

GHOST

**ADVANCE
REVIEW
COPY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**

COUNTY

JOHN MCCARTHY

ADVANCE PRAISE

“In John McCarthy’s arresting debut, *Ghost County*, the middle of America reveals itself to be a belly full of opportunities and frustrations. McCarthy’s sharp poems explore the people who stay in these Midwestern geographies where every house ‘hides / old trophies, missing years, and nameplates / in unfinished attics’ and tired mothers ride Ferris wheels ‘with scrape-kneed kids / until the sun collapses / behind all the dust.’ These poems work like a pensive map to it all. And while the locales change from Indiana to Illinois to Kansas, all of the secret and sometimes regrettable things that make us human stay the same: longing, bent expectations, tenacity, and long horizons on every side.”

—Adrian Matejka, author of *The Big Smoke*

“From the dilapidating metal of trailer parks to the almost unfathomable hope found in a pickup truck, the poems in *Ghost County* marvelously articulate the strange, fluctuating space between the real and the imagined. The known presents a loss of possibility while the future, as pocked and problematic as it is, whispers that change is possible. But how? In this debut collection, John McCarthy explores growing up where fences ‘decay like rotting teeth’ and ‘gutters fill with all four seasons.’ With imagery that forever questions the now, the details in these poems continually slide between the surreal and the real. The mesmerizing sequence of eighteen poems all titled ‘Pickup Truck’ suggest that such language is necessary seeing as how ‘we are ghosts’ and laughter evaporates ‘because it was real.’ Impassioned and insightful, this is a book that travels between those very real places not found on any map: memory, disappointment, and hope.”

—Charlotte Pence, author of *Many Small Fires*
and *The Branches, the Axe, the Missing*

“The poems in John McCarthy’s *Ghost County* exist somewhere between the jar of car tires on a rutted dirt road and the silent and haunting music of dreams. The way he imagines and executes these lyric Midwestern narratives renders the place both familiar and strange, humdrum and ethereal. This may be a debut collection, but McCarthy has the craft and vision of someone who’s been at this for a very long time.”

—Chad Simpson, author of *Tell Everyone I Said Hi*

“In the Midwest there are two worlds at odds with one another: the simplicity of the surface level and the complex life occurring beneath everyday life. In this stunning debut, John McCarthy illuminates this complexity and curiosity of life in so-called ‘fly-over country.’ The poems in *Ghost County* move fiercely between violence and love with equal measure and means. In each poem, new worlds emerge from what might seem ordinary from an airplane window over the prairie land. This is a book that never stops opening up.”

—Adam Clay, author of *Stranger* and *Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World*

“The world of John McCarthy’s *Ghost County* is the world of the flyover Midwest, where any ‘town could be a stage prop / for *Our Town*.’ However, in these gritty poems, McCarthy exposes a grimmer reality tainted by drugs, alcohol, poverty, and violence. He instructs the reader to avoid the words ‘halcyon or nostalgia.’ He constructs a speaker who is ‘an addict to continuity,’ hardened by traveling miles and miles in a beat-up pickup truck between dying towns trying to hold a frayed relationship together. Yet this is a hardscrabble life where time stretches past into future, back into the past, and all seems predetermined to remain the same. McCarthy’s poems pay close attention to a darker middle life, and they do not flinch.”

—Sandy Longhorn, author of *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form*

GHOST COUNTY

POEMS

MG Press

<http://midwestgothic.com/mgpress>

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GHOST COUNTY

POEMS

JOHN MCCARTHY



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For my father

*That world! These days it's all been erased and
they've rolled it up like a scroll and put it away
somewhere. Yes, I can touch it with my fingers.
But where is it?*

—Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son*

BACK ROADS OUT OF LONELINESS



*REPEATING THE FUTURE
IN PAST TENSE*

I had two friends who picked us up
in a brand new Grand Am.
There were no dents in the door.
The plush seats were not burned
with clumsy ashing.

They drove us to the park
where we remembered the years
staying together like rosary beads
on a string before snapping.

“People are passing through us
like they mean it,” I said.
You told me to stop
thinking and listen

to the other world
hiding behind the clapping leaves
glowing green in the dark.

My friends remembered
to come back for us that time,

and their clear faces,
full of the confidence
of people who could not see
that far into their lives,
said, “Get in.
Get in.”

JUST OUTSIDE
OWASSO

falling apart, the wooden
Oklahoma fence decays
like rotting teeth,
corn husk and quiet jubilee

and someone is looking down
from a plane's porthole
seeing nothing but squares
brown yellow green mortared
together with dirt roads
a goddamned boring life
they probably think

knowing nothing
of the twelve-year-old
holding the mason jar
mouth full of mashed
potatoes and crumbs
wiped away by the cracks
in his dying father's hand

the same tired man unable
to be seen from that distance
his tractor slouch
his mouth shut so tight
and content he is invisible
because he understands
life the dusk harvest

hay bale lightning bugs
in his fist who cares
if the whole family thinks
the little bugs are stars

