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Snug Harbor

Sean Jeffrey Bates
UMass Amherst, sbates747@gmail.com

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SNUG HARBOR

A Thesis Presented

by

SEAN JEFFREY BATES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2018

English Master of Fine Arts for Poets and Writers
Poetry

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A Thesis Presented

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SEAN JEFFREY BATES

Approved as to style and content by:

Peter Gizzi, Chair

Ocean Vuong, Member

Martín Espada, Member

Jeff Parker, Director
M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

Randall Knoper, Chair
Department of English

ABSTRACT

SNUG HARBOR

MAY 2018

SEAN JEFFREY BATES, B.A., OBERLIN COLLEGE

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Peter Gizzi

Snug Harbor is a collection of poetry dealing with a collective working history and the personal working history of growing up in various restaurants around Upstate New York.

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The Glass Factory Opens

I took a ghost road home
to the ankle licking Chemung
kicked up in preparation.
Monday with a plate of eggs,
handed a cauldron of coffee.
Here in the valley,
knuckling out
in this rich vein.
Later, the one whistle sounds,
two boys steal up the hill,
their fathers are headed home.

The Devil in New England

A good attic should shudder.
Old Scratch,
he knows where we keep
the yellow stained spinet.
And he plays—oh he plays
astride those cheapkeys,
—sinning with both hands.

Me and the Reverend,
sweet in the parlor
when, down the drain pipes,
I hear a gypsy sting dance.
Lucifer's own rendition
of the prance and shuffle,
that confounded street tickler.

Hell, I take to the hallway
dancing like laundry on the line.
Reverend looks at me over his nose.
I say fry the fat of this prodigal evening,
the lamps ain't even lit.

i. rice

water bound sprite,
daylight burden
in a chapel of mud.
driven without tide,
cherished
in terraced edges of the sky
turn the wind
green enough
to slaughter and haul
and sell
and begin again.

ii. sugar

crutched over cane
in stalking fields.
bubble tar,
sap tooth sticking.
hack ankle and be
slick to the sole
and buckle
this honeysap,
to these cloying dreams.

iii. cotton

prying cream.
a praise of sentinels.
flayers for the day.
swords drawn
in the thicket.
snow-like
white knaves cackling
behind fingers
that bite.

A Bartender's Quandary

My stern broomhandled master leers
never yet to spare me.
But my champion of suds at hand,
the indolent bottle,
my dusty partner
grins green with delight.

I am a bearded matron.
I have two aprons:
one to wash and one to wear,
but until customers are well thatched
and drowning boister with relish,
I buff no brass.

There Are Vineyards Upstate

- i. made by ice age claw
 flooded by slow blue giants
 drained by grapes and steam

- ii. ripen like the Rhine
 but bottled in Upstate slate
 smitten with Riesling

- iii. pressed into service
 the vatman's few red children
 corsairs in bullion

- iv. falling rain runs through
 robbery under the trees
 bitter long battle

- v. thimble on the hill
 a stone chapel on the bluff
 small song for a son

- vi. great oak cauldron full
 blushing sap to live again
 but first we must wait

- vii. great abandoned king
 some tangled reclamation
 still sits up for sale

On Millersburg Ferry

The boatman worked with his back.
In hand a headless spear, prying.
Two boots leather strapped bright and sturdy.
He eased to a lean and eyed the passengers:
A cobbler with nothing to carry,
two nodding farm hands fighting sleep.
Strings of hair clung to the reverend's temples,
The boatman sent the smallest of smiles to the reverend's daughter.
She watched the shore, only her curls
trembled in the air.
These ferry rides,
no cost but the coin,
made the voyage cheap.
When he kicked away the pebbled shore of the Susquehanna,
nothing could take the teeth from the wind.

(Interloper)

He swept through yesterday,
walking low-East of the oaks.

We saw him legging over hedges
sweet talking to himself in the plantations of God.

Enticing, they called him.
Some said worth his salt

though he left the trees standing like used spindles,

He slept out in the dark hay, careful with his messy thinking.
They found him there, and still rolled him on.

Carry this jasmine
until rapture.

May we never catch you,
nor the slink of your shadow.

