Frankie Thompson Oklahoma story| poems

Bryan Clark Moskop

The University of Montana

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Frankie Thompson
Oklahoma Story

poems by

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Not far from here someone
is calling my name.
I jump to the floor.

—Raymond Carver, Not Far from Here
1890, buffalo hunter kneels in the crashing sagebrush, chin to stock, eye to notch, barrel creasing the warm palm of his outstretched hand. Bitter Creek because the water runs low, because the water unfolds beyond the rocks, black flies scattering among the gypsum caps. Fifty-caliber whir, the last buffalo falls down into a bed of cotton, 1891. And Frazier floods, Bitter Creek rising, North Fork of the Red River rising, everyone falling and back to the higher ground to the rounded fields, back to Latin, back to Altus. Bodies hunched in the drying fields, faces in the chestnut soil, yards and endless yards of cotton ginned, until the earth is never old and never young, and 1930 the blow sand, blow sand that writhes beneath the doors and the windows for fifteen years. Tractor and bulldozer, an earth of new terraces divided by red cedar. Wheat and alfalfa tossing in a slower wind, over the low hills fields of stronger cotton, an Air force base where the winding sounds of turbines wing in a punctured sky, 1975, read the welcome sign, "Altus is a City with a Future to Share."
Hands on a Red Plastic Shovel

Beside the sandbox,
the smooth blue tricycle,
imagining the soft rubber
bumps of the handles,
spongy tack on metal,
blue tubes curving to the wheels.
This is mine, inside the sandbox,
inside the wooden rails, a lattice of grass,
and sand and sand, my pink feet
pushing against the tiny rocks.

Hands on a red plastic shovel,
shadow on the yellow plastic pail—
I am digging. I am digging
these holes to find what is in there.
I am digging holes
out into this world.
I am the Invisible Factory

A leopard, an aardvark, a pencil in a zoo...

A green horizon of letters
dancing above the blackboard,
the flip of desk lids, smell of paper and milk,
I am the invisible factory:
arm moves, pencil moves.
Careful and Careful.
Mrs. Mathis sings beneath the clock—
a song of calendars and alphabets.
This day has a new name,
I see invisible things,
there are new words waiting in line.
A Fox Traveled

One fine day
a fox traveled through a great forest.

Mother's warm sound,
slow light breath,
my body almost dreaming.
I see the orange ears