TOUGHNESS

spent all weekend barefoot on a bicycle
with pegs hauling kids around
aimless kicking Natural Light cans
caught in sewer grates next to flattened
leaves like wet rags in a lump fire
talking about the friend who drowned
this winter in the pond behind the barn
whose parents hung themselves
with rustbelts we threw rocks against
sheds turning it into a pissing contest
our tongues growing up before we did
we ate dinner off a toilet lid
while mom shampooed our hair
my sister's Barbies were missing limbs
my best friend carried a BB gun
thinking cleavage was as hard as it got
in the gut if you precede drinks with rot
fast forward twenty years adding sizes
to our shirts maybe I will explain why
I own brass knuckles with a thick scratch
or how I got this scar like a rat tail
broken bone accordion I wanted to live
in the austere house on the outskirt of town
where the paint was peeling off
cuticles pulled back until no one
remembered racing through sedge grass
sickle pod weed to the edge of soybean
fields where out of breath and biting
our lower lips the cockleburs tore our feet

open like a coward's chest but no way
we were going to let something so small
show its pain of course it is trite as hell
but fuck it was as sacred to us as the building
we got dragged to every Sunday in clothes
stiff and rigid where we bowed our heads
looking ashamed because we were
thinking only about how later that night
we would leave our shadows under pillows
sneak out of our windows missing screens
and locks our lives small and safe
crawl to the openings in trees
find our way with fists into the deep
hollow in fly-dump dark to sit in the silence
beside a barbed wire fence one of us asked
who could grip it the hardest

GARNETT,
KANSAS

The sky changes color sharper around here,
grey to green like an overnight infection.

In the seconds before a tornado,
you hear your own voice dim

like clouds descending,
puncturing themselves on bluestem.

And when it touches down,

your initials carved in dogwoods are ripped away
like letter magnets off of a refrigerator.

You hide by staying outside, watching
lightning open up the sky—the sound of zippers.

The sky exists to add a new layer to the ground,
to push you under by what comes next.

After the cone lifts,

the houses and brick settle like crooked teeth.
Sliced cottonwoods frame the road with labored breath.

The earth has been unearthed,
revealing the fossils buried here,

their ancient language preserved as awe,

as Carboniferous bone.

Like bone, the town's debris is scattered
across fields, buried by now until next time.

COUNTY
FAIR

I.

It takes place in a vacant parking lot—

the circus, some call it a festival,
a fair, all the same.

The football teams
sit in the back of borrowed Chevys
chucking empty bottles at streetlights.

II.

A bald man, the name *Ciara*
on his neck, hands a dart
to a sharp boy who pops a balloon.

A girl with cracking nail polish blows a bubble.

A blue teddy bear is yanked off the shelf,
its white stuffing will be left
shredded in the mud by a Rottweiler.

III.

The Ferris wheel
is smaller than a two story house.

Mothers ride it with scrape-kneed kids
until the sun collapses

behind all the dust
beat from their heels with flip-flops.

IV.

On the last day, cheap fireworks
ignite the brown air.

The fairgoers are back home
filling houses with blue glaze,
while the games and rides are dismantled,
loaded onto the beds of trucks.

The night outside flattens
under red and yellow explosions
exposing a humid couple,
overweight in sadness,
fingers laced, slow dancing
on the cooling pavement.

*THE WEIGHT OF
DIRT AND RUST*

Red fingernails swirl through white air.
Stale pretzels—a gaggle of throats coughing gravel.

That bar is a shed with its one Stag sign half lit,
barely visible from across the street where I live.

Patrons stand outside in overgrown zoysia,
cradling Pall Malls in callused palms,

while their houses start to tilt on slab-lots,
while their gutters fill with all four seasons,

while the weather-crustured furniture rocks back and forth
on their porches from the weight of dirt and rust,

while their garages fill with empty buckets,
while car parts scatter and collect across their lawns.

Their greasy toolkits are assembled from people
who let them borrow hammers and nails.

And I am wiping my oiled hands
when I realize I am young and lucky

enough to stomp my foot on top of a cigarette,
dropped weeks ago, grinding it into the gravel,

still trying to filter the fire out.

MUD ON
THE CARPET

I walk my father to the Veteran's Association
on Main Street, where he swaps a lack of money
for fried fish and brown bottles.

On the way home, I look at my reflection
in dusty windows of a vacant pharmacy
surrounded by the discount smoke shop
and Alcoholics Anonymous,

before deciding to head home,
to hit a heavy bag hung from rafters
on a detached garage
without gloves or proper form.

Every time I throw a punch,
I think of my mother, and the word
agoraphobia. I heard it once
when I was young,
never bothered to look it up.

I figured I had it anyway,
the way my father screamed
that word at my mother,
the way my mother has been sleeping
all this time since.

Every time I throw a punch,
I count another second
my father has not arrived home.

Eventually, the front door will slam.

Through the small living room,
steel toes will grind mud into carpet.
Inside the curio cabinets,
tiny porcelain angels will shake.

*PORTRAIT OF A PREACHER'S
SECRET, DEKALB, ILLINOIS*

Illuminated, a flash bulb,
the light a cigarette glows
when someone inhales,
squinting into the dark
where shadows exhale
their spirits of smoke.

The alcoholic preacher,
barn dweller and crop-
grower of infertile seed,
blesses his forehead
with pantomime and oil
stains. He burned

his tongue in a creek bed
of dried lilies, a peat-still
he sucked so thoroughly
he tore his right hand off
when building the church
from wood and lathe,

signing the cross forever
with a scarred, closed fist.

