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Primer for a Feudist's Daughter: Poems

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PRIMER FOR A FEUDIST’S DAUGHTER: POEMS

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ABSTRACT

The following dissertation is a collection of poetry that, in large part, reveals the narrative of Zinnie Lucas, a fictional character set among historical events in my family’s past. The poems are told from the point of view (sometimes in first person, sometime with the second-person “you”) of Zinnie. The collection begins with letters, composed beyond the grave, written to Zinnie from her murdered father. At the beginning of the manuscript’s main sequence, the second section, Zinnie lives in the Guyandotte River valley of West Virginia in 1888, about the same time as the beginning of the Hatfield and McCoy feud of legend. The Guyandotte River valley is located several miles north of the Levisa fork where much of the killing of the Hatfields and McCoys took place. However, Zinnie’s story is not a retelling of the Hatfield-McCoy conflict, but of similar, less-publicized violence.

Shortly after the sequence begins, 15 year old Zinnie’s father is shot by Paris Brumfield, a member of a chronically violent family in the area. Many of the poems deal with Zinnie’s grief over her father’s death, and her contemplation of her future without him. At the time of the murder, Zinnie is the oldest daughter. Zinnie’s widowed mother, pregnant with her fifth child, attempts to avenge her husband’s death. After nearly shooting the wrong man, she makes plans for her family to escape the violent area. During the spring floods, while logs from the timber boom are being sent down river, Zinnie’s mother loads her children onto a raft and floats with them more than 50 miles to the city of Huntington at the confluence of the Guyandotte and Ohio rivers. The sequence follows the Lucases’ attempts to integrate into city life, and, eventually, the remarriage of Zinnie’s mother.

After a short departure, the fourth section titled “Revisitation” adds further detail to the historical-fictional narrative laid out in the abecedarium sequence of the second section. The third section, “A Short History of the Future,” departs from the 19th century; it is a selection of lyric poems told from the perspective of a young Appalachian woman in the 20th and 21st centuries. This section of “ancillary” poems gives the book a greater historical arc while still speaking to many of the Zinnie sequence’s themes: childbirth, death, and an attempt to reconcile sexuality with a fundamentally religious upbringing. The final section of the book, a short series of erasures of the first section’s epistles, returns to the voice of Zinnie’s father, as the memory of his life and murder begins to fade.
UNLETTERED | THE EPISTLES OF MONTEVILLE LUCAS TO HIS ELDEST DAUGHTER, COMPOSED BEYOND THE GRAVE

A letter is a joy of Earth –
It is denied the Gods –

—Emily Dickinson, Letter 960
Dearest Zinnie

this place where the pistol and the ire of Paris Brumfield
with such haste so dispatched me this place
you should not call death rather it is a well-appointed cellar

here the earthworms are teaching me their prose their lines
composed by what they take away they leave me these scrawling furrows
to ponder this narrow tomb now a tome

each day I read the sprawling calligraphy of absence and in this library
this dim study I’ve learned the history of all humankind
what is gone always outlasts what remains
My dearest Zinnie

my Zinnia I don’t reckon you ever knew we named you for a flower

neither of us had ever seen we were drawn to your sound
I was put in mind of the Bible-men Nebuchadnezzar like me who couldn’t read
the writing on the wall and the prophets Ezekiel Zechariah who could

your mother thought of wind of a breeze rasping to get in you were so small
arriving early only the size of two potatoes in my hands and yet

you threw open that cellar door to my heart
My Zinnie
	his is what I would do differently I would remain forever infallible in your mind I would erase every harsh word toward you I would plow under each malicious deed you watched me do if you must think of me as you would a locust a din a husk a scourge above ground only remember not that life nor the burial but keep in your heart what is bound to come after the floundering change these wings beating loose the last clods of memory this flitting body newly minted redeemed
WE KNEW WHEN THE EAGER APECHILD SCRATCHED THE SQUARE IN THE MUD
THAT A GERM OF GREATNESS WAS IN HIM FOR THAT CRUDE SYMBOL
HAD ALREADY RAISED A ? ABOUT PURPOSE, SPOKEN
THRU WORDS LOCKED IN HIS POOR MIND BUT CLEARLY SAYING TO US:
WHAT IS TO GO IN THIS SPACE? & EVEN TODAY THE SQUARE
IS THE FIRST OF CHILDREN’S DESIGNS

