

Fall 12-20-2018

The Ones Abandoned

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The Ones Abandoned

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

Thomas Dollbaum

B.A. University of South Florida, 2014

December, 2018

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my thesis committee, John Gery, Niyi Osundare, and Richard Goodman. Your guidance throughout this thesis process has been invaluable and you have all pushed me throughout my time at University of New Orleans to be a stronger writer and poet. Thanks to Carolyn Hembree for all of her guidance throughout workshops and as a strong mentor. I couldn't have made it through this degree without her help. Thanks to my girlfriend Cora Nimtze for supporting me throughout this process, and my friends Jason Saffels and David Sanchez for their help editing this manuscript. Finally, I would like to thank my mother, father, and two brothers for always being there for me when I need them most.

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Preface

I grew up in a small town between nowhere and nothing. A blip on the map in Central Florida. A place among pastures. A truck stop where wild sand burrs hustled around fields trying to get out of the wind. Over time, neon signs crept into these fields. Developers cut apart country roads. The increased traffic haunted neighborhoods with exhaust. In fact, most of Florida has this same story. New towns grow out of wild country with expectations of starting new, many of which end up half-hearted and empty. By reputation, people move to Florida to run away from their problems, but instead of leaving them behind they bring the same problems with them. These are the people I grew up with, people struggling to start life over in a place promised as paradise.

These people have affected me the most, their voices the ones that have resonated with me the deepest. These voices are not of the world's future leaders, not of people on television, nor people praised on a daily basis, but of sheetrock finishers, painters, roofers, and carpenters. They are deadbeat fathers, drifters, prostitutes, gamblers and drunks. Though they may be people with good hearts, they can be superstitiously religious, make poor decisions, or just run out of luck. They are the voices of the working class, and I am obsessed with the situations that affect their lives. The poetry in *The Ones Abandoned* is about these people, the ones who have always inhabited my world, and the ones with whom I am most familiar.

The first poet who inspired me to write about the people I grew up around was James Tate. When I first read him as an undergraduate, Tate captivated me was his ability to balance humor and horror in his work, the way he pulls deep emotion out of the mundane by creating everyday characters to whom the extraordinary happens to them. Tate's use of voice is something I try to emulate. Like Tate, I try to create strong colloquial voices through dramatic

monologues in an attempt to give an intimate view of my character's inner thoughts and to open up worlds for my characters to exist in. For instance, in my poem "Social Mobility" the point of view is from a father who is watching his five-year-old daughter drinking martinis and laughing with seabirds in a retention pond. While the drama of this poem is intentionally surreal, the dramatic monologue grounds the poem with a reliable narrator. This allows one to suspend disbelief, to accept the world the character is in by immersing the reader in the narrator's thoughts. My intent in using dramatic monologues throughout *The Ones Abandoned* is to push the boundaries of reality, to explore deep emotional situations (in this instance the estrangement from one's own child as they grow up) that sheds light on the horror and humor of our everyday lives.

Throughout *The Ones Abandoned* I use dialect and idiomatic expressions to establish tone and context for a character. This stylistic choice was inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks. While her poetry is usually constructed in perfect English, she often uses her own unique interpretation of African-American vernacular to establish voice in her poetry. Brooks does not attempt to copy African-American dialect verbatim. Instead, she incorporates her own dialectic choices to create voices that are simultaneously African American and uniquely her own. Following in her footsteps, I attempt to do this throughout my manuscript, in particular in my poem "The Ones Abandoned." This poem, about poverty in the Ozarks ends with the phrase "done up and left" a common slang in the Southern vernacular. I am not using slang in an attempt to copy verbatim a southern dialect. Instead, by pairing certain idiomatic phrases with regional imagery, I try to create a mood in the poem through the character's voice. Similarly, I use dialogue throughout my manuscript ("Clair Mel Florida", "Junk Men", and "The Fruits of Our Labor") to inject the language of the people who inhabit the worlds of these poems. By

doing this I hope to create my own unique vernacular that encompasses the people these poems are about while also establishing my own voice.

Another poet that influenced the composition of my manuscript is Pablo Neruda. The way that Neruda combines details of the natural with the human experience is something of utter beauty, and although I have not achieved his mastery of it in my poetry, I attempt to intertwine the natural with the human in the same way he does. My most successful attempt at this I feel is in the poem “First Death of Ordinary Times”. The lines:

“The sun breathes deep in spite of you.
We mourn your skin beyond the hills. In town,
the hordes of men cull roses from their eyes.”

