cherries. Seven.

Little white puffs of hair curl out like smoke from under the edges of her decades-faded bandana. Her pea coat is folded over itself and rests atop her walker as her dimpled flesh hangs from the curvature of bone like a damp quilt from a line as the whole soft assembly reaches up to the penny machine's arm and takes it down its arch.

Seven. Seven. Lemon.

## Photographic Memory

His hands press under our schoolchildren chins,  
lending our wobbly heads some semblance of posture  
like the neighborhood tomcat balancing atop the fence  
on the far edge of the church lot. Our confirmation day  
picture, taken before his bright lights and cameras as  
he said *you'll always remember this day*. But I only wish  
I could remember the explanation to that lengthy verse  
Pastor had picked out for me or exactly how those vows  
we all made went. All I can remember is the taking  
of the picture, us trying to hide the pack of Marlboros  
and the lighter behind our backs and slowly learning  
as we extended our guilt grins to the old photographer  
that there's no place handy to tuck away your sins  
when you're tangled up in a white church gown.

## Maintenance Order

The steady chime of the workman's keys  
sound at every step his steel-toed boots take  
over the yellowed linoleum torn at the sides  
along the walls, where the foot traffic of secretaries  
and businessmen are heaviest. With a short gasp,  
he ascends to the top of his ladder one rung  
at a time, with another gasp removes the long  
blackened tube of a bulb and, with a gasp again,  
restores light to the narrow path of the hallway.

## During the Near Warmth of March

the otherwise empty sky resembles the white, open  
space on the back of a Sunday bulletin, sacrificed  
by a mother to the stray mark scribbles jet engines  
have left up there. I drag my muddied feet through  
the last cold patch of snow to check the seed  
in the bird feeder, but it's full, and I'm learning  
I still know nothing about the migration of blue jays.



## Elevator Pigeons

are well provided for, as there's so much spillage  
that goes on after the harvest. The golden grain  
is hauled by trucks driven by sweating farmers  
or their sweating sons and dumped into grates  
under the scale where so much is deducted from  
the pay before it is loaded on the train, and farmers  
are left to do their sad arithmetic of getting the taxes  
and bills paid; left to their whiskey revelations  
that they'll have to sell off acres of land while  
elevator pigeons get much too fat to fly.

## The Bakery after The Accident

The old man reaches up to adjust the bent bill  
of his ball cap before he reaches for the dice cup  
which will either win him or lose him this morning's wager  
of a nickel. Other men crowd around the edges of the table  
and suck the filling from long johns between deep mouthfuls  
of coffee more akin to breathes of air. A chair sits empty.  
Except for the sloshing and slurping of mouths at breakfast,  
and the aerobics of dice in the cup, they are silent.  
Some of the wives accompany the men, and take their own table  
away from the dice in the back by the window.  
They pass shocked glances back and forth  
interrupted only occasionally to pause on the empty chair.  
They haven't touched their rolls, only the necessity of coffee.

Waiting for the train to pass in Hankinson, North Dakota

When June's ground stretches open its arid lips  
to sip of the sweat rolling off a farmer's face  
in the last minutes of daylight, which wrench  
themselves as thin as the linings of the farmer's  
pockets, a boy's hand shakes in the rail yard  
as he posts his name with the small can clutched  
with the wonder of how far away the steel wheels  
might be able to roll his mark away from here.

## Ink Stain

When your mortem was posted  
in the paper, I noted the contours  
of your face and how different  
you looked to me in uniform.

I thought about that last night  
together, the night before you  
shipped out, and how unhappy  
you had said you were. Your

family made funeral plans, but  
how could I have explained who  
I was and why I was there to your  
husband and your daughter? Today

I threw the paper out, after it had  
clogged up a corner of my desk  
for a week, and wondered what you meant  
when you said you wanted to leave him.