-30 DEGREES

Conifers and Jack pine glaciare
while icicles hang from a crow.

Bone-cold aluminum siding
suffocates the trailer,

while razor-cut amphetamines
litter the coffee table.

A father who is not a dad
wipes his hands on his long johns

before rubbing one hand
through his matted hair,

before rubbing his eyes
with fists. His tongue stutters

last words of spirits
and prescriptions.

He opens the trailer door,
enters the freezing draft

like an animal, like a ghost.
Playing with toy trucks,

his daughter hums a lullaby.
She hears a shotgun blast.

*I WANTED TO SAVE HER BUT THE
TRAILER PARK WAS A CHASM*

Girl named someone
made of birthstone & birch-
bark disintegrates

among the amaranthine
rows of telephone polls
guiding the abandoned

highway. Road kill,
a dead elk. Prairie
grass like fingers,

searching for a spirit.
Her face against a car
window. Her father,

a collector of labyrinths,
of skeins, the skulls,
taxidermy on his wall,

gives her vacant stares
until she falls
asleep; every night

her father tucks the
covers over her body
knucklebones reach out

to shut off the light.

She wonders
if she will feel

like her mother.

Her father, his prison
wasp tattoo

stretched & faded,
then a probing,
then his sharp ribcage.

*HOMECOMING PARADE IN A TOWN
WITH LESS THAN 1000 PEOPLE*

The homecoming queen with Down syndrome,
who made national news, stands on the head float
blowing kisses to a teary-eyed community. This whole

parade started a half mile out in autumn-colored corn,
trapezing like wrong notes bellowed from a trombone
toward the open stadium, with half-working floodlights,

where the football team will play tonight.
Half the town remembers playing for the team.
They still pretend to care about rivalry, dressing it up

in their throats, hoarse from cheering at teenagers.

Candy is thrown; children race to Dum Dums
and Tootsie Rolls. Parents watch the end of the spectacle,

hoisting folding chairs to their shoulders.
Everyone is polite. "It's going to be a good game."
No one disagrees, except for three kids

who skipped school to avoid participating in spirit,
smoking purse-snatched cigarettes under the bleachers
knowing the underwhelming, stupid truth.

ASHLEY, INDIANA

Home of the smiley face, the bloated egg yolk,
a hot air balloon about to burst,

overlooking the basketball hoops missing nets.
The balls are never taken inside.

Every house in this town hides
old trophies, missing years and nameplates,

in unfinished attics. Around the street corner
is a baseball diamond, an initial-carved bench,

and one child left waiting after losing
the game. The sun is setting.

The wind is picking up. The child is alone
and trying to bang out the dirt—

the chilled clip of smacking cleats together.

THE KEY

Fluorescent lights hum as the employee sweeps
the concrete aisles clean of the enduring dust—

the constant collecting of reasons to buy hammers
or light bulbs. Lives evidenced by mud off of a boot.

He is thinking about the man
he copied a truck key for minutes ago.

His age-spotted knuckles turned the metal
against the key copier, carefully

before slipping it in a paper envelope—
his art, the tracing by which spaces are unlocked.

The bell jingled on the front door
as the customer left, and the employee listened

until the muffler rattled awake
and coughed. He forgot

where the man had said he was going
and why he had needed the extra key, immediately.

As he continues sweeping,
he finds a wallet-sized picture of a young girl

that must have fallen from the customer's pocket.
He walks to the front door and peers out.

The only streetlight in town turns green,
but there are no vehicles around to move.

Behind the hardware store, worlds appear in the alley—
a raccoon, a tin can falling, the soft ping of its spinning.

PICKUP TRUCK



PICKUP
TRUCK

Just pretend it is all
four seasons at once. I will
push you into a big mess
of leaves. You will

climb into the back
of a truck that sat
for sixteen years
on the front lawn

of my parents' trailer—
the one with cup holders
you told me to clean
forever ago. I will

drive for decades
pretending you do not work
at a gas station anymore.
You will not have to lose

the toothpaste cap
again or wear nail polish
that cracks every time
you make change. I will

tell you how alone
everything goes bang,
loud and afraid
is what I really am.

I will back out
of your driveway
for hours listening
to the gravel

pop its spine—
sound of arrival
then the headlight
feeling of leaving.

PICKUP
TRUCK

I will not know what to feel
or say when I am expected
to feel or say something important.
You will slam the door

on this truck after we leave a party
where everyone is messed up
on sadness, calling it two decades,
a reunion, disguising themselves

as bodies wearing bodies
that drive cars and have kids
they keep pictures of in pockets.
I will tell a lie about it all

to relieve you of the burden,
explaining how we are ghosts
and we want our ghost child
to be the best damn shadow

this side of the light. Everyone
will hate me, telling me I am
missing so many parts of life
like my past was its own face,

an ugly kid with crooked teeth
on an old milk carton. You will
thank me for doing the talking
even though I did not talk,

and I will admit I cannot tell
you what was said or unsaid—
but you will not slam the door.
You will shut it with great caution

like you know what my truck means.
You will be glad it only fits two
people, both of us, comfortably. You
will say how you like how bright

my headlights shine. Leaving this place,
our old neighborhood, other people
asleep with television haze we never watch,
the distant barking of a dog fades mute.

