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## Yellowhammer

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Yellowhammer

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

University of New Orleans

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing

Poetry

By Carrie Chappell  
B.A. University of Alabama, 2003

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*But poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know.*

*—Adrienne Rich*

## In Other Words, I Am a Poet: A Preface to the Poems

*Why poetry?* I have never been able to satisfy this question with a definitive response. Like many other poets, I have the feeling that writing poems is what I *have* to do, that it is a compulsory act. In fact, writing the following poems has been, if anything, an act of processing my complicated feelings about home, lost love, self-identity. Poetry is a means of self-discovery, an exploration of the unexplainable, and a quest for peace. By joining this tradition, I find opportunities to imitate and reform, indulge or disinherit artistically the personal, cultural, or literary voices that have preceded me. Seeking this kind of expression, I can meander through articulation to investigate what shadowy circles I might draw in announcing, *I see this, I believe this, hear me*, which, language, in its seeming accessibility, appears to engage with the primitive human want *to voice*.

Yet, language, subjective and collective, veritable and false, has its own chaos and grammar, definitions and ironies. I can declaratively say, *I am a poet*. In this definition of identity, I, by constructing a fact, call attention to its contradiction. In this way, when I say I am poet, I cannot apply this title, necessarily, to my time spent sitting in a dentist's chair, e-filing my taxes, or texting a housemate that *yes, I picked up toilet paper*. Yet, are not these mundane activities "the stuff" of poetry? So, then, *when* am I poet? To me, poetry is an art for the everyday, the every hour, but it is also a medium through which I can consider how we as a people represent our daily experiences in the name of art. While I have enjoyed poetry for its grandiloquence, I have also loved its simple speech. While I have sought poetry for its lateral and associative power plays, its space for individual and genuine expression, I have also come to poetry out of sheer linguistic intrigue. The variety of purpose of occasions for poem-writing and the variety of

linguistic modes for representing these occasions are what most intrigue me about the form.

I trace my curiosity with language to my home, the South, host to myriad language complexities. My feelings, awe-full and rueful, towards my home—my mother and father, my grandparents, the city of Birmingham, the state of Alabama—have not now nor ever been easily expressed in logical, linear constructions. While nothing was outrageously dysfunctional in my home life, I still felt as a young girl stifled. What really irked me was the *mendacity* of society, to quote the sentiments of Tennessee Williams’ Big Daddy:

Mendacity! You won't live with mendacity? Well, you're an expert at it!  
The truth is pain and sweat and payin' bills and makin' love to a woman  
that you don't love any more. Truth is dreams that don't come true, and  
nobody prints your name in the paper 'til you die. (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,  
1958)

My mother, a very animated and over-bearing guardian and English teacher, enveloped me in her dedication to words, grammar, literature, and poetry; while my father, a meticulous man of science, always made me learn the long and hard way of it. All their love came in corrections at the dinner table—“No, *Joseph and I*”—and hours-long explanations of the *several* ways to go about working factorials. Yet Joseph, my brother, and I were fortunate, by most standards. So these days, I often ask myself, *Why, then, so frustrated?*



The South can be a smothering place. Not only culturally, as I consider it still wrestling with its semi-charmed criminal past, but also climatically. Nobody who lives in the South is stranger to these forces. Of course, for me, these feelings were compounded with the weird anxieties of social etiquette and “academic performance” I was facing at home. And this grooming did take its toll. I almost always wanted to defy my parents’ desire for me to date a nice Methodist boy, make the grade. Just enough, at least. I wanted to do well in school, wanted to fall in love, and, most of all, I cared about literature. I wanted to be a journalist, convincing myself that, at some point, these directions would lead me to a life where I wouldn’t have to participate in the Southern politic of niceties. I found myself, within the microcosm of suburban Vestavia Hills, editing the school newspaper, singing in show choir, conversing over coffee with my best friends at Barnes & Nobles, and running the hills of my neighborhoods to touch, from whatever distance, the natural world with which I had always felt great communion. And, then—*Roll Tide!*—I went to college.

Soon I learned I was not meant for journalism. My introductory coursework in the field made me feel just as narratively boxed-in as any classroom of my high school days. I needed freedom, and so I turned quickly to the subjects that had always sustained me—Literature, French, and Creative Writing. My earliest aesthetics emerged in the creative writing classrooms of the University of Alabama. During high school, like many others, I had interacted with a state-approved canon of literature. I remember most vividly T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a poem that alone bore weight on my sense of poems as songs. Still, whether my teacher’s wild reading of lines begged me never to forget the poem’s melody or if the imbedded structures of Eliot’s formality

bestowed me with a sense of phrase and rhythm, I cannot now discern. I remember, however, feeling a great affection for *the poem* after that reading. Encountering it again in my early classes at UA, I realized how much its lines had stayed with me. The restless, disenchanted speaker, allured by the “dare” of engaging with his culture, sang to me again. Again, the imagery and hint of conversation contained in its refrain (“In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michaelangelo”) reminded me of the “sophistication” of my suburban Southern culture, the uppity-ness echoing in my ear even after I thought I had exited Vestavia Hills stage-left. The cultural import and sound of “Michelangelo” had a similar ring to Mercedes-Benz’s, country club memberships, summer beach houses, or press box Alabama football tickets that so many of my peers valued. With the aid of my professor, Dr. Sara Davis, though, I was able to step out of these reminders, to see the real work Eliot was doing, the real work a poem could do, as social critique. This kind of composition—part-song, part-prayer, part-petition—drew me to poetry and compelled me to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing.

