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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of English

Writing Program

ANOTHER RIVER

by:

Luke Cumberland

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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GAINSBOROUGH CREEK

I grew up quickly and thinking I'd never need a drop in my life.
John was back—he had slept through his first year at college—
And we were sitting by the creekside as we'd done before, with the big oak
Hanging over the water, its leaves brushing the bright face of it;

Thread-legged bugs bending the surface with the neat tips of their legs,
Bending the light on the water in toward the hysterical little dance of their feet.
I'm reminded of a poem by Tu Fu, it is a poem about friendship:
How after years Tu Fu returns to the home of a friend

To find he has raised a family, and been successful in business;
They drink wine from the rhinoceros horn together. This was nothing like that.
“There are ten thousand cares in the world.” John said, as the procession of water
Slowly spun the back wheel of an overturned Peugeot. “None of them are mine,

And I am not one of them either,” and I agreed. By this time we had finished
The bottle he had brought, and were lumbering back home through the woods
Behind our street. All around us the fog hung in the trees like a wish. And we walked
Through it that night as if we could meet ourselves on the other side.

WHAT THE CHILDREN DO

The children make their world from leaves,
Wattles, and cleverness; their world is a good dark—
Soft July dark—they are helpless, yet their bodies are the small
Flexed muscle of refusal. Refusal to leave the dark.

The priest told my brother they grind the babies up, &
Then they burn. As a man, and because he told his sons
And daughters this, I told myself I'd never set foot in another
Church—won't, will not. There are other reasons.

METRICS

My mother I thought was crying for me when
I was a greenhorn of 12, but she was crying for the years
Between hands, the centuries of noise, the centuries

Of light. She says the moon will keep sinking in the Pacific,
Regardless if anyone's there to watch that bonewhite
Coin drift beneath the water's surface and settle.

"How do we measure thirst except in a string of breaths?" she said.
In a dream, remote to me as my mother's voice, her joined
Palms cup a puddle of saltwater. There is a moon in it.

I brush the surface and a dozen moons swim inside her hands,
Flitting like apparitions in the small drink of summer.

CRACKED SKYFUL

I'm teaching Andrew how to kickflip on Gainsborough Dr.,
He says I look different—the late summer breeze chilling strangely
The upper lip I have just shaved for the first time—I was embarrassed.
“Pop the tail like a regular ollie, flick the nose with your front toe
As it slides up the griptape, let it spin, catch it with your back foot,
Roll away.” He caught it halfway through the rotation again, turned his head
Down, said “Cocksucker.”

An hour ago from the top of the stairs my mother
Said do you know where your father was today. The phone rang: it was Tim.
Then it was Matt, Mary, Duke, Grandma, Jeff, and it kept going on like this.
“Pentagon.” She turned her head from the phone and told me “Pentagon.”
I keep thinking Jack. Sitting with his face to the wall TV in Mrs. Henman's class,
His back to me, how the smoke clung like the tower's wild hair, how it happened
Again, and when it did Jack turned his head to me, hung-mouthed, and I the same
When his eyes strangely hardened, his hairless lips pressed tight.

SILENCE

We used to go down to the edge of the Potomac River to bag
All the tennis balls that had washed up from some country club
In Northwest DC. Once I chucked a rock into the water there;
And I amazed at how quickly the water healed its skin

Behind the bl-ooop! of the plunge and returned immediately to itself.
That rock is still being driven into the muck by the cold push of the river
Even now, 20 years later. We used the tennis balls for batting practice—
My father would tell me choke up on the handle as he lobbed the dirty

Yellow globes overhand toward the brown grocery bag that was home plate.
When the dark pressed down on me and everyone else had gone inside,
I could hear him calling my name, which is silence, but I didn't know it yet.
I didn't answer then for that reason, I don't know why I still don't answer.

