Letters of a Ruined House

Benjamin P. Sines

University of New Orleans, benjaminsines217@gmail.com

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Letters of a Ruined House

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Poetry

by

Benjamin Sines

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for Chelsea
Thank you to my thesis committee: John Gery, Carolyn Hembree, and Kay Murphy. Your support was a daily source of help and guidance.

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Preface – Dramatic Monologues in Sequence to Build a Narrative

Writing this manuscript has been an extended exercise in conquering my habit of indulging in self-deprecating anxiety. I think of Li-Young Lee’s poem “Arise, Go Down,” from his book *The City in which I Love You*. In this poem, the speaker remembers his father and the void the man left when he died. The speaker begins to learn about the world and himself without the aid of his father, “discovering/on my own what I know, what I don’t know,/and seeing how one cancels the other./I’ve become a scholar of cancellations.” For me, my fear of the accountability of being a poet – the daily grind of work and rework – canceled out my desire to be one. I have become a scholar of cancellations myself, discovering that good, hard work cancels out fear.

In grammar school, I loved to diagram sentences on the chalkboard. I remember the stillness of the class as students broke the sequence of written language into brackets and lines. I craved time at the board, and while my diagrams weren’t always correct, I didn’t care. I only saw the reason of the lines and the span of the sentence separated into parts, resulting in a grid governed by varying weights. The subject, verb, and object ruled the logic of language and everything else was a slanting streak away from necessity.

In terms of syntax, the diction in this manuscript flows from a straightforward subject, as in the poem “Elaine Speaks of Clarence’s Banjo.” Here, the subject is Clarence’s banjo, and its travel across an ocean to come back forever changed. In the lines “Letters sent the same way came back unopened and stamped red./He never wrote, so he never heard about Annie’s death/or Raymond’s birth or the slow ruinin

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common experience in the human condition: we disguise the way we feel by talking about something else.

I have spent so much time within my thoughts that memory has become a constant companion of composition. In the sixth grade, I played third base for my baseball team until I took a line drive to the mouth. It was the first game that season my parents were not in attendance from the first pitch, and when they arrived at the game I was unconscious in the infield. I would have lost my front teeth had it not been for the quick action of my orthodontist, who shifted my bent teeth forward in my mouth with his hands and reattached my broken braces. This was a pretty traumatic experience, so it was necessary that I hone the language of “Raymond Goes to the Orthodontist,” pare it down until only the images remain: sparse, raw, unembellished, as in “You lay in the grass under a cold sun, trying to feel the pressure in your face/where the linebackers helmet had been so briefly.”

In writing this manuscript, I am gathering a series of voices from a family of imagined people. Constructing a firm, consistent family tree and timeline for this family was a primary challenge. The composition of “The Fargo Family: Dramatis Persona,” a five-part poem written from the points of view of every character, began almost as a scholarly exercise. As the poet, I wrote this poem to flesh out the voices of each individual character. In a sense, I wrote to a prompt, creating a poem to satisfy a specific need in the chunk of the narrative. This sense of writing a poem for a specific purpose was new to me; most of my experience with writing poetry involved following a line I couldn’t get out of my head, or starting with a disembodied image, rather than saying I
need this poem to establish a story and voice for each of these people, and it must satisfy this requirement or else it is useless.

In writing a series of utterances by a specific speaker, one must imagine a listener as well as a speaker. Poems do not occur in a vacuum, so in each poem I include enough narrative detail to keep the wheel of the story turning; I am very conscious of my reader and try to anticipate the questions “what next?” and “so what?” In “The County Fair,” Raymond mentions Elaine’s comment that “a dead man’s words make poor food,” and realizes that he already knows this.

I divided Letters of a Ruined House into three sections: At the Farm, During the War, and At The Orchard. I wanted to ground the format of this manuscript in geography to explore the connection between location and time. The poem “Raymond visits the Farmhouse” occurs when Raymond is older, but is placed in the section “At the Farm”; Annie’s death, as described in the poem “Dear Annie,” had already occurred when Clarence wrote this letter, but I placed the poem in the section “During the War,” because Annie’s death happens during the war. Here, the boundaries of both location and time are fluid, and depend upon the perception of the speaker.

