AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A MOUNTAIN LION

A Thesis
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Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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Autobiography of a Mountain Lion

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Autobiography of a Mountain Lion is a collection of poetry exploring the complexities of identity in the Southern Appalachian region, a typical concern for Appalachian letters. However, the author's approach in this collection differs from other Appalachian writers and texts in that the author operates primarily in a surreal mode. Writing in the abandon of a surreal mode allows the author to compose in a style that is unrestricted in creation and interpretation. It both renders the audience powerless and empowers them to make of the work what they will, and in so doing the work becomes an authentic representation of the human condition, for we cannot...
understand the whole of anything, not even ourselves. The poetry in this collection incorporates imagery, metaphor, sound devices. Both lyric and narrative poetry populate this work. Additionally, regional figures appear in this work operating as symbols of region and as manifestations of the idea of native celebrities as extensions of identity. Allusions to religion, geography, geology, and legal institutions also occur throughout the work as components of the region and individual identity. Ideally, this collection of poetry champions new approaches to regional writing and ways in which we see ourselves with regard to our region. It would have us reconsider autobiography as a form that is intensely individual but not esoteric, that it is possible in non-fiction to be not only imaginative but also to resemble what Breton refers to as the goal of literary surrealism, “the adult fairy tale.”

Accepted by: 

[Signatures]

Date

March 24, 2010
Autobiography of a Mountain Lion

Poems by Christopher Allan Prewitt
Dedicated to the Original Mingo County Gentleman
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Each moment of time is a mountain.

James Wright, “Today I Was So Happy, So I Made This Poem”
Excavating a Rat Hole

Only tall enough to find the knives
with divorce papers, I heard a country station
playing in the kitchen. I followed the music
and found my mother standing over a skillet.
She turned to me, smiling, and said, “Remember me?”

I nodded.

Raising me up to the skillet, she asked, “Remember
your brother?”

Under the smoke, I saw his shriveled hands,
his crossed legs. He looked like the coal we busted after
school
to see the silver cursive, the signature of god.
“Where are his eyes?” I asked.
“With all the other things we cannot eat.”

So I crawled into a rat hole. I crossed my ankles and held
my knees to my chest like a child learning to accept being deaf.
Thumbnail Geology

He pulled it from her mouth
a chocolate roll on a white stem
illuminating a sucked on
cherry sphere He smiled He returned
to driving the bus I offered her
my thumb out of pity

First I felt the teeth
farthest back brittle and wet
then the wedging of nail and thumb
by her upper-front
teeth

There in the gap of nail and thumb
is what I carry to this day
the varsity athletes running
naked through the aisles
circumcised and uncircumcised
alike bored with youth’s eternity
of a downhill flaming school bus
their screaming
Australia by God Australia
by which the driver knew
they were referring to
his bottom row of teeth
the austerity of his smile
Dissecting an Owl Pellet

A chrome wishbone pulling apart a globe of fur is a covenant. Expected to reassemble fauna from these fragments and finding only mandibles, I feel myself becoming a tapeworm in an ashtray. As skeletal butterflies freeze on the wall, I am searching through the artifacts of digestion.

A bucktoothed breeder asks me, “Have you ever eaten pussy? What? I thought that we was friends.”

How can I tell him what you tell me now, o beaked god, that there is no salvation for me, the slant wrist carving nature?
Colts

I have four uncles. A unicorn
isn't one of them. As young men,

each masturbated quietly
before rising for school. Gen-

erations dried in blankets
with images of colts

resembling those my uncles saw
while walking to and from school.
The Dark Mane

Two thoughts come to me
looking at my father
in his casket: how

easily bucked a faithful man
is from his religion,
and if this was the age

that I would never be.
I thought for years
that a chocolate mare

would carry in its mane
my death even before my name
was known to me.

I knew not to be deceived
by brown, long, slender legs
and a lifted anus,

for there is nothing
in a legion of flies buzzing
around the ears to suggest

anything but impending death.
Yet my father loved them
even as he whipped them
for jerking as he hammered
fashion for their own good,
and every clink, curse, and smack

made me quiver, sitting in the truck
he left running in winter
while I waited for the bus.