However, in graduate school, I became even more sensitive to the texts filling my ears. No longer did I want some mess of male poets governing my mind. The mendacity had returned, and I, in all of my eagerness to do well in college, had let it in. I became skeptical of my own voice, beginning to understand how it was haunted by the rhetoric and hegemony of a hyper-masculine literary world. Through course work in the genre, in workshops, I saw myself, for perhaps the first time, wanting a female writer’s identity. I wanted my peer poets, mostly female, and me to read our women writers. In this mode, I made choices, gave in to obsession, met a whole other plane of work by poets like Anne Sexton, Stevie Smith, and Adrienne Rich. Whenever allowed to choose my own poem for

a paper or presentation, I chose one by a female. When writing a book review, I picked a new collection by a young female writer. By conducting my “studies” in this way, I found my truest influences. On YouTube, I listened to the brashy alto tones of Sexton’s phraseology. I gathered Rich’s poems and found myself enraptured and liberated by the character of her fox. From reading her 1971 essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” I was almost uniformly, or as much as a person can be, reawakened by her call to service in the name of re-vision, what she calls “an act of survival” for women writers. Of Rich’s understanding that she, herself, had for too long been entrenched in the old traditions, she told me, “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.” This resonated and was electric to me. A part of me, I understand now, has needed these Southern stereotypes and suppositions. They have given me reflection. In their lightness or darkness, I have drawn a picture, using my own resources.

The following poems trace some of my early memories of language, of becoming a thinking person. I have considered moments of indoctrination, ignorance. I have wished for a clean slate yet admired the echo of my family’s history in my voice. In the poems I call the *self* “Girl,” giving my past the wish of wistful anonymity. Yet I think, I have worked with some detail, some specificity in naming—places I have termed *yonder*, Tuscaloosa, Moon, the yellow kitchen—and guiding human hands—characters I have called mother or father, Al Copeland, Silver, Tallulah Bankhead, or Mr. D-----. This nomenclature I intend genuinely and playfully, as I hope the poems demonstrate. Of course, I do not regard the *self* of the poems complete victim, ghost, or benefactor, nor of those who interact with her, parental or societal beings, unfeeling themselves or

quintessentially homespun. Poetry has allowed, for me, a space to create story and song without an obligation to definitions, those, like the ones I knew growing up, which can be binding and oppressive. I enjoy the lateral logic of the line, the phrase, the stanza, the inconspicuous architecture of the white page.

At the same time, my pursuit of this art has given many people the wrong idea about my strengths. I am most often prone to anxiety, stage-fright, overwhelming dubiousness in moments of crafting sentences, writing papers, book reviews, stories, and, yes, poems. Inevitably, given my enrollment at a university, I am tested, expected to perform, confidently, with words. During weekend gatherings or over holidays, new and old acquaintances presume that, I, in pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing, possess a fantastic agility with words. Embarrassments on the battlefield-boards of Scrabble, Balderdash, and Taboo, remind me what got me into the whole trouble of poetry. Here, Yeats (better than I) provides the phrasing to characterize this phenomenon:

...My curse on plays

That have to be set up in fifty ways

—from Yeats’ “The Fascination of What’s Difficult”

The logic and strategy of these games are not far from the classroom measurements, the social affectations I knew as a young person. These kind of spaces, where words become science and math, are where I grew into the anxious woman I am today. Given the distrust of self I knew in these theaters, my relationship with words became quite conflicted. I began, in self-preservation, to think of myself, rather than an inadequate writer or thinker, as a unique user of words. And at the same time, I was mimicking, absorbing structures I had not realized were structures. What I knew best came through

song. If my words were complicated in delivering meaning, then it was because I was thinking in lyrics, trying to articulate the synapses. Or so I said. And so I think. But even this is a romanticization. Basically, I am a poet because I have always had a problem with words.

To me to write poetry is to investigate these very problems. In a genre that both celebrates and rejects traditions, I find space to do the same. In poetry, many versions of the *self* coexist—past, present, and future. And in this variety, I find what I have always wanted or felt is true—that to be genuinely human is to admit duplicity, multiplicity.

While we experience the present, our thoughts live near and far, in and out of body. In this sense, the *self* is dynamic, at once detached and aware, both emotionally stunted yet temporally free. I hope the following poems, ones I consider to speak to my coming-of-age, represent the risk and rapture of this self-expression.

for my dear family  
and my huckleberry friends

*...the stumps are there to suggest the monumentality of the tree, even in its absence.*

*—Jake Adam York*

I.



## The Feeling of Yesterday in Today

Here is the mark.

Here is the hand with the mark.

Here—the mark is here on the ring  
finger, my five-year-old hand.

The hand is writing. Yes, it is. But here  
the hand is corrected. Here the hand  
is writing *properly*,

and here is the other mark.

Here the other hand,  
with a mark on it, too,  
that is not on the other hand  
with the mark, but rather this time  
on the left

hand. The mark on the top  
of this hand goes across  
a vein—a gash, showing  
you where once a machine

took a bite of me. Here  
the marks cover  
the mouth. Both marks on both hands

clasped, covering the mouth that has just  
made a mark in air.