A FOOL EXCITED BY EVERY WORD

His fingers are locked in the black metal of my facemask, his sprayed
Saliva flecking my pocked face which shows indifference even though
I'd forgotten my responsibilities, which sends him off the handle;

There the cleats have worn the grass down, it fades to dirt at midfield &
Around the goals' creases. I wonder how we got here, him and me,
To Burke, VA and in this way; how any man can live one minute

In a world where every other man is his father, red-faced and German,
Endlessly opening the door to the bedroom where his son's mouth moves
As if speaking in the lap of yet another father's son, now horse-collared

By his father's hand, which has become this man's own, thick-fingered &
Blackhair-tufted on the knuckles, nails white underneath with pressure—&
Locked in the black metal of my facemask, the hushed crowd behind us.

COLD SKYLINE 1

The sun gives form to the branches again beneath the split-skin horizon:
I crack a beer and think I wish I were rich, I wish you weren't going to die,
That the sky remained undivided, that my religion wasn't penumbras

Slung onto pavement at a certain angle at daybreak, but simply the looking
And not asking. My mouth heaves the January cold that slouches away,
I watch it sink reluctantly, reluctantly into the cadmium light, and close my eyes.

GUN SHOPPING

After a dancing drunk night in Charlottesville
We pulled into Clark Bros. Guns in Warrenton, Virginia.
It was a clear Saturday morning with dogwoods
Gushing white; spring was in us now.

Jay handed me a bolt-action WWII Russian surplus rifle.
The softness of it surprised me, the way it reclined
In the curves of my hands like a swan's neck.
What would it take for me to splinter

A man's skull onto the sidewalk, to realize my own
Casual apocalypse, my delicious rage? Who hears
The music of the steaming headless body?
How can this cavernous wound sing to so many—

The guttural fugues echoing from its opened flesh?
“Luke,” says Jay. My fingernails are digging hard
Into the handle. I let go and gave it back to him.
Rain, the firing range out back sounded like rain.

ELEGY

Between his naps in the dumptruck cab in Maryland he taught me and Tommy
How to knead grout with a spade and lay flagstone. He put on a dry shirt
In the cold morning and told me about how the Starlight had burned
Down but all the girls escaped. He said he wouldn't eat re-fried beans

Because they looked like they'd already been eaten once; he was no
Spring chicken. He wore a suit with sharp lapels, the neat shiny shoes.
This is when he was dead mind you. He never looked as good alive.
The church's bereavement committee asked my grandmother

Was Big Eddy a habitual churchgoer—his hair was cleanly parted.
The priest came over and muttered, reading from a black binder.
Then they closed him in and lowered him down and that was it. I remember
That cold morning in Maryland, he said "Just a quick change of clothes."

BRICK AND MORTAR

A thought catches in the mind as wind in a sail—
As at Assateague Island where me and Ross drove that evening
After laying brick all through the hottest week on record in DC—

Only some is caught, the rest smashes into buildings and sand.
A boat might set off in one direction, dividing the water as it goes,
breaking it into two shards; broken again and again

By other errant boats, manned by the drunken captains
Of Assateague Island; the water swells as it is broken,
As skin swells when it is broken, and all flesh-pains are swelling.

I drove us to the beach this time and with my hands still raw from lifting
Bricks to the scaffolding with the rope pulley. Near the Delaware
Border I fell asleep at a red light, but we made it to the waves.

But there was no wind pushing into the waves, it had forgotten us.
They were simply left to occur on their own, never accumulating, building &
Unbuilding momentum, the boats sitting in the distance of our youth.

WHITE MAN IN A WHITE VAN

Is who we heard the shooter was. We were golfing in Fairfax City
Nine years ago—and nine people were already dead and we'd been running
Like squirrels in zig-zags for weeks while he'd been forcing their bodies
Into bloom; there is nothing to learn from this: the bullets came from far off

Through a hole in the trunk of a car the size of a Coke can, and came quicker
Than prayers to God—Franky had just hand-wedged onto the fringe,
We were stupidly hunched over like strange crows in the fairway,
Our creaky pull carts chastising us. How did the bullet choose some,

Seeming to forgive the rest, as if we all craved mercy, but not equally—
As if anyone—who—could know this? It came quicker than the connection
To her phone at the Sunoco across town when another body slumped
Hard into the pavement. “Please hurry,” she said, and they did.