I consider myself a narrative poet; in writing my poems, I constantly focus on telling a story. In this manuscript I explore how a single act of passion results in unintended and irrevocable consequences. I wanted to utilize domestic imagery and emotions to explore themes of death, birth, identity, and familial anger. Though Letters of a Ruined House is a manuscript about people, many of the poems are ironically unpopulated – a lone speaker refers to past events, or uses a memory of past events to construct a framework to understand the present. No matter how many people may
surround us, powerful emotions can make us feel alone. In “The County Fair,” Raymond focuses only on John, Clarence, and himself, even though he is in a field filled with people.

John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* have become sort of manual as I worked to construct this manuscript. Berryman utilizes a repeated nonce-form – three stanzas of six lines each – to build the world of Henry and Mr. Bones. I realized the logic behind this continuity of form – it matches continuity of content. In “Dream Song 14,” Henry bemoans the boredom he feels, and remembers how his mother would say “‘Ever to confess you’re bored/means you have no/Inner resources.’ I now conclude I have no/inner resources, because I am heavily bored.” There is a deep irony at work in this poem. Henry details the depths of his boredom: “After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,/we ourselves flash and yearn,” yet in the process of explaining his boredom, an energy springs forth, counteracting the very boredom from which Henry claims to suffer. Berryman disguises the complexity of his ideas within a concise diction. The power of *Dream Songs* gathers by accretion; I’m trying to mimic that same accretion.

Attempting to convey large-scale ideas of being and reason often results in vague writing. A narrow, detailed focus can stimulate both writer and reader; it is an irony of description that a small emotion – fear of a child’s injury or anger at a family member – creates a more accessible pathway to larger ideas. Not one of my characters is a hugely influential person, and the secrets of their family will not change a nation. Rather, these poems inhabit the minds of a group of people trying to unravel an unforgotten event of the past. Everyone has a moment in his or her past that has not stopped reverberating in the present.
I created the characters of this manuscript using shreds of my own memory, my own emotions. I think to myself, *is there a reason I remember the baseball injury this way? Is there a way I can tell this story differently, more completely?* I left gaps in this narrative to leave space for my reader to inhabit with their own narratives and familiarities of familial anger. *Letters of a Ruined House* is not an exhaustive telling of everything that happened to the Fargo family, every small lie and rebuff that coalesced to break them apart. To create such a narrative, one that fills in every gap, would not tell this story in the way that I want. For me, what keeps me writing day after day is the examination of how these characters interact with one another despite their past, how they keep on being a family even after tragedy and violence. The truth of any family, real or imagined or a combination of both, lies in what is unsaid, what the family knows and remembers but refuses to discuss.
Dramatis Personae: The Fargo Family

I
Annie

Despite the chill of previous days
this evening came on warm and humid.

We’d slaughtered pigs for sausage last week,
and were losing it to rot. The air
holds heat and late rain like summer.
In a starless night of fetid breeze

Clarence stands outside the black window,
calling for me. For days I dragged him
through my mind as John and I readied
the fields for winter. John drove the plow;

I looked over my shoulder to where
Clarence tuned his banjo on the porch,

smiling at me, knowing what I thought.
Tomorrow Clarence will leave for war.

In my dreams of him we have our passion,
but he dies screaming.

*Annie come out I’m here.*
What folly makes a man pursue his brother’s wife?

Folly drove me out of bed
to follow him to the corncrib.

We lay and sweat in loam and corn silk.
Clarence scurried away to smoke

in the barn in the heavy smell
of fresh meat slowly turning foul.
II
Clarence

I wanted to die in the war. The tank shudders as bullets flaked its armor, but we fire smoothly into small bunkers. Wings of flame and bits of enemy burst from concrete; our men advance in waves. I didn’t know all that a mind could contain,

the gore and shouts and drum of hot cannon.
I didn’t know there would never be enough whiskey.
Dear Raymond, I came home to find our farm so prosperous John had bought an orchard

and wanted to move after the last harvest, after the county fair.

I wanted a war hero’s burial, a crisp flag and saluting rifles,

not apples and manure and endless work.
Diphtheria ran through our county & took
my husband Stan. He died hacking like his lungs
were cracking, croaking water jesus god please.
When we went to bury him, a boy named John
came & helped us with the shoveling. He said
my family all got the sickness so I left.
I needed help to keep the farm & Clarence
needed a brother. John hated hunting.
He wore glasses & squinted when he drove
the tractor or shucked corn. Clarence tried to teach him
how to dress a deer, how to load a shotgun,
but they never agreed on anything,
except how to waste the night hours
sneaking to the liquor store.
I knew where they went but never stopped them.
I knew if they made trouble together they must be brothers.
IV
John

We met in a summer
of drought and heat lightning,
the whole county
puckered dry as a scab.
We made love and rain
fell in sheets and I thought somehow
one of those things had led to the other.
You died birthing a child
that wasn’t mine; would our child
have killed you just the same?
Look at my orchard, Annie: the trees
shed white blossoms and spout apples
year after year
in fragrant glory
but none of it is for you.
V
Raymond

Can you see me? I can find your faces
in the kitchen, rising sun a glossy
glare on wrinkled pictures.