Come with news of the harvest
or come not at all.

Winter Knives

The small waters
are fleeced of chatter.

As in Eden
before Adam gave names.

Trees walk up like men,
a harder step than they have known.

It wasn't a hymn caught in her mouth,
it wasn't the way they laid her hands.

Now my labors, dire and soft,
haunt through stark reeds
to wail.

I know nothing of winter knives,
or how they bite
with a sable blade.

Eaves

A warm creak
to this home,
a wooden ease and groan.
The wind batters the shutters,
the windows reveal the rain.

From his chair, the iron poker is his crook
and his flock is hearth and fire logs. A hewn kettle,
lionized and rough, breathes a constant note.
An axe kneels at the door,
a slim gun rests quietly.

The fire stretches their bed
Her shoes in their footprints,
where she let them rest.

And tonight,
his pipe will bring no comfort
with the smoke's grey hug
on his skin.

Still it comes,
in the whispered morning,
turned over again,
her pillow cold,
as if she had risen long before,
careful not to wake him.

Deep Lock Quarry

All workers carved one face
at the deep lock quarry,
watched it crumble into the canal
and wash on.

Brick stocks guarded
sweat like sap sticking.
Mills churned, the steam coughed.
Raised arms held high
and brought down for bread.

The chimneys
were buried in tall coffins.
More leaves than cobblestones,
more sapling than furniture,
a family of cold millstones
mourned by no one,
when they drained the water for the rails.

Riverwatch

Levee stompers
went out that day.
Bulge was moving
on the River.
Floodwaters
coming like a whip
down the line.
As bad as '27, maybe,
we didn't want to wait and see
what had been sleeping.

Levee stompers at dawn,
and even my mother
went striding.
She said when the River gushes up,
even the grass churns under your feet:
the whole world draining, by the neck.

Levee stompers until dusk
went searching.
Even my mother,
climbed to the roof,
and topped the high mast
and heard the levee wail.

We saw the bones
of factory lines.
We saw the shopping carts in the street
like lobster traps.
The sandbags ran out.
The cavalry
died in the stables.
And we heard the levee's howl
like a gory battle cry
broken
with the River
in its teeth.

C.V. (My Family's Restaurants)

- i. LINCOLN HILL INN: they met.
O'BRIEN'S, on a different hill,
 yellowed sign missing a letter, grease fire up the hood fan,
 said it wasn't his fault.
There are no stories about STARS.
THE GOLDEN GARTER for a day;
 hired by the father, fired by the son.
SHORTY'S, a gin mill, a dive
 my grandfather burned down twice.

- ii. THE KNOTTY PINE built by my grandparents where
SHORTY'S had burned, lines out the door for
Bates Prime Rib,
I could climb a barstool to politely request,
"One Shirley Temple with extra cherries, please!"
GLENORA WINERY CAFÉ over Riesling vines. My job:
turn off the lights, 6 switch flips.
THE LIBRARY, renamed THE VILLAGE CLUB AT SANDS POINT.
BERGEN COUNTY JAIL, "Two 4am bus rides away
to sling slop."
VERAISONS RESTAURANT
AT THE INN AT GLENORA WINE CELLARS again,
but this time to build a hotel.
My brother and I peeled gold potatoes seated on upturned pots
in the kitchen, my father showed us on the blueprint
the way doors would swing.

- iii. LAKESIDE RESTAURANT AND LOUNGE on Keuka Lake,
last name on the checks. I shepherd my siblings
roaming in the house next door,
occasionally too loud and too close to customers.
The place was haunted by an old fisherman in the mirror,
and a woman on the docks.
In the attic of the house we inspected
the cedar walls and ceiling
and the door that opened into the falling air.
We left when my father's
father said he would crucify my mom.

iv. RONGOVIAN EMBASSY: I helped hunt for the next place.

I filmed my parents. The tape
of them pointing with ideas.
I point the camera: the back stairs,
clearly a smoke spot, the pantry
pink Sweet 'n Low packets all over the ground.
Big plans.

LONDON UNDERGROUND open kitchen. The customers saw
tall white toques stride,
the chefs could never swear,
and they did.