## Cassiopeia

We cried when she poured the *Star Spangled Banner* into our ears,  
a decade ago, dampening the disappointment of impending loss  
homecoming night. Our queen, bound in a red strapless dress,

her wrist embellished with a silver bracelet, whose charms now clank  
the convenience store scanner as she rings up packs of cigarettes  
and scratch tickets, and I wish I could give her back the joy of her song.

## Theology

The minister, a few years my younger, and a good foot taller argues with me on the front porch. *Your disease* the minister says *is your fault. It's come upon you because of your sins; it's God's good will, boy, that you suffer it. Bear no grudge against the Lord!* I say nothing. He keeps talking; *Your pain is God's design, you must've done something to deserve it;* until the coffee is gone. As he passes under the maple tree in the front yard, a bird shat God's will on his forehead.

## Fences

Inside the fence, on the porch, they're drinking  
their shiraz, scratching their octogenarian heads,  
saying *how long it has been since the children*

*were home*. Across the street, a man with an only  
slightly stained coffee mug pulls his children back  
inside the gate of their backyard's chain link fence.

## AstroNot

My kindergarten classmates laughed when I showed them the chunk of the cement, shared with the rehearsed story Aunt Kara had given me with a grin about how my father was only seen on the weekends because he was an astronaut on secret missions for the president to the moon. I didn't think it funny, sitting at my desk during recess where the teacher told me to consider my misbehavior, clasping that rough cement clump in my hands, wishing I could be up in that rocket with him.



## Cygnus

The drowning scene: some hapless youth, usually the one in glasses, gets into water too deep, or a current, or the ice breaks.

The brother, or caretaker, or ridiculously buxom babysitter strips down to what cable TV will allow and drags them

to dry safety. The rescued then feels indebted to rescuer, mumbling something of honor and life-debt. But *he* didn't want

to be saved. He was angry I pulled him out. He had hoped to find peace at the bottom.

## Heritage

In my favorite versions of the story, Papa knocks Pa out. My Pa was, at the time, thirty two years old to my mother's sixteen. One aunt would say it as, *she had no vices except for your father, and he had no virtues except for your mother.* But Papa was the hero in everyone's version, even my Pa's. The whole thing, for me, was always best summed in that brief, narrator-contingent picture of Papa's heavy fist bludgeoning my future father's face, stricken with guilt and reverence.

## Train Song

Sleeping upstairs, alone, at my grandparents' farm,  
I was afraid in my blue footsies pajamas. I search  
for some soft, consoling sound, but to a child the howl  
of the owl is not a question but a threat and the problem  
of Coyote cries never factors in the safety of indoors.  
But comfort comes from the low, mumbled rumble  
of train cars that I like to mistake for the rocking of the world  
to sleep by giants; bigger, even, than Papa, whose job  
it must be to put the sun back up in the morning.

## *My Rocketship*

is what the old professor called his coffin, standing upright in the corner of his office like a grandfather clock. He would stand inside of it sometimes, saying that when it was his time, it would launch him out of this world. But when I saw him last, in the retirement home, I wondered if he hadn't started wandering already as I showed him a book of the paintings he had done, paintings that his hands had once stretched out over like an old testament offering on an altar. But he didn't know the fruits of his labor. He was both delighted and suspicious when I suggested that he had painted them: *did I now?* He said, squinting and tracing, with a trembling finger, the contours he once created.

## Telescope

I had hoped I'd see something more through it:  
my Confirmation Day gift from Father,  
who was likely unaware of the package's contents,  
and Mother, who'd obviously picked it out.

It showed me little, but I'd take it  
to the abandoned Whittmer farm, using it mostly  
as an excuse to make out with my latest girlfriend,  
though some nights I'd look up in earnest,

tracing the invisible connections poets had drawn  
in a quieter sky millennia before: arbitrary shapes  
extolled as gods and storybook heroes. I've tried to find  
them again, but the Whittmer farm is now an ethanol plant,

and I've moved to the city where head lights  
and street lamps dilute the calm of nightfall.  
I squint my eyes up toward the sky in earnest, still,  
because I think I remember seeing something there.