Stan: faded coveralls and stains and rust.
Elaine, you grip his arm and in your best skirt
you almost reach his shoulder –

your skin red as clay soil, dark like blood when it dries.
I know nothing about you, save your names.
I need to hear you speak.

Who are John’s parents?
   Another family dead from diphtheria.
Where is Stan buried?
   No answer, only old sepia dreams.

I see you waving to me now, you two
out in the orchard, behind shrouded bark.

I step outside, but now
you are a rake and overturned barrow,
warped wood and rust-speckled steel, shade.
I: At the Farm
The County Fair
- Raymond

John sang through a bruised jaw Clarence never opened his eyes
they played in a sudden storm the whole county of our kin
danced the field into a mess of mud forgotten shoes
I don’t need sight to see the music Clarence said to me

the notes swelled in his interior to sprout out of his hands
my fathers cursed in anger after they died Elaine said
a dead man’s words make poor food I know why I didn’t
read John’s songbook in the corncrib pages marked with ink only

flipped the creased pages pages with scrawling letters broken lines
John cuffed me sharp for being late this time Clarence answered
they were on in five minutes
Clarence threw his fist across John’s chin lifting John off the ground
jerking like a fish when the hook has been set
John Writes about the Liquor Store

The old man loved money and would believe our lies about how *this is for our pa.* Other people in the store shifted feet and looked away. To sneak past his corncrib to scale the barn to drink on the store’s roof we stepped without sound. We buried every bottle beyond the soybeans in equally spaced rows of five-by-five. The liquor made us sing too loud and we would leap down to escape because old men sleep light. We stole his cash to pay for our next bottle and he looked at us with milk glass eyes shaking his head trying to reload his thoughts. He waved the money off and growled *get out.* That night we took his tractor for a ride looping through his fallow fields for hours until we came back and found him dead in the barn where the tractor belonged.
Elaine Speaks of Clarence’s Banjo

Clarence left his banjo on the porch when he went to war to operate tank cannon in Germany, loading shell after shell in hot darkness. The instrument sat outside rotting – blue mold bloomed in its sagging cowhide – until John sent it away from us, following the address written on Clarence’s telegram: please send banjo stop. Then, nothing. Letters sent the same way came back unopened & stamped red. He never wrote, so he never heard about Annie’s death or Raymond’s birth or the slow ruining of our house. He suddenly came home, seamed & scuffed as a football’s stitching & no hair & no banjo & no words for John, happy only to follow Raymond around the corral or to tinker with the old tractor driving crazy loops through dusty fields trailing plumes. The postman brought something strange one day & Clarence unwrapped his banjo, pristinely clean.
Mudsquishers

- John

Everywhere the smoke and thrum of tractor, painted mounds of dirt and scattered birds – the picture Elaine took. We walked each furrowed field, diligent archaeologists

in filthy clothes, squishing mud with foot-fists searching for artifacts. Clarence, do you remember the arrowheads? We put them in our wooden box with brass hinges.

I tried to find that picture of us with the arrowheads, the artifacts – clay-red columns on the North/South axis, our heads down, squeezing mud and water,
diligent – but our box is empty.
Hair Poem
   - John

Every evening, I watch you brush your hair. You free it from braid or band and hair falls, the color-name a lie of language, a beautiful thing with an ugly name like peacock, pulchritude, or dirty blonde, unlike apple, sapphire, or sparrow. The brush strokes are wind in leaves or a bird named thrush. Annie I wish you wouldn’t dye it, but I know you chase the shade of your young hair, autumn leaves in soil. Sometimes, I wake with your hair in my mouth. Sometimes, my hair is stuck to you with sweat. When I cut our hair in the kitchen sink, little bits of us litter the floor. When I sweep them up, long strands of your dirty blonde will be wound around my shorter brown. Your hair – talcum, chamomile, lavender, silk – feels like it smells and sweetens the death of every day, every day a little dying.
No Good Blood
- Elaine

My sons played music & hung in a vacuum
of unsaid words. Every family holds secrets, but Raymond

looked just like Clarence & our secrets
leaked truth like a sieve. If Raymond had read John’s songbook

he would know the story of Annie’s death,
her blood let out at last in a small boy with his mother’s eyes,
a boy raised by his father’s brother. John sang
every evening from the porch while fireflies hung suspended

in thin blue dusk; if Clarence were home
he would play his banjo, lifting harmonies to match John’s voice.

