



# RAGGED EDEN

Michael Meyerhofer



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GLASS LYRE PRESS

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-941783-58-0

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Design & Layout: Steven Asmussen  
Cover Art: © Dreamstime.com  
Copyediting: Linda E. Kim



Glass Lyre Press, LLC  
P.O. Box 2693  
Glenview, IL 60025  
[www.GlassLyrePress.com](http://www.GlassLyrePress.com)

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*2River View* — “The Animal Morgue,” “On the History Channel’s Lack of Imagination”

*African American Review* — “An Apology to Thin Air”

*American Journal of Poetry* — “Divine Witness,” “Ode to Silhouettes,” “Patriotic Cookie”

*Arabesques Review* — “Algebra Taught Me Nothing,” “The Man with Six Hands”

*Diode Poetry Quarterly* — “The First Musician”

*FRiGG* — “After the Election,” “New Year’s Eve, 2016,” “Literacy,” “Why Don’t You Dry Off After You Shower?” and “Flight Safety Instructions”

*Moon City Review* — “Adjunct,” “The Dying Breed”

*Open: A Journal of Arts & Letters* — “Phantom Head Syndrome”

*Permafrost Magazine* — “Driving to the Airport”

*Ragazine* — “Piss-Poor,” “When I was a Kid, So Many Died”

*Southern Poetry Review* — “Eighth Grade,” “Truck Stop Lamentation”

*South Dakota Review* — “Women in the Bible had Pretty Eyes”

*Split Lip* — “The Conversationalist”

*storySouth* — “From the Hospital Bed”

*Valparaiso Poetry Review* — “The First Law of Thermodynamics”





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clearly I'm not needed,  
yet I feel myself turning  
into something of inexplicable value.

—*Mary Oliver*

It is possible to be brave.

—*Bin Ramke*



I.





## NEW YEAR'S EVE, 2016

That was the year nobody died:  
all the musicians and actors,  
  
the boxer, the poets, the Holocaust survivor,  
an uncle in a star-spangled top hat,  
  
their illnesses mere rumor  
or at worst a reminder of something,  
  
like a shawl thrown past the full moon.  
And when, midway through winter,  
  
the time came for reminiscence  
and countdowns and champagne,  
  
hardly anyone could think  
of a single thing that had gone wrong,  
  
which was itself quite unsettling.  
So after a while, we gave up  
  
trying to be sad and simply kissed  
as the snows fell, transforming a nation  
  
of lawns into canvases for trees  
to scrawl their warnings in shadow.

## AFTER THE ELECTION

I'm having a hard time believing  
we have so little iron in our blood

even in times of war, even after  
the fifth or sixth heartbreak,

but the television documentary  
insists each of us carries just enough

to make one sixpenny nail—  
adequate to hang a college degree,

I suppose, but not Christ.  
So that later, at the hardware store,

picking up a handful, I realize  
I am holding a whole city block:

former classmates, dead relatives,  
and a smattering of past lovers

who still prick my brain's fingers  
when I try to squeeze them close.

## RESPAWN

Maybe it's time I made some changes  
thinks the goon with a machine gun

right before I rappel down behind him,  
swinging my climbing gear like a hatchet.

I'm not sure I believe in this cause anymore,  
grumbles the orc just as I release

the bowstring, the poison blow-dart,  
the crackling death-spell.

Even the one-eyed dictator  
pouring over casualty reports

wonders if he should finally give  
representational government a chance

as my sniper scope inches  
up his arm, a weightless insect

in a world where steel reflects fire  
and death is a knot that unties itself.

## ODE TO SILHOUETTES

I mean those people who walk by  
the camera, the movie screen, the stage

in a concert hall or a nightclub, so that  
all you can see is their heads

and maybe a shoulder, slumped  
or jerking a bit as they stumble free

of their row, untethered from their table  
with its dark mysterious drinks,

on their way to the restroom  
or the snack bar or the sidewalk

to return a call in spite of the rain.  
So that whatever earrings they chose

become as meaningless as their hairstyle,  
the effort put into matching

this blazer with that pair of shoes,  
all of it backlit into passing obstruction,

the way sun-worshippers must still  
groan or curse or at least take it

personally whenever the fat full moon  
photobombs their view of God.

## AN APOLOGY TO THIN AIR

When I stepped outside my house, I grimaced  
because of how June roiled off the sidewalk,  
  
wrinkling the porch-pose of my wife's orchids  
and the sleek dark fur of the stray cat  
  
lying in the shade of a planter, then I realized  
my grimace just so happened to line up  
  
with an old black man crossing the street,  
and he frowned back at me, so that I stood there  
  
unsure what to do next—if I should run  
after him and explain the misunderstanding  
  
or if that would only make matters worse;  
besides, maybe he only looked that way  
  
because of the awful heat which by then  
had lasted so long, even the sprinklers  
  
couldn't resuscitate those sad yellow lawns  
lining our block in crisp, identical rows.