These lines are an emulation of what Neruda does so well. By construing the natural and the human, by making the flesh meet the earth, I am attempting to blur the lines between fantasy and reality, to create imagery that is magical and vivid throughout my poetry.

Lastly, a major influence on my artistic choices throughout *The Ones Abandoned* is the poetry of Philip Levine. When I found Levine’s poetry late last year, I was already attempting to write about working class people. His poetry about the mundane aspects of working is written with an intimacy and emotional weight that can only be found in poetry. When reading Levine’s poems, especially his collection *What Work Is*, there is a sympathy for workers trapped by poverty and the boredom of laboring on assembly lines. Levine’s poems emphasize strength, endurance, and united efforts among people. His language is simple, concrete, and matter-of-fact, like the speech of the workers whose stories he tells. His characters are similar to mine in the poems, “Junk Men”, “Trump for President”, and “Fruits of Our Labor” in that they are people struggling with jobs that are physically and mentally exhausting. My intent in writing

these poems is most similar to that of Levine in that I want to show working class people as complex. I want to show how they persevere with dignity through survival.

The first section of *The Ones Abandoned* is derived from a personal narrative that thematically deals with working. All the characters are trying to make a living. The voices in these poems are certain, but the characters are unstable in their place in the world. This section shows people trying to understand their lives while dealing with the obligations of working day to day. These poems are designed to show the different ways in which people's ordinary work is interpreted, as well as the effect of work on the individual. The majority of the poems portray men I have known my whole life, men whose staunchness makes them unable to change. For this reason, in most poems the lines are direct and abrupt. While their interpretations of work all differ, the narration throughout mirrors the confidence and determination of people who live paycheck to paycheck. Even when a narrator admits something he is not proud of, or he doesn't understand, I try to depict a certain bravado that is distinctive to the men I know who work long hours and live on society's edges.

The second section in my manuscript is focused on how places affect the people who inhabit them. My titles in this section tend to be named after a city or an area in Florida I have always known. These poems attempt to represent the culture of an area through one character who can provide a perspective of the community. While the characters are individuals, their stories and situations embody whole groups of people. These poems deal with relationships, whether it be that of an estranged father in "I Promise I Still Miss You", or a homeless couple looking for a place to stay in "Where Will This Haunting Leave Us." All the characters in this section deal with internal and external struggles that are indicative of the worlds they inhabit. Although the voices resemble those in the first section, the poems explore more the inner

workings of people. These characters are attempting to reach out, find some rectitude in others that inhabit their worlds, and seeking answers from anyone who will listen.

The final section in *The Ones Abandoned* turns to poems on death and loss. I consider the final poems to be the most surreal in the manuscript. I was raised Catholic, and religious icons played a critical role in my upbringing. The biblical allusions in Part III come from religious stories that have stuck with me. I am trying to capture in this section the mixture of magic and reality behind myth, stories that convey the human experience through the fantastic. I mean these poems to have a proverbial tone, and through this I hope to explore the questions of life and death through my own personal myths. All the characters in this group of poems are sentimental and the poems are the most lyrical in the manuscript. This section attempts to reflect a human need to fabricate stories in order to make sense of death. These poems deal with my own personal obsession about what it means to live and die, and all the anxieties that stem from these questions.

What unites the three sections of *The Ones Abandoned* are the poems' structure and tone. Throughout this manuscript, I use short, couplets or tercets, with varying lines between five and six syllables, usually end-stopped. The line breaks often run from one line to the next, but not in the free-verse fashion of breaking lines arbitrarily at prepositions, adjectives, and nouns after the manner of prose. Instead, I try to make sure phrases are well-defined rhythmically before cutting to the next line. If I allows the rhythm to carry through to the next line, or leap over a stanza break, usually I find some emphatic word to terminate the line before I do so. Through my composition of these poems, I attempted to create the dynamics of everyday conversation through poetic interpretation. I also set out to capture a tone of longing and regret that I hope is evident in each speaker's voice. As each character attempts to rationalize where he or she is in

their world, many are complicit in their poor behavior, regretful, and dismayed with the worlds they live in. Whether they are dealing with death, earning a living, selling their bodies, or raising a family, all of the characters in my poetry are struggling. While their desperation should be apparent, the voices I take on are not voices of mockery but of admiration. I want to explore the beauty in the way we speak, with a deep respect for the colloquial language we use. It is for this reason I think poetry is important. It elevates language and give meaning to the everyday.