Here is the mark of the tongue,

here the syllable not turned over.  
Here is the mouth absent  
a tooth. And here, here the hand feeling,  
filling the absence. Un-marked,

here is a word absent  
a syllable. Here it is, the word, *ruined*. Now,

here: a five-year-old girl says the word,  
sounds like *rooned*. Here is the hand,

not hers, grabbing her marked hands.  
Here the hand grabbing her hands, the mother's,  
saying, *no*. Here her feeling, *no*.  
Here are both marks,

both hands clasped,  
covering  
the mouth that marked  
the word. These, here, are  
the blemishes. Here, this is the poem.

## Blue

Girl goes to the kitchen, takes the mirliton from the bag, spreads its early gourd across the counter. *Stuff, pickle, or fry?* No, Girl can't. She won't pull the center. Won't split the marrow. Shoots and leaves too easy to consume. Girl thinks, *Plenty of room in the garden for sprawling.* She wants to mumble recipes, set plates, sing the words: *dragon-whisker.* Girl cares for names. But Girl can't. Quiet as dirt she looks to the blue, pampers the blooms commonly on the trellis.

## From a Wrought Iron Patio Table Under the Stars of Mid-City

Silver, I am reading late.

Tonight, I found a note stuck in my *Norton*. An *X* over your words, slashed by your hand—a love note, which *was*, then quickly

wasn't. It ends under the *X*, with the words (not new) *I love you*.  
You wrote while I slept, avoiding a paper due the next day,

one that drove me crazy, you too, as you watched madly my mad procrastinations. Tonight, these words crossed out make sad sense.

You loved me as I slept, but what in life? Tonight, as I read Berryman's "Henry's Understanding," its title distracts me: *Understanding*.

Remember, the birthday you wanted, the one  
with the Mexican guitarist we saw at the Gold Mine Saloon

who sang a cover of the Animals' "Misunderstood"? Never could I  
have pulled off that party. Tonight, I know because

come every morning I did not understand you, nor you me. It dawned on me  
we loved each other best in the strange night hours of our dream songs.

## **Tuscaloosa,**

You are not just a whistle-stop,  
a forest of poetic  
kudzu, nor just a tub  
of sweet tea, a gravy biscuit, a one-screen  
theater. You are not just, Tuscaloosa, a wrinkle  
'round my eye, a city of ghosts, a trip  
to the thrift store, a court house plantation. O, Tuscaloosa,  
nor just a lie. I lie  
in your Dolly Parton Sunday mornings,  
in the hammock of your strip mall, in your  
bourbon puddles, your beds of catfish. Tuscaloosa, Queen City,  
more than a word. You are  
not just a night sky, red clay, Crimson Tide, BBQ moon, a yellowhammer,  
a hammer and nail. You are not just. Talkative  
you go along in the trees, a roaming, pockmarked  
veteran. You stumble in high heels  
on the green quadrangular grass. You haunt  
the library, lounge under an historical marker  
to catch the rap lyrics from an air-conditioned SUV nearby.  
On the bridge to Northport, sunbathed,  
you smell like rootbeer, dying, a line of country knot,  
drying. You, wrathful, yell.  
Not unjust, just a godless country, just  
lawns of nativity, though, Tuscaloosa, you  
are the destination. You are the sling  
shot for a tamed bird, not  
a steadfast winged thing. You are  
the bench for reading Frank O'Hara, the stoop-less,  
vista-less riverwalk, the dreamland

of landlocked nightmares. You are unjust, yes,  
dear Tuscaloosa, but in your secret art,  
from your smoke  
stack in a smoking town, lifts a lofty breeze. From this  
we breathe, lordly as we please.

## Half the Song of Longing

*What's that song?* he asks, as a mandolin waltzes  
"Tennessee Waltz," carries a tune once carried

by a man named Pee Wee King, written by him  
and Redd Stewart on a matchbox on the road

to the Grande Ole Opry. His question is likely  
another. Ears hear differently than minds do.

I've always imagined the song composed  
by a woman, whose heart is answering

a betrayal, as songs often do, as if begotten  
in silence, until a person calls upon them.

*Can you convict a melody?* is what I ask, myself  
parched of song, longing

for understanding. *Must we pick up*  
*our instruments, fingers clean*

*of dangerous residues?* I tell him,  
*It's that song—"I remember*

*the night and the Tennessee Waltz,"*  
but his face shows no recognition,

appears like betrayals do, cold  
as wood, speaking to nothing

in my voice, taking nothing  
of my question as an answer.

## Alabama Chimera

*Yes, they have always been this loud.*

Then we begin to practice the parsing of time, to number  
old pines that used to swing, to count the number of porches tired  
of rockers past. We cast thoughts in air  
to arrange the swollen yard—

This tender celestial that trails of smoke left  
by old fire, we follow, remembering the heat, camp choirs,  
and other disappearing forces. Then you ask, as though before,

*Have the barges always been so loud?*



## To Al Copeland from My Kitchen on Piety Street

In the diamonds of morning, I am not  
a practical but dangerous

woman, lucid as coffee brewed  
to the tune of a man

working on cars next door, his red hands,  
rusted, matching the dried blood

of my nails bitten off.  
His warehouse houses fourteen cars

to my one blue Saturn parked curb-side  
facing the river where occasionally

a cruise ship passes towards the Caribbean  
around bends of land and water I cannot

see. It's 6:29 am. Outside my other window a gospel  
choir sings a melody I can't place. Frequently

I smell the burnt fibers from the space heater,  
and at 6:31 the cat outside stares

at my cat staring at itself reflected  
in the French doors. Mine is no mansion.