AT THE VERNAL EQUINOX

I'm half-sleeping-standing-up at the beach on 115th St.
In Ocean City, MD where the stars look like white caps
In a darker ocean. The sand over and over again is wiped
Clean of foam by the everywhere engines that are the invisible.
I consider the white hair of stars fallen into my hands, how I run

My fingers through, I think "I hate this." There is a field inside me
Where sins are scattered like seeds; the field is black, the sins star-
Colored. I think "The stars would disappear if surrounded by only light."
I think "This field, a second sky full of star-colored sins." I think
"A faraway burn in me, this field is only heat. The seeds invisible."

FALLING DOWN

After I hit him, I thought the streetlight might lift from him,
Might flicker out, or turn to the lights of ambulances.

The curb split his head like fresh fruit. I sat in your office
In the English Dept., our blonde Emily. You didn't sermonize

Like the lawyers and fathers. Your sole sentiment
Was blue in the sky of your affirmation. "Fuck,"

You said. The sentence of his body was shattered
Into incoherent syllables, I thought. "If the stars could ring like bells

Or looked like them, they might have chimed that night,"
I remember thinking, sitting next to her. "They might have been

For the dead. The bells are always ringing, they are
The songs of the dead, they do not reach us, though."

COUSIN RYAN

When the depression meds made him gain over a hundred pounds,
And he had to drink himself to sleep every night because the weight
Gave him sleep apnea, and the breathing machine drove him nuts:

There was laughter inside him. There was a savage dog staggering behind him.
When he went into seclusion in his basement for a year to get his head right—
And he had to keep his divorced parents from trying to kill each other because

They were living together now since he didn't want his father sleeping under bridges
Or in cars—he started to watch all his old Power Rangers tapes so he could laugh,
And laugh at himself, and at the dog gnawing his calves and heels and lapping up

The blood insane with pleasure. When he came out of seclusion he knew—
Because he told me—that his generation was humming a hackneyed requiem
To itself somewhere beneath hell, and that American culture was rotting deep

Inside its guts; and who knows maybe it was. He said “It's suicide to come outside
When you've seen the dog grinning in your face.” When he lost the hundred pounds
Because he started smoking dope everyday that the lobbyist group sold him

From the Eastern Shore, he started to feel the static of carpet on socks with his feet
Without his brain flashing white behind his eyes: color dripped through the cracked
Walls of his glass box childhood and ran across his fingers and palms as he cried

Completely happy and exhausted; and I knew he was beautiful because what else
Could he be if not this ugly. When he sat down with each member of our extended
Scarcia and Altobelli family on Christmas, and told us where he'd been the past year,

How he'd beaten the dog to its newspaper and magazine grave, and they all thought
He was fucking crazy, I told him I understood, but I didn't have a goddamn clue
What he was talking about. I knew I didn't know what we were doing here smoking

Black&Milds on my grandmother's front porch in Maryland in late December,
Talking about his self-diagnosis and Power Rangers. I knew how lucky my life is.

COLD SKYLINE 2

I'm still drunk as the morning light hedgerows the Blue Ridge; I step
On the gas and in minutes another sunrise on 64 East, then a third.
I pull over onto the shoulder, get out and lean on a guardrail.

Snaplighting a cigarette, I watch the traffic skitter past—frost is flowered
On the edges of the windshield wiper arcs, the dogwoods are pale—
This is it: a morning snagged on your notice: miles away she is 84 pounds,

Almost hairless in a bright room wondering what is left to ransom
For an afternoon. I snaplight another cigarette, this time more carefully,
As if joining a bright berry and stem, as if my lips were garden walls

Within which something might grow, or burn slowly down.

CRACKED SKYFUL

From here I can see how his arms hung obstinately by his sides
In the photograph, his button-up torn open like pinions by the wind—
How he might have taken full breaths, filling his lungs with sugar-fine air,

Like buckets filling with water, which spill out when dropped from high up,
The water rushing over the sidewalks of Manhattan, into the street.
I wonder could I catch him and hold him there, or, less hopeful say,

“He could not fall forever, though he must have wished for it—
An endless fall and nothing could interrupt it; a fall through a wound torn
In the earth just for him; his eyes fixed on the next field of crystal-fine sky

In a morning that would never warm, just keep blueing out until like a radio signal
He left the other edge of the world, and was brought slowly as a small moon
Into orbit, his gravity tugging lightly on the earth, and we lightly back.”