Their music needed strength
in separate parts, but how can two men who share no good blood

play music of dependence? Listen:
one day sun & storm split the sky & Clarence knelt

beside Raymond in the orchard,
telling him about a woman he knew before the war.

She had brown eyes like yours was all he said
until John shouted their names looking for them.

The next day dawned red & rainy, poor
weather for a county fair.
Raymond Visits the Farm House

After John died I went back to the farmhouse,  
to see a house with all the windows open  
breathe with wind. The porch no longer fills with hands  
clapping and people singing. The only sound

comes from clamoring metal pots and empty  
cabinets. I’m outside the house watching bright  
kitchen lights on Someone cooking for no one.  
A cigarette burns on the counter. Someone

takes hungry puffs as he moves clattering pots;  
Someone smokes like he’s been missing that hot bite.  
Clarence, do you remember the county fair?  
How, high on the crowd and sparkling stage, you walked

to this porch to take your death? Everyone stood  
inside and joked typical Clarence, never  
thinking it was real until it was.  
Delicate emulsions, egg yolk and mustard

sparkle in glass jars as Someone heaps steaming  
leftovers into slick plastic containers.  
We left to grow apples, away from old sounds  
replaying in echoes– twang of banjo string,

hooting jug, family swaying from room to room,  
a gunshot and startled screams.

I want to walk in and show Someone  
the disquiet of my family’s house emptied,  
show him someone who can’t sleep and talks to strangers.
Dear Clarence

- Elaine

I started smoking again. You stood on the porch with the shotgun, leveling it in such a way that you might leave & take summer with you. Now the heat breaks earlier every morning, dew gathers on the moving trucks. John wanted to leave after the last harvest, but we are leaving now, leaving the farm & mountains & shotgun no one moved after you dropped. John wears your old coveralls, but he looks so small in them, so thin, a bundle of wasted wood bound with twine. He loads boxes like he has no thoughts, shouting at Raymond carry more weight! Stop crying. One night John muttered this canvas smells like Clarence; he was drunk & didn’t know I could hear. Every day the house fills with kin who don’t care if they pick over your things like bones. I can’t sleep, so I watch rainwater drip from the eaves, watch the mountains exhale fog in trees. It looks like smoke. I like to think of the mountains, smoldering in dawn light like green wood brought to flame. I like to think I’m like the mountains, hard & eternal & breathing smoke.
II: During the War
On the Night of Annie’s Death

*He will be a winter child* I spoke to blackened windows and you grew in me as the year waned but I felt swollen only with fear. John was adopted and wanted a child of his seed. My ankles puffed with anxious nights spent in sleepless sweats and John never knew about the night before Clarence left for war. The windows said *Annie what if Clarence doesn’t come home?* and weeks passed with no letter from your father. Everyone blamed the snow and slow mail. I hoped the war would take him, swallow him up in tank-fire or cut him down with shrapnel and when I woke with a heat in me from throat to belly I just knew Clarence was gone. I staggered screaming into the kitchen in a cold dead hour, my limbs useless sleeves of fluid. The windows called out *Annie this is your deliverance and even if John finds out shame will silence him.* I pounded the wooden countertop and pointed lights hammered inside my head. John stood ready to catch you and I squeezed from my center and let the windows break.
Dive-bar Zoology
- Clarence

The frog-eyed bartender nods.
Now my glass fills; red lights twinkle.

Drunk in the dark, shrouded in smoke,
my seat anchors me. Twisted and tinny,

music floats from sources unseen.
The bartender turns his back on my babble,

scribbles something on his pad, paws
the register. Cling! A gaggle of young ones
cackle like geese, something I did?
*Check your balance – flex your feet, stiff as hooves.*

The woman next to me licks
her glass with a giraffe-long tongue.