INDIAN HILLS GOLF CLUB rebuilt, new logo with three hills.

BOSTON CULINARY GROUP concessions at

GREEK PEAK SKI RESORT. Hot dogs and burgers.

We were babysat by the mountain.
We crashed and ate and crashed
and skied and ate. We were a different family
on a vacation where we could ski,
on a vacation where we could afford to ski,
on a vacation where we could afford to ski more than once.
We presented his signed business card
at checkout,
“Sorry but our Dad is your boss.”

- v. KING RICHARD'S RENAISSANCE FAIRE turkey legs, muddy boots.
Written on the side of big cups resembling trumpets,
YARD O BEER.

PORT AUTHORITY Ferries

to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. A full day:
the beach, the Atlantic. My father worked.

FRANKLIN PARK ZOO and STONEHAM ZOO. \$4 waters.

I worked retail in the gift shop, sometimes

I'd be the one to crumple all the new bills so we could count them.

My parents managed. In our too big house by the sea
we each had our own room.

My father turned to crack or cocaine: pipes on the dresser,

makeshift bong in the recycling. He gave lectures,

he loved us. He threw chairs. We babysat ourselves.

My father got fired. They didn't promote my mother.

We didn't know why

my parents went back Upstate.

My grandmother watched us.

vi. TRADITIONS AT THE GLENN RESORT AND BANQUET HALL.

The Susquehanna River flooded
and trapped us in Binghamton.

I had a shift until 6am. One guy with blue hair
who's only talent may have been rolling tables
said I looked older than fifteen
"Because you work."

My father's first DWI.

FAT CATS jazz at night. Busy Market Street business.

Upstate NY tourism. I bussed tables
and I worked functions. I got drunk
on New Year's in the small back room before
I was supposed to pour the champagne
toast into a tray of plastic snapped-together
Marie Antoinette glasses.

My family:

Jeff, Kathy, Sean,

Alec, Mia, and Brian all

took five days of vacation to Long Island.

The phone rang:

the water main near the restaurant had exploded
and flooded the basement and first floor.

He lost most of his office, his cookbooks.

The inspector sued the city, the city sued the inspector.

My father drove back that night talking to insurance companies.

We drove to the beach. FAT CATS closed.

- vii. HOLIDAY INN & SUITES. He arrived
for an interview they said was a formality.
“The position no longer exists,
just heard from the regional office.”
My father hit a car outside the hotel’s bar.
He went to jail for a DWI.
FRIENDLY’S when he got out, he managed.
While he was gone my mother was a bank teller,
then an assistant manager,
then a financial consultant
studying and passing licensing exams.
She quit for the next restaurant.

- viii. HOLME'S PLATE turned down my parents' consulting offer
as the restaurant hemorrhaged money.
I worked there without them.
- STOCKYARD RESTAURANT & EVENT CENTER at THE RAMADA.
My parents created the name and the business
with help from my older sister's credit.
The hotel to the brim frackers, natural gas pipeline workers.
Tuesday was payday
and the bar was only a crawl away from their rooms.
I learned how to pour a beer.
I reminded them to smoke outside
The owners of the Ramada charged my parents with grand larceny
after they hid their touch screen cash registers
in the basement and said my parents stole them.
We ended the month-to-month lease,
carried the booze out in crates.

- ix. SNUG HARBOR RESTAURANT: Keuka Lake, Hammondsport, NY
Rejuvenated a failing 225 seat restaurant
in the historic Finger Lakes Region. Established profitable
relationships with local wine, craft beer,
and sustainable farm industries. Swam every day.
Caught my father cheating on my mother twice.
Once with an employee.
Once with the nurse
who took care of my dying grandfather.
Scrubbed every inch.
Hired every friend:
Katarina, Jackson, Will, John, Caitlin, Elizabeth,
anyone old enough to commiserate,
my youngest brother bussed,
my sister served, my brother served, I tended bar.
Realized a 60% revenue increase
over the past owner. My mother,
the front of house sergeant.
She squeezed the books while my father tried to run the kitchen.
Crashed and napped in the 3rd floor apartment:
a bunkhouse or cottage we couldn't afford.
Managed bar staff, maintained inventory and pricing,
drank for free right from the tap,
slept in booths at night,
provided customers with tasting options and suggestions.
Ran out of money in our third winter.
Ran out of favors.
Ran out of summer.