WHAT THE WOMEN DO

“Your mouth is an intoxicating wound, and my tongue a blade.”

THE ROAD UP AND THE ROAD DOWN ARE ONE

The thunderstorm enters the city like a professor
Might enter the classroom: looking sober, graceful and reticent.
If she could, she might tell me that clouds aren't there,

Only water is, and that the virtue of water is formlessness.
We know, or ought to, what the water knows—a body
Is the loss of its form, that the body fails absolutely.

The sky is the earth's expression: autumn purple, winter darker,
Spring translucent: these faces transcribed in the Atlantic: the horizons
Hold what is held in the water's reflection, not in the air between.

I live alone, and my only friend is 1,000 miles away.

LIT WORLD

The lights in the windows snap off one by one
In downtown St. Louis; there is much winter to come.
The buildings reach up and stake themselves
In the sky as the temperature slips, vicegrips
Them—the whole city, its transients, the river edges.
This small galaxy of lights cools off slowly, quits
Humming; concrete and steel in every direction
Cooling from the outside in, they are dark now
As the sky is dark, and the river. Maybe this night
Will not end.

POEM IN THE MANNER OF JANUARY

It is daybreak, the light leans into me through the windows.
The light wraps around a bedpost, the shadow of which is shoved
Into the brightness of the planks of the hardwood floor.

In the kitchen I cut an orange in half, a string of juice hangs
Between the halves like a clothesline, then snaps. Morning
Is a cast robe of light from which no body walks out; today

Is Tuesday. Outside the window, the wind like a cold knife cuts
A leaf from a branch, and the leaf falls away. By now she's moaning
On the computer screen and I notice the scum water pooled

Outside on the AC unit surrounded by windows and brick, the sky.

CATHEDRAL BASILICA OF ST. LOUIS

Standing here alone—save my shadow, longer than my body,
Laying slantwise on the pavement on Lindell Ave.—I look up at it:
The mountainous arrangement of stone and glass, shadows spooning
The ridges in the windows the saints stare through. The gigantic cupola

Reveals permanence in genuflection as gravity sucks it slowly into the dust
Of the world, its convex dome held erect by the gradual tailing off in every direction
Of deep rilled tile; held up to clear nothingness, the proffered cross at the peak.
A woman arches herself at the moment of conception, then arches

Herself in the ER; the arches of the Basilica transubstantiate
The grayness of stone, give life to nothing, save this, again and again &
Again. A woman arches when she is filled and again when she is empty.
A woman arches to give breath, the Basilica to take it.

PAPIER-MÂCHÉ

The light in the hand fades, the shadow of the hand goes.
6 years-old, left hand mummified in cerement newspaper and glue:
The effigy of my left hand larger than the hand itself.
I worked my hand out of its damp, clinging Sports Section. I know
Now that sleep is daily rehearsal, we are practicing stillness. Sitting
In a basement somewhere the ink of the hand is worn, the glue
Flakes, the fingers break off and lie around the sunken palm.
My hand is larger than its effigy, but I know it must somehow still fit.

THE KINGDOM

Dust pushes through the alleyway, pollen heaves itself against
The faces of apartment buildings across the way, the alley
Swept clean of kids screaming their heads off. My right elbow rests
On the balcony ledge, the cherry tip of my cigarette brightens
Between two fingers in a city of smoky fingers—the kingdom
Of the cashed, the chronically unemployed, fucked. Trash clings

In the gutter like algae in a stream, it trembles slightly with the wind.
It is a long Saturday, August. Here again's the rain we go under,
Like a living robe hung on my shoulders; the clouds are ash on summer's
Lip, summer with its diet of sky calls me sap. After the rain my cigarette is soaked
And bowed over, the alley starts to leaven with steam in the eveninglight;
Neighborhood kids start to trickle out of doors and onto fire escapes.

I light a fresh cigarette, the sun lights me, I know I have one body to burn.