The poets that influenced me the most (Brooks, Levine, Neruda and Tate) have a deep sense of everyday life. In an attempt to find beauty and meaning in the world around them, they create poetry forged from personal experience. They show us the worst and best humans have to offer, and reveal something about us all in their poetry. I am trying to emulate their accessible language, form, and technique, while retaining a musicality that is uniquely my own. I want to convey a vision of hardship, pain, and grief; but also one of celebration, joy, communion, and continuance. I am attempting to emulate their refusal to turn a blind eye, which hopefully makes my poetry full of empathy, humanity, and dignity for people that more often than not are *The Ones Abandoned*.

I.

Nebraska Avenue Tampa, Florida

When the Daytona Methadone Clinic fails you,
you will become another one of those pitbull
children in A.A. I'm always running into.

We will get drunk at Sanford International Airport,
smoking cigarettes with a man dressed up
like Mickey Mouse until we all miss our flights.

We will meet again after you kill a child with your car,
and your manslaughter charge is dropped, and yet again
in the rehab center with an Olympic-sized pool.

You will be all bones, angry at the sunshine. As you practice
your backstroke, you'll convince me to stand up to what hides
in the St. Augustine grass. You'll say, *We have nothing*

*to fear, because the green palm-tree women
are thick and naked at the Casa Loma Motel.*

The snakes in their hair often turned me to stone,

back when I was still hooked on cocaine and depression.
Do you remember when I whispered in Monet's ear
with whiskey on my breath? A cottonmouth jumped

out of her hair and bit me on the lip.

That fine day. We were all friends then,
God the only thing we could all get behind.

The Ones Abandoned

Blood is nothing
to be ashamed of:

Your old man, up to his arms
in oil sludge, spills soup

from aluminum cans into styrofoam bowls. Pig slop is tracked
through floors unmopped. The ashtrays are never emptied.

The mobile home, caked in mold, is strapped with a handmade porch.
Dogs underneath, foaming with mange in their teeth.

Up the road, the mill knocks with molten slag,
slag steeped into red waterfalls near grandpa's hands.

Cloud and soot, fire and iron.

Why all this junk in the yard? Sun-baked toys, rusted-out pickup
trucks, and tobacco dip spit into puddles the size of cow pies.

Sandgrass wilts at the foot of a dull mountain.
Even the trees out here lean with a grudge.

Cloud and soot, fire and iron.

Where is a woman? Have you seen a pretty thing ever?
Cans. Old Milwaukee. Tired. Dead Pheasants

hanging around the necks of .22 caliber children,
whose only home is Ozark country.

All they own left in the empty cast-iron skillet
their mothers used before they done up and left.

You Sing Work Songs

You stand in ragged boots,
staring at the word "*Faith*" stenciled
on the wall of a skeleton kitchen.

With the bone studs and drywall all torn out,
the paint skin in young light peels shining pink.
This saw is so loud you can't think.

Bossman tells you,
Be shy, until you fucking learn.

Nod in your old plastered pants.
Shimmy wire up a hole in the wall.
Shower in one-hundred-year-old dust.

Your legs have no roots here, among the cursive
letters on the wall left abandoned by someone
washed out in the great American flood,

the one where we let black folks starve and drown
for television, the one where the Mr. Roch's sister
couldn't hold on to that tree trunk.

You never ask. You can tell from his quiet eyes
he never saw her again. In the other room a man
sanding window frames is yellowing, ugly and strange.

He yells about Arabs. The state of the Americans.
Midday, you find some solace lying on the broken
bricks and mortar. You try to daydream, but you feel sick.

Across the street on the church playground, a black boy
is swinging. You wonder if he was here for Katrina.
You wonder why your stomach churns. Is it for Mr. Roch's sister?

The boy across the street? The yellow man screaming?
You can't put your finger on it. This saw is too loud for you
to think; besides you've never been that smart. *Just be shy*

until you fucking learn. You go back

to singing work songs until evening,
when you sleep with a nine-pound hammer,

until all the color in the sky slinks
out into the night. You hope.
You never dream.