Aspire

When the fireflies are whiskey drunk,
hovering like dust in the sun

I will catch fifty,
fit for a proper lantern.
And in the blue dusk,
I will set my jar of light in the window and walk

Past clothesline
into the tall grass,
into meadow.
Keeping my one window
in sight, I run.

In rain
my tree stands like a watchtower
and I race to dry
beneath lording boughs.

This year I will be tall,
tall enough to reach the first branch.
I will climb to the highest place;
I will look down on our house
and shake its eye
in my hands.

Yet this year still,
I stand
tip-toed on roots,
wild palms
full of rain.

On The Feast Day of Saint Lobster

He minces like a surgeon. The beasts go into their boil. My father already blunted their nerve endings with the heel of his knife. They clunk. I peel potatoes. That is my job. I gouge out their eyes and mind my knuckles. Soon the unguarded kitchen simmers. In that small time when there is no meal yet, between cooking and cooked, napkins sit cross-legged, knives lay down, bibs embrace necks. The creatures from the grave, they rise shades of pumpkin. My father talons them onto a platter. Steam hovers. My family lunges for their seats. The table is set with claws raised and bread singing.

The Summer After They Put Out the Blue House

- i. am I older now? if I know where my checkbook is,
can I work a riding crop
or take on water?
for the nerves in my feet, maybe
a dance or two,
before this whole place closes
and they throw on the lights.

ii. a rare chance
at an empty park
full of perfectly chasable geese.
mothers no longer
guarding. the bolted slide
left over.
the bruise
below my knee. the one sock
that falls.
my brothers and sisters below me
wouldn't dare climb
this tacky staircase which grabs
my other sock
holds strong and I keep an eye—
out in the sun,
the shape of my mother
is cross armed.
my brothers and sisters dance beneath me,
shrill devils at the maypole.

- iii. my father hasn't seen buildings this high since the service
when he split a bottle at the coliseum.
he hasn't dared since my sister was born,
since the sub base was open,
since he held her,
and a rank, and a file, before being freely dismissed to:
make more children, ease a pain.

iv. we are hidden.
we have uniforms for the night
patrol. two dovetailed backyards,
a whistle, a lookout, sizzle of crickets,
our cool breath escaping untagged,
traitor in our garden game.

v. stop sprinting
through the mudpit lawn
where little sculptures with hands
and faces are undiscerning
of two people's errands
and how they make way
in a crowd of avenues.
at the fountain, babies
balance on new feet while parents' hands wait
with a safety pin and a cloth and a wish
to not be those parents
that chase,
but their little bird
escapes
to fly naked on the water.

- vi. lead right to a sleeping playground
near our sledding hill, now snowless.
where the summer waterslide needs trash bags sewn,
so a runway can pour
a field of baby soap agitated by the firehose gush
only one summer after they put out the blue house.
the of the fire, my father was quick to see smoke and a story
climbing out of the block.
I still play in the green yard that ate up that house.
the laundry line can hold my weight
feet dangling over where I imagine the kitchen.

vii. an unexplained resemblance
between generations. no one remembers
taking this one, but that's your smile for sure.
the kitchen light stays on to keep the house alive.
we give it names, we draw its ghosts:
 a kitten at the bannister, is one.
I caught a tail dipped in ink, fleeing some writing.
these dusty paws printed on a headboard
can't be bottled;
our camera doesn't have that quick magic.

viii. the snow:
young snow,
too early to be taken seriously,
falling on the still-green.
salt thrown at dinner.

Ode to Chef's Tongs

Hot coal handler,
brave spoons of the Earth
greedy as patrons
privileged to prod the roast
and taste bubbling onion broth
just as it blooms,
whirling cowboy pistol,
street performer's
juggling trick,
with a scalloped mouth
not always of mercy
when jaws crack and snap
closed to plunge
one amicable creature
into hot doom,
only to emerge with open grin,
new twin sons, at my father's call
you volunteer ironclad hands
when I can't.