PICKUP
TRUCK

In order to say the word *love*,
the tongue must pass between
your teeth, and I will say it
with so much force when I bite

my body right out of my body.
I will stand under hot water
until all my skin dries out,
but I cannot help any of it.

I will tell everyone, except us,
what to do with their lives,
those final years cracking open
until time is a pair of lungs

laboring so hard to scream
through the static of a speaker
system so broken I do not worry
when you slam the truck's door.

My pockets are empty, just fists
wanting to squeeze the idea
of a picture so bad I show people
how overwhelmingly happy we are

when we are not home. You will
drop a whole stack of dinner plates
one night when we are somewhere,
yelling at each other for breaking life,

a life that never even made it
off our tongues. I will yearn,
and you will tell me it is too late
for nonsense. I will buy a house

without gutters. In the winter,
on an unusually warm night,
the snow will melt, and we will
fall asleep to what sounds like rain.

PICKUP
TRUCK

When you wake up, I will
make coffee so we won't
sleep again, even though
that is all we love.

I will kiss your fingernails,
pinch your hard knee.
We will pretend we are
healthy. You will tell me

to shave. In my pickup,
a screwdriver is jammed
inside the cassette player,
a sign of love, a song

I wanted you to hear.
We will sing invisible
tunes we do not know
the names to and forget

to finish every board game
we start, losing the rest
of the pieces on purpose.
We will laugh for decades

before I burn the toast
for breakfast. The years
will fall out after that,
but it won't be sad.

We can have another day
like this. I will sit through
every green light listening
to you recollect a lifetime,

how your parents still show up
in your dreams as coyotes
wishing you well with reasons,
but it will be different, you

and me, arriving anywhere
early so you can fix your hair,
while I listen to the cooling
engine click its tongue.

PICKUP
TRUCK

All the trees in Illinois are frayed
nerve endings and it is fifteen
degrees. You will hide inside
your body until your coat stops

shivering. The heater in this truck
has not worked since I bought it.
I will tell you how we need to go
home. We will stop holding hands

so I can go faster on stick shift.
You will tell me I care too much.
I will beg to stay inside our house
for so long the neighbors forget

we are home. You will leave me, briefly,
always hating the idea of my truck.
I will realize I could get comfortable
inside a bed full of boxes and glass.

As we drive and the years break
apart, I will tell you the same stories
about vacant parking lots and parties
that never actually happened,

where the acne-spotted quarterbacks
measured marksmanship by breaking
streetlamps. Every basketball hoop
in town is still missing a net. You will

reassure me we had it good enough.
When I begin to cry about growing up
in a trailer park, you will backhand
the blood out of my teeth.

PICKUP
TRUCK

You will kiss my hand
on a sharp turn. I will
not tell you how close
I am to crashing. You

will write your name
in the condensation
like a neck tattoo I am
too afraid to get.

Nothing says forever
like covering ink up
with a Carhartt. I will
be in love forever

with this truck's door
opening like a mouth
biting down on a fork,
the way aluminum cans

roll around in the bed,
sounding like panic.
You will stay inside
while I buy cigarettes.

Your red thumbnail
is perfect, pushing in
the truck's lighter,
priming our breaths

for heat. The air
is so frigid you quit
trying to fix your hair,
and I try to start

everything back up,
the cylinders and lights,
the conversation
about our safety

in this part of town;
IDs are not needed
to hide. We will flick
cherries into the dark.

PICKUP
TRUCK

We will take a road trip
to another stretch of road.
You will make me leave
my coat in the truck

while I grab a payphone
outside an old saloon,
dialing any number
I am able to remember.

My white knuckles
gripping it so hard
I will freeze the voices
on the other end

that never answer.
We will walk and tell
no one that we are broken
down outside a village

in rural Dakota, a name
I would give to our child
if we were given that luck,
but I only have pockets

full of closed fists. It is hard
to tell you how much it means
that you wake me up
when I forget to fall asleep.

We will walk for years
until we are given a jump.
You will offer to drive,
but I will point to my nose

and grin. You will say you
saw a shooting star; I will
ruin everything when I tell
you it was a homeless man

dragging a ripped trash bag
spilling aluminum cans. Matters
of perception will be your victory.
I will think about the centerline

and how I want to cross
it on purpose, heading home,
or nowhere, looking at trees,
their varicose vein trunks

taking all the weather with them
through black wind and flatland.
I will wish I could give you eyes,
wish I could tell what was real.

We will remember the normal
life we never had. At last,
when we arrive back home,
I will count every hair

on your head, say a deep prayer
for every inch of each strand.
You will not have to hide
anything. All your belongings,

all your hard-won frailty,
will be kept in the living room.
We will not understand
how anyone else existed.

PICKUP
TRUCK

I will be pulled over
for a broken taillight.
The cop will demand
insurance I do not have.

You will tell me we are lucky
when he lets us go. It is easy
to feel sorry for people leaving
cigarette butts on the floor.