The man next to her blinks
his lemur-dark eyes. In the bar mirror,

someone behind me lights
a cigarette, bony claws and a snake’s

hooded eyes. The door opens.
My owl-neck swivels as a draft

disturbs the settled opaque haze.
Outside moonlight pools like gold.
Man with Cigarette on Street Corner
- Clarence

A concrete pedestal lofts
a traffic light vertical.
He sits still and stares at me.
Trucks and tanks pass perpendicular,
as trash whooshes in slipstream.
Perhaps someone gave him that Army coat,
perhaps he pools change with others
to split packs of cigarettes
while another day slips
through his dirty fingers.
He smiles and lights up, humming
with pleasure as he inhales.
I see the filthy cold nights
caked under his nails.
I read the pack and know that cheap taste –
he laughs smoke and spit,
satisfied in the smolder
of lung and throat.
John Writes of Grip

Dear Raymond everything is with grip in the rows of lifted cars. Gritty particulate and oil drip from undercarriages. The chain fall rattles. In its box of gears, mouth-less metal teeth bite and spin and hoist an engine from its block. Nothing is too heavy for this machine.

When we lowered Annie’s casket, a chain creaked over our heads. My hands slipped a bit but the pulley turned and made little labor of wood and flesh. Now my rough fingers are sore every morning. I pick grease from my nails and rub your arms to warm you in the cold house. At least your hands are clean for now. You are Annie’s final blood, and I must lift the weighted days so you can eat. If I had a contraption to heft the heartache you will know, I would grip anything.
Dear Raymond
- John

Remember when you breathed her water? Annie said *I dreamt he was a bear, snout and fur dripping wet while a stream spouted silver scales.* The dream rippled in me like a river.
Now her body is dryer than flame, no vein of liquid runs through her limbs.
I felt her skin flaming with your birth, but her life-water burst to bring you out.
Dear Annie  
  - Clarence

I didn’t know about our son until I came home to find he had your eyes and my hair. I can’t stop leaving things undone. I wrote you letters, but never posted them. They were bad letters, all of them, hasty and guilty, with nothing really said. I don’t know what I did the day you died, the day Raymond fell into John’s hands, but let’s say I woke in the cold morning to heat a heavy pot for soup while everyone slept. I tried to think about my banjo, about the women upstairs who spoke German in their sleep, anything other than the men I killed without thinking about their fathers.
III: At the Orchard
Raymond Writes from Scout Camp

to stay above water i used my pants to float
with an overhead sweep i trapped enough air

to tie the legs and waist off then swam twenty yards
learning to save lives while trying not to drown

to subdue a distressed victim i know he will be frightened enough to fight
i will swim up close pin his arm and spin beneath the water

to gain control spin him under again and again
until he gives up support his head kick for shore
To Clarence on Opening Day
- John

Raymond strung the deer from a glittering tree: he knows you are his father and this morning will sharpen in his mind like ice.

He never once punctured the fluid membranes, removed the bulbous sacks of tissue better than you showed him and doesn’t need my help anymore to snap the pelvis. My glasses stuck to my face with nervous sweat when the deer brushed against slowly freezing leaves and Raymond exhaled and fired. You said hunting lives in your blood, so you should know Raymond had his first kill today.
Raymond at Quarterback
    - Elaine

In his last game, Raymond turned
to break a tackle with his head;

shouts leapt out around him
& he crumpled like paper.

In his last game, Raymond never
missed a pass. In the huddle, his team

pounded his pads & drove their fists high.
Every ball dropped neatly
to the sprinting receivers,
their arms outstretched.

Play after play like this until both coaches
threw up hands in disbelief – praying

in thanks or begging some god
to stop the power Raymond held.
Raymond Goes to the Orthodontist
   - John

You lay in the grass under a cold sun
    trying to feel the pressure in your face
    where the linebacker’s helmet had been so briefly.
You almost broke that tackle.
    When I got you in the truck blood and dust
    stained your seat. My voice must have sounded garbled
as you groaned and swiveled your head. The orthodontist
    rinsed red saltwater from your mouth
    and said I have to straighten his teeth.
When he gripped your wounded palate
    I worried your back from bucking
    up against the force would break.
All Our Kin