Around here people say you were *gauche*, *fast-paced*,  
*over-the-top*. I can identify a chicken on the run. It's okay;

I am a poet. Nice to make your acquaintance or, how  
do you say, *enchanté*?

## Quicksilver

Still I, Silver, think of you in the locust night,  
in the cigarette, in the wizard trees. Still I  
imagine you in the orange chair, Silver,  
on the ferry ride, among the hangovers.

Still I crush you in coffee grounds,  
in my garlic press, in the yellow kitchen  
over pork chops, over what I recall of you  
now. Still I see you, Silver, in fedora hats,

on forest paths. Still I hunger for you  
in restaurants, in morning times. Still I, Silver,  
want your words to please, the truth of them, the lies  
to cease. Still I, Silver, spit your love

in spite of your jealousy. Still I dream, Silver,  
of tender spots, a house, a plot. Still I,  
Silver, stir you into recipes, into future dreams,  
into poems I weave of the wizard leaves.

## To Al Copeland on an August Night Spent on a Hand-Me-Down Sofa

Have you read Rilke?  
You would like him.

A German man-child, a wild wringer.  
He writes stuff like

*Coax me  
to come forth—*

so as a woman, I want to say,  
ok, Rainer Marie, here I come—*to the summit:*

*so as to fling  
into your soft night, with  
the soaring of a womb-dazzling  
rocket.*

—and I want outside my window  
a mountain or a moon

pie, but when I look, over the ever-lull  
of my air-conditioning unit, and see a long vine of bugs

and a blue neon trail to a corner bar,  
I sink in these cushions. Rainer, why must I

live vista-less?  
Mr. Copeland, if I were most men,

I would want to punch the poet, in the fruit of his body, but I don't  
know. You seem mystical enough. I think

you and Rilke could really sweat it up. I mean, you know,  
he would have kept his speedboats in glass houses, too.

## Mother's Way

I.

I come in the middle  
of an Alabama coup  
d'noon, in a hand-me-down,  
in god's plan, full

of migratory thoughts,  
of infinite  
*do what now.*

II.

In various shades  
of denim,  
in the scent  
of Old Spice, you  
arrive in a spell,  
with cupped hands,  
with a few words  
sailing in your head.

III.

Not enough to say  
a prayer  
or make an excuse.

I am waited for  
on porch swings,  
in the names  
of flowers, in drops  
of bourbon, in the junk  
of junkyards. Really,  
no way to show you  
all the things on the road  
to Alabama.

You pull up  
in your '61 Chevy Biscayne.  
I prop open the house  
door, introduce you,  
wait for the wave.

She waves you in, *Stranger*.  
Really, no way  
to tell you  
what I've excised  
from this mouth.

IV.

How sick to see me  
this way, living  
proof that cowards  
hide in and out of  
a drawer. *Lawyer*—

the rhyme is meaningless. Yet,  
here in my mouth,  
I cannot hide,  
attentive as my plots may be,  
I cannot hide, ruthless  
the mind that wants  
to get away.

Really, no way to  
tell you what I've excised  
from this flesh.

Really, no hiding it  
now, as it diphthongs out  
my mouth. I told you

*law-yuh*, or which way  
do I say it? Anymore,  
I don't know.

## Vietnamese New Year

Here in the satellites, we come, our feet touching  
the latch, forgetting the one-hour time difference, the infestation  
of boll weevil in this growing region. We pause in the non-abuse  
to comment on parrots, how they never die.

You say at the moment the teacher becomes  
an amputee, she sings in imitation of trauma. The prosthetic toe  
that a little beast invented for the star that lost its heart in Hanoi  
just after the agreement. This waking parachute that fell along the lip

of the courtyard wall will lift five men at once. Swelling in the silk  
cloth, ashes. I don't blame you for cremation, but shouldn't we save something  
for the end? Wasn't that the plan, the reason for the quiet  
attack? You don't understand: this is our deformity. In the beginning,

we ferry across the moon to discover where  
we all must return. Remember you're the teacher, remember sleep,  
the student who uttered *graves of our ancestors, lucky orbit, escape*. Here,  
many eyes make the slender gun swallow birds.

II.

## **And Another Thing about the Blue**

Girl walks into the forest. Sun cans its rays into the chest of a tree. Grace she's known before under the pines. Drool of sap creeps down the bark. Girl considers the mood. A glass cage, submarine chamber. Another thing, but missing: water. Squirrels scuttle past her, fast as minnows. Ferns become anemones. Girl thinks, *Stranger grows the garden longer she away*. Girl thumbs a holly leaf, winks a bug away. A bead of sweat trails, tucking itself in the briar of her hair, here in the sometimes-called *yonder*.



## To Al Copeland after a May Visit to Maple Street Small Animal Clinic

I'm in league with the season.  
What an easy harvest we have here.