I will apologize for the solar system
of Styrofoam cups under the seat
where you sit, resting your feet
on week-old McDonald's bags

eaten off an exit ramp. We will
spend multiple lifetimes suspended
on I-55 between Litchfield antique
malls and Joliet toll roads charging

change to keep going. I will
toss in a handful of lost teeth
and beer tokens from some tavern
named after Route 66 phantoms.

I will want to go home, an addict
to continuity. We will never know
why we bothered to try to go
anywhere. We will always end

up falling back in love. A flat tire
will keep us from doing anything.
My hands so callous from trying
to change it. We will break down

in the middle of a cornfield,
and I will try to articulate
the amount of hubcaps I lost
explaining how beautiful you are.

PICKUP
TRUCK

Cattle sit behind barbed wire
for miles along I-80 thinking
about nothing. You will say
we need to return to nature.

I will turn the conversation
to a television show we did not watch.
We will wake up in a parking lot
at a trucker's diner. All that acid

blue of jeans hugging thighs
of men who have not seen wives
in thirty-five years. We will
order corn beef and hash,

liquid egg yolks, turning
into ketchup, familiar
images, and me wanting
your stomach to feel better.

It is always some kind of winter.
I will tell you how my hands
are made of your skin. You will
tell me I am more fucked up

than our life is. If you are real,
then you will leave me in reality
and in dreams where I play
the banjo and sing along

to the railroad tracks that broke
my childhood by the ankles.
This is how our fighting starts.
You will tell me to fold

my truck around a tree
while I try to flick ash
out a hand-crank window
during freezing rain, black ice.

At home, wherever that is,
when I get there with my bag
of hammers, ready to smash
the windows out of my dreams,

we will hot knife nuggets of them
until everything is fake, all gold
and true inside my head forever
like a nail stuck in tire tread.

PICKUP
TRUCK

You will want to know why
I did what I did, placing the gun
to my head, asking for you
to snap a picture, to remember

driving to Indiana
through an ice storm
only to run out of gas,
to play harmonica,

bundled up and hiding
under the awning of a church
abandoned and dilapidated.
You will tell me to go to hell

or figure out what to do
with a lifetime of Mountain
Dew bottles and three dollars.
We will start recollecting

about you, a little girl, reaching
to stick your hand inside
your father's lathe, and him,
in overalls as big as winter,

yelling for you to stop
before you ripped your body
out of your body. You will cry
and curse the alcoholic he was,

the time he took an ax
and split the kitchen open
to find a crack rock he hid.
I will talk about my sympathy,

how it feels like a violin
plucked with a hacksaw
or a grand piano balancing
on the tip of a fishhook.

You will kick my truck
and tell me to shut up
with all my imagery. I will
break my own nose

in a bar fight to show you
how real this is. You will
drive with me to Oklahoma
or Ohio, the edge

of all our placelessness,
asking if we have made it yet,
opening and slamming my door
until you feel warm and safe.

PICKUP
TRUCK

I will rip the wipers off
one night trying to find
wings, a way to ascend,
to divine, to become

a feather or leaf, a thing
with conscience, a thing
that knows the loss
of connection with bodies

larger than itself. We will
stop every ten miles
because of that attempt;
this pickup is a crater.

I will swear to God
when it rains. I will drown
when it snows. I will
suffocate. How can I not

when the word freezing
comes from a root remaining
motionless. Emergency blinkers
will flicker in a shallow ditch

because my truck stalled
and we do not know
what else to be but cold.
It is a shared type of heat

when I finally lose my fingers.
I will hold you until our lives
come back to us as steam
in reverse from throat smoke

we exhale—a jacket sleeve
pulled back through itself,
inside-out. I will trade you
spots, ask you to drive

out of Indiana after I chase
a handful of painkillers
with Evan Williams. Usually
I am not this drastic.

PICKUP
TRUCK

You will say you want more.
I will wear a torn flannel and wipe
dripping snot off my dumb face
with unbuttoned cuffs. I will

tell you to scratch your gums
until the whole truck is numb.
You will say your lips feel more
like a mouth than lips. I will

keep talking. The smoke burning
our eyes might be our shadows
turning inside-out. We will
stop at dawn at a family diner

named after nothing,
ordering only hardboiled eggs
and coffee. We will leave
a bad tip, try to justify

our own guilt, mumble
something about love.
We will not look at each other
as we walk across the lot

to my truck's faulty ignition,
a metaphor too obvious
to notice. The waitress
glaring from the window,

judging our tragedy.
When the engine overheats,
I will watch leaking antifreeze
dye the dirty snow.

PICKUP
TRUCK

I will look for an excuse
to use my brass knuckles
or lose my teeth. It will
feel better than admitting

we had it so nice. A tavern
is where I will sit, calling
the hospital until I learn
what happened to you.

God, it must have hurt,
and me, too selfish, to be
a face in front of you crying.
I will grab the keys to my truck,

roar all the way to the Quad
Cities, nothing to think about,
except for the small names
of towns and who the hell

got to name them and why
do the ones without football
teams sound like the best
places to hide. At home,

when I get there with you,
I will promise to detassel corn
with the high school kids
or sit in a parking garage

for the rest of my life, purchase
the absence we created
with absence. That cracked
Bob Dylan cassette case

is still in my glove box
holding your fingerprints.
I will listen to you
until there is nothing left

but ideas we will never have.
You will wonder about gifts,
what I would have given them
besides a crumpled role

of two-dollar bills, extinct
Americana, some old baseball
trophies lost in the cold attic
of my parent's house

that I did not even win.
I will waste the rest of life
spitting my mouth out
of my mouth, and you will

come back to me somewhere
in southern Illinois, lost.
I will not have a clue
how we got here from there.