-Elaine

All our kin are come to see the dead man. They gobble every morsel & touch everything, arguing over what things you left to whom. In the two nights since your death, the kitchen lights haven’t dimmed. Raymond & I drink the good, dark cider from your reserve & cut the hours down in stacks of produce. Dear John, Raymond cooks better than you & Clarence put together; soups of deep amber flow from him, the vegetables perfectly cubed. We finish each meal by packaging it into plastic-ware, stacking it in the fridge. For now, the house is full of life, breathing in night wind. Raymond leaves to fetch cider & comes back with beady, blank eyes. Grandma I can’t talk to those people he says to me so I light a cigarette from the gas range, smoke & hand it to him. He smokes, sweats at the forehead, dabs it with the back of his wrist, then flicks the cigarette at the sink & the ember separates, a trail of smoke to where it fizzles in dirty water.
The Orchard’s Drainage

- Raymond

The backhoe ran well today, easily
lifting the ancient rocks that now mark your grave.
You were proud of the acres of gravel
beneath our orchard, would stick out your chest
and say that’s why it never floods. Before you died,
you spent days arm-deep
in the mechanical interior
of the backhoe, its guts of bolts and belts.
I would ask to help; you would wave one more
strange wrench from your plot of grease and metal,
frowning at my questions, saying, go find Clarence,
knowing he was dead.

Dear John,
Other pastures soak in seasonal storms;
little growing things drown by the dozen.
Here the rain disappears before it pools.
I wish I could drain you away that quickly.
Gravestone Quarry
   - Raymond

Digging your grave was difficult. When I found two large stones
I hooked a pulley and chain to the backhoe to lift them.
At the time, no one cared about two knobby rocks, crusted
with old mud. I scrubbed away inches of dirt and the stones
yielded layers of colors, shades of brown, then deep blue on black.
They looked like brothers.

   Grass runs through every row of the orchard
and out to the cemetery where a smooth coat of green
covers everything except the bald stones atop two mounds.
Come winter, the trees release their leaves and I rake around
the stones and clean dirt or bird mess from their pocked surfaces.
poem

- *Raymond*

incense for the god of poeming a night breeze scent of fecund fields

poems rise in me like heat of day rushing up and turning into wind
two hard lumps peak my skin

one in my armpit a new one in my upper thigh
my cavities smell like raw earth dust and sickness god of poeming

secrets of this body i feel withering

eye of moon over apple blossoms echo of my father’s banjo in trees
my hands shake too much for writing
On the Day of John’s Burial: Letters from Elaine

I

No birdsong woke you but instead
a balmy wind in trees. I said, get up
& threw you his shirt through the open door.
In weeping leaves the backhoe
hummed ready to dig in dew-damp clay
to make a hole for his grave. You walked

heavily to a console of levers
& pulled dirt apart uncovering two
knobby rocks. It was too warm for flannel.
You never rolled up the sleeves your shoulders
stretched to reach the seams of John’s shirt,
smoke and oil creased into the fabric. Each stone

fit neatly so you nodded while everyone
walked away from the stacked stones resting above
freshly turned earth. I looked back & shadows
flickered over your face like many masks
& apples fell with muted thumps.
II

You checked each belt of the backhoe
all night so everything was tensioned just right
under trees sagging with strong fruit.
Now I am your truest kin & we own
this orchard this house & all its anger
down to roots. No one sang at John’s grave.
The silent morning shade throbbed in branches.
Last night he died in a rush of cough holding apples
mumbling some nonsense in his sickness
sweating from spotted skin & the open
window breathed only a heavy sweetness.
Reach & pick an apple its packed flesh
will snap with freshness when you bite it.
I marked all the letters to show you who wrote each one & when I said we own this orchard I meant I will not die soon. Every good yield started with holes in the ground so six feet of grave must be enough to grow healing. Let apple blossoms hold your hurt then plump into a flesh you can consume & pass. Make a space. Then put something in it: your aggregate suffering inside a flannel shirt with stains & weather thinned elbows or a scuffed wooden box bursting with letters. The brass bed is yours in a room with windows over fields of ripe trees a room with air & light with a closet holding clothes you will fill. Dear Raymond, you dug a hole today & all these other letters have been just drafts to what I want to say. A dead man’s words are poor food but you will remember this day by a box full of words from your kin spilling over your hands like fine dirt brought up from depth.
Vita

Benjamin Sines grew up in Spokane, Washington where he learned to run and love the mountains. After earning his Bachelor’s of Arts in English from Loyola University New Orleans in 2009, he spent the next three years teaching English and coaching cross country and track at two different Catholic schools in New Orleans. He entered the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans in 2012 and proudly represented UNO as a teaching assistant of freshman composition.