Mr. Valentine's Eclipse
(August 21, 2017)

Today, before the moon
met the sun, Mr. Val's daddy died.

Valentine didn't shed a tear
but the earth did darken. In silence,

we worked on: As we sanded sheetrock, the air
changed hues. Time passed. The sky blood red,

bled through the broken window panes. We worked on.
Val said to me, *My daddy kept so many women, bruh,*

his phone bill costed him \$500 a month. Then, the moon said goodbye
to the sun. The ground brightened, and so did Val's gold-toothed grin.

By day's end we were back to carrying on, laughing,
playing with the walls of the house, knowing all fathers

someday wane like that shadow of the moon.

Junk Men

Hustle into line, beer cans piled high,
sweating out yeast in the pale morning sky.
We have no jobs. Recycled men out of work,

carrying bags of pipe and coils of copper.
Junk men drooling over the next big load
of abandoned dryers and aluminum windows.

We spit smoke and skin wire. Our hands—
almost as callused as our tongues. *Put your weight on the scale.*
Give up your fingerprints. Sign your name on the dotted line.

Complain to a man with four teeth about the wait. About gas prices.
The President, don't matter who. Obama gone, same shit. Cars crisscrossed
every which way. Yours a beat-up jalopy with the breathalyzer, beeping.

The bills never stop: electric, cable. If not cable, the IRS is looking
for your annual income. *Where's your credit?* Tell them, *Among the lushes*
and chicken heads, lost in corner store meat pies and fried fish.

Wrapped up in lawyer fees and \$20 piss tests to tell you you're dirty.
Tell them you can't get clean. Tell them it's a plot, your whole worth
weighted up on a scale, dragged off to meet the others.

\$35 dollars until your next load.
Call your girl. She is waiting.

A Trip to Walmart

With the strip joint closed,
I've resorted to stealing clothes

with Wallace to sell out my car
to buy beer for the week. I try

and keep my head on straight,
but it's hard. These fluorescent lights

make my blood sick. Rummaging
through work pants, putting on ten

t-shirts at a time, I'm wearing a full
week's work by a child in Vietnam.

What would he think of me,
stealing, walking out bloated

in cotton? It feels like I have never seen
a flower. As if lilac were but a dream.

Would he ask about America?
If I play baseball? I'd tell him

I bat .400. I'd say that no one
loves children as much as we do.

Trump For President

I

“I am afraid” is what he wanted to say
everyday: metal detectors in the schools,
Steve Harvey on TV keeping the races

warring. Shootings down the street. Rapists, all of them,
walking free, green glowing out their teeth. He wants to talk
to his boy, but his bedroom door is locked with a deadbolt.

He wants to stop hurting, alone waiting
for the lottery numbers to come in.
Where is his condo in Miami?

The Rolls Royce - the party in his honor - the gala

opening? He wants a waterbed and a player piano,
two snakes that wrap around a bad bitch, who is his!
Oh, to wake up to a golden toilet!

With enough money, he would go to the state fair
and buy up all the deep fried cheese curds
and knock-off shoes for his girl.

With enough money, he'd roll
the nickels. With enough money,
chicken ain't nothing but a bird.

II

Monday at work the roof burns.
You try holding yourself up,

but you can't, so you cook
your knees. At lunch,

as you stare out at the levee,
the breeze hangs heavy.

Some men talk, but you're not feeling

here right now. Your trying to get away

from this burning sun, from your dirty clothes
and the smell of sweat and tar baking in the air.

But where would you go
if they set you free?

The Men I Know

We bust thumbs
and can't quit drinking.

We roof to spite the sun. We claim to fuck
the best, but the fire in our bellies died

long ago. No more laughter. No flirting
with the darling women at the drugstore.

From here on out, it's just you and me,
the twenty penny nails, and these busted

floorboards we stole. We're tired of dreaming.
When weary, we get juiced at bars, or we hide

at home. In dark rooms lit by the TV, we feel
estranged from the women smiling

in Coca-Cola commercials. We drink
gallons of Coca-Cola. We lick

our own wounds. We call each other:
Pendejo, bitch, pussy. We cry alone,

if we cry at all. We refuse
to eat right. The sheetrock dust

playing with our hair all day
is the closest we come

to love. We never
iron our clothes

or polish the silver. We breathe
heavy, lungs clogged with gunk,

still, we smoke
like chimneys. Everyday,

the wood is unforgiving.
Someone must hold up

the roof. We are here,
Lord. We are willing.