—James Merrill, from The Changing Light at Sandover
Not until you were 14 did you learn that A was for ABSENCE,

that dark aperture of a daguerreotype camera. Maybe it was his crooked Adam’s apple, but the picture man got the idea of Eden all wrong, forgot that the fruits would simply have fallen into your laps. As a backdrop: the ragged tickweed. His props: a fodder shock, gourds arrayed at your feet, something harvested in each figure’s hand. For your father: a clutch of mustard greens. Mother swaddled the year’s final squash. Little Blackburn and Julia, each gripped a near-rotten ear from the crib. While you tried not to squint at the sun, the black veil pulled over the man’s oiled head could not yet make you think: grief. As soon as he trapped the moment, it vanished, like that ache left after

the APPLE had fallen from your hand.
You had your hand shoved in the dark mouth of a BUCKET.

As you clenched at the chicken feed, your fist swimming in seed cool as the gravel-bottom creek, you watched your uncle burst over the ridge into the pecked-clean yard, over the droppings fanning out from the coop’s open door. The banties gave their staccato bock and flushed. Your uncle huffed up the porch’s three steps, wet-cheeked, puffy-jowled. Surely this didn’t mean death. You could only hear scraps, the news striking you like bits of frozen rain in the wind: portend, white bird, stretched out, oh lord, a pistol, enough that’s, the road, slumped, to the river. For a moment all you could think was: awful orphan awful or—words from a prayer’s slow end. But then, a lesson in logic returns, the broken analogy. Finally you understand: just as

a BARGE is not heaped with steam but with coal:
the COFFIN, of course, is made to receive the body

and not the soul. It’s the end of a dirty century and you are a girl, your father dead and laid out in your narrow front room. A swatch of camphored cloth covers his strong-jawed face; you must keep it from turning black as a slate at school, tarnished as your mother’s only silver. Today, the sooty ladle will remain buried in the drawer. Today, you will not scribble a word, though your hands twitch like they’ve never. You will imagine you’re holding a bucket of garter snakes. You can’t stare back at the tiny faces in the frame. The once-green earth has donned its mourning robe. Yes, you think, Let the gods be erased, though you will never know: palimpsest. Your sister will draw only boxes next week on her slate—she will say to you nothing but, over and over, these words:

What can chink these CRANNIES, these holes? You will not tell her
what you think: all life is nothing but DEATH

covered over by a plot of black dirt, a picked-clean field plowed-under. And you will not explain how it stinks: the shit that makes every last beet grow larger. Instead you will draw up a new primer, tell your waspwaisted sister that “D” stands for “deckle”—produce a four-sided frame and a screen. You can’t wait to replace those grave-dark slates with something more permanent, more malleable. Yet, your paper will never be pure as you wish, never the whiteness of angel wings. But, oh, you’ve forgotten: you had refused to believe. So, after you’ve soaked the ashy newsprint—the pulp hornets’-nest-gray, that papery slop thick and wet in your hands—you finally rouse the courage to shout: With my own spit, I’ve sealed shut the eyes of

DAMNATION: I am god, making myself out of mud.
Even so, you can’t stop fearing the preacher, his EVERLASTING PIT.

Why does his right hand always hold the white napkin, pristinely square? Why wipe his mouth as if it were a baby's fevered brow? You thought you’d be numb at this funeral, your limbs & mind harder to move than rods of cold iron; but, no, your thoughts lumber through a dark wood—an unending interrogation: Can that truly be the holy ghost you hear quavering in his wail, sputtering from his throat like a flame? And what of the sermon: surely not shot through with impossible fire? Is this grave you hover near the hand-dug entrance to hell? Surely he knows the second-coming is no easy consolation? This hole left behind by your newly dead daddy is bigger than any gash Jesus could rip in the sky. The wound of his grave will always loom larger than the threat of a gaping ETERNITY, that never-ending slip over the lips of the well.
& so you pray: Our Father who art

Your FATHER who art not

is nothing but rot.