## The Red Door

At the bust stop, a white, dented car  
reels up to the curb. The mismatched  
red passenger door whines open as a tired  
man in a flannel coat and orange cap steps  
out with his hand choking the throat  
of a clear plastic sack containing  
a sandwich, a soda, a candy bar, some carrots,  
and the hope that this would be enough  
to get him through this day  
of bumping with the brick elbows  
of the city, and before the red door  
is shut, the driver leans in to give him  
the short, practiced kiss of marriage,  
hoping, too, that this will be enough.

## Word of the Blizzard

often hits harder than the blizzard itself.  
It's not usually first through the television  
one would hear it, but at the bakery,  
when the old men playing dice would warn you  
to take home an extra sack of rolls and loaf  
of bread. Word is shouted across yards in town:  
*Hey, Larry! Did you hear? We're going to get  
a foot an-a half Wednesday night.* The preacher  
says at the post office to stay in, there won't  
be any Wednesday night Bible study.

In the country, the telephone rings, "Goodness,  
Helen! You haven't heard? . . ." And when the  
farmer's wife tells him, the crusted eyed man  
says in response, before he calls up the neighbor  
to cancel the weekly game of cards, "of course I knew.  
I could feel it in my bones." But over the fields,  
no dark clouds gather. No brown, wilted grass  
is clothed in the white fluff of snow. No moisture  
comes to wet the dry, frozen lips of the ground.

## Structurally Sound

### *For Doc*

The weathered lean-to shed in the backyard  
*looks about ready* you said last October: ready  
to give in, to give up and fall under the next  
white quilt of snow. After we were blanketed  
I'd notice you're struggle to remember who I was  
when I'd wave to you from my front porch. You  
didn't remember our talks, I was sure, of housecats  
and delivering cattle, always, on the *coldest damn  
morning of the year*. I'm in the yard the next time  
you walk by, as you bend your brow as if to ask *who?*  
to the screech of the plywood door as I pull open  
the shed heaped with the soft, cold burden of snow.



in Progress

Picture: soiled dishes heaped  
four days high beneath a force field  
of light excuses. I believed their promises:  
I could be an astronaut, drive a race car,  
or at the very least be the president.

The greatest lesson is sledding as a child:  
a toboggan over a thick crust of snow. You  
can choose where you launch from and how  
fast you start but once you're in progress  
the only choice left is how to toss around  
all 70 pounds of your inconsequential body.

## 17<sup>th</sup> Stitch

*for my sister*

I can't remember, my little one, why I did it,  
but I remember it: a little shove while bed jumping  
and then your 30 pound body flying in a backwards  
corkscrew with your arms flailing, your head gone into  
the tin of that jagged heat register; my first childhood  
memory. You, as younger siblings too often must,  
endure all of the scars of our childhood. I see  
the unnatural part in your hair, still, from where  
the doctor sutured the soft edges of flesh  
atop your skull back together. I call you, on your  
birthday. You don't answer and I wonder  
with what thread we can be drawn back together.

## Season's Greetings

By the time I've glanced at the return address, I realize you've enclosed your annual advent lies. Hesitantly, I peruse each article: your yearly photograph that looks like an JCPenny's advertisement; you haven't put on a pound and you gaze at him with the longing and lust your eyes once directed at me. How considerate of you to hand write your cutesy, glitter-penned note. You outdo yourself with your trademark tiny hearts for each dot of an *i*, and conclude, of course, with *wishing you the best, my love*.

## Romeo and Juliet

The EMTs ripped the bodies from the tombs so they could have funerals and get tossed back in, but the doc's electronic imaging showed that Juliet could be revived.

