

## End of the Wharf, Mobile Bay

Eight hours ago on the other side, I emptied my father  
into this same bay. His ashes were stark  
against the dark green. I'd thought he would sink  
to the bottom, but instead he spread out,

feeling for a wall in the pitch black, looking for the door.  
I threw purple chrysanthemums and yellow daisies in his wake  
to make it pretty for the people watching. His every dreg drifted  
farther from the other. A sailboat left the harbor.  
I saw my father fade to dark green.

Lying back on the wharf, my friend and I stare into the silent stars,  
knees bent, our calves dangling over the edge. This light we see  
could have burned out millions of years ago, it's impossible

to tell what still exists in the heavens. My friend's full cheek is silver  
in the glister. She's already becoming a photograph of the past.  
I dip my feet into the warm, dark water.

Beneath this punctured firmament, my skin  
grows colder. I see our earthly bodies dim, bone dust  
settling to sediment.

## The Arsonist as a Father

Late July's heat and early evening still the trees.  
I crank down the truck windows, and the air crowds,  
swells to a huff, while my daughter sulks and twists  
the radio knob violently. She opens and slams  
the glove box, rifles through the center console,  
looking for the evidence she needs  
to condemn me. When I park, she shoves  
open the rusting door then sits, waits for me to lead.  
I lumber past the jungle gym and up the concrete steps  
through the fog of smokers, don't look back  
when a man I know from the crack house  
on Texas Street lights her cigarette.

Inside the church hall, I suck the black distraction  
from the Styrofoam cup to fit in with the rest,  
feigning recovery. I could devastate this cup,  
crunch it to bits with the one hand, easy. But don't.  
It would scald the people next to me. My daughter,  
eighteen and motherless, is seated beside me  
like a parole officer. She's come to confirm  
what she already knows: These AA people  
don't speak to me; we don't know each other.

When the hour is up and I've driven her home,  
she'll exit my truck, the backs of her thighs  
leaving long wet streaks on the vinyl.  
She'll see my mouth, that hole, suffer  
with want, and from the driveway, scoff  
as I pull away. The black tongue of road  
will put her behind me. Where I'm going  
will devour her for good. Unless it doesn't.  
I'll be hawked up on her doorstep, again.

Choosing

*After Jim Harrison*

You'd pour the tiniest glass of sherry, a "sipping wine,"  
and tongue it for hours on the couch, watching *Dallas*.  
You'd say, "Life is like a shit sandwich," then boil chicken  
for dinner, eat only what I left on my plate. We couldn't manage  
a tree, so you decorated the TV with ornaments, sequined  
elves and Santas strewn about like dead bodies, while J.R.  
and Sue Ellen went at it again beneath the glittering debris.  
On Christmas morning, Marilyn Monroe surrounded the TV:  
a cardboard cut-out, her face penciled on a t-shirt, a 12-month  
calendar, a bargain-bin biography. What had inspired this  
variation on a theme? I'd only said in passing I liked  
*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes!* Was there something else  
you were trying to tell me? Marilyn died from an overdose,  
and you from cancer. Meanwhile, Daddy was at the crack house  
with the pedophiles, but only because they shared.  
He's dead now, too. "All past tense and past haunting,  
but not past caring." That's what Mr. Harrison said.  
I say, I'll take the bottle from the bottom shelf and fill my glass  
until I numb this memory into dead sleep. Or, I'll just drink half  
a glass and go to bed with a headache. Do you remember  
how many moments of self-deprivation it took to starve  
from lack of living? Or how many questions a person can live with,  
knowing there is no answer? Tonight, I lie awake longing for your comeback.  
The lone relic is the silver razor, beckoning from the bath.

## The Last Phone Call

The last time I called, I put it off for a few days,  
and then more, waiting till after 7 o'clock

when my minutes were free,  
and it was too late. You'd eaten supper

and were already doubled-over in your chair,  
nose to knees, as if in prayer.

The nurse tried to rouse you, held the phone up to your ear,  
and I said, Daddy? And you said nothing.

I said, Daddy, it's me. Are you there?  
And you said nothing.

And fumbling, I said, Daddy, how was dinner? Was it good?  
And you said nothing.

Blackness pitched across the signal,  
the dark wad of silence clotting my throat,

and I said, Daddy, are you okay?  
And you said nothing.

In the distance, a piano chord  
played in a low key

perished. A lost bird landed  
in a dead tree. And I said, Daddy.

And then the silence did not end.

## In Dreams

You still wear your old clothes.  
I'm not the same. I'm embarrassed  
for you to see me like this,  
reheating pizza in my pajamas  
in the afternoon. If I had known  
you were coming, Mother,  
I would have washed my hair.  
I swear, I'm not always such a mess.  
When I ask where you've been, you say,  
*The store*. When I ask, what took you  
so long, you say, *The line*.  
You've come casually, with armloads  
of groceries, like you don't remember  
you've been dead too long.  
Mother, how did you get the key  
here, how have you let yourself in?  
Tell me something simple. Make a joke  
about my hair, tell me you live here too,  
or better, that you've come to take us home.  
Please don't speak the knowledge that leads  
to waking. Delay the death daybreak brings.