## PORTRAIT OF A CHILD TYING HIS SHOE

Plato said children carry all knowledge inside them  
and simply need the right impulse to wake it up,

the way we carry the raw antibodies to dead plagues  
in the dank recesses of our genes, just in case.

John Locke described them as a *tabula rasa*,  
their margins best filled in by flattery and praise.

And how often have we heard it said by now  
that children learn languages better than we do,

a kind of communal, post-Babel consolation prize?  
Still, when the farm boy knocks one to left field,

so far out that the catcher has nothing to do  
but stoop, toss his glove, and garrote his shoelaces,

you can see it: there, beyond his fuming pantomime  
of masculinity, the grace of his fingers dancing

a spell so profound, it takes two eyes, two hands,  
and a choir of dendrites crackling in unison.

## THE FIRST ORPHANS

She said, *I think this is called being naked.*  
The boy didn't know what that meant

but it seemed kind of scary so he  
sewed them skirts made out of fig leaves,  
snaking grapevines around their kneecaps.  
Then, for the first time, he noticed

the unashamed flexing of her toes  
as she loitered by the trees. So he knelt

before a wild, as-yet-unnamed bush  
and started braiding its thorns

into sandals. *Try these on.* She winced,  
took a step, fell. He helped her up.

She decided not to hurt his feelings  
so off they went. Before long, he got used

to her limping—she, to bleeding.  
And everything kind of went from there.

## TRUCK STOP LAMENTATION

They're saying goodbye to Lynette. Someone  
has propped a blown-up picture on the bar,  
a pixelated 50-something with bombastic hair,  
and every once in a while, Lynette's friends  
heft their steins to this makeshift grotto  
or press lips to its glossy finish, never minding  
who's been there before. I wonder if Lynette  
would be flattered by all this attention:  
throng of chain-smoking women, unshaven  
men in tank tops, one guy who walks out  
of the restroom with a plunger over his crotch,  
thrusting his way across the dance floor  
to hymns of wild applause. I'm staying  
at the motel across the street, just stopped in  
for a quick beer, but they tell me that's fine,  
Lynette would want me to stick around. A few  
hug me despite my jacket and loosened tie.  
Later, when I offer to pay for what I've drunk,  
an old guy who hasn't said a word all night  
looks up from a heap of peanut shells, his eyes  
like two wet sharpened stones, and tells me  
to put my damn wallet away. And I do.



## THE CONVERSATIONALIST

I'm no good at talking to people  
but I'm even worse talking to animals.

Whales roll their eyes, giraffes  
cock their heads like prom queens,

my mere approach causes  
the most patient platypus to dive

headlong into the gurgling stream.  
Sadly, that's just the beginning.

Try as I might, I'm still the guy  
whose chatter pissed off the Pleiades.

Mountains rebuff my small talk.  
Even shadows dodge me at parties.

God, if only I hadn't learned to talk  
by wasting hours at the window,

my good ear pressed to the glass,  
listening to the stammer of rain.

## TOURISTS

A bald monk met us at the door,  
asked us what we were doing there.

I told him I only wanted to see  
the inside of that bamboo pagoda,

charmed as we were driving  
by its gated blossoms, the way

those jade and tangerine tapestries  
hung between two knots

of traffic, straight as Shaolin arrows  
despite the squeal of brakes

and the rumbling jag of rap music.  
He made us take our shoes off.

I recognized the Li Po he recited,  
though I've only read it in translation.

We went out to the gardens,  
snapped a few pictures, then retired

to the red brick path leading back  
to our rental car. At the last moment,

I looked up and saw a child  
pressing her face to the glass,

her breath forming a white sunburst,  
a toy airplane waving in her fist.

## ADJUNCT

All my friends are buying houses  
and rings that won't lime your fingers,

sometimes making the tough choice  
between Italy and Amsterdam,

swapping war stories of committees  
and escalating taxes and all

I have to share is my concern  
that the sink will go dry

before I can rinse off the shaving cream,  
and all I know is that their houses

grew from wood that grew over  
the graves of prehistoric birds and gold

comes exclusively from the hearts  
of supernovas—which makes them

smile since everybody loves  
to hear what they already know.

## EXTINCTION

We woke to hear that all the world's zebras had begun  
to shrink. By nine, they'd become the size of basset hounds.

Tadpoles by noon, dust by five. Scientists were baffled.  
By midnight, zebras dwarfed the cells of lions, the mitochondria

of butterflies. Next morning, they simply drifted off  
the lenses of microscopes like party balloons,

grazing on air. *They don't seem to be in pain*, said a man  
in a long white coat, *just a bit sleepy*. By week's end,

we remembered how to yawn. Storefronts returned  
to mannequins and smartphones. Even the hyenas forgot.