Father, I wondered, how far
can a man go mocking his mortality?
I suspect he would say—

if not for the tetanus of his rage,
as he caught me quivering
on the saddle at a young age—

death comes to everyone
who leans against the wire fence
post soon enough.
Baiting

I spent my adolescence
as a snapper turtle.
Young women in abundance
were pink and raw, boneless
on the end of twine,
and I bit down, hard.
Pulled from the amber marsh,
it all happened in the space of
a cash register opening.
The taste turned me on
my shell, placed a foot
on my chest,
and drove my brain into my throat
with its sledgehammer.
It twisted my head from my body
the way the young women that I wanted
tore and had torn their humanity
to become bait.
Worthless, my legs and arms
mimed my crawling into hell.
A Poem Written at Historic Harland Sanders Café

Japanese tourists lick their fingers,
and what became of you,
Harland Sanders?

A bust your daughter Margaret made
decorates your grave in Louisville, but I wonder
about your body, far too precious to be buried.

It seems somehow appropriate
that you would be fried, Colonel,
headless, in your prized
herbs and spices—as anonymous
and essential as drops of rain

in a lake, plops as pronounced
as the hot grease popping in the fryers.
Founder and mascot,

what would you think of the pile of paper
skinned from the straws, left
unattended by the soda fountains?
What is this greasy flight
to a featherless bird?
These Years Are the Burning Wasp Hive

A package burning in an oil
drum behind the tobacco
outlet.

A coward, I sent
my opaque cow
to fan away the flames.

Her tongue, calf-like,
dropped
to lick the burning salt

at my command.
She brought me a note,
illegible—

not from burning,
but the letters themselves.
It was worthless.

But a calloused tongue
is nothing to her.
I found her

by the charcoal lilies
sprouting from her gown.
Adolescents
were throwing stones.
I took her to graze
in the caustic field

of my gender,
for I had my time
to lick

the melting battery
on the pavement,
having failed

to peddle my wares
to those who lick
mercury just to burn,

who believe
God illuminates the head
of Perkins Branch,

and I believed
everything with milk
had the honor

to suffer.
I had strange beliefs
in the epithelium—

I was sugar drunk,
sucking black
jellybeans from the skull.

I swept
the hooves of my dissolved mammals
into the gutter. How many?

But she did not dissolve,
she did not
profess me a god,

although my anger
harkened
to that wasp hive

that she did not
have to tell me
to burn.

The little cud she chewed,
I knew,
was owed to that calloused
tongue,
but she never wept.
She never wept.
A Myth

—January 26, 2008

As sure as the blue fog fell
over Charleston, West Virginia,

a moth stitched itself from the fabric
of my carpenter pants. I do not know

if it forecasts the taste of metal
diminishing after a long month,

if this is luck, or
if this is the presence of God.

None of us are exempt
from venerating, or creating, a myth.

But Charleston, let this beige moth
be a reminder: your choking was not.
The dog hacks in the dark
of a rooster’s pupil. It is early evening,
fall, in Pippa Passes, Kentucky.

I undress and step into the shower
where I removed with difficulty
a drowned cricket. It smudged
my hands, so that my palms
became the creek’s mouth
where the filth accumulates and stirs.

It is not my duty to collect the dead,
so it is not automatic; it is not as it is
now: peeling myself to wash the death
that swept away the chimney sweeps
who permeated the literary period
that fashioned a dramatic poem, a scene
from which the town was renamed.

No one loses sleep over this.
No one even seems to know.
A Poem About Flooding in Eastern Kentucky

It is Autumn, and the festivals have flooded
Eastern Kentucky: Paintsville,
Hazard, Hindman, Martin, Pikeville,
all flooded, all deep-fried and dreaming of powder sugar,
the candy apple entangling overfed
children with its effluvium. But let us
not attend this year. This year,

let our own flood commence
in the shower. The sour apple
body wash smells as real,
and the scent lasts longer on your shoulders
than the candy apple’s
tossed in the trash, remnants
of caramel and nut
across its circumference.

This year,
instead of screaming children
mourning drifting balloons,
the delicate timbre of breathing;
no salutes from the cadets or the field commanders
directing high school marching bands;
just our hands, our fingers, goose
pimples and sighs, the exquisite
floods of our bodies
drops of water on the shower tiles.
Appalachia is a “state of mind.”

Higgs and Manning
J E T F U E L

The pure products of America / go crazy— / mountain folk from Kentucky
—William Carlos Williams

Mira el ansia, la angustia de un triste mundo fósil / que no encuentra el acento de su primer sollozo
—Federico García Lorca

When I enter the gas station,
always the two-headed cashier asks me,
"Where you from?"

