

Clifton I

We stood there
me, him, regret
crowding the edge of the road
same nose
same hands
same nervous smile
casualties
in a civil rights era
divorce war

stood in the mud
in the sane
pretending to be father and son
shadow and tree
finger and thumb
again
avoiding each other's eyes
biting bottom lips
hoping we left our pain
in the city

staring at the edge of his unlit cigarette
I search for answers
I wait for clarity
and or flames

hidden among the lessons
in the stories
he pulls from his pockets
like peppermint candy
covered with lint

we wander through
the family resting place
at the rear of the church
on a crooked hill
just beyond the old outhouse, a two-seater
searching for his grandmother's
marker
among the Trumbos
Terrances
Rowes
and rows of soldiers

nodding at a gravel road
made more visible
through naked winter trees
and a spot opposite
the old schoolhouse
at the edge of the cliff
he said
'papa george's daddy died
right about there'
said
'a runaway team a horses

missed the turn
and plunged over the cliff'
said
'his head musta hit a tree
on the way down'

peering out over the water
he mused about
a giant black dolphin of a man
who used to swim up and down the river
on his back
face up like a log
said he could swim that good

he took me to his favorite spot
to where he played as a boy
where clark's run
empties into herrington lake
in a ceremonious succession
of slate and limestone steps
that both walked and crawled
the descending one hundred yards
free falling like a Caribbean mountain
waterfall
ten feet at a time
before splashes
softened into ripples
then drowned

we walked the land
then stood there
in the mud
crowding the road
again
family history clinging
to our souls
his stories
floating in the air
like vapor photographs

we stood
at the edge of the road
in Clifton
looking out at the
wide wet mirror
that divided
one county from the next
absence from forgiveness
then spoke and laughed
in unison
like twins
like a small choir
singing psalms

Wishbone

often times
parents
at that fork in the road
grab on to their end
like the smallest part of the wishbone
close their eyes
and snap
and wish
nothing but pain and suffering
and revenge
on their now-severed halves
the used to be
'til death do us part kiss me lips
now scream
kiss my ass
and you can raise those snotty-nosed kids
by yourself

iron will
and skillets
answered with such venom
that he left believing
only a crazy man would have stayed
though he never saw
the butcher's knife

that was stopped in its path
by the back door he slammed
for the last time

he never looked back
at the puddle of woman
he had snatched
from a high-school honors program
and awarded apron strings
traded her diploma for
two thousand one hundred and ninety days
in a role of diaper duty
instead

he sprouted wings
and carried all of his paycheck
to another nest
took off his shoes
in a prettier place
with nicer things
a place unlittered with crumb snatchers
and pretended
he never
gave his name away
never said
'i do'
never looked back

thirty years later
he stands much shorter
than his photograph

and moves without the same decisiveness
that used to carry him out
of the same stores
or into a back room
if we were sent to visit
on his payday
granny always said
he'd come crawling back
mamma said
she couldn't wait that long
and gave her love
and four more kids
to men
who made her feel young
again

often times
parents
mamas and papas
at that fork in the road
grab on to their end
like the smallest part
of the wishbone
close their eyes
...and
snap