Though some nights, I swear I feel those zebras  
floating upward on pillows of dark matter

like I am the penitentiary that fed them,  
like ours was the ragged Eden they outgrew.

## FALLING PIANOS

Implausible as the flying guillotine,  
set up for politically incorrect

cartoons drawn by grandfathers,  
still they draw us in, especially

on moving day: so many writers  
congregating like pigeons

at the bottom of stairwells,  
along sidewalks, below windows,

all of us looking up in time  
to be paralyzed by that curse

followed by a heavy scrape of oak,  
the music of vibrating teeth.

## DIVINE WITNESS

It all started with Christ, you know.  
So many dust-covered followers

passing bread, pouring wine  
like whale's blood, when suddenly

the son of God whipped out his iPhone  
and took a selfie. *Just sharing*

*a snapshot of our meal*, Christ said  
when they asked what he was doing,

and for the rest of the evening  
as he spoke of nails, and roosters,

and swords bought for the price  
of a cloak, they listened

mostly to his breast pocket:  
that steady, unanswered buzz.

## WOMEN IN THE BIBLE HAD PRETTY EYES

Take that with a grain of Lot's wife.  
Think of pebbles buried by rushing water,  
  
sprinklers in a California drought,  
bits of moon-black hair  
  
missed by the skinning knife  
still clinging to the cave-mouth,  
  
whatever flesh keeps the rain out. God,  
the sharpest blades are thin  
  
as fingernails, break if bent. But women  
in the Bible had eyes like porn stars,  
  
like cattle: grass-fed, roving,  
smarter than you think, smarter  
  
than you think.

## AND NONE OF IT WEIGHS A THING

Let's say you get a box in the mail,  
the return address washed clean by rain.

Inside the box lies another box,  
and so on. Most are just cardboard

but some are colored glass, plastic,  
mahogany. Now and then you find one

sealed, its tight little lock just begging  
for jailbreak. Others rest in ribbons

soft as calfskin or yawn half-open  
like miniature grand pianos. You keep

opening. Before long, your labors  
call for a jeweler's hammer and scope,

tweezers, nanites. You wonder  
if such Russian intricacy suggests

a designer or if it's simply in the nature  
of boxes to hold one another. Atoms

become down-quarks, tiny strings  
of vibrating generosity. And so on

until both your imagination and your  
toolbox lie exhausted. You curse.

Then you start backwards, stacking  
each box in the one that came before.

When you're done, you tape that first  
and final box shut, so that it looks



pretty much the same as it did  
when you started. You raise it all

to your ear, you lift it like an infant  
or an atom bomb. You shake it.

## LITERACY

I was terrified of pronouncing shirt  
as shit, rap as rape, and most of all, beast  
  
as breast, having already seen what happened  
to those who committed such wrongs  
  
in a world where just one letter separates  
laughter from slaughter, when the sole way  
  
to avoid ending up like a rain-whipped  
sapling under thunderheads of grade school  
  
ridicule was to worship the difference  
between rectal and recital, to mouth  
  
each syllable like a prayer—dust to dust,  
firehose to firehouse, astray to ashtray.

## PISS/POOR

How that adjective hung over our daily lives  
like a loop of errand mistletoe, year long

those two glib syllables enough to distinguish  
between regular Iowa-poor and those failed

dirt farmers down the road whose kids  
seemed to know a bit too much about sex,

so poor that all they had was their own  
personal spurt of the divine, which turns out

to be you, just you, handed back with the best  
parts already spent on God knows what,

the remaining broth so heavy and gilded  
that holding it, of course you feel like a king.

## PHANTOM HEAD SYNDROME

Everyone's talking about the latest kid  
made to kneel in the desert so some guy  
with a machete can cut his head off,  
maybe the tenth such video looping across  
the dark ether, and I remember volunteering  
for a group that tracked kiddie porn sites  
and reported them to the FBI. You can  
imagine the result, like Holocaust footage  
viewed so many times you hardly flinch  
when bulldozers roll past the camera  
whisking a pile of heads into a hole.  
Talking to another volunteer, this ex-cop  
on his umpteenth marriage, I said  
the hardest thing for me was the lack  
of closure, never knowing who if anyone  
makes it out of that human sand trap.  
*Nah, he said, the worst thing is  
sometimes, the damn kids are smiling.*

## DRIVING TO THE AIRPORT

The last time I saw you, Mitchell County  
dawn was just gilding the powerlines,  
broad swaths of darkness between windmills.  
Frost eased across the windshield, ghostly  
palmprints. When you switched on the heater,  
the vents rattled so badly you confessed  
that a mouse must have crawled in and died.  
We were literally hearing its bones quiver  
like seeds in a popcorn maker. *Don't worry,*  
you said. *It doesn't stink anymore.* I took  
a breath, said you're right. *Of course I am,*  
you laughed. *I pilot this wreck every day.*

## FROM THE HOSPITAL BED

I'm lying here reading story after story  
about Zen masters precisely foretelling

the date and time of their own demise  
when I remember my grandfather

who must have told us half  
a hundred times that he'd be dead

by the end of the year then went on  
living another two decades,

until his speech slowed and he  
no longer cursed the length of skirts

on television or blamed his arthritis  
on the Japanese, actually stopped

threatening to cut off his own legs  
when rain rattled the eaves,

and mostly just wandered around  
the house finally unattached

to the bottles of cheap beer  
that had for so long sustained him

though he still stopped sometimes  
to ask for a dish of ice cream.

## FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER NOT MUCH HAPPENED

I'm thinking about that night  
second year in grad school

when we sat around and got blind  
drunk on minimum wage wine

and you told me you were in love  
with that poet in a wheelchair

but you were worried  
because his last girlfriend

was flat-chested and you were  
a triple-D and I told you

not to worry but you still lifted  
your Flaming Lips shirt

like I was a doctor  
you'd known all your life

and asked what I thought of them  
so I repeated my prognosis

and stared until you said thanks  
and refilled my cup the wine

blushing for both of us  
as we switched to talking shop

so-and-so with the bad line breaks  
sitting as close as friends do

having already touched  
deeper than bones or blood.

## THE FIRST MUSICIAN

Sometimes, I like to think about the first caveman  
who invented the flute, how he must have  
been out hunting something big and dangerous  
one day when something caught his eye—  
just some reeds sticking out of a pond, all muddy,  
but for some reason he snapped one off,  
shaped his breath through the opening  
and heard it come out clean on the other side,  
only changed somehow, more high pitched,  
untamed, so that he thought about the wild cry  
his child made when she entered the world,  
slick as a fish, and as he carried that simple reed  
back to the rest of his clan, carried it back  
with the same hands that had thrown spears  
through hides and ripped meat right off the bone,  
he had to stop sometimes to rub his eyes.



II.



## JANUS

I've built a wall  
between the two continents  
of my brain, in the space  
where I caught them  
rubbing up against each other  
like teenagers at a school dance.  
On one side, God  
knows why, I painted  
a red barn leaning off a hill,  
dappled in sea-light.  
The other side?  
For a while, I covered it  
with spikes and razor wire  
but I took them away  
once I realized  
they might be mistaken  
for handholds.

## THE BODHISATTVA OF OLIVE AVENUE

A guy walks into the gas station  
with one of those overcoats that says  
he means to rob the place,  
only there's an old radio  
bandaged in duct tape hanging  
from his sun-burnt neck,  
blasting God-knows-what  
as he spins and jives  
between sales on wiper blades  
and transmission fluid,  
the speakers so worn the notes  
might as well be pinballing off tin walls.  
So that everybody looks up  
from those tiered aisles of candy  
and beef jerky and even the cashier,  
who appears stoned beyond words,  
starts this vaguely sexual  
wiggle-dance which makes  
the man with the stereo applaud  
and cry, "Go on, man, express yourself!"  
then turn and eye the rest of us,  
his gaze both desperate and hopeful,  
like he's about to start  
some kind of movement. Only it doesn't  
quite catch on, the cashier  
stops dancing and takes his money,  
everybody else looks down,  
and the man with a stereo  
hanging from his throat  
like a horse's feedbag, when he goes,  
he takes the music with him.

THE SHAPESHIFTING SECRET AGENT GETS  
CAUGHT DISCARDING A SWEATER KNITTED BY  
HIS GIRLFRIEND

Honey, you have to understand:  
I was the book that became  
the dart that flew clean through  
the desert warlord's throat. I was a house  
fly riding into the mansion on  
the coattails of the Russian ambassador.  
I've been a French maid with  
a malfunctioning bodice, a dolphin  
trailing the dictator's yacht,  
the butler whose wrinkled fists could  
make paste out of petrified walnuts.  
In all cases, truly, I am as naked  
as my profession requires.  
What you see as a kilt  
or a tastful pantsuit is just my skin,  
as open-minded as stem cells.  
Otherwise, I'd find myself tangled  
halfway between taxi driver and prostitute,  
trying to shrug off a tuxedo or a ball-  
room gown suddenly twice my size  
as some vengeful sniper closed one eye.  
Listen, I know you mean well but  
this yarn might as well be the fishing net  
that nearly drowned me once  
until I remembered I could change  
into water. Besides, doesn't it  
look like I'm already wearing it, even now?  
Don't you think I heard you lying  
right next to me in your separate gown,  
your long needles clicking in the dark?