For a Lot Lizard in Arizona

I wanted to stay with her, stripped naked,
dull and buoyant like day old balloons,

sprawled across a long, blue,
pay-by-the-hour motel.

I intended to fall deeper into her tight jaw
and untitled teeth, languish further into her bosom

until I found a burrow of tarantulas to crawl around
and kiss my neck. I wanted to ascend past the ceiling

so as to look down at her dust-fed eyes, to be tethered
between her and the endless prairie sky,

but she asked me to leave her alone so she could look out
the curtains and watch clouds spread over gulches.

She asked me to leave
all my silver dollars at sunset,

She says, *A woman needs
nothing more, nothing less.*

I thought I'd found a home
in a woman raised on milk and stone,

but there is no love to be found
in the sunburnt land of Arizona.

In Tuscaloosa

or maybe
Tecumseh Falls—
even for

that matter
Tiananmen Square—
who can recall

where one has been?
I got caught, tethered
to one end of a long processional

of guilty household names.
We we're all mourning
someone— who

can recall?— but I do
remember the most
morose looking chair

crying among us.
The whole group worried
if I needed to sit,

hoping both the chair
and I might quit our incessant
weeping. But I knew

it would make no
difference. The sun will die
as will I, so

I sat and wept, knowing
nothing but the way wood
cries when it bends.

To My Brother

Why must you curse the sky the birds
hold up with the flutter of their songs?

Why not warble praise and worship
to the wild, humble breeze?

You have known it as long as our mother,
who awaits your hum across the sky to reach
her, standing sullen in the yard at home.

She is just how you remember,
only older now— still calm but waning

as if she was the last oak
waiting to be cut down.

II.

Clair-Mel, Florida

On the TV behind the barroom counter—
our poor town made the news again.

With nothing left to offer, Billy Ferry Jr.
set fire to the midtown supermarket,
burning down five women. His sister said,

*It was just a matter of time. She could sense
the suffering in her brother's crazed blue eyes.
BILLY CAN'T HANDLE IT, SEE*

sprayed out in red-lettered graffiti
on the block walls behind the trailer parks
where we grew up. With just his bucket of gasoline

and a light, surrounded by twenty empty Winn-Dixie
shopping carts, there was no refuge, no place to hide.
Soon after, the package lounge drowned with the sound

of Cumbie Critters choking down whiskey.
Through crack-ridden teeth, they mourned.
The man at the register whispered,

*He must've been one of them drifters
who prowl around the oak and pine.
Behind me, an old drunk piped up,*

*If it was my family I'd do things, things
that son of a bitch never'd dreamed of.
The bar fell silent. What else can be done*

with what we don't understand?
Left wondering, I lumbered outside
to my car, then drove drunk

deep past Palm River, deep past
every First Baptist Church said to save,
deep past the orange groves hanging

heavy in the saccharine air,
past strawberry fields picked bare
to where not even dim front porch lights

shine off the double-wide trailers. A place far gone.
Out there, I shivered in the celestial darkness,
trying to find a sign about the flames or the dead.

But nowhere gives back what's been lost.
I was so deep in Florida, I must have crossed
some holy break between God's country and man.

The Seminole Casino in Ft. Lauderdale

I can't afford cocaine,
and the purple bingo women
have become hostile. I can't catch up

to all the numbers being called, and that bright light
parade in the red carpet ingress keeps my heart
on edge. The smoke hanging from my upper lip,

drowns the Puerto Rican boy dealing Pai-Gow
for his first time. Latina ass for sale at the Spanish 21
table. \$50 vouchers buy you in. Look at that old man,

crumpled in the corner. Before every hand,
a wife-beater boy knocks on wood. Down \$400,
I want to grab a handful of chips and escape,

run out to the tall grassy mangroves, and hide out among
the chameleons and snakes basking on sundried banks,
but still they'd find me. They'd haul me in front of a tribunal.

I'd tell the chief if they'd just let me work, I could live. They'd laugh,
tell me they've heard it all before, turn me into a scrub jay,
and banish me to the sick orange groves along I-95.

Instead, I sit at the baccarat table clacking my bills
together, as if to play another hand,
but all I really own is my rasping *kuk*,

the *whoshing* of my wings, and the rank smell
of still water waiting for it's time to shine.