Rain begets rain. Termite 1 equals  
termites on and on. Caterpillars. Other

mathematical mania. Humidity s' wonderful  
beast. Everything is empty. Everything

swole. Including my dishwasher, the front door,  
my fingers. Unlikely, at this point,

I'll find another job. With a coke,  
I tried the 5-piece Louisiana tenders,

a side of those Cajun potatoes  
with gravy. Didn't make it through

the biscuit. Been looking still for  
your Lamborghini. Part of it I want

still in roses. More to tell...  
Cat's got leukemia. Symptoms:

loss of appetite, persistent  
diarrhea, poor coat conditions.

## A Southern Gothic

He must have seen I was suspect,  
as quickly he turned from me to stare  
out of the café window, his profile  
gleaming, and, from what I could glean,

the man lived in embarrassed perfection.  
This was not Silver at all  
but Robert E. Lee, late General  
of the Confederacy. I easily marked

the differences, once I knew up  
from down, as Silver never smiles  
as a gentleman but occasionally leaks  
a lonesome grin through his teeth

like a freckled boy with a new toy.  
Yet rigid sits Lee in his gallantry.  
Recalling his entrance, I think of his walk,  
which I then remember was off-

kilter, meaning it was straight.  
And balanced, bringing out a stainlessness  
to his features that had never been there  
before. Never one to honor a man's shy spots

I told him: *Robby, your secret's safe with me.*  
*I can see you are no Silver.* Though he looked  
away, I watched as his body jerked to attention,  
becoming as, how do you say, stiff as a deaf mute.

After a time, he folded his arms around  
his middle-parts, and finally, in an effort to calm  
him, I pulled from my bag a little Carson McCullers.  
Though I seemed deep in the page, once

I began an excerpt from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*  
(a distracting title for a book), I noticed his body  
relaxing slowly, and I swear I saw his mind  
shatter just at its pronouncement. I tried to reel him in

with my genuinely good Tallulah Bankhead accent,  
but he wouldn't have me. So I closed the book,  
apologized for my previous informality, then told him

once more in all of my airs: *General Lee, I shall take it*

*to the grave, but my dahlia, your cause is lost.*

*You are no Sylvia.* And I could sense his head  
turn back to his cup of tea, as I walked away trying  
to undress his sad and handsome machinations.

### Wednesday Afternoon before Chagall's "American Windows"

The peacock,  
the small babe  
wrapped in the hands  
of the clock in his sky  
or the cellos folded  
in the lattice of glass,  
in-swept by a few bars  
of music. I am forgetting  
where to start. The light

cast over their shoulders  
made them bolder. Silhouettes  
are silent but so are many

chambers. A purple dove  
lording over—over  
her body, and hers,  
the ones who stood near me,  
a peacoat and a hoodie,  
regarding the same man  
fall to the city.

## Shall We & Why Not

*after Creeley*

As I said to my mother,  
because we are always  
fighting—*Lane*, I

said, which isn't what I call  
'er, my childhood surround-  
ing me, *what is there to do*

*with what I know of*  
*the Canterbury Tales?* I said,  
imitating: *Whan that aprill*

*with his shoures soote. When I read*  
*Shakespeare, I did it, I said, to please*  
*you. She said, When she does praise*

*me, grieves me.* As I said to my friend,  
because I love him—*Perry*, I  
said, our names soaking

in rhyme. *Hold on, Perry*  
said, *Lee Young Li say*  
*s that a poem should be*

*in the exhale, the release, the moment*  
*of dying.* *Perry said, I am*  
*not sure if the word "curious" is*

*doing as much work as you want.*  
As I said to my love-  
r, because always I am

dreaming—*Silver*, I  
said, my nickname for him, grass  
hoppers around us, *what*

*can brown do for*  
*you except drive the ground*  
*away, & why can't we buy a big*

*ole house to have babies in, said, for all the trans-*  
*om windows above us, we sure can't*  
*see outside.* As I said to this man,

because he looked strange-  
ly confused—*Sir*, I said, my voice  
echoing around the block, *the city's in-*

*fect*ed with caterpillars, termites coming, can no-  
thing be changed, or what can we do  
to protect ourselves but

*watch our heads, turn off the lights!*  
The man said, *Fuck off, bugger, or I'll*  
*squash you, too.*

**[Silver & I in the Yellow Kitchen, Cruel in Paper]**

Silver & I in the yellow kitchen, cruel in paper  
towels, sparring locusts and making pork chops,  
stand great meat-eaters above the broiler. Out

of doors, fireworks across the wharf freckle  
the brown water in reflected light with flurries of gun  
powder. In between booms, Silver & I slide

outside behind the vine-laced wall  
to the porch. We sit, him & me, back in Alabama,  
on the porch made for roaches, in the yawn

of historic Northport: A porch, not unlike  
the one we occupy now over beer and scrambled  
ash, a curious welcome mat. Each morning

we watch the house beyond this one, across  
the river to the next porch, imagination that could  
wed us. We feel our stomachs, then remember

we are wrapped in swine, that we danced  
with our toes in insect wings. We take  
breaths, lopping off molecules, splintering

humidity one drop at a time, dividing water  
becoming easier when we transcend the end.  
Silver says, *Aren't we lucky to have meat?* And

in no time, we picture our planets spread thin  
on the plate, honey-cured like domestic  
carcasses. Our hearts pool above tepid, little

victuals. Silver & I wink to each other over after-  
dinner cigarettes, reminding our tongues whatever  
heavens be above we can't consume in one night.