Every field’s gone FALLOW, every last plot’s plowed under.
You can’t avoid glory forever. A GUNSHOT HOLE

will be no more gory than the birth of headlong twins, will seem no less startling than a hillside aflame with firepinks, the carnival’s scarlet floodlight, a gift of hand-picked poppies. You can’t yet know how anger can fade, still so new yourself to bloodstain. But know that you will dispel the gloom, will refuse to let such things glom on to you like the trail-side’s cockleburrs on a storebought skirt. You will think instead of the path ahead: the boy, the gloss of his cave-black hair, the perfect cisterns of his night-dark eyes. Become gemini. When he turns to you, watch your doppelgängers glitter in those wells from which other girls thirst to drink. Move in close to admire your twinned selves, each swaying on a stark and lightless stage. Do not kiss him, not yet, but do not think: Must love

be always this dark, a blind arm waving in an empty GRAVE?
You will never see your daddy's HEADSTONE, never

lay your eyes in that thin picket of rock hewn from the ridge's spine. Still, you can’t help but think that life is split like a grave-marker, cloven into its parcels of birth and death. You think of the froe, this life riven from heaven like a shingle flaked from a log of white oak. And you know that you are quickened with the sap of eternity, torn apart for a time from the land of sweetmilk and sorghum. They say you see through a glass darkly, but you know the sky is nothing but sawdust, and heaven keeps to itself, like corn in its flimsy husk. Thoughts of this world and the other put you in mind of your lessons, of the schoolmaster’s clean geography, his perfect globe, and those gruesome word-pictures of the brain, how everything ends up split, divided into it’s separate HEMISPHERES, connected
only by the thinnest ISTHMUS of skin.

You tell your brother he has more gumption in his little finger than those Brumfields can ever muster in all their shot-gunning, IGNORANT, blank-faced days.
History will never know if the JURY-BOX remained empty,

or if you stood silent in that courtroom, hateful with sobs; if those Sunday-bested men divined their not guilty from the floorboards, returning each to his plow by noon. Did you only imagine those lantern-jawed kin—those Brumfields—up on that hasty stage with Jack Ketch, ancient hangman, black-hooded? The centuries will not know if you dream-summoned the crowds gathered to gawk at those no-good jakes, those lanky widow-makers strung up like jumping jack dolls, stiff-legged, without the slack even to bow down before God. Yes, you've imagined their hell-fire, but not the courthouse’s conflagration, so many births and murders flaming to ash, nary a record left of gunshot or jugulation, blood sprayed while a mother looks on. But this is no matter: you already know that justice is just a gimcracked toy, fuel only for the cookstove’s dark maw. The law of this place is only

a leaky JUG, good for nothing but the joy of smashing a thing to pieces.
You watch your mother through the barn’s KNOT HOLE.

She sharpens anything that she can use for killing, polishes and cleans her own dead daddy’s Confederate gun, his knife folded quietly in the homespun pocket of her skirt. The pitch fork gleams like a fox’s hungry chops, the scythe fleers its grimace, the sickle its overwrought smirk. Between weapons, her fingers turn to kippers, writhing, those pale-bodied worms eaten up with death. And now, you know why she keeps moving: she must. To rest would be to give thought to the maggots, to the fine-haired fungus, to the earwigs and earthworms; idleness serves only the graveyard’s nibbling legions. She will not feed her anger like slop to the swine. Vengeance is mine, saith the widow, for each stillness, each silence is a dark-mouthed KEYHOLE through which grief slithers like a honey-voiced snake.
Generally, you’d be humming as you sat before this LOOM—
and the black door to heaven LATCHED fast before me.

no home in this world—

—

Girl—around my neck, neither noose nor key—no father,
the beat of your dirge—I’m just a useless hand of a
found sorrow—your hands slowing down to match
new song—something shot through with your new
sackcloth sun—this plain-wove shawl demands a
untangling in your hands—black as Judgment Day’s
road that’s streching before you—the dark sky that’s
plied (as carded, quick-spun & wound)—the dark
plot forming from the sheep’s black wool—shuck—
palm—your feet raising and sinking the heddles—
a tune blended to the rhythm of the shuttle—a lit,

a
And this **MADSTONE** held in your hand,

squared-off and porous, taken from the paunch of an albino deer, your daddy’s last gift of venison to you. He’d heard the doe had been roaming the hills like a ghost, a flash of white and nary a shot gotten off, every hunter stunned. And now, this stone in your hand for snakebite and rabid wound. { **Boil in sweetmilk, place warm on the gash.** } You’ve watched it stick to your brother’s bloody shin like a tick, sixteen hours and loose again. Milkboil and the milk turns green with the poison, { **yes, you can know the dog was mad** } the green of the baby-fine grass of your paw-paw’s grave. { **The only thing the dead can leave behind is salvation.** } And once more the madstone adheres, sucking out the poison, keeping your brother from unquenchable thirst, from a closed-up throat,