When Chores Are Done

Raised in one or two houses
made holier by dirty feet,
while open windows drank the night.
And we'd finally cleaned the house
so friends could come over
and doors could be left open;
it's warm enough
for my father to place sandalwood incense
in the aloe's soil.
The thin torches could lift prayers,
though he doesn't pray;
he wishes:
keep his family safe out on the hill
or by the river or behind the little league field
where burdock caught one of us
before our parents could, when we slipped off
our clothes and stood on our shoes
and a window broke three alleys up
when one catch was missed
and feet found pavement gritted
and we lit joints at the top of the slide
at the lip of the valley and looked:
the factories were skeleton
shifts but they blew the same hearty whistles
four times a day,
workers in the museum, farms raising
solar panel seedlings,
papermill boutique malls, the corner shop
sells only windchimes,
a grocery store offers upward mobility:
scholarships, community college—

and my father's voice:
a holler, my name,
and we know the time.

Late to the Last Drive-In Movie

Neighborhood packed in a minivan
mobbed up in the trunk biting down
giggles, hands packed in convenient closeness— silence.
The girl in the booth rolls her eyes for a living, we pay her before
We have to search the back
rows with dimmed lights apologizing, park
and an ancient box of cartoon popcorn dances on screen
to vinyl vibrato strings and unnamed cola.
I find a corner near you where
sharing blanket
is providence.

Under the screen's blue
white, hot sun, we bask on
while electric waves roll overhead humming the chorus from each window,
a crescendo vapor laser trail projector ignites in trick light fumes before
I inch my pinky
closer to
yours when I can, before
the radio erupts,
the orchestra raises

—a voice, one voice, *the* voice.

Deep July

Even the cicadas
and I are
brooding,
the very
tithe of
this haze.
I learn
to spin sour.
When I run
home I am
pumiced and washed.
Down
the river
they scorched
that skinny island
with this year's
fireworks.
That Scottish Rite
Cathedral
is up for auction
on the parkway.
I'm dying to
break some windows
in that place,
and see some
empty rooms.

It's All Happening at the Zoo
Franklin Park, Boston

I befriended a peacock
free to roam
through the people parts of the zoo.
Even had to chase one
as it eyed M&Ms
spilling from the gift shop doorway.
Me in my fullbrim outback hat,
badgeless khaki
boyscout shirt and shorts.

I worked
in the Dippin' Dots space-cold ice cream hut,
in the giraffe safari stuffed animal hut,
outdoor airbrush tattoo parlor hut.

Places people want three day animal themed tattoos:
forearm, bicep,
lower back giraffe, calf calf,
deep cleavage paw prints with glitter
I was required to provide.

I ran register tape in the Giddyup Grill.
I slung things breaded into checkered baskets.
The cook with the teardrop tattoo
called through the heat lamp,
Fries down.
He told me might have to run,
back to Cape Verde. He said he dressed up
like a cop and robbed a few dealers.
My register ran out of pennies.

Late that summer, men came for him.
Who? I said.

The Face I Wore

I don't have all the letters
he wrote,
in a county jail, for me.
I have what I have
on yellow paper with attempts
at richer words. In the margin,
I see him try out sesion, seshion,
session, I love you, how's your mom? I know
his words written
in a caricature of the usual
scratches, he slows at a word, questions
the legibility. Do I see
a boy in this bed? Was it me
who bobbed and floundered, or him
who swam with what to say
and thrashed when I would
not write back.
Luxuriating evil in my stomach,
the power of silence.

Long Island Sound

I punched my father in the head
as he reached across the stick shift
to pry keys from my mother.

We were parked near the shore.
He was dazed
from beach cocktails with dinner.

I flinched,
waiting for the door to open
and for my family to spill out,
before I was taken to task in that sandy parking lot
and gaped at by full bellied diners.

But my father stayed in the driver's seat
and reached to the crown of his skull
the way you check a wound you can't see,
and expect bloody fingers to return.
And my hand ballooned
beyond my wrist
like it blew a gasket and was taking on water,
at critical mass.