"Did you get fuel?"
and always the other head when it asks
sounds as if it's saying
jet fuel; and though I tell him
that I am the accumulation
of every callous sediment
deposited in the Big Sandy that was driven mad
by the smell of phormaldehyde
and a tongue that knew too much of its own family,
I might as well plead my salvation
with Old Regular Baptists,
who no longer worry about the congregation
of elk with a taste for bones in their yard.
After all, the Lord will provide,
and who would believe me, the one
who cannot distinguish the sound
of an ATV revving from a gun
being fired in the distance?
I have heard the headless man
in the Ford call out to me,
_Do you know what the street value is of this mountain?_
And I liked the way it felt,
like being a visitor and not a nuisance,
even if I was bred by a creek,
even if I have known the great sadness
that arrives in the anecdotes about weather,
for we have nothing of significance
to say unless we speak of rainfall,

years and years of rainfall.
A Pinch of Skull

The first breath sounds like a trash bag
full of empty bottles
dragged across the peaks of Tibet.
The first breath
cheers on the mares,
running, oblivious
to the cruelty of their bones:
holding together a valentine
made by the Laurel Heights nursing staff
for the woman whose fingerless hands
reminded me of hooves,
and all this being said
let the nightmares graze in oblivion.
I have prayed
that the mountain lions
would carry them all away
in their gums
to the buried continent, or
the other coast.
Must I always be reminded
that a breeze fells an aspen,
but nothing fells
a mountain lion?
Because you asked,
I have come to a door
regarded, erroneously, as locked.
I have opened it.
I have witnessed a ritual
so shameful
I tear the skin from my face in apology.
Loretta Lynn

If Loretta Lynn were peeling grapes
beneath the sidewalk,
would the specks of white
form her face in the darkness?

That line of questioning kept him playing guitar,
kept him strumming
open chords that burst into flames.

He hoped it would help him see with the clarity that he saw
the truck driving into the wall when he lost the words
to a song he was writing.

What becomes of the world
when the song does not spill out of his hands?

And me, at my blonde piano,
waiting for the conclusion.
**Mountain Oysters**

A set of nuts hanging from a truck: prosthetic, not a prize of a war or fauna shot in the wilderness to be mounted on a wall or converted to jerky, though if a bull’s certainly a burial in gravy and buttered toast would be appropriate.

She once tried it because her dad liked it, but every bite made it larger in her mouth like the national deficit.

He ordered it on his seventy-sixth birthday, his last; and a white boat washed ashore by the dining facility.

The river had revolted. “Here. I wish to return your son.”

All the patrons hoorayed and raised their invisible declarations in the spirit of Truman and ran outside to collect a wooden plank.

Oh, the joys of a prize that feels like sneezing in your hand!

Excited to burn the boards in their backyard oil drums, they sped away in their Silverados, their F-150s.

Some drove for hours in circles, singing Montgomery Gentry’s “My Town,” as the decorative nuts glistened under Adolf Rupp’s blue moon.
Sneezing into My Hand during a Stroll on a Farm

Wiping my hand on the fence post, I notice a duck being pulled under a gray pond’s surface by a snapper-turtle. How the duck resembles the cross-eyed church pianist who could whistle down the cardinals from the power lines. Waiting for a song, he would chew the children’s fingers that he kept in a jar full of dirt and lint.

Power lines would bend, would lower themselves to watch.

Yes, when he first noticed this, his surprise mirrored the duck’s and probably the children’s.
A Laugh Track of Crows in a Funnel

Blonde Beth's boney wrist,
wrist, Megan's
mocha skin,
both I forfeited
for a spine that straightens

and the sounds
of breaking billiards.

They were
my Fränzi, my
Marzella.

I think of them now,
grown women,
when eating stuffed cabbages.

Sometimes I want to die.
A Bucketful of Devils

—For Ronald and Jessie Cooper

One peach face among them says,
“I wish I hadn’t killed myself.”
I never could sit comfortably under a tree
fingering the lint in my belly button
without feeling myself a bird-flipper
to a ceramic fish that sits in the palm of its maker’s hand.
A shame because I love maples . . .
Those two holding on to the handle,
they could be twin sisters with shaved heads
breathing for each other,
or the daughters of a pillar of salt,
whose father could not rebuild a shattered urn
by fucking the ashes.
Staring at the faces, I wonder
how long had I floated face down in a flood
with rusted nails hammered in my back.
Oh God.
Were my last words
the names on prescription bottles?
For the Roaming Shopping Carts in the Daniel Boone Plaza

Here to purchase a shovel for some unmentionable chore,
I long to hear You and anything with a heart
should not be cracked open without one first wearing a surgical mask.
For the mildew smell emanating from the sternum is overwhelming—

descriptions of an apocalypse that the mystics forgot by necessity,
and being here now even I have to wonder if we must
carry the economy like a pouch of silver dust that when blown
off the palm freezes the pins in mid-juggle. I wonder

if the disease left our bodies from prayer or prescription,
or if it would have been without the appointment of President Johnson.