keeps the curses and mad froth from his tender, slack **MOUTH**.
Your mother’s drug you here, trailside, where your mind is a **NEST**, 

a mess [ ] tinder and twigs [ ] thrown hastily together [ ] full of holes [ ] holding nothing [ ] aflutter with nonsuch [ ] so much air [ ] more vacant than her cruel womb [ ] empty as your own belly [ ] as your hand [ ] held open [ ] before you here [ ] in this sinkhole [ ] smell of black mud [ ] leaf rot [ ] the cornmeal scent [ ] her widow’s dress [ ] your palm creased [ ] with the silty muck [ ] a spider’s fruitless web [ ] a dingy map [ ] devoid of towns [ ] nothing a drizzle [ ] won’t wash away [ ] reason has been cut free [ ] gone [ ] like an uncle’s War-vanished arm [ ] yes 

here, your head’s full of **NAUGHT**, not one germ of thought,
no egg of cognition, no O will hatch, no OH! until the moment,

until your mouth encircles blind anger’s great equation: Your mother has a horse-backed man lined up in the notch. You watch her work her rustic math, a double barrel held forth, that sudden equal sign, flint-cocked.

Your mother’s revenge = X + her gun,
where X is not a Brumfield, but myopia.

Her great unknown is not the hereafter, but a circuit preacher, black-hatted, approaching at his sacred trot. You cry out like a saint in church, your Oh! a holy-ghost shout, your No! a hallelujah. Praise Jesus, praise Time.

You’ve saved the wrong girl from turning into an ORPHAN.
in dream :: you do not whisper :: PALINODE ::

in dream :: your mother's fingers :: still as bedsheets :: her face :: soot black :: your father's fretful hat :: your one-legged uncle :: shouldered uphill :: a two-day wake :: in dream :: no belief in signs :: even Brumfields :: kindly neighbors :: pay respect :: in dream :: decent as cornmeal :: guileless as milk :: do not compare :: they say :: this coffin :: a barge :: the blades in the barn :: turn slowly to rust :: in dream :: the dog bite blooms :: a poppy at her neck :: in dream :: a white-bodied deer :: no hunter whispers ghost :: no one sifts the innards :: in dream :: your father's hands :: no steam :: no blood :: in dream :: no faith in cures :: in these woods :: no metaphors :: your head :: in dream :: no nest ::

your rough PILLOW :: no raft on which to drift :: in dream :: no rest ::
She’s squared it all away, signed the **QUITCLAIM**, her writ of *Get-me-out-of-here*. And so for days you’ve been holed up, waiting for the rains to cease. A mist beats it way through the clapboards, curling every page in your abandoned books. Through the waxed paper window, the blurry fields are glowing green, furred with the weeds of early spring neglect. Your mother has three satchels packed beside the door, waxed-canvas, stacked for any moment. You don’t have to imagine how your exodus will be. You six will trudge, mud-covered, downhollow, a war-torn brigade: your stoop-shouldered mother and her unborn child, Blacky and Julia tottering closely behind, and cinched-tight to your back, like a weapon: little Wilda,

her thin limbs jostling like arrows in a **QUIVER**.
This splintery RAFT bobbing at your feet will be the pillow

upon which you will drift. The brown water nuzzles these logs that hold you afloat, foamed as the spittle of a preacher’s furious lips. You cannot doze for the damp seeping trough your dress, your legs cold, prickly as the skin of a plucked quail. And the lumber men, guiding your craft with their poles, they holler and natter on, warning your mother of this river’s treachery, the perils of the Guyandotte: two pushboat men, last week, arrested for pistolfighting; just yesterday, a black man hanged for robbery and murder. Their rough words hang in your throat like a cough, suppressed. Your mother refuses to sit; she is stuck, trancelike, her eyes fixed downstream, the stiff hand of broken clock. She does not rock or wince like your siblings. You will float through this rough dream for only two days but you will never forget

this log-choked RIVER, these two banks that’ve become your cradle.
As you rock-a-by, float farther away from that slope-spraddled SHACK,