CRACKED SKYFUL

I saw a TV screen full of smoke, I've seen many, many more. I heard
The hysterical songs, I saw the tattoos and bumper stickers, I listened
To the speeches, I listened to professors, I listened to priests; they all
Suggested something spectacular and true. What? There is a cracked
Skyful of smoke, and here I fill up paper after paper only to burn them,

My small fire adding to smoke of the world, which is also mine. I'm reading
Jack's message home in a blue-edged box on my Dell: "9/11/01: 8th grade
Home room, 9/11/11: Kandahar. Remember." He should have just said
What we've all been thinking: You must choose as you have always chosen,
Before the dead as before the living.

SOME DEVOTIONAL

I remember she had hair like candles, the woman
With the mouthful of sky—she held out her glass &
Drank it like champagne. I am eating a sandwich
By the church near my home. The church has tall
Windows, the walls are pricked with spires and blackened
With rain—I swallow another bite, and another. Crows land
On the church walls. If the world was perfect I wouldn't know
The difference. A river rises above my life like prayer from silence;
It isn't prayer.

WHAT THE MEN DO

They run fast and put the new man down.
Bendorf hears the shoulderpads crack
From the opposite end of the field.
The men put him down on the field
With the lacrosse stick pushed down
Hard across the throat and shout loudly.
Then the men drive their sons to practice,
Tell them separate the men from the boys,
Tell them they'll be readier for the next hit,
That he has your shoulders, his mother's face,
That I'm proud of him. Forgive me.

ON FAT TUESDAY NEW ORLEANS HONORS THE NEWLY DECEASED

Dancing down to the river among the dolled-up and facepainted,
We hop down St. Anne Street steps behind the band, the clown-
Dressed bereaved with their urns like jelly jars, the little sepulchers.

Beneath the varicolored costumes, underneath the tights and spandex,
Is the clap or tattoos or C-section scar tissue. The music is ecstatic,
And the warmth of brass.... We turn a corner and they dip

Into the funeral dirge; our pace is stretched like the tune to a shuffle,
The sashay of women in peacock dresses becomes wooden, we go
Down the stairs to the Mississippi a half-mile from where a man

Drowned whom my friend loved, where they never found him
In the black churn of septic water and night. The harlequins dump
The ashes in and there are miles of drunkenness ahead of us—&

Across the river is a moonless western sky. Now dancing,
Now song. There are hours and bottles before we sleep in Missouri—
We are free from god and disease and jobs, so we punish ourselves

With smoke and sweating cans of PBR—nothing will punish us here
But ourselves. If we must be punished, let us do it to ourselves.

JACKSONVILLE BEACH

I've come for love, the dog track and pool hall dives,
The Book Mine and the clinging stuff—the dappled gowns
Of Spanish moss. The house cats greet me with breath and saliva,
The parrot meows then rings like the portable telephone.

Hours later from the top of a lifeguard chair by the Atlantic,
The wind-kicked sand grinds out our sightseeing resolve,
So we climb down and duck under the wind and into a Jamaican
Theme bar. True nostalgia is misremembrance: I could never solve

The algebra of memory, anyway—the language scrambles itself,
Then we gargle it like ocean water and spit and spit and spit.
After I've had more Red Stripes, the dreadlocked Floridian himself,
The white bartender and joke Rastafarian, says how do you like it?

He meant the beer but I was feeling sad or like singing.
In my ears, seagulls join the static ringing of the ocean—it rings.

BY THE RIVER OUSE

By the River Ouse, we're sitting on the esplanade as the ducks
Go around busy in their small labors, the crewboats passing
Through, manned by two men cutting the water with long oars,
Raking the surface with their heaves; the ducks rising with the small
Waves during their dumb attention to flung crusts; she watches
Me in the low purple light.

I will sit with you until the river is
Indistinguishable from our bodies, and we are submerged—one
Of us, neither, or both—in the total darkness above another river.