It will not matter. We collect
parts of each other, giving
them away with sympathy.
You will focus on the missing,

and then without you my truck fails
to start like it used to, in the cold
of my oil-stained hands it idles,
chokes, complies, resists.

PICKUP
TRUCK

The pain will always dream,
becoming realized, pushing
us into my pickup truck
that never drives us home.

I will use up decades
teaching you to forgive,
failing to teach myself
the difference between

sacrifice and desire. I will
regret not being an architect.
I could have built skeletons,
bronze frames of skyscrapers

from all those bobby pins
that fell from your head,
the same head you rested
in the crook of my neck,

when we drove all the way
across our cold Midwest,
bone-cold root of nowhere.
I will agree when you say *fuck you*.

PICKUP
TRUCK

The snow is melting into dirt
all around us in squares,
illuminating silent churches,
their crucifixes pointing

at streetlights and telephone poles.
Christmas lights hang on the steeple,
on the paint-chipped columns half-lit.
It will be a coincidence, something

to do with blind faith, a purpose
always stacked on another purpose
doing everything on purpose,
a sign within a sign. I will keep it

simple when I beg you to understand
why I drive this damn truck begging
myself to understand you in myself,
talking in circles about purpose.

My truck has multitudes. You will act
as its tongue, telling me I am missing
form. We will never have form. I will
never shift gears gently, the stick

is jammed, the screwdriver, years later,
is still stuck inside the cassette player.
All we can do is have ideas about not
having ideas about hope. You will

tell me we will be fine, but I will
say that is what I am supposed to think.
You will yell at my mouth for behaving
too much like its own mouth and body.

You will be right, all the time, afraid,
silent and present too far into the future,
just like my truck, this hole in my life,
in my big dumb face—a sign.

PICKUP
TRUCK

This whole truck smells
of ghosts, one half-dead
and me. You will declare
guilt is an imperfect form

of knowledge, the way
we are always leaving
IDs at home but driving
anyway. You will keep me

up all night watching stars
for no other reason, talking,
lying in this flatbed, pointing
out how one million light years

match the shine of your nails.
I will want to go to sleep
quick and slow, full of speed.
We will drive to Florida

in the summer, terrible ideas
about happiness in my brain.
I will hide a six shot revolver
in my glove box, wondering

what the mouth inside my mouth
would say, the color of its breath,
sidewalk chalk. I will run over
someone's important message

to no one. What would anyone
think of our cold Midwest,
or my proclivity toward driving
my whole life all over town

trying to remember a feeling
I will have when I grab
your sundress that I describe
as rather nice, because I am

afraid to say I will never forget
how easily I am scarred by the color
of someone's hair, or the warmth
unique to your forehead,

the way I will dichotomize
the hotness as sick or well,
regardless, telling them, or you,
we're fine; we're fine.

PICKUP
TRUCK

I will be excited all the time
when I finally land the job
twisting the auger. You will
tell me to be careful, watch out

for the swather and thresher,
but only because you have
heard me use the words
like I know how to use them.

I will think about jumping
in front of one during a harvest,
last winter's salt stains
still on my Timberlands,

but I will not. I would never
do that to you, leave you
in front of a kitchen window
looking out on an empty porch

swing that sounds like chains.
You will tell me you like dirty
fingernails, the way they grip
a cigarette, a steering wheel,

your thigh with understanding.
My face will be stained
with a beard that keeps you warmer
than it keeps me. You will

start enjoying the pickup truck
parked on the front lawn,
and me slamming the back flap
like I know how to be useful.

PICKUP
TRUCK

Pretend it is all four seasons
at once. You say it must be
winter, the way the leaves hurt
when you jump out of my truck,

yelling how I am never clean,
how the bed is filled with weather,
and the grimy cup holders
forever stained brown.

I drive for the rest of my life
wishing I did not have to work
at a parking garage to make ends.
My fingernails dirty and bitten;

change lost in-between leather
seats torn open from breaking
years apart like a Eucharist
under our sitting bodies, wishing

for transcendence or taste,
just one sense to bring us back
together, soft and alone,
loud and afraid, everything I am.

You offer me my body
when I back out of our driveway
for the rest of my life, listening
to the gravel break its spine.

**THE TRACES WE
LEAVE ARE LEAVING**



*SILENCE RISING,
DUST RISING*

The quiver of prairie grass
reminds me of birdsong,

and all those mornings I rose
from one life into another.

From that life where I would run,
feet callused from paspalum and rye

out to corn silos I took for the end
of the world, until I walked farther—

until it shrank and shriveled
like chicken wire. I cut myself

bare handed. I caught myself
living here and not living.

The smell of hay lingers.
The garden is overgrown

with sowthistle, bermuda, crabgrass.
I want to scoop the dirt up, turn it,

plant every thought I have
until they grow new, but my brain swings

like the screen door I used to slam,
listening to wind chimes sing, watching

silence rising from the dust that rises.