My mother drove to some picnic table vending machine park.
Couched between my sisters and brothers, I drank fistfuls of tears
whose salt made me the drunk one.

Another Opening

The restaurant waits.
Our players primp rogue feathered costumes
and strut out those bright lines
that sold two desserts
last Tuesday
to much applause.

The manager coronates
with the hand of God:
for each realm of tables, a server as monarch;
for each monarch, a busser;
for each busser, indentured servitude
and a night of breadding and watering
and deep bows.

In the wings,
a few aprons find necks,
a few cigarettes
find heels.
The chef strides by in buttons,
stabs the stove
with a lit baton.
A count goes out,
places are taken.

Sleeping Above Our Restaurant on the Lake

Two stolen plates:
green Caesars smuggled
up the high mast
of the house,
above the hive
that hums and rattles
like an engine,
there's a cottage from
someone else's life.
Those days off,
those mornings
we played
our third floor
getaway game.
The whole place opened
and busied beneath us,
until slinking for coffee,
got us spotted at the sugar and
caught by the arm, my mother says,
"Lose the pajamas,
get behind the bar.
Lunch is slammed."

...Or Ruby Cottage

Snug Harbor:

This restaurant's ribcage waves more than drunks on docks
worth watching from windows.
Light switches sit up like rude fingers.
Our matriarch of the southern crooked leg,
Ruby Cottage used to wink from the sign,
used to have more than diners haunting,
local coin used to find beds already warmed
in the only brothel for miles.

Every customer asks
Have you seen *her*?
I polish up another glass as well as my best answers:
A portrait of a woman hangs at the top of the stairs,
a white face in a black shawl,
She sizes you up like a mother,
presides over each night,
and dares every man
to fear a woman alone.
The drunks laugh bubbles into new drinks
"That's a sneer only the Madam could have."

Dead Shift Dinner

it smells like a valley restaurant
rinsed off and shined.
the dead shift turns over
like a headache or thumbscrews.
we're shining ourselves into the brass bar,
we're pulling the linen
from lonely tables showing ankle,
as the lake lies down,
and chairs hang up like bats.
we pack away the feast,
plumbing lists, thumbing bills,
picking butts from the gravel.
on the crooked lake,
where water thrums
so do dead steamboats,
wise salt veins, ghosts
in the houses of wine,
great oak vats full of schemes
on the east wind— waving
like a postcard
through the door.
the keyed lock forgets his grin.
black aprons slither off from our waists.
as we leg it down the road
pulling a quiet heist.

Fireworks Night Poet

We threw a blue sheet over a good spot.
The spangled blanket poked by grass beneath.
The snap shot explosions
are what thumped.
When I think of all this kindling I've gathered:
images stacked like wood, a cord of time just for me,
it haunts now like using Young as an insult,
like imagining the beds of other people.
Days I've kept on shelves, admired
happily before stowing groceries, and standing for praise.
My smile could not be broader.
The grand finale, the final boom,
I recognized a neighbor
in the grass: a family of faces upturned
to see the booming sky.
Maybe I'll pilfer the entire night,
and make up their names.

Tutelage

Scrub out basins
with radical ideas.
Recycle happily the destiny of others.
Disregard calls to lend
pauper thoughts
to rich men prayers.
Radiate enthusiasm
over artisan water colors.
March into television.
Proselytize ghettos
or simmer in your tree
where they used to
hold dances:
damn good barbeque.
Bloom to insure
they see you.
Utter sensible niceties
as the waiter walks away.
Pity that no one knows
you fear to stand
in an audience.
Brim with radical ideas;
do nothing.

The Tourist Returns

I'm an Ass on an ass.
Sitting in a train of donkeys
splayed up the marble steps
of The Old World.

I'm not the only one
who has dared confess to having
a true fire in the belly
and theatrically thrown my body
at The Continent
begging for a lean cut.

Each country
welcomed me, a con:
I was slamming my pockets with fists of ambrosia,
little bears with little flags, and Real Wine.
I was packing my cheeks with contrapposto,
a certain European Sensibility,
untranslatable names for bread,

When I returned to my own front door,
the wanton profile of The Vagabond,
basking in the quotidian,
I heard a drizzle in the gutters,
"God," I said, "it even rains here.
How beautiful. How just."