## THE DYING BREED

I donned a dark blue tank-top on my way  
to the Trump protest because nothing  
shuts down a loudmouth bigot like nineteen  
inch arms, but before I could  
cross over to the left side of the street,  
a gliding fellow in eyeliner called me  
a Neanderthal, then this potbellied guy  
in a trucker hat asked if I meant to  
knock that first guy on his ass and if so  
I'd better wear gloves because of *the AIDS*,  
then Trucker Hat looked confused  
when I went to stand with the throng  
of rail-thin college kids peppered  
with black drag queens, and the whole  
time Eyeliner Guy kept looking over at me  
like I was some kind of Manchurian protester,  
and even amidst all that noise and naked  
Germanic rage, I just kept thinking  
about how the TV told me that Neanderthals  
invented the flutes from the bones  
of dead songbirds then died  
out so that homo sapiens had to  
invent flutes all over again, bamboo  
piccolos sailing westward from Byzantium,  
migrating from the woods of nameless hunters  
to the concern halls of Italy and France,  
no longer bone-carved but steel,  
capable of bending one shrill breath  
into more notes than some can hear  
let alone have the good sense to applaud.

## THE MAN WITH SIX HANDS

may not have seen  
the face of God  
but he made a wicked  
swimmer, so many  
chlorinated molecules passing  
between his fingers  
that he blurred  
towards the finish line  
where a blue-  
eyed sweetheart  
with brothers in the war  
smiled and knelt as  
she held the towel open.

## THE ANIMAL MORGUE

I'm sure there are more depressing places—  
say, a day-long tour of Auschwitz—  
but surely, room must be made on the list  
for the veterinarian leading us back to collect  
the remains of Lieutenant Fuzz  
from one of a half-dozen stainless steel  
drawers shut along the wall of this  
refurbished kitchen, so that as we take turns  
cradling her, it's almost like the morning  
we opened the dresser to find her  
fast asleep on my work slacks, unfazed  
by however long she'd been trapped  
in mahogany darkness, merely stretching  
like a lyre washed in bedroom light  
before sprinting away to hunt her fill.



## THE FIRST LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

Dig too far and you'll find the shards  
of something ancient, stacked like Rome  
and San Francisco on the crust  
of ancestors: streets capping ruins,  
ziggurat plus bazaar equals taco stand.  
Sooner or later, all the cloisters  
in your abbey become eligible  
for an upgrade. All you have to do  
is peel back your bedroom wallpaper  
and you'll find a whole tiramisu  
of lost history. Remember, atoms are  
just bags of cowbells—electrons, leptons,  
quarks, the mayfly's sparkler lifespan.  
How many cowbells in a tulip,  
a woolly rhino, a taxidermist, cowbells  
sloughing through the pastures  
of Tel Aviv, tin song that used to be  
my mother now recycling that anthem  
of hay and flies and runaway sun.

## WHY DON'T YOU DRY OFF AFTER YOU SHOWER?

asked the pretty blonde in my dorm  
the semester I almost hung myself  
from the stairwell with an extension cord,  
partly because of a dead mother  
and a weak bladder, still years before  
a masked woman dipped a scalpel in the dark,  
but mostly because I wasn't getting laid.  
I don't remember what I told her,  
though I suspect I simply liked the appearance  
of sauntering in from the rain,  
a little wild-eyed, friendless  
but perfectly fine, like the Zen monks  
I'd read about, and not another lonesome kid  
obsessed with the thickness of his biceps.  
Which reminds me of an afternoon  
walking back from a physics lecture  
when the clouds opened up and everybody  
but me ran—everybody but me and this  
plain-faced girl walking the other way,  
her hair like tarnished gold,  
both of us smiling as we passed  
each other, too afraid to say hello.

## STOPLIGHT

It's terrible  
to be caught yelling  
at your crotch  
next to a minivan  
full of kids  
and a young mom  
just pulling out  
of the parking lot  
of Ambassador Baptist,  
no still soft voice  
informing them about  
the cell phone  
you just dropped  
on your lap,  
let alone the call  
that won't go  
through to  
the hospice ward  
in which your grand-  
father wants  
to say goodbye  
to the only  
member  
of the family  
who didn't inherit  
his temper.

## PATRIOTIC COOKIE

The sign says it only costs a dollar,  
either because of or in spite of  
the poorly melted frosting, tri-colored  
palette of sprinkles smeared by California heat  
into a kind of murky blue not half  
as impressive as the brighter hue adorning  
the tiles on the Islamic mosque  
I just saw in a documentary  
about some desert with apostrophes,  
and still less impressive when  
compared to the adjacent seafood aisle  
with its plucky crab legs and shy  
grammatical shrimp, canned goods  
with their Depression-era robustness,  
roasted chickens in their bodices of spice,  
all those exhibitionist heaps of melons  
and well-marbled steaks, and of course  
the wall-to-wall display of diapers  
which do their best to whitewash  
the horror that happens down below.