## Corner Store

### I.

Strange as it sounds,  
only catfish on Tuesdays, only day  
Sam can bring the truck down  
from the Strawberry Fields Fish Farm  
to loosen the bungee belts that keep  
the red door pulled to the bed  
of the truck so that the fish don't fly right out  
the Igloo, busting their little fish lips  
on chunks of asphalt or worse,  
oyster shell.

### II.

*Girl stuck her head once  
in the mouth of a Louisiana gator.  
After she had been lost, in guts, for three  
days, she came out reborn in saliva  
pulling her masked face out, bead  
by bead.*

### III.

The brass fleur-de-lis behind me  
came from Alabama, my mother.  
*Floor duh lies.* Four years of French  
means only this: croissants are like  
fried rice is like  
bourbon. So take this carton,  
this case of booze, this pack  
of Parliaments to your house  
on Royal. Make sure you share a bit  
with your cat. And, me, I'll make sure  
she gets a thank you note: *Ma Cherie,  
nous sommes comme ce que nous mangeons.*

### IV.

So again, you have found yourself intrigued by the Hubig  
Coconut Cream Pie. And understandably so.  
Local yet tropical,  
a community reinvestment with a global eye.



The strong family name!  
The delicious cream center!  
Exquisite branding, Savory Simon, his cute  
little chef hat to boot.

V.

*Most places only exist when you think about them.  
In fairytales, we dream the marble courts.  
In Alabama, the pine people.  
But sometimes, here, if you imagine a swamp, a swamp comes  
up from under a bridge, panting.*

## How the Music Answers

I hired a man to give me mandolin lessons  
on Friday afternoons. We sat  
in my bedroom with our instruments, orange  
chair à orange chair, cowboy boot à demi-cowboy boot.  
I learned by ear the songs, at least. *I cannot  
read a note* was a lie I sometimes said. I would  
often strum the opening of “Moon River,” a tune  
I could pick like a weed out of any  
instrument. *Strum, pick, pluck—*

words as different in meaning as  
notes. But magnets cannot choose  
their own fields. Drawn was my face  
as well as the curtains and two of us  
to opposite poles. He asked me to try  
his way, but, like a stick in the mud, a needle  
to North, I could neither attune nor sway.

## To Al Copeland from Under My Quilt in Early January

Music's funny. Especially in i-Tunes. Today, I am stuck  
on C's. I go from Chet Baker to Cat Stevens

to CAKE, trying not to give symbolism  
to coincidences in technology. About words

I wonder. Where will the names go when  
whatever happens next happens. *Generation Y*

we've given ourselves, a black hole letter, a variable  
in a non-equation. Are we really ourselves? We could be

anything. On Wikipedia I find a few names—*The Millennials*,  
*The Baby BoomEcho* or *Generation Next*. All this language

recalling decades of economics and other population  
games. I guess, that's why lately, I've been considering

poetry a lost cause, and so I've been with my music.  
This morning, the C's. The band Chicago reminds me

of my father. You would have liked him, I think. Though  
he's had just one wife, and he's nothing like Rilke.

[I Could Never Throw / Love out the Window]

*after Rimbaud*

I could never throw  
love out the window. Not with this trouble-  
some body. Not with these poems

idle as—. When the night shrinks  
to my sun porch where I've planted in water-  
less vase a crowd

of eucalyptus leaves, I ask myself,  
why do women weep out windows? *Why—*  
and then I madden

for the question and tone of voice. I  
could never weep out  
a window. Not without a cigarette

or a record playing broken tunes.  
If a truer place befell me, I would think it a place  
for tears, there by the neighbor's

fountain, there where flowers weave  
up their deck and trellis, where they grow  
in glory of never-ending

water. Vainless. No, I never could  
throw love out the window. *But—*  
I certainly could *drown it*.

## **Drinking Whiskey with Tallulah Bankhead**

Tallulah wrapped her fingers around my drink  
and I mine around hers, as both of us fell

under the whiskey spell, wrestling, softly so,  
all the nasty questions women have

about themselves, like two women fighting,  
maybe, but in the same body or like one

body fighting two terribly angular faces. I began  
to separate and contemplate just how self-centered,

what with good grammar and a liberal education,  
we both could get. After the sun went down,

of course, we retreated  
to the yellow kitchen, awaiting

food to come, men to swoon, our words  
to sway with all the power vested in them.

III.

## **Moon Pastoral**

Through the half-brite of Earth's glow, we follow a trail of ridges to where they found the water. We never thought of the moon as a leaking faucet, but here we sit by its tides. As the pine people tell it, the men who lived here first carved the riverbeds from the dirt that fell after the Great Soil Storm of 1993. Now, the rivers run off Moon's every surface, draining our dreams into years of space.

We bounce past the hoverboard farmhouse to follow the dusty echoes of a howling wolf pack. Catching the tail-end of a space wind, we glide across the Cold War Mountains to rest under the shade of an abandoned spaceship. Here, everything sings—yonder star, herd of cows mooing, trill of a crater-lark.

We walk on, gaining earth in each step, redundant in our weight. For a half-second we pause to glance at the universe. To think, all this time, those moonlings saw in Earth what we saw in them.