PLANTING

The word *bloom* is a grenade.
Pull out the L-pin, and boom.

The dandelion turns into a piñata,
confetti blizzard; exploding

is an efficient way to start pollinating.
Plant landmines in the garden bed.

Don't keep off grass. Be beautiful
all season. Take care of efflorescence.

When fruition comes, make sure no one
gets complacent with your design.

Rip it apart. Scatter prepositions.
Spring comes with an influx of wingspan

and disappears with quiet fireworks.
Refuse to let your perennials fit

the routine occasion. A barrel
is a place to plant a flower.

Load life in root
gun powder and blossom.

GENERAL ELECTRIC
MONITOR TOP

This town could be a stage
prop for *Our Town*. This house,

a façade which can't be torn down.
It has been in the family too long.

All of our fathers died here
tipping brown bottles back, frosty

from a General Electric Monitor Top
refrigerator, plugged in

since wars none of their sons
or daughters even remember.

Out of walls, shedding paint flesh,
the pots and pans on nails jut,

dough rollers, cutting boards,
dish soap in cans, vegetables

in mismatched Tupperware; around here
expiration dates last longer.

Against the living-room wall
plaid patterns push against bloodroot

and dusted blue curtains,
while grandfathers twirl

their thumbs and hum, waiting
to forget their forgetting,

how they chose to remember
memories crack like a swelling

of cicada-static opening a storm,
leaving behind wet shells in the skull

watching swivel-set televisions
shut off after their glow and pulse.

AT SIX I LEARNED
HOW TO COOK

My grandfather baited & trapped squirrels
in a cage, next to a homemade vineyard,
 he carried with him from Italy
 when he escaped Mussolini's army
& shot them with a pump-action gun.

I would peek through the window
where the fast-twitching brown
 of taught muscle was pinned down
 by the greasy barrel
& I would listen to him pray and curse.

One pellet between the eyes.
There would be squealing sometimes,
 leftover energy, but mostly they would fall
 in line, assume the changeable parts of fate
& that would be it for ever moving again.

At six, my grandfather taught me our history
with the gun, placing it in my hands,
 telling me *shoot when it stops squirming*
 then I will teach you how to skin
& he told me it was safer than touching humans.

I still feel the toothless whisper of his mouth
like knives in my ear, his voice,
 It could be you in that cage.
 Don't be the one that squirms
& I did not eat for a whole week after that.

*ON AND OFF ROUTE 130,
COLLINSVILLE, ILLINOIS*

The mystery stopped coming through here
when my palms crusted over. I started

husking corn at dawn, then the night shift
at a parking garage—where tourists walk by camera light.

Faces framed in snapshots: Polaroids for grandmothers.
I count the disappointments—then the epiphany

that even the grandest destinations are the same
as looking up at the world's largest catsup bottle.

GRAVESTONE

Throbbing is a good word for adolescence.

We want everything back—
all the given away, stolen items.

Thighs on fire, tingling then roasted
from marijuana, coffee, the newspaper

on Sunday mornings where a century
fits comfortably inside 10 am.

What have clock hands actually held?
It's shocking how similar we are.

We swear we had at least five lifetimes left
before dinner, and then we wake up asleep.

Teething started; then we sharpened families.
Our shadows became full of unbearable light.

The way we remember the people praying
in the swamp of memory. It was a trick.

All the girls had libidinous calf muscles.
All the guys had lascivious necks.

Our dead dog, some days
I just think about her.

NOSEBLEED

imagine leaving
on a dirt road
but a cracked
powder-brick
church too honest
for its crooked frame
leaning on the corner
of the town's center
altar-glow trapped
inside keeps handfuls
of people company
outside as they smoke
under 80-watt halos
thinking how
it is too cold
to be made of skin
thinking how
they felt in the silence
of the narthex
right before the bridal march
exploded
and everything after
that was a diorama
cardboard scenes
that could be ripped
away if on one Sunday
the hours just took
a few more minutes
to themselves

and carved waiting
into a spot
where television haze
wheezes into the glow
of too many gas stations
and too many restaurants
named after some guy
who wears all denim
or all leather
and a headband
the same guy
who broke your nose
and was too stupid
to remember
to do it again
when you deserved it
the same guy who looks
so damn masculine
he should be successful
just for the size
of his fingernails
but his chicken-wire
posture makes him sweat
through all his clothes
makes him too tired
to tell his wife
that he knows her
when they both know
it is a small town
and you have to leave
so much behind
before you can disappear

HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Many people will die inside your skin.
Your whole lifetime will have occurred yesterday.
To know how is to know what it is like to be a moth,

bouncing off what is compelling you forward,
getting nowhere, always burning yourself after crashing
into what you want to call home.

You must live inside a whirlwind of frustrating storms.
You must eat white rice, white bread. Drink
white milk. Learn what it's like to digest the color of ghosts.

If your friends have basements, ask to hang out down there.
A weird request, but find a way. Observe the stuffed animals
left on the floor in a room their family calls *The Junk Room*.

That's how quiet two decades is. That's where ghosts live.
Learn to meditate like that ragged teddy bear. Don't mention
the words *halcyon* or *nostalgia*; they are your worst enemies.