you can’t help but hate these hills at your back, like God’s shoulders nudging you away from tobacco drizzled chins, from the hot tempers and ancient shot-guns, from the hard work that gets you nowhere, from the hands shoved under your dress, from the rank sweetness of a boy’s humid breath, from the summer dew on your feet, from the winter ache of your hands as they milk, from the dogtrot days of dirt, fine as flour, cool as a city girl’s talcum powder, from the doodle-bugs, those ant lions, in their coliseums of dust, from the mucky sties, from the stubborn pony’s whip-lashed flank, from the corn silks’ writhing worms, from the lady bugs, lady bugs that long to fly away home, all those delicate husks

studding your charcoal hair like a village of wingèd SHANTIES.
The earth has become a crammed-full **TRUNK**, brimming

with strangers, and it teems like your Mother’s new belly, round as the schoolhouse’s fragile globe. Your daddy’s grave bulges with fresh-heaped dirt, brown as rust; last year, his father lay out in your crowded front room, a camphor cloth over his face to keep his color alive. Still, in your life, you’ve known more new babies to come tumbling into this world, all these rafted young ones, for instance, your brothers and sisters: Blacky, Julia, Spicy, Millard, and the littlest one, unborn, rolling around in there, a tiny thief caught in a corncrib. Even girls your age, holed up in a body’s home, cradle their babies like laundry to be put out on the line. You reckon it’s happening everywhere—this arithmetic—more people coming than going. It might never stop. Soon it all will be naught but so much

**TRUCK**, a load of bristling shoulders, the whole world shrunk down and cooped.
You glide beneath noon’s dark UNDERBELLY of sky.

Past the
bank’s trees, you see this
town’s ruined cupola, pock marked by the
Blues and Grays before you were born, become
a house for purple martins, an umbrella that does little to
keep out the rain. This whole city is a beast upturned, and this
official dome: a bloated cow’s heaven-pointed udder, this “U” upended.
You whisper to yourself, a quiet second person: You will not stay here, in
this Barboursville. You deserve something more than rust. You want a new city,
incorruptible. There’s not a soul here you could trust. Your mind has become
a chime, rung by some stranger. You can’t help but hark its somber toll:
you you you you Your body’s become your mind’s sluggish
pendulum, the tongue that sways inside the bell, the moon that’s
tethered like a newborn to the earth.

And as you slide along, the weak sun hovers: ancient scar, UMBILLCUS.
You’ve trudged the sooty avenues, looking for some VACANT place:

in this city, full of strangers, wayfaring hill folk, street leading onto street, searching for just one small space in which to let the latest piece of heaven fall out into this world. The longest day you’ve ever known: in this spun-out valley the sun lingering low over the Ohio, and the dust clinging to your skirts, your shins, covering the shoes that have numbed your feet. But finally: an exchange of paper, a hand with a key, a flight of wooden steps, a squalid hall, a mis-hung door, and the room: no bigger than a sty for the five of you that dusk, the six of you that night, the waxy angel who refused to bring with him even his own pallid light, only blood and water, and a weeks’-long wail. Your mother now, gaunt vessel, takes on a new labor, plods forth each day for the factory, for bread, and cloth, leaves you with the bicker and squall,

with this littlest VAGRANT, swaddled in the V of your arm.
Two months in the city: through this bleary \textit{WINDOW} you pry

at the afternoons, the rare days when you’ve gotten all the younguns to sleep, napping upon their thin pallets of rags. Their chests rising and falling, you turn from them, from those whispers & huffs of slumber. And you turn from the newsprint covering this apartment’s four walls, the advertisements for tonics & time-savers, remedies you’re beginning to think you need. More than a draft across this yellowing paper, the street below pulses & ebbs; you turn toward this other undulation, the to-and-fro city that’s exceedingly awake, the strutting city-folk ignorant of your peering, of your attention to their parade: velvet & taffeta, fine linen & silk. These strollers can’t imagine how each day how glare at your own mother treading her way through their throng. You swear to yourself you’ll spend your whole life as a spinster before you end up,

like her, a homely \textit{WIDOW}, clothed each day in lowly homespun.
Here in this teeming city, everything comes to an X:

the chronic intersection of avenue & street; the perpendicularity of railroad, tracks laid down, tie upon infinite tie; and all these lives thrown together at right angles: merchant & laundress, landlord & squatter, sot & barkeeper, coxswain & bawd; these crossings woven into an inextricable warp & weft; civilization’s plexus of how-do-ye-do & aversion, sucker punch & yes-m’am, I-don’t-care & caress. But you remember enough of your hard-learned math to know that, too, this symbol is a way to wrangle in the unforeseeable, one more means to pin down the unknown: your mother has thrown herself into this straightforward path of courtship, into the way of this lanky man: black-jacketed & crook-nosed, straw-headed & prim. Once more on a Saturday, on a square of parchment she has given her mark, put down her own X, that sign that has made you the daughter of another man.
yearn for a YOKE: a willing shackle they make of a simple pewter band.
Only once more will you recall your schoolmaster: a \textit{Zephyr},

he would proclaim, his sobriquet for this constant breeze. Beyond the rough-hewn desks, the drowsing heads, above the din of the lone sill’s sluggish fly, his soliloquy on this balmy wind: \textit{the blowing, the longing, the wish to be home again}. Soon, such school-bound memories will become erstwhile among the puzzle of this new city, the complicated laundry of strangers, the lazy affections of street cleaners and clerks. But, each spring: this mercurial breath that plays at your neck, this wind that warms itself for weeks, that kicks at your skirts, that lifts dark wisps from your braid as you wend your way, zigzagging these greening streets. Wherever you amble, it will trail after you, rustling the unfurled leaves of citified trees. Never for long will this breeze quit its whispering, its faint scratching as you turn each corner:

\textit{Zinnie, Zinnie, Zinnie}, that hushed susurration of your name.
guns and wailing women, full as
greedy owls exist; the scene of the crime exists;
the scene of the crime, drowsy, normal, abstract,
bathed in a whitewashed, godforsaken light,
this poison, white, crumbling poem

—Inger Christensen (trans. Susanna Nied), Alphabet
I never would come here alone as a child, even with you tethered like a kite to my imagination. But I have turned fifteen today, rambling about this ghostly holler, graveyard of jagged stumps, hunting mollymoochers for Mother, tracking butterflies for myself. For years I have shut my mind to you: old friend, little girl seen by only me, invisible woman you must now be, upright housekeeper, mother of three younguns, starting early.

I have haunted your spine, singing a lopsided duet, like the song of strange birds, haints in the ghosthair of the stretch-marked sugar tree. You did not know you could hear me. Caterwaul, witch’s light, dark corners: your fear is turning in on itself. I am spirit-bound, more childless than you think. I am your daughter and your mother, thrumming like a still’s bright liquor through your veins, that dense filigree of serpents lacing your bones, each wagging head swallowing another snake’s sharp pointed tail.
Mr. Patterson told me of the terrapin
and the rabbit locked in their usual race, of the old man
with a name that mimics mine. First I thought
he was teaching of Zeno's Pair of Ducks. Then he had me
write it on my slate, paradox. I felt silly as a lace collar;
I just stared at my fancy X. The wise old terrapin
knew he was slower, that he'd never outrun the rabbit,
so he tricked him, told him what Zeno figured out
blue moons ago: you can never go anywhere until you go
halfway first. Now this is not surprising: before
I get to Pawpaw's at the head of the holler, I take
my fifty paces past the Widow Dillon's first. But then,
that terrapin made it a little harder: and before you go
halfway, you have to go halfway to there. I knew that
was a quarter. And then half of that, an eighth,
a sixteenth. The distance you must cross will get smaller
and smaller forever. I learned that this was one part
of infinity, the other part would grow and grow until
it was even bigger than God. That dull old rabbit
couldn't even make a move, stuck there at the starting
line like a sinner in church, like a girl who can't begin
to imagine all her secret sins could be washed away.
LEARNING OF DARWIN’S THEORY, 1888

You always thought if you were God, you’d be a tinkerer, taking one thing and tempering it just a bit before moving on to something new, saving every scrap you’d practiced on, the whole earth a hallowed sampler, every soul—bull frog, work horse, preacher man—stitched, whittled, or dinged into its separate roughhewn shape.
In church, you imagine your parents: bonneted
and bearded with youth, strutting like doves

but mournless; November. Difference is what
you wish for them, a life unmarred by the marks
of their hoes, a life of growing extravagant

fruits—peaches, grapevines, persimmons—
raising perfect gardens without the pain

of their willowing backs, without the ache of gnarled,
rheumatic fingers. You would start with a new creation:
nothing but days of velveteen skin, supple as store-bought