Her eyes lifted up heavy as manhole covers under the bright surgical light, the doc said Romeo's dagger had missed her heart, though it would not have penetrated

deep enough to have killed her anyway. For months, she would bask in the breeze when it would touch her, hoping maybe some specter of him remained. But then

she happened across the cache of nude photographs: Rosaline splayed out across Romeo's bed. She started dating Bob, Mercutio's little brother, and never spoke

of love or light again. What really killed her was the way Rosaline had signed every letter Romeo had kept with the photos in a closeted shoe box: *"I'm dying for you."*

October on the Banks of Plum Creek

The abrupt buckling of train cars  
rings out with all the hollowness  
of a church bell through the damp air  
already saturated with starlight  
and the hissing of Katy-Dids

Back home a farm girl sips gin  
at the bar alone after burying her father.  
The girl to whom I promised *I'll always  
be there* as we kissed and kissed  
on the banks of a creek much like this.  
She's tanning her brilliant skin  
in the residual glow of overflowing  
neon light, which is bright but never warm.

## Exact Change

Her hair is stuffed in a loose bun unruly and rough  
like the garden surrendered to the weeds and July heat.  
Beads of rain glowing from the lamplights of oncoming traffic  
make ant-trails down her exposed shoulder. The balding, brawny  
driver taps his hand to the dash and says *a dollar seventy five*  
to which she gestures with one free arm and paints frantic  
pictures he can't see in shades of the language Korean.  
He begins to stretch out his arm to tell her off his bus but then  
the baby pressed tightly against the woman's breasts makes a plea  
in words belonging to no language. The driver motions to the mother  
to take the refuge of a plastic seat.

## Pondering Precipitation

She uses herself up sometimes. She pushes herself, and she melts behind; like a snow cone dropped on the slope of a sidewalk. She pushes. She melts. She pushes. 'Till there is nothing left to push, and *nothing* left to do all that pushing. Sometimes, then, she'll smile. But she's not there. She's there, of course, but she's not *there*. She's a crater waiting for rain; waiting for the clear, clean water to fall down and pool: to pool and gather and be deep again

because she's empty, because she has evaporated up into sulking skies, the formidable kind that cancel little boy's t-ball games and cutesy park picnic I wonder where she goes to, when her smile is wide, and her eyes are dim? I ask, "*What are you thinking?*" She says, "*Nothing.*" She knows it's something but she just can't tie it all down in words

like when she knows it's about to rain. The sky says it won't. The weatherman says it won't. *I* say it won't. And it does. "*How'd you know?*" I ask. But she says nothing. And that's hard for me, because all I have to line my jean pockets are words, between empty-eyed smiles and a little lint.

I say, sometimes, "*I need for you to be here with me, now.*" She is here, or course, but she's there, too. She's off somewhere, and I like thinking that somewhere is better than here, but I know that hope's as empty as my beer can, as empty as her dim-eyed smile. She can only wait for the cold sting of rain to slowly fall and gather in pools so she can be deep again, and not used up, so she can be deep again.

Pet-Co

When we walk into the store  
for food and a brush and maybe  
a new toy for her deformed pet  
cat, I see that she sees the Gecko

in its tank, tongue hanging out,  
dry, uneven and crossed eyes rolled  
off to the side, and a malformed tail.  
I know we'll pay the \$49.99 to take

it home, too, because she is looking  
at the little monster the way she holds  
onto a sigh and glances at me after  
the doctor signs my release from treatment



## Commuting Across Highway 34 at Dusk

The rise and fall of hills remind me of my young bride's chest as her lungs count change for oxygen in moments and minutes. She'll be asleep by now, on the pine porch swing, which waits for me to paint it someday. The fleshy constellations of moles and freckles peek out from under the horizon of her tank top, and a thin crust of soil from our modest cucumber patch becomes a foreign husk over her hands. A cherry tomato seed hides itself away in the valley under her lip for me to notice as she playfully lies and tells me *no tomatoes are ready yet* through her grin which will be the light she leaves on for me as the car and I wobble home.