Social Mobility

My five-year-old daughter June and her fleet
of well-trained seabirds sip martinis, sprawled out
on life preservers, floating in our backyard

retention pond. I stand in the yard. I try to call her
in, keep her safe from the looming fate of still water,
but she refuses. She's always been a bit of a firecracker,

but it wasn't until some schoolboy held her down to kiss her
while fighting over their free public school lunch that she came
into her own. Since then, she's been so unhinged, so grown up.

I love June, but honestly, she scares me.
She yells to me, *What pain you must feel,*
to suffer from your same faithless dreams.

The seabirds cackle. They understand
her wit; I do not. I am tethered to the shore,
she, destined for a far-off world

or just the next neighborhood.
Some other dead end.

Angus Valley, Florida

Your lips shine with gloss when you wake up lost,
fifteen in your cum-stained bed now lifted into a storm.
High above land, you look down for signs of love. You see none.

Daddy gone—
into the silhouettes of highway miles, into the
gruesome blue wind, the one dream-birds die in.

Daddy gone—
So alone, you land and crawl your way through Pasco County,
wriggling through cul-de-sacs of empty promises,
through dreams unkempt.

Daddy gone—
Leaving you with drains in the trailer clogged with dish rags
to keep the maggots from burrowing and festering.
Cocaine suits you fine. Someday soon, a boy from school,

with a crooked gold-toothed smile
and a chain rosary, will call you his bitch.
Who else could your savior be?

Then look, you're pregnant.
With that watermelon under your shirt you glow
like all the other children having children,

the ones who stare at you as you walk to the clinic
to check for the bug. They will help you give birth,
these child midwives in their Angus Valley trailers.

Skin glowing with life, its a boy! He'll be waterlogged
but beautiful. You'll name him *Cowboy*. The doctors
will drain his brain, but he will never be right.

Meanwhile, the boy from school
will be long gone, up the road in Starke
Penitentiary. You always expected more.

Now your lips shine with gloss. You wake up lost
fifteen in your cum-stained bed lifted into a storm—
all because momma told you only whores wear lipstick.

The Woman with the Pink Prosthetic Leg at The Bus Station in Purgatory

While you slept with your head on my shoulder,
behind us in his red Kangol hat Lazarus awoke, drunk.

Whispering in his green breath, he prodded me
with his spooned-nailed fingers to tell me

he thought you the most wholesome thing he'd seen
since Beatrice ascended garbed in her white linen gown.

We shared a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 and in hushed voices,
like children in church, talked of your pretty, pink prosthetic leg.

We wanted you to know, how here on Earth, time had fled
but with you, it has bloomed like marigolds in spring at noon

but in our drunken stupor, we never saw you leave.
By morning, you could have been anywhere between

Jackson and Tuscaloosa. Our bus stalled in a rainstorm.
A cold one. A dreary one. It couldn't be helped.

I get so tired, don't you? To be dead forever. Waiting
for what? Weary-eyed, we now linger like ghosts

at night in hillocks under full moons.
They feed us rocks, a fifth of Popov,

breast meat fried in old grease.
They'll probably make us walk

through fire together until our flesh melts off
our bones. I ask Lazarus if he's had enough.

He smiles and tells me, *Hell, I can still smell my own blood.*
Besides, the Greyhound is due any day now.

Showmen's Rest, Florida

Things aren't great for our kind.
Freaks—

every last one of us down the coast
from Jacksonville to the basin of Rednecks,

Cubans, and Haitians calling in foreign tongues
from the Ft. Lauderdale jail. Patois,

our native language: broken, black and bruised still
from slave ships. They never teach white folks

our heritage: a people lost at sea— refugees, so far
from home, we never know what native means.

When you visit Florida, come on down
to the carney graveyard and there,

pay your respects to the lobster boy's wife.
Her husband had beaten the years

out of her, deformed her children
with his claws, and murdered the love

of their only daughter with the back end of his pistol.
Still, they just wouldn't take him away.

They let him ride it out on probation.
What else can you do with your people?

She shot him. Dead.
No regrets.