cloth. You pray to God to make their hands less
worn than the handles of the plow, for an absence

of the hard life they’ve had: a love without you,
your younger kin, the blood you’ve all brought your
mother. And a sky more brilliant than any symbol: a stone

of aquamarine, the ring bought with the jeweled meat—
that fatty amethyst—of your grandfather’s finest hog.
I can still hear the grating scratching screeching
the blade against the harsh whetstone
in the back of my skull, keen as a skidding fingernail

against the slates at school. In our yard,
I stand for a minute at the well, the tiny

thunder rolling around in my head’s dark cave.
Daddy’s hands work at the blade, flickering
in the afternoon like creek ripples. He blinks

into the sun, turns and winks at me.
The sound doesn’t stop—will never stop.

He tells me, Be good now, and heads down the path
to cut cedar boughs for Mother. The ax flashes its smile,
its edge quick and bright, slick as a baby’s new tooth.
OVER SUPPER DADDY TOLD US A STORY:

he’d run into tatty-haired Nola, two years behind me, earlier in the day down the creek. He knew this holler was headed

for progress: he took it on himself to suggest:
Nola, oughtn’t you best be in school? But she was

a Brumfield & wore her truancy like a rooster’s spur. She’d take advice from nobody: not one

of us Lucases, dark-headed brood. She plopped a snotty hand on her hip, as if she were bouncing

a collicky child. She cocked her head to the side & told him:
Hell, no. They ain’t a single good fight in none of y’uns. I’d like to see

you make me.
UNCLE HIRAM BROUGHT US THE NEWS BUT EVEN HE could not tell us directly. First—his felt hat hanging limp in his hands, his eyes pink as bacon—he spoke of the bird:

   *I told you'ns that bird was a sign, a portent, dead on that porch step, and white as snow, stretched out there like Jesus. I told you and now it's come true.*

The Widow Dillon had seen it all, had even spoken with Daddy across her fence, his ax gleaming above his head, a sorry halo, she thought. She’d remembered a scripture from church—*in a moment, in a twinkling*—had spoken about the weather, the dove-gray clouds slipping over the ridge like weasels.

They both had work to get done, the widow and Daddy, less than an hour before rain would come. If only she’d been more neighborly. They could’ve had biscuits and molasses, fresh-churned butter, talk of a sermon or children, family that’s moved away.

   *If only.*

She wouldn’t have had to see those two damp spots, pistol shots, red as poppies, blooming on Daddy’s back. Nor him slumped over in the road like a collapsed barn.

   *My daddy, dying there in the dust as the bare trees swayed like women shrieking and shouting at a baptism, or a burial, full of glory.*

She wouldn’t have had to watch the bloody eyes of the devil slowly open to stare Paris Brumfield down.
Four strong men trudge up the holler carrying
your daddy on a simple wood plank, your grandmother
wailing behind them, every dutiful neighbor trailing after
like a city girl’s showy bridal train. You’ve already turned
two straight-backed chairs in the kitchen toward each other.
Your tears flow to fill that space hovering quietly between:
where once a conversation might have been placed, your daddy
will stretch out, mute as the roots stored-up in the cellar.

Mother sent me from the room, told me
to fetch two nickels, the heavy weight shears,
daddy’s whitest shirt and his suit. She said
to wait in the front room until she for called me.

And you know your mother is washing you father’s dead body,
dipping and wringing the rag, the water that drips from his fingertips
spotting the black leather of her shoes. You’ve never trembled so hard
as when you hear your mother’s muffled sobbing start up like a child’s.
The neighbors on the porch sing their soft hymns, their own sadness
shirring like locusts that have risen the wrong time of the year. You
can only imagine your mother finding behind your father’s ear, cold
as the hand that milks in winter, the birthmark she’s never seen before.
THE SHOT FIRED FROM HER BROTHER’S PISTOL,
that wretched girl watched it, the small cloud escape
into air, the discharge
of powder: clan of motes, that dark swarming
of fate behind the trigger. Loved it

every time: the jolt inside her ribs, the ringing inside
her head she’d transform into cathedral music

she’d never heard. It would always
hollow out that stuffy space, the barn loft
muffled with sweet hay.