## FLIGHT SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS

In the event of a water landing,  
this poem will not save you.  
That's because words cannot be used  
as flotation devices anymore  
than they can replace good  
old-fashioned adult supervision  
during a rousing game of lawn darts.  
Also, be advised that talking  
like this means we've broken down  
the fourth wall though such walls  
are only made of air anyway,  
meaning that under just the right  
conditions they like anything can be  
squeezed down into a star.  
It could be that I've failed to grasp  
the intricacies of nuclear fusion  
but there's still this poem  
on your end and this laminated  
placard on mine, vibrating in its sheathe  
sewn to the ass-end of somebody  
else's chair, and as the plane  
banks between mountains  
hemmed in by vast deep lakes,  
I take it out and study the family  
depicted as white and unafraid,  
merely bending as though in prayer,  
as though whispering to God hey  
God what did we do to deserve this?

## MAYBE

the girl rolling her eyes  
as she waits in line  
beside her mother  
at Victoria's Secret  
isn't thinking  
that the world is hers  
so much as it's not  
her mother's anymore  
than it's mine  
and why should she  
waste time listening  
to the ones who  
never broke out  
of whatever kept them  
zipped inside their skins  
like the mice  
in the snake's belly  
with their teeth  
and their smartphones  
and all those friends  
they forgot  
long before their own  
firstborn needed  
braces or a co-signer  
and something old  
to put her back against.

## PART TIME JOB

I almost got my eyes burned out  
one Saturday afternoon back in Iowa  
when a chicken broaster  
exhaled a plume of boiling-hot grease  
that, somehow, landed perfectly  
on the glasses I almost never wore.  
I'd like to say I stopped  
pining after the girls waiting tables  
for long enough to imagine life  
without these nubs of glorified gelatin,  
but honestly, who does that?  
A clothesline separated the kitchen  
from the room where girls with eyeliner  
and no bodyfat made ice cream cones,  
and pinned to that line were all  
the orders I had to fill before  
the boss would let me go home  
with a quart of whatever was left over  
to keep me company in my russet Ford  
while gnats danced in the streetlights,  
porch swings creaked like thuribles  
and kids rode by on bicycles, laughing.

## THE NEXT GENERATION OF POETS

In another dimension  
all our poets are gathering  
along that kidskin border  
where our country bleeds  
into Mexico. They've brought  
what look at first like bricks,  
white bricks that take  
two hands to carry—but no,  
they're unpublished  
manuscripts. One by one,  
they stack them up  
while the National Guard  
does their best to block  
the wind. When they're done,  
a tangerine-faced  
Donald Trump gives  
a speech that has nothing  
to do with poetry. Later,  
once everyone else has gone,  
hungry families arrive  
and start climbing the wall  
or simply push through,  
except for those few  
who ignore the rumbling  
of bellies and guns and stop  
to thumb through fallen pages.



## THE LOWEST WALL IN HUMAN HISTORY

Though it stretches for thousands  
of miles, across deserts and mountains  
and the bright snakeskin of rivers,  
it's almost impossible to see,  
dwarfed by the thickness  
of a baby's fingernail, no more  
than a molecular smear of granite.  
They say the builders needed  
tweezers and microscopes  
as they stooped like rice-planters.  
In fact, the wall's so low that we might  
be standing on it right now.  
We might even be part of it.  
And to think, we never felt a thing.



III.



## THE GREAT SPEECH

When the dictator began shouting  
and gesturing, the children ran  
back behind the crowds, where a cracked

and overturned tank had filled  
with rainwater in which the children  
could swim. Why don't

our parents play like this?  
one asked, stretching beneath the stars.  
The others shook their heads.

## WHEN I WAS A KID, SO MANY DIED

by blundering into pits of quicksand  
that I half-expected to sink every time  
I navigated my stubby legs

through a hospital parking lot,  
a blind alley, a playground after rain  
made mud roil off the biblical deep.

And that universal lesson imparted  
by so many TV shows: *Don't*  
*struggle*, requiring a kind of

Zen-like acceptance of our fate,  
the grim knowledge that if it struck,  
*when* it struck, we were fucked

unless a friend was passing by  
with a rope coiled over one shoulder,  
or a tree branch just happened

to be hanging low enough that it  
could be grasped, and bent,  
and climbed like a tether to the sky.

ON THE HISTORY CHANNEL'S  
LACK OF IMAGINATION

I like the idea of parallel dimensions  
if only so that I can get a medal  
for beating the crap out of anyone who believes

in ancient aliens—as though our ancestors  
were too dense to move a statue  
or jigsaw limestone into a skyscraper,

like we're living in the only time it's possible  
to turn over a bucket and dream  
of a helmet with an umbilical cord.