## **“This Is for the Safety of the Mannequins and You”**

She fingered the hung wool

suspended, there on the rack, a low-hanging mobile,  
dream-caught in the specific

measurements of woman, seams frail as the mannequin  
limbs she was not supposed to touch

*for the safety of.* But that wasn't the real issue at hand, now  
was it. Having no particular claim to any person

or home, well, such a thing a thrift store might remind her of,  
but, she thought, if words

like these could un-phase a room, then  
what was she doing looking for clothes. Sure, an epitaph

to a thing which was no part hers was keen, yet what was the dream.  
There were things here one might like to take

as a present or a wish, for example,  
that clarinet. One time she herself had looked for an instrument

to express some kind of sentiment but now twas a song  
deferred, for better or for worse, everything must take its rest—

or so she told herself in the aisle  
where the sweater's reason was in constant question, could at any time be buggied

off into a backroom. She thought about the words  
that revealed this place to her before she arrived, that acted now

in her head like graffiti would on a wall, absent  
of the hand that drew it there.

Online, a person wrote, *the boyfriend & I came to this location*, meaning  
here, where she stood.

This she remembered  
as she walked out in search of the dear, old Saturn.

Sometimes, she thought, words boil the ear, and sometimes  
they bury what's alive.



## Girl's Dreams, Crestfalling

Every time she yanked the metal chain, a bulb  
spat beams, a few stars of slow

and sluggish light, in the underworld  
of a La-Z-Boy recliner. Like a princess

or tyrant she sat telescoping the deck  
for possums, raccoons, any glowing orb.

It became apparent that no longer would a god  
in all nativity's lawns deprive her

of the troves of girlhood's treasure, nor of the sky. What hung  
in her outcry was betrothed to sun as rocks are

to lifelessness. Silent in gravitas  
and gravity. Alas, all sick with science.

In her swifter years, she grew to grow conspiracies,  
carried them through the choral rings found only among

stars and webcams. Like a moon she wandered  
Alabama in earth's nocturnal course. But her mind

now pitied to the ground, worked its humble celestials  
down to be loosed among the roots.

Below the trinket rocks, below the gaze  
of owls, she turned her heart to teething things: worms spun

in trees, beetles lipped in mud. And for a time, she slept  
in thorns, throes, and colding moons, until

one Van Winklian morning, she woke in a rip of grass  
where, lo and behold, there ballooned a flesh of sky.

## Romance

See it's like  
when we waltz  
*one two three*  
we are poems  
filled *two three*  
with mad birds  
tasting *three*  
of loves we  
plant in ground  
*one two three*  
just to see  
*one two three*  
how long we  
have to stretch  
the floor sure  
of what we  
got *two three*  
coupla folks  
would say nah  
*one two three*  
dance is dead  
it's usual for  
*one two three*  
young hotbots  
to try old  
sillyworld  
songs *two three*  
It's like poem  
writing, see  
*one two three*  
saying hey,  
girlscout, let's  
*one two three*  
cut a rug.

## Trying to Talk with a Woman

I stare at you sleeping  
their beet-lipped somethings  
yes I'm here three years

awake with fear  
prayers  
for a good pretend-while I

behind my eyelids wondering  
one has to wait for another to find  
like that again never to be lonely

when you and grandfather took me  
off the mouth  
your bread in the bloodiest

the frightful passion I had for you  
on my cheek each time I left you  
stiff Easter dress

I remind people of now the one  
in the kitchen before  
scared my father from the kitchen

rutabagas I stare at you sleeping  
whisper their beet-lipped somethings  
I fall asleep at last I hear you

all night your lips whisper  
you wake to see me you blink to see me  
old and wide

of your beet-lipped  
faintly you tell me to go to sleep and I do  
noodle around

how long  
sleep never to be curious  
in wonder like that again never to be

to Piccadilly I ate the things that slid  
that do not stain while you dipped  
bowl of hearts I had ever seen

the one who sent me onion kisses  
the one who sewed me another  
every year the one who

who cut her finger  
every spaghetti dinner the one who  
as you admitted yes you were roasting

all night your lips  
these are the memories now at last  
young girl giving yourself the name Opal

## **This Is, as They Say, Another Story**

A songstress. A girl in the forest. Some holy  
ghostbot. I have allowed this mess to persist,

to make its passion here by sling-breath, arrow-  
foot. This rude flesh I want to open. What else

do I know? I have counted on it. In the distance,  
I slow the mountain, asking the snow to wait

in the car. *I'll be right back.* Where the eye's light marks  
the edges of love, I will grow no callouses.

## Vulcan

*for the Birmingham Steel and Iron Company workers*

When they cast his body of pig iron, and shipped him,  
for assemblage to St. Louis, his legs and feet

arriving separate from his head, there where Giuseppe Morretti  
supervised his piecing together, with the Cahaba

nearby to christen his iron-clad head, they did not  
ship you, too. He came back, while we slept, to lie on the tracks

for eighteen months, until they found a pedestal. Finally,  
they erected him on Red Mountain, while we watched.

Without Morretti's keen eye, Vulcan's hands were put on  
backwards. He couldn't hold his spear. Still, to us,

his strength emanated— in city commercials, as he held on  
to an ice cream cone, a pickle sign, a Coca-Cola bottle, sporting

once a pair of overalls. While you mined the hills, they brushed him  
in milky flesh tones. While your industry perished,

they filled his body with concrete to anchor him in the sky. The years  
labored on; the forties happened. With traffic, a torch appeared

on his spear to glow red for road deaths. And when 1999 unfurled  
its fears, we called him a safety hazard, feared his collapse

atop Red Mountain. So we took him down, to mend his parts  
among the hills, where once you, rust-faced, had dug him up.