In the Safety of Streets Named After Trees

A girl crosses my headlights
the image of a deer.

A comfortable strange
is glimpsing a neighbor's pearl bottomed pool
admiring their privacy.

I pick out tiles from a book of tiles
imagining keeping each one clean.

The work is nearly done in the yard.
I admire the enclosure
and path of tiered lamps.

Voices ring out on a nearby corner
a call's width from their homes on their streets.
I sleep unimaginably well.

The tiles arrive with the morning.
I plan my whole day around
what they take to dry.
I tamp each of them in place.

But Rilke Said

I wouldn't take you there:
one high tower climb
dressed as purposeful villain
alone
in the pillow of arrogance,
a certain glee,
a wave of earth between
isolated columns
where I love
to threaten
to stay.

Whoever Said The Devil Was Dead?

we must silence our fat mothers.
we must silence our fat fathers.
the seed did not take.
the old linger.
the magik failed.
the brine from breasts.
the children in soot.
the world woke up flat.
built on feet.
built on backs.
we must chew this fruit.
we must eat this pit.
raise spattered hand.
to spattered mouth.

The Age of Last Scattering

Even a place for all of us
down in the reeds.
Tiny molds to brim with lives
and love to walk fingers back
up some traceable string of memory.
Time surprised to be strung taut and shaken awake:
the age of bricklayers, and salt, and parked cars,
and the shelved up way we used to dance,
the age of alcohol and oil paint,
basement stairs paint cans,
Dixieland and old pipe tapped window glass,
the age of bombast and gifts, flipped stomach kind of fury,
of milk, bartered baths, spelling, memos, opera and swing,
bracken and slack jaw and blue eyed girls and sugar and sugar,
the age of wrath.
the age of scrimping, of pandering knees,
the age of owl nets, grey-paged daisies,
and eyes that reach.
There was even a place for all of us
where we tried to chronicle
where we tried to name
each new strangeness.

In Common

we get to know:
our greasy years,
cackling.
your training bra regret,
my pissed zipper school days.

we get to learn about your father's liver
and my father's heart,
our mothers' nightwatches:
embers, down, a sharpening stone,
look venom silence,
punk ugly christmas.

we get to wish for the relish of divorce
and hoofing the gas pedal
interstates away
from the children who raised us.

Jeffrey,

I am slate born of a seamstress.
My skin has ripened and creased at my knees.

I am what has been made of me.
Is there more to say?

“The twists of your fingers
at the frames of your glasses,
became my own.”

Friends

Beyond standard drunk
for this late in a stairwell.
Some of us sit, some parade and domino down.
Our evening just put on a rosey face,
and when shouting a toast,
his name was raised—we echoed and glugged.
We traded cheers to health
for the blistering pleasure of an articulate oath,
Fucking Jackson, the prick!
what a piece of shit.
The bastard.
We raise fists stuck to beverages. A Toast.
We know he hung himself
and we try not to think
about how he left us all here.

AFTERWORD:

When I was little I used to play a game with my mother where we would try and spot the most 'broken down barns'. My childhood was and most of Upstate New York is filled with used buildings in various states of disrepair. I remain fascinated by what those who live in the present must decide to do with the skeletons of our working past: giant empty wineries, paper mills, and yes... broken down barns. I began to imagine the workers there, I wanted to speak for them, but I was wary of sentimentality. These buildings are crumbling personal-political monuments. I don't want to be the poet who glorifies without recognizing who is or was left out of that conversation. My task was to connect my own life of work with the heritage around me. There is no way to separate me and my speakers from the places they have worked. The way my father and mother had bore us into work. I grew up in these restaurants. I learned and failed and loved in these poems. And my testimony, my voice, is a hand reaching both forward and backward, connecting memories of service with a used up present. I am reporting from the scene of the restaurant, especially Snug Harbor because it felt like the end of something: restaurants bookend my childhood and my poetry, but also the death of my friend Jackson. I want to share my own part in the heritage of work. I do not want to go back. I do not want to be 'great again', but for the people and speakers in these poems, and for myself, the work remains.