CITY SONG

The sunlight spills onto the streets of Washington DC
Where the kill economy is wheeling at 8 am; you are naked
On the bed and I'm drawing you with pencil on a pad above
23rd Street NW. You tell me an interstice is not a line, only
Two forms touching. Skin is a record of failure. Nearby,
Some protestors are shouting and singing beneath a red sky
Framing the edges of buildings with iridescence; they have pictures
On signs that show brokenness—like my little sketch—
Forms touching imperfectly like sky and space, restlessness &
Grief. Look at me she said. Look. I touch her shoulder, she says
My name, I crawl back into bed with her; that was enough.

ODE TO NOWHERE

1.

I know that what moves is dying and what's dying must make due
With less light, less time: always less than the moment before,
More than the next. It isn't 6 a.m. yet and I haven't slept in what seems
Like a long time. I puke stillwarm coffee and beer in the Lambert airport
Bathroom, then move through an aisle and sit by a window. There is cold
Air blowing hard on my face from a vent, the runway is covered in mist
That looks like a daydream—as the sun burns it away—as if the dreamer
Were startled, as if there were a dreamer. Then we're miles over Indiana,
Over Georgia, over DC. Jettrails like scars dug in the sky, the wings dragged
Across it, gliding noisily along for a long time. I drink more coffee and beer
As we cut through the sky; we tell each other yes, please; tell each other no,
Thank you; tell each other goodbye, you're welcome.

2.

After Franca died and I'd driven back to Virginia from Missouri,
We were all at a bonfire sitting on the green moss on dead logs
Where we sang. It was spring. The leaves had been bruised with autumn &
Buried by winter. A fog slugs through—the wind starting. Stopping.
Matt is walking back and forth through the fire; Nick, too.
When it is time for me to drive to Harrisonburg, the sunlight through
The trees like bright leaves is scattered on the ground, but nothing here
Will make me worship again. I hug my friends, I hold them. We are at the edges
Of the fire among ashes. "Love like ashes, not fire." I thought
Not fire, wood—the warmth of its own smoldering—crackling—its quiet.

3.

Clouds hang from nonexistent hooks all around our steel
Fuselage, which like a weird lung we're breathed in to. Later
Outside the windows is complete darkness; I will backtrack
Through this dark furrow in 10 days beneath guttering Andromeda.
What catches in the ear and stays there? The engines screaming
Softly. What will the upturned eyes hold somewhere while
Daylight lands like weight there on their eyes, on the ground?
Our shadow cross turns the day dark and holds those below inside
As the mind holds a dream, which passes. And another dream passes,
Another world, another another.

4.

Cranial horizon, let me see what we have made. Let me see the silver wings.

The deep charcoal thunderhead pestles air into rain, the gears

Of the storm are like groaning. Sitting by the big glass window overlooking

The runway, I notice a shadow alphabet strewn across it that is

Maybe beautiful because disappearing as the runway turns wholly dark.

The sky is flushed with geese; a sky is coming over like an eyelid. The birds

Are hysterical among the noise of planes and the storm. I want to smell the rain

On pavement, the metallic sting and subsiding. I want to remember what

The geese broke—the expanse of air and moisture. I want to remember what

Their wings remember—up and back, flat and locked, the rain that couldn't stick.

5.

If there's wisdom, if there must be truth: I'm from nowhere &
Like a clear sky it holds no shadows—I've never lost anything
I wasn't going to lose anyway, I believe this; I laughed at the religious
Once, prayed with the religious; I returned to my family
Like the T'ang hermit, Cold Mountain, and like him they didn't recognize
Me because I was changed irreversibly by the world that I cannot change;
But I returned with this wisdom: I have no home and I'm always going there,
Nowhere—there are no shadows there because there is no sun. No sun
Because there is nothing to illuminate, a nothing that warms and makes grow.

NOTES

The poem “Gainsborough Creek” alludes to the poem “To Wei Pa, A Retired Scholar” by Tu Fu, translated by Kenneth Rexroth.

The poem “A Fool Excited By Every Word” takes its title from Heraclitus’s fragment, “A fool is excited by every word (logos),” translated by Richard D. McKirahan.

“Cold Skyline 1” is for Kelly Rankin.

The poem “The Road Up And The Road Down Are One” takes its title from Heraclitus’s fragment, “The road up and the road down are one and the same.” Ibid.