**To Mr. D----- of New Orleans from a Castletop in Pennsylvania**

Perhaps, a lake that goes down. A cathedral that goes up. I am  
a loud goldfish, you a sweet possum. Our one hand misdirects

the other. Once, you told me to follow the fences  
of your childhood to hear the wolf breathe.

You want me to hunt. I want to show us the center  
of the tooth, but I haven't the gadget. We build

our delusions on these levels. If you could wring water  
from gold, would we drink the wooded mountain? Would we

taste the salt, if I spoke of the surf? In your earth-  
foamed globes, a person behind the scenery roams,

these levels, where moons and comets meet  
fables and seas. Mr. D-----, perhaps.

## What There Is to Listen to

My voice? A yellowhammer  
above does not know it

is the state bird so then  
I could tend a garden. If

I could tend crows, when  
their black beaks pecked me, I would

not spread water. When humid eyes pick me,  
they ask what can't I do. Each day

I fret over mistakes I  
would not make were I

my maker. Shouldn't we begin with my heart?  
If I could carry you to bed, I would

carry the idea, too. Love does not  
pass away; in fact it gathers

among us, even in the dust of  
my jaw speaking to you.

## Names

*Most damned things in the world—words are,*  
I'll say. *Prisoners themselves,* just as Silver was.

As if words decided the wish of us for *We art*  
*hairless towns*

*of dreams.* Even this you'll hear  
me say. The pronged spools loop a song of one-note

singers, their names on instant replay.  
*Contradictions,* I'll say. To understand a name

you must consider the almighty  
slingshot. *Thanks be to energy.*

While I impart the story of the kite  
tail catching itself half above horizon, half

hand-fed casting, I'll say, *Listen.* In my mouth  
a partial nests like four tines staked

in a pork chop. *Silver is of you and of me,* I'll tell you.  
*For unto him, for I so loved the world, I gave him*

*only poems. See,* I'll say, mouth dumb with words, *Cherie,*  
*nous sommes comme ce que nous vous appelons.*



## Walking Is Driving Still, They Waited

Once we could stoke the fire squeezed between four axels while  
warning the wind, *We kiss here*. Later, we'd pull in and tell'em

of the bellies we wished to fill. Killing we talked about as having  
no place in this godforsaken sunset beachland. Sand we felt until

a mountain sharked its way into the crestline of my/your jaw. *Yawp*  
you yelped to my parents with a boldness best

described as in cahoots with the time trials of the XXX Summer Olympics.  
Too many times I've tried too to be delicately un-mannered. Here we

are peeling a stamp, pitching a map. Heavens, what a ferry. Delaware  
could be for me forever a bay of promise. No one could be sure what

cardboard says about tomorrow, but you sent the message anyway.  
*Don't forget the mini-soaps*, and for god's sake, don't hide those doe-

eyes. We're all a little revolutionary. In dreams, I never did like those  
lima beans. Gentility is for the birds, and you, dear, you are for water.

## **This Daily Wilderness Is Your Lips**

This daily wilderness is your lips suspecting words to pass mine.  
& there will be not one or so many answers as there will be more  
questions consuming the pictures, correcting the bloom of real-life  
wonder in today. For surely you know not that we are talking, nor  
the listening hours ear-ready. Yet, I tell you, *put your feet in my mouth,*  
*press your elbows against the window that one day will reveal*  
*a mountain, whisper against the grated stove a recipe for the dish*  
*I have not made but will.* Take no breezy palm, no skittish raccoon  
as a sign of the heavy love we are not due. Your pillow smudged  
with blood is evidence of how quietly thunderheads move in sleeping  
bodies, how bright we are in calm. In the sweet repose of a wadded  
sheet, speak not of the sails of other men. Take this boat by the mast,  
yourself from this bedroom, me from this poem quickly. To the sea  
we are called. To it we must go.

## Herman Melville Was a Leo

Have we forgotten what the stars meant then? White  
sky, white sail, white tide. No use trying to recreate

the worries of evil, but wouldn't it be nice to touch, once,  
a whale? Time is just many whiles. I've at least said as much

before. To comment on parrots matters somehow  
to tomorrow. But here we are, forgetting. I think a lot

about the first time. How exactly did people bed  
one another before words? Is that worth considering?

I don't know. We have but a few marks—  
the hands we got, the feet-crows around our eyes, the way

only we can gag. Whenever our splendid hero Melville is sinking  
into dust, we pull him out to consider the tidy earth, the word

*wigwam*, or how many rhetorics we can put to work  
for just one will. Not often can we wail in pleasure

and in pain. Sometimes we dream of doubloons while still hearing  
the crunching teeth of sharks. I can't go on believing storms

have their pages, or I might sculpt a falsehood. I want to search  
the watery pillars for a sign. It must be there, I think always,

in the brow, somehow, or just in the tail winds, bodying forth  
a good god, or, at least, for us, a good song.

### *Vita*

Carrie Chappell is from Birmingham, Alabama. She earned her BA at the University of Alabama and is an MFA candidate at the University of New Orleans. Her poems have appeared in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Bateau Press*, *The Offending Adam*, *DIG Baton Rouge*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, and *Evening Will Come*. Currently, she serves as Associate Editor for *Bayou Magazine* and lives in New Orleans.