Study spider webs; they are quieter than silence.
No one ever sees a spider web coming.
Even when they crash into one,

they don't know where it is on their body, and they forget.
Be the soul of an unborn spider web. Buy a shovel.
Start digging. By this time, no one should ask,

but tell them China if you have to. If you're over the age of ten and digging a hole, it's best not to tell the truth. If you decide that it will be a grave, call it a foxhole; don't hide without a fight.

GHOST FRIENDS,
SANGAMON COUNTY

Remember when you said if
you could, you would extract
your soul, bait it with a hook,
cast it into graves and raise
the dead? What is that area
between the storm of imagination
and the platitudes of reality?
You said television.
You always had an answer.
How did you disappear
into thick air? You are small
and large like the word *bulge*,
describing bumps and mountains.
Perfection is always hiding.
I never found you.
Counting to one hundred,
I'll admit I stopped at fifty.
I was the one not ready.
You told me idealism was the drug
dealer for a weak mind. We
ghosted smoke on hanging bluffs,
lips puffing bloodshot leaves
pulling autumn down
the Sangamon River. Burning
tires from the trailer park,
and the screaming interstate.
Last night it turned to winter
when you left. On the way home
you got sick and I got sour,

harvested fields scavenged by crows;
complacency scraped the soil.
At home, I found loneliness
covered in smoke and fog—
my buried driveway, and my father
trying to crush beer cans
against the moon with help
from my headlights. I pushed him
to the ground with fists, and we made
stoned angels in wet snow;
our laughter evaporating
because it was real.

OUTREACH

I love that old lady with the triple chin
keeping her dead husband alive
through the process of six cats shitting
all over the living room floor,
and the mentally handicapped man
quadruple-bagging one can of veggies
in the checkout line.
Look at the one-armed woman
doing yoga in the park,
a malformed tree branch
staying alive because photosynthesis
just feels good. Here is a town,
for me, I thought, where my mother would
not have to kill herself over and over,
where she is entitled to be entitled
to sleep, where her kind of sleep has a point—
a lesson to how we judge the process of the body,
the way it loosens, thins
like a favorite t-shirt washed too often.
I couldn't possibly imagine
a place like this,
where all the hands we need
would come to grip.

*ON THE DAY
I LEFT TOWN*

It was raining and there were holes
in the way I was raising my voice
without anyone hearing;
it was another night alone,
but I swear I felt everyone
more in their absence. I didn't
know anyone specifically gone
but it all felt permanent,
the way a goodbye falls
short, and on the way out
I imagined a chorus
of trumpets and ukuleles
in the late afternoon
of telling everyone I love
that this is the way it has to be—
the houses shrinking,
the sound of gravel
crunching then clinking
against the bottom of the car,
rolling the windows up
to quiet the sound.

*REPEATING THE PAST
IN FUTURE TENSE*

I have two friends that will pick us up
in an old Grand Am—

hubcaps missing, dents in the door.
We will climb into the back seat
as they drive to the town's park
where everything doesn't happen.

I will slip a dollar to our drivers.
Everyone is a chauffeur;
it is all about giving and taking
enough to keep the years
from breaking apart. We will hide

on a blanket under red-dark trees.
I will try to take it too far. You will
tell me to listen to other people
in the distance enjoying their freedom.

My friends will forget to come back for us.

I will walk you home,
holding your fingers
until your front door almost smashes mine.

On your porch, I will stand
facing the street, folded hands
digging deep into my pockets.

NOTES

1. All descriptions of towns are the author's creative interpretation and do not necessarily reflect the actual town.
2. "Repeating the Future in Past Tense" is for Jeff Adams and Robert Erwin.
3. "Garnett, Kansas" Garnett is home to one of the most well-known fossil maps, which contain some fossils three hundred millions years old. The first known photograph of a tornado was taken in Garnett by A. A. Adams in 1884.
4. "Toughness" is for Jarred Adams.
5. The first stanza in "Ashley, Indiana" is based on the Smiley Face water tower in Ashley, Indiana. According to the town's website, they are "the home of the smiley face."
6. The Chapter, "Pickup Truck," is for Rachel Jamison Webster.
7. In "Pickup Truck" (#9), the line "when I get there with my bag of hammers" is borrowed from Bob Hicok's "Elegy with Lies."
8. Lines 18, 35, and 36 in the third to last "Pickup Truck" are references to the diary of J.D. Salinger's fictional character Seymour Glass.
9. The destination in "On and Off Route 159" is referring to The World's Largest Catsup Bottle, a tourist attraction in Collinsville, Illinois.
10. "Ghost Friends, Sangamon County" is for Donald McCarthy.
11. "On the Day I Left Town" is for Caleb Avart.

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John McCarthy's work has appeared in *Best New Poets 2015*, *The Pinch*, *RHINO*, *The Jabberwock Review*, *Oyez Review*, *Salamander*, *the minnesota review*, and *Redivdier*. He edited the anthology *[Ex]tinguished & [Ex]tinct* (Twelve Winters Press, 2014). John is the Managing Editor of *Quiddity International* Literary Journal and Public-Radio Program. He currently lives in Carbondale, Illinois where he is an MFA candidate at Southern Illinois University.