To think of it is to flick the foreskin like a disobedient cat’s ear,
to resolve curiosity is to gaze upon a crucifixion scene.
What god have we disobeyed to be subject to such wandering?
Into the Fish

No longer content to whistle down the beardless boys from the top of Bald Rock, Willie fell into a dream. Let the diamond scaled fish leap from the scalp and swallow what it must: the pink vase of gums in the hole of the diabetic's foot, who upon waking will drag himself and his flatulence to the bathroom and lock himself in.

What difference does it make to the wooly worm if the lawn ornament ceramic jockeys hold out a naked arm for their stolen lamps, and the jigs to which the diabetic must now commence?

A mound of purple leaves in the throat could justify a lie even if the wax paper imprints can't. The detaching retina, Willie, is James Hutton diving into the fish. Consumption the key to the present.
Keg Stands with the High Priests of No Good

Straightening my teeth with the bark,
an eagle leaped.
Goats trembled at my left hand

as if I could start anything
with a prayer to the fossil in the wind.

An eagle leaped.
Flight of Larry Flynt

Given wing
from the vase
of flames,
half-dressed
bitches
are pollen, as
farther away you float.
Posing for an Obituary

I want to say
that when I released canaries into her navel
the ceiling melting above us didn’t bother me,
or that the twelve cocoons at the back
of my throat were moot. It should be enough
to catch the last glimpse of summer
on her fingernails, but red wires wrap the globe,
and no matter how much I taste
infinity in the crystal womb,
I still run through a circle of hay bales
on the county fairgrounds—
lung and testicle, palms and a mound of purple
wound together by skin that goes running
against its will.

The goldenrods kneeling in prayer,
a childhood of glass that cannot be wiped
from the cornea, a green smudge
in a brick night, gums drying due to the absence
of sugar and a granite cloud,
a machine rusting in a field,
and untouched saddles chained
to the radiator in my breathing.

The blood of a song book
penned by a six-fingered hand,
speaking its name over and over again.
Eating the Lilacs

A young boy faking his death in a ditch reminds me of lilacs
eaten in the dream of a vanilla cow’s head
caught in a wire fence.

This must be a dying priest’s last wish
before climbing a rubber ladder into the
septic tank in which sputum wouldn’t feel
any different.

Why wouldn’t he lie like that, waiting for someone to find him,
waiting for a hand on his shoulder, to laugh, spitting
in his palm before mounting.
In my spare time, I construct billboards—
a new one for each evening commute: because it lays its
eggs in the scalp: because the attorney withdraws from
the court room to pluck the migraine from his temples
just for his skull which deteriorates into a crammed stall
of goats in which one tries like the devil to mount
another: because Albert Stewart rolled out his tongue
towards the county’s borders: because Pippa Passes
bursts in a bottle of Clorox sitting in the trailer’s
windowsill: because the water-heater leaked
cottonmouths that forced us to our hands and knees to
lap up the rust from the mattress springs: because the
scabs on her elbows looked like sea shells that she had
collected for a liberal arms abnegation that amounted to
burnt teeth and pennies.
Dwight Yoakam Reconsiders His Hairline Following the Cold War

I had repentance on my tongue. Then, nothing happened. But it’s nothing to bitch over. If ticks conspire to cling to my ankle, I wear white snakeskin boots. Therefore, I can always wear a hat.
Essay on Calcium

Such electricity in the nipples that infants
suck and spit out could power the facility
where no one wears out his welcome, and
the imagined faces across the table.

In the proceeding jolt, Josh Brolin portrays my
grandfather in the seventies, eating forty hamburgers in
the woods. He does this just to tell me thirty years
later, many years after I’m born, the yellow wrappers
floated down clear streams in crumpled wads;

each time one floats away
he sees my infant fists. Like apocalypse, he
says, you were inevitable. You were born for
my right knee and a tit. You are a conductor.
Mountain lions tend to divide people . . . Outside of a pocket of lions in southern Florida, the big cats officially are considered extinct in the East . . . Yet people . . . swear they have seen one . . . where is the tangible evidence: a picture, a lion killed by a vehicle on a highway . . .

You are either a believer or scoffer.