At a Truck Stop along I-29, On the Way to Papa's Funeral

In the booth across from ours, a family eats  
in what would be called silence if it were not  
for the stabbing and slashing of forks and knives.  
A small girl in small overalls, with her dark hair  
pulled back in a single braid, waits, as the slender man  
with the same dark hair, whom I presume to be her father,  
orchestrates a ballet of fingers, to which the child only smiles.  
A paper party hat is placed upon her head as the whole  
family's fingers partake in this dance, and then the little girl  
blows out the candles on a dark, chocolate cake.

And back in our booth, when a tear climbs down off the pale  
ladder of my cheek, my wife says nothing, but lends me a smile  
and rests the wing of her hand on my thigh.

Latte

*Everyone Should Believe In Something*: bold face print hangs from fraying twine on the west wall of my local coffee shop. Ella, four years old, born blind and swaybacked, sips her cider through a straw's bent arm and asks me, because of our conversation's pause: *What are you reading?*

## Hephaestus, Crippled Son of Zeus

He had the countenance of an apostle from the Sunday school picture Bible as he sat hunched over in perfect silence before each Sunday service, I thought, because I was too young to understand he was actually older than my father or that he was sitting so humbly and reverently because his spine was permanently arched, or his only job in the world was recycling the beer cans tossed from locals' pick-up windows that he'd collect and take to be crushed, smelted, and reformed. When, as a boy, I saw him sit before the cross with his head bowed down tapping his feet to the organist rehearsing *Hark the Voice of Jesus Crying*, I thought I knew what it meant to be a son of God.

## Lesson Learned from the Housecat

My stubby thumb forces out the last pennies-worth of mint paste to brush my teeth. I'm in the mirror, I think, in pajama's I've borrowed from my dead Papa with an extra 40 pounds he must've bequeathed to me. He would have had advice for me of how to handle this argument with my wife. His mauve pajamas are still haunted

by the smell of Bengay, which I can't help but notice as I lay awake with my hours and minutes arithmetic of bus schedules and breakfast and a library pit stop which must be subtracted from the tally before rest. But my housecat is asleep in a mound of dark and orange fur and if she sleeps with this state of things, then so shall I, trusting her trust in my competence.

## Eating at the Bakery Alone

I eat my breakfast alone, on a steel folding chair,  
while an AM radio station taunts me in a monotone  
whisper with its grain prices. And outside the window I  
see crusty-eyed, sun-skinned farmers selling their corn cobs

and melons from dusty, rusty truck beds. Their wives sell  
homemade jams they must've made from the many tiny  
chokecherries plucked off the tree while the wind sear-stitched  
all of their blisters into their faces. The children play on the grass

of the square. They chase, they laugh. The little sister, who looks just  
as my little sister looked six years away and six hundred miles ago, trips  
on the curb, but there is no one to catch her as she falls face-first into  
the concrete, because her big brother is busy eating at the bakery alone.

## The Babysitting Guide for Beginners

*For my sister*

Make sure he doesn't fall when he takes a piss.  
Hide his keys. Be sure he doesn't get a chance  
to call anyone. Listen to him tell of the woman  
he was with before mom. How he wants to do right  
by mom. How he doesn't do right by mom.  
When he goes for the next drink, begin watering  
it down: more cola, less whiskey. Listen to how  
disappointed he is in you because you'll never be  
a real farmer, because you'll never build your own home,  
because you read too many damn books. Move.  
At least two states away. Fall in love. Instruct your lover  
to never answer his calls after 4 pm. Try forgiving.  
Fail at forgiving. Try again. And then, with you both  
exhausted, let him put his weight on you  
as you guide him to his bed and bury him  
under the thick, course covers.

## Explaining Myself to North Dakota

Russian olive saplings patiently scabbed over  
the corpse of your dirt road, marked by  
a sun-faded yield sign, forgotten on its corner  
like the cream I was asked to retrieve  
from the grocers, but more slowly and less  
deliberately. Your kids settled for the city,  
your hog barns caved in from the weight  
of the market, and your dead dirt road  
has no place to go and no place to take me.