She saw my daddy thump onto the road,
I’m sure, the dust rising like ash

in our cold firebed, stirred.
I try to imagine her; but that’s all it is—me
trying to be that girl—here

as my mother readies to shoot
the man who made her a widow.
YOU LEAN AGAINST A SLOPING MARGIN:
the rim of a dank sinkhole, your foreheads
poking out as from the barrel of a shotgun.

Your mother steadies the stock
against her thin shoulder as you see

a hawk with a V—deep
as your bent elbow—notched in its wing.

The clouds shift with their slow scuttle, slow
as cattle. The sky cinches
around the bird: a blinding noose,
a perfect halo tightening.
HALLOWED be, Mother whispered, THE RAFT
for us is ready and waiting. So I’ve left
my books behind me: all eight
opened like bodices, flung; pale dugs
borne to the air in madness; lips, trembling
and blanched, parted in prayer: Thy will be done,
on Earth, as it is.
I’ve stopped hearing what I always hear,
what’s always here: the rustle
of leaves, the creek’s thick trickle,
Little Brother clinging to my skirts
whispering his ignorant name for me
       Zeno        Zeno        Zeno.

But one bump from him, one too-hard nudge
and I’m nothing: a broken leg
or neck, a sudden eddy in this slow river—
its brown coffin—suddenly I am
a swirling zero       unseen.

*   *   *

On this raft, dark       cold water
surrounds me now, half a daughter

with his death.
Half a breath—

the pull in and hold-
ing, the cold air growing old

in my chest—
I DON’T KNOW WHY

Mother calls them such a hateful name,
a nastiness spit out of her mouth like flecks of rust.

And I don’t know why these people are called black:
Daddy’s shrunken hands, two days dead, were blacker

than anyone’s skin. Nobody cares to get things right:
brown as plowed dirt, as a mess of soup beans; the color

of wet bark, of a turpentine bottle; skin like a freckle,
like a Bible’s smooth leather: These are all truer than black

as pitch, black as sin, black as the tinker’s pot.
What’s black is not skin, but this sky we float beneath,

this watery sky we’re swirling above, our raft grazing the stars
like an owl—this black sky punched-through with buck shot,

pocked as with pellets of hail. But last night, the sky
was black as an anvil, as heavy, as cold. I thought of

Mr. Patterson, when he taught me the name for falling stars: meteors he’d called them. On the schoolhouse steps I pictured

the bright sparks flung by a smithy from hot iron, embers
of metal turning to soot in the air. I wanted to catch

a burnt-out star, the last ash of it landing like a snowflake
on my tongue. I wanted to stand in that blizzard of falling

night sky, caught naked in a tornado of ash, each cinder kissing
my body, my cornmeal skin smudged dark as lampblack.
ERYTHROPHOBIA

—Huntington, West Virginia, 1889

How could I know what to call this? I figure
Mother must be lying,

refusing to admit it’s sin that makes her sick
at the sight of a bawd’s

painted lips, cheeks rouged into shades deep
as the rust of a rail-yard’s

thousand cars. She loves nothing, now, but the color
of her own frail envy.

She won’t hear the science of how a little red
would be a compliment.

She’d slap me if I blushed at a lamplighter’s wink.
I can’t stand, anymore,

those scarlet deltas of exhaustion in her eyes,
the tiny globes in them

clouded over with a factory’s tireless smut, blacker
than a widow’s fading shawl.
To die – takes just a little while –
They say it doesn’t hurt –
It’s only fainter – by degrees –
And then – it’s out of sight –

—Emily Dickinson, Poem 255
My dearest Zinnie.

this place where the pistol and the ire of Paris Brumfield
with such haste so dispatched me this place
you should not call death rather it is a well-appointed cellar
here the earthworms are teaching me their prose their lines composed by what they take away they leave me these scrawling furrows to ponder this narrow tomb now a tome each day I read the sprawling calligraphy of absence and in this library this dim study I've learned the history of all humankind what is gone always outlasts what remains
[ II ]

Zinnie

like

your mother a breeze so small in

my heart
[ III ]

Zinnie

plow under

in your heart

these

of memory

last clods
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sara Pennington is a native of West Virginia. She holds a BA in English–Creative Writing from Marshall University and an MA in English–Creative Writing from Ohio University. While pursuing her PhD in Creative Writing at Florida State University, she served as assistant director of the Reading and Writing Center and as editor of The Southeast Review. She lives in Hindman, Kentucky, where she is an activist and the online editor of The Chattahoochee Review.