I Promise I Still Miss You

Last night, I called the angels up on my party line to plead my case.
I left a detailed message of all the times I drank myself into a dream,
the times I hurt you. I talked about what I know:

The gauge of a shotgun, the best hour of night to fish,
how there's no honest way to make a dog walk like a man—
all while guzzling a bottle of pluck and smoking a dime-sack

I'd copped from the neighborhood yard-babies with no daddy.
No one ever returns my calls. Sorry about your birthday,
sweetheart. I tried to get there but I'll be damned,

I couldn't find the airport between I-4 And SR-626 for the life of me.
Lost in the wretched wind, I got caught in the kind of rain that wails
across palm trees, the kind that drags me clean into some long-pine

depression, the kind that leaves me stuck in some local yokel bar
near Yeehaw Junction, drunk and alone, cooing to the wall calling it Ann Marie.
There is a stone in my heart that makes me afraid someone is going to catch me

in an act of kindness. Ugly as hell, everything about me. Hard to love.
I wish I could see what you looked like when you were just a knee-high
but it's for the best, I guess, still I think you'd love the gentle oaks

down here. I could never be a father.
I could never be your father.

Where Will This Haunting Leave Us?

The days curdle our blood. We think
it can't get any darker. Then it does.
Night crawls up our necks, growing

wild, running it floods. The streets
feel other than our own, our whole world
haunted, as we roam through some low-country

town that keeps bones high piled
in doorways. Ghosts whisper all sorts
of strange. A little grim one spits up,

you think you can win, don't you?
No, no, no. The devil lies awake
in your bed. When you recline to rest

he leaves roaches half dead
to twitch down your throat
as you swallow in sleep.

Snug naked under a covered bridge,
we make a nest and examine each
other's hands. You sing a song

akin to the long proclamation
from the hemlocks to the wind.
We shake together in the cold.

You are out of tune.
I find comfort in that.

III.

Genesis

Lying face down in asbestos, hands and face
itchy and black, high above the floor,
soaked in sweat, I see all things—

Bruce with his ornery mule temper flying up the ladder,
like a mullet moving from spring-still water into spring-still sky.
Troy painting the porch blue to keep away haints.

Everett shaking a nail gun in one hand, a wrecking bar
in the other petitioning the wind: *The fuck I'm afraid of?*
We was born to die.

Through the window, waterbirds in an overgrown lot—
some flutter, some sing. Everyone below is either going
whole hog towards green grass and daisies,

or feeding five thousand on a single loaf of bread.
I like it up here, hanging light in the ceiling, pulling wires
through joists. In the dark, among dusty beams,

I tie switch legs, twist wire nuts tight.
In the end, when you come home,
flip the switch, *Let there be light.*

As God proclaimed, *Look upon*
all that we have made. Indeed, it is good.
In the end, when you come home,

look for me, in your attic choking
on fiberglass carefully crawling
doing the Lord's work.

Pilate

I scrub in basins before bed,
but awoken each morning
to the same dried ichor,

dark and aching. So much fate nailed
to that tree, so much I didn't count on
resting dead in the cold caves

of Judea. How was a man like me
to suppose? Claudia warned me
how this nightmare never ends,

how the eternal plight of man
is misery, even as olive trees bloom
and sweet nardinum tinges the air.

They banished me to Paris.
I drink wine and take long walks
awaiting the worms to gnaw my toes.

The Seine is littered with pigeons and I admit,
I am guilty, I am guilty. So much for redemption.

The blood on my hands is enough,
enough to wash the whole world.

The Sun City Retirement Home

His deepest fear had come true— no flash of thunder,
no spirit from beyond wrapping it's fingers around his jugular
to wake him. No, just manicured lawns, portraits of children

hardly known, golf in the mornings, his wife working
on her backstroke, the occasional shuffleboard game,
and of course, they were very well to do.

No one spoke out of turn, no strange lighting. No kinky sex.
Seventy years of smiles as in the commercials he had grown used to.
Trimmed, roses in the garden. Peach mums, bunched and blooming.