## MACHISMO

I have to admit, I laughed  
when the guy who said he'd been  
studying taekwondo

for so long that he could  
kill a man just by touching him  
got knocked out in a bar

not by a punch but a YIELD sign  
pulled off the wall  
by the band and thrown

into the audience like a Frisbee  
or a flying guillotine  
skimming over beer steins

that he didn't block because  
*A real man never raises his hand  
unless he's ready to kill.*



## JACK DREAMS OF ATTICS AND SNOWFALL

Jack has never met anybody named *Jack* before,  
except in bad action movies and the romance novels  
his mother used to read, which Jack read too

for the sex scenes because he was home-schooled  
and bereft of lessons on female anatomy.  
Jack's father died in the war, in an airport bathroom,

in a train explosion. Hard to say. But sometimes,  
Jack pretends he's alive and comes back  
to get him, and isn't at all perturbed that Jack

has grown pudgy in spite of his barbed wire tattoo.  
We all do things we regret. Jack's mother  
taught him that. One time, Jack watched a race

on television, a runner so damn fast he almost  
lapped his opponents. Jack noticed that by the end,  
it looked just like the winner was in last place.

NOT-GOD, STANDING ON THE BEACH,  
TALKING TO HERSELF

What's across the ocean

is just other people wondering

what's across the ocean

Listen,

what rots only rots

because it can't last forever.

## ODE TO THE GETAWAY

Last night, I broke my brother out of jail  
using Tommy guns and a tandem bike.  
Granted, he didn't look much like me

what with his immaculate white suit and cigar,  
his blurred face, his accent that kept  
shifting from Chicagoan to Samoan

with just a dash of Welsh-Irish thrown in,  
but that's just what happens after whiskey  
and hot wings and a few hours' sleep.

Besides, when I finally felt up to leaving  
my bed, then the house, I passed a stranger  
who might have been my real brother's twin

right down to the goatee and hairline,  
plus those jaywalking Bohemian eyes  
as he shouldered by, *The Times* in hand,

coffee spilling down his shirt-sleeve  
so that for a moment it resembled gun oil  
left over from our daring border break.

So that I nearly stopped him, this stranger,  
and asked where he'd been all this time,  
and most of all, if he still remembered

the cops with their curses and sirens  
and Prohibition mustaches falling  
further and further behind our ludicrous bike

as we made for that seaside village  
where surely pretty girls waited  
under dark trees heavy with foreign fruit.

## THE MAN WHO RISES

He goes out after midnight  
and lifts fire to his mouth  
so that the wispy smoke escaping

his back porch resembles  
the looping orbits of the planets  
not just around our sun but through

the whole Milky Way, an arm  
of which he sees as he glances up  
in silence, practically a model

for Zen contemplation  
were it not for the carcinogens,  
the plants in need of water,

the frayed bathrobe  
and the dog pawing the screen,  
softly whining to get out.

## EIGHTH GRADE

My family's idea of a vacation  
was staying at the Lamplighter Motel  
two towns over, forty bucks

for temporary access to cable  
and a swimming pool,  
which I usually avoided because

I didn't want anyone to see  
my calves, those broken flippers,  
but one time I got talked into trunks

and just kind of walked around  
waist-deep in the musk of chlorine,  
thinking this wasn't so bad,

maybe it was time I taught myself  
to do more. So I let the water  
slip past my neck, kicked

like a dying lobster, moved  
only half a foot toward the ladder.  
Still, my heart soared

until I straightened up  
and saw some drunk bastard  
snickering from the upstairs bar,

waving for me to join him.  
I'd never seen him before  
but I can still see his hayseed cap,

that familiar locker room smirk,  
and most of all, the fact  
that my parents sat two tables

away from him, and they were  
looking down at me too,  
and they were also laughing.

# ALGEBRA TAUGHT ME NOTHING

plus nothing equals more  
Nothing. Still,  
When winter paws

the windows, our limbs  
by some instinct  
older than

words know  
to press, to tangle  
like a celtic knot, fractals

of dark matter,  
both shivering yet warm  
to the other's touch.

# MY MOTHER'S LEFT EYE

*After "Grace" by Eric Enstrom*

I don't know why I remember that painting  
hung over mashed potatoes at the Gingham Inn,  
a dreary Russian-looking fellow praying

over bread near real tables where farmers lifted coffee  
in the ceramic clatter of their daily rest.  
Maybe it has something to do with my mother

who was reading the cafe's newspaper  
one afternoon when I dove for the comics,  
pulled those colors from the folds and somehow

left a papercut across her left eye.  
So that for days after, she wore an eye patch  
that wasn't nearly as cool as the ones

on TV though she assured everyone  
it wasn't my fault, all of this joined somehow  
in the Proustian soup of my brain

to a drab old man leaning over golden fists  
of bread, his famous arch of piety and forgiveness:  
two things that have always made me wince.

## DEAR JUNG

It's not that I'm afraid  
of burning houses or broken  
teeth or the breasts

of my long dead mother.  
Rather, I'm awake now,  
the window's open

from last night  
and a woman I love  
just brought me strong coffee.

Besides, I know  
they'll all still be there  
whenever I get

around to them,  
waiting with the patience  
of wet stones.