*Bill Cochran, The Roanoke Times, April 21, 2005*
Autobiography of a Mountain Lion

When the tongue washes, one wants another’s
to clean the shoulders of salt and dander, to feel another’s belly placed against the lower back—the synchronization of breathing. To know front paw, back paw, shoulder—that everything tastes good.

I kneeled to kiss her soapy, pregnant stomach where we showered, where we stepped beyond a wasp’s blue roof purgatory, hand-in-hand.

Moss grew on the mole on her face while larva fell down her cheeks into gas cans. She spoke to me in the dialect that is the armpits’ burning skeletons, “I can’t bottle the atmosphere, or shake it until it becomes periwinkle and vanilla.”

With that she placed each flimsy handle of a shopping bag around my
ears. Then, ashamed, she threw
her pregnancy from the top of
Bald Rock, and kept her
windows locked all summer.

I stumbled against the tree-stump
pedestrians in Fort Blackmore,
Virginia, looking for a holy man
or a medic. From the hillside, I
threw myself through the
generosity of a smiling
whippoorwill that grew tired of
my lungs—a monument for my
friends without miracles, who
tear off their toe nails, who do
not know that the antelope bone
underneath means little with a
spread of plum polish.
Everything in me spilled out after I
catched myself
on a jagged sandstone, after
rolling through
brier and shards of broken beer
bottles.
Ceaselessly multiplying rabbits chewed
my epididymis, looking up into
my eyes
like a bride on her honeymoon.
What
little of me that could reassemble
crawled
and begged for a surgeon. I am
an egg,
here and not here, divorced.

Sporadic matter in a tissue—strange how
it makes one feel
solemn, or lubricious—a slug in the hall
of mandarin orange.

Why must I collect
the things I cannot understand
you say, replacing the handkerchief.
A simple question, for you, and a simple
request, for me: to stand on four
legs instead of three.
How can I tell you that I refrained from
the fawn
without seeming insincere, or worse yet,
a liar? Yes, the blood in the dust
is mine, but who will believe
me? I was wounded and running,
in other words, an erosion, and you skipped pebbles
at them when their guns were drawn.

What else can I do but thank you
by sneezing at your palm?

It has been raining.

It only matters that the grieving ceases
when my face no longer
resembles people's: not being
shot over a VCR, not drowning
in the bowels of a mountain, not
sleeping in a well of flames
underneath the shadow of the
ascending pail, not the Christmas
morning prayer for
someone to have noticed the
overflowing blood in the
poinsettia, not gathering under a
pale sun for therapy, not being
burdened by life's cysts and its
heaviness, not going to the creek
to spill it, wanting to spill it,
trying to spill it, but unable to
spill it because of the red-veined
walnuts in the throat being too much, not being too young for Europe but earning patriotism with a mound of ash on top of which sits a crooked rooster's beak.

He stares out the window for another humor, but no one can replace the tension with a hammer. The imprint of the gravel on his wife's knees from wiping the greasy eggs he refused off the ground, is a dead woman's jewelry at dusk. He is drunk, and this is Interstate 64, and something up ahead stands perfectly still, stands as if it's praying like an elk.

A mountain lion, discarded cardboard kite-floats; garbage, all garbage.
Some set off / for the edge of this flat world, / some spin in a frenzy as if they know / this isn’t where they were meant to be

Jim Hall, “Sperm Count”
A Farmer’s Son

I—The one who hears the skeletons on the roof; their pejorative wails directed at the fighting cocks, whose feathers harden as they pluck themselves, until they are sawdust mourned by horse shoes rounding a steel spike in early October.

I—The one who hid in a hay bale the Sunday scabs of a preacher’s daughter, who licked the roof of his mouth and spoke their name when he plucked a deer tick from her thigh that he thought had been a freckle.

I—The one who has a crooked spine as proof.
Kristy Jacobs Embraces a New Sunday Wardrobe

Lord god, she thought, all the bureaus
are chewable—each bite contains a midnight.

Her nipples scrape the two or three planet colors,
gravitating toward the hemisphere without smoke stacks.
Oh, the impossible pleasures of great distances!

She sings the sunflower her spine becomes
as the sunlight enters her mouth
and lingers in a circle of light strands around her navel.

The kudzu of her bones renders the men cornflower mules
snorting bloody mucus at her feet
by the volition of their imaginations during prayer.

The black smoke rising pulls her from her window,
but dressed in silk she knows the day is willing
like a tiger! Let the bed sheets resume its rosary of silence.