Still, he wished someone at the clubhouse, anyone,
after his third glass of gin, might ask him how his father's skin
had looked on his deathbed, as he whispered:

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

Another Second Coming
(after William Butler Yeats)

He woke from the dead, in some forgotten
American city, where, every once in a while,
an indignant bird flies up in the air, only to choke

on a cloud. Where nothing moves but conveyor belts.
A slouched bum scurrying from here to there. In the hospital
basement, his blanched eyes, sick from death, scanned the room

hoping to see something familiar. Nothing. No such thing as loved ones.
He pursed his lips until a lone whistle sounded, so loud the white walls
turned blue. Time stopped. The dead came alive, frigid bodies dancing

through the morgue. The nurses like witches rejoiced
as the doctors' bodies contorted into those of Sphinxes,
while the patients dreamed of the falconer's muffled moans

echoing out towards the pitiless sun, all in a moment
before he disappeared. Then again, it was death,
a world without end. Most believe he is elsewhere now,

beyond us but I remember years later, seeing him
one pale morning off the yellow coast of Islamorada

swimming in the loosed blood-dimmed tide,
turning and turning in the widening gyre.

First Death in Ordinary Times

Among the beech so tall and sweet, you break
from world and folk you knew so well. In time,

all things must end for you and me. As rain
falls folding off the tops of leaves to douse

the land. Your blood returns to earth. Rivers
will drain. The sun breathes deep in spite of you.

We mourn your skin beyond the hills. In town,
the hoards of men cull roses from their eyes.

The locksmith carved me keys from your old bones.
The healers rode in crying for a fix,

craving something sweet as frankincense.
Grown out from graves the tulips even sigh,

All things must end. Beyond the hills, I'm here.
Still hard to love.

Working the Day after Big Norm Died

Today is no special occasion, the sun I woke to cackling,
unappreciative. Your bones, so fresh, they still drip marrow.
Me? I'm drying out, whiskey pouring from my pores,

the top of my mouth sharp as the taste of radish. I work all day.
Cut my hands a thousand times on small slivers of sawdust. Dirt seeps deep,
dark, into the creases of my skin. Hades' breath born on the back of my neck.

Norm, your body will be buried. I can already smell the methanol
in the parlor, your embalmed palms cold and stiff, folded into a prayer.
Later, chubby children in clip-on suits crowd your yellow cake and slither

their fat fingers through thick icing with not a whimper of dim gloom,
just rustling noise in the stagnant bloom. From the hallway, our kin's laughter
echoes out over your wooden box, deafening the buzz of your black blood.

They are calling to me, but I refuse to go.
Today must be the saddest day of our lives.

Norm's Last Promise to His Wife, Fran Taranaki

It seems one steadfast hallelujah,
the way folks get begotten and buried.
I whispered out of the church

doused in the same holy water
they baptised me in as a sin-child.
It all drips down

my forehead now. The water, the death.
They pulled my cheeks back into a smile
I never could quite learn. I was a sulking brute

of hard countenance, never earnest.
I sure as hell never had much to say.
But you knew all this, still you held my hand

before they closed the casket, until you bedded me
at last wrapped in the fog of another time.
The kind that strips bark from magnolias,

calls fiddles to play, and bleeds oak across the dirt roads
and water banks we used to call home. The priest said,
Never will he find what he is looking for, stranded

*like Ponce De Leon, biding his time waiting to find gold
in some lonesome dream.* Fran, you know different.
You know a long wait is in order, but in some far-off morning

after your last glass of Sobieski, after your babushka is untied
for the last time, I will find you again. Someday, we will break
through, thrashing together out our graves towards God.

Before the Birds Died

The death of earth was not as bad as we expected.
On our ship, no ones starves. No dead children
found swollen in hunger, no disease, no war.

We are content, even happy, bouncing among the stars.
Everyone, but my father, the last old man on our ship.
No one else remembered the world he missed.

He dreamed he was a swan searching
for his own small space, some familiar shore
where he might feel still the slight breeze of Earth.

The last time I saw him in the infirmary staring out
of the windows at the stars, he turned to me and said,
All the birds are dead now. There was no repass

*for the morning dove, The old world crow
and the new world quail, both lost as the loon
up here beyond the clouds. I promised him*

if he held on a little longer we would see one.
I told him the same stories he had told me:

about the buildings sewn out of concrete
and pine, about all the creatures back home
he loved so dearly. Always coming, always going.

*Can I be your bird? I asked.
Tell me again, what were they like?*

Then he up and died.
You must understand:

He had been promised so often
so many things he had given up

on waiting. Since his death,
I have confirmed with the captain:

All the birds
are dead. Indeed,
we are alone.

Vita:

Thomas Dollbaum is a poet, carpenter and musician from Tampa, Florida. Before attending the University of New Orleans he studied Creative Writing as an undergraduate at the University of South Florida.