WRITTEN AT AN OUTDOOR CAFÉ AFTER NEWS  
OF ANOTHER AMERICAN KILLED IN BATTLE AT  
AFGHANISTAN

While a nearby couple discusses Jane Austen,  
men across the street are tearing the room off a house.  
Shingles fall like one-winged butterflies,

or maybe moths—the ones that change their color  
after a couple generations of roosting near factories.  
It's a day for frozen yogurt and iced coffee

sweating in rings but these workmen in ball caps  
and knee pads go on, stooped like oil derricks--  
even the new guys tethered like fetuses

to the steeples—hammering and hammering.  
Except for when a breeze ghosts over the lot—  
nothing miraculous, just a knot of air

cresting the tops of cars, the plumage of trees,  
these men just high and smart enough to pause,  
turn, and mouth it with their sunburnt faces.

ON THE MATTER OF SYRIAN REFUGEES, OR  
POEM WRITTEN IN THE SEVENTY-EIGHT YEAR  
IN WHICH WE HAVEN'T LEARNED A THING

They came to escape the busted glass,  
the children with broken noses,  
those looming smiles bound up in kinked crosses,

about a thousand souls clutching the rails  
of an ocean liner named after a city  
known for birthing jazz, which stopped

first at Cuba, then the US., then Canada,  
turned away each time in the name  
of prudence, so sorry, there's just not enough

time for that kind of extreme vetting.  
Imagine the long trip home, how every breeze  
twisted like a knife made of bone.

How shame and fear inhabit the same side  
of the same silver coin. It should be  
remembered that off the coast of Florida,

that crowded death-ship found itself

surrounded not by stern men with pencils,  
let alone Christians with blankets,

but American gunships—a goddamn swarm  
sent to make sure nobody swam for it.  
I'll not say these were your parents,

your young, for the dead are just dead.  
But I think that you and I are floating on a raft  
that is actually a great door

torn off its hinges, and there's an arm  
rising out of the fog, holding aloft a torch  
that might glow if it weren't made of stone.

UPON HEARING THAT THE RINGLING  
BROTHERS CIRCUS IS CLOSING DOWN AFTER  
146 YEARS

It all starts with jugglers, usually  
immigrants with elaborate mustaches  
touring town halls to the applause

of farmers who can only look  
at fallow fields so long without crying.  
In time, a horse and a dancing bear

get involved, then women on trapeze,  
elephants like blunted scimitars.  
Boys sell paper bags soaked in butter.

Tents thicken, a little bit related  
to blouses. Meanwhile, those farmers  
go off to war and come back,

or not. Their children grow tall  
then stoop and wither, biplanes

transform into jets that bleed  
across the clouds like eyeliner.  
So much becomes beautiful

on retrospect, including the whip  
and the tiger that bows in spite  
of fur that knows no rhyme.

## HOW TO BE A GOOD BUDDHIST

It's not about appreciating  
simple moments. In fact, you shouldn't  
until long after they've passed,

and all at once for no reason  
you feel this nearly  
unendurable affection for

the sunlight slanting  
somebody's backyard near a grill  
and a cooler full of beer,

or the way she gathered up  
her hair as she stood in the shower,  
not yet out of love with you,

or the child now grown  
leaning over sofa to pet a dog  
whose name you don't remember.

## TOO LATE

I should have got myself  
enlightened on some hilltop  
between daffodils

and pastures of horseshit,  
stopped fucking,  
stopped eating meat,

gave up liquor, maybe  
even taught at some monastery  
where I knelt straight

as a sixpenny nail  
for hours, always smiling  
at the mice behind the walls,

then when I finally felt  
my chest unknotting  
stunned everyone

by ordering a hooker,  
an alarmingly rare steak,  
a fat glass of Scotch

that tastes like rainwater  
shushed through the arms  
of fire-hardened trees.

## ODE TO NOTHINGNESS

A caveman dressed in reindeer leather  
whittles a flute from the wing of a vulture  
and four hundred centuries later,

not one of us knows the tune he played  
as he limped across prehistoric France,  
not especially concerned with what

we might call the *soul* of that vulture,  
its immutable cinder—just that the breeze  
felt good on his face and isn't it lovely

how breath makes sound, how rocks  
yield fire and even dung grows flowers,  
how the earth makes music of our bones?





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Michael Meyerhofer's** debut poetry book, *Leaving Iowa*, won the Liam Rector First Book Award. His third, *Damnatio Memoriae* (lit. “damned memory”) won the Brick Road Poetry Book Prize. He has also been the recipient of the James Wright Poetry Award, the Annie Finch Prize for Poetry, and other honors, including five chapbook prizes. Since 2011, he has served as the Poetry Editor of *Atticus Review*. His own poems and stories have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, *North American Review*, *Hayden's Ferry*, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, and other journals. In

addition to poetry, he has published a fantasy series. For more information and an embarrassing childhood photo, visit [troublewithhammers.com](http://troublewithhammers.com).





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