This day belongs to Kristy Jacobs.
She Kept the Lights On

As a girl who rode the backs of crawdads on Caney,
Erin Watts had only the holes in Saltines
to sleep in and siblings for blankets,
but through prayer she kept the lights
on and found her lawn
littered with the ribcages of her dogs
and a stray dog that whimpered at her swollen ankles.

She licked the Mississippian, she licked
the Pennsylvanian, and the pinecones
urinated on her freckles. She prayed for the plaza
and a monthly certificate that like the sun
signified a living god and an order.
She found on her wedding day
that her mailbox had been dented in.

She purchased, she prayed, she purchased
through the bleak Christmas when her childhood
walked hand-in-hand with her father’s skeleton
who had his tongue pulled before he went numb.
She prayed, she purchased, she prayed.
The shift ended. She had kept the lights on.
Ol’ Chester

Poor man. The yellow roses were phosphorous teeth that I can still
pick from my brother’s mouth, twig-like, a snap, another pedal
to rain
above a headstone that bears your name.

You were conscious of

your slanting
teeth, so that sun-dried tomatoes lost their richness, the Autumn
dusk
no longer scratched the roads in butterscotch and the
silvery blue
of the Tufted Titmouse wing,

and even if it did—so? Between
West Virginia and Kentucky,

only the oil refineries are breathing.

You knew that everything beautiful eventually is taken away from us,

which is why
you sat in the tub with the hair dryer,

but so full of despair for your teeth
you forgot to plug it in. Probably

you reconsidered your efforts, but then

you saw the plaster paneling—a wall

that reminded you of your ex-wife’s freckled shoulders.
Poor Joan. The joys of firing at pop cans from the back porch never resonated with her, nor did Dionysus inspired sonnets shouted across the hall, when the moon hid behind the hill as an ashtray went through the window.
A Giant Holds Soft Shell, Kentucky to His Ear

Confused by the screaming
coming from what he assumes

must be floaters
from spitting into the sun’s mouth

for sport, and from being
slightly drunk, he calls to his fellows

and associates in another continent,
“No, I did not hear the ocean.”

And much like other spent
entities greater than small communities

in Eastern Kentucky,
he moves on to the next.
Why John K. Pratt Isn’t Baptist Anymore

Supper that evening consisted of rising from pews and offering hands.
We left home with olives that dripped from a canvas of branches and an orient pink sky.
We returned home on a rich coral blue night, guided by the moon’s teat, beautiful and empty as ever.
If I hadn’t been overcome by the tetanus of pulpit voices,
I might have danced in the dew of the grass from which the mare ascended towards the golden-eyed pink swan of the moment.
Spare me the lyric, the prayers, the prosthetic claws of the clergy.
Eating a lamp is the only way out.
The Gospel According to Perry Lucas Gayhart

I seem to get nowhere praying, which is why
I try to avoid a den of lions whenever possible.

You can listen if you want, or
you can take a chocolate kiss from the angel’s bowl.

It is easy to feel lonely
burning in the bell of a blue sousaphone.

But I do believe that if you surrender
to one palm, you’ll remember why you have a navel.
Breaststrokes

Stained beyond cosmetics and prayer
by the colt of meth, she is taken by Operation
U.N.I.T.E. whose black apple uniforms make it
that much easier to blend in with the sewage
at midnight. One officer hooks an arm,
one a leg, and the one leading the way
has a hand wrapped over her chin.

In the current of Letcher County's bowels,
she is floating on her back toward
a blonde flame to be decontaminated.

Meanwhile, a new thing hatches
from the hardened placenta of the garbage
bins. In the language of its heaving,
it recites the mantra of the young woman
who laid it: It is time to be industrious.
It is time to be somebody. It is learning
how to breathe, how to fill the lungs, how
to stretch the arms to push the damp
refuse of the world out of the way.
A Straw Hat

Here is the miracle of Caney: a straw hat blowing away from the hand that I left behind on a rock in the creek. It is a monument to my mother, the piece of her that never left, the piece of her that welcomes strays and only laughs when they rub the ripened, round, and leaking punctures of flea bites on my legs, the piece of her that mourns in the cupboard more sacred than her womb that I spend the Sunday morning of a Baptist foot washing pouring rubbing alcohol on the throbbing, seeping flea bites fresh from my picking, instead of washing the congregation’s feet, the few who were made new in Caney Creek, the stream of their ancestors, the union with their Father. In it, I wonder, will someone save this straw hat in that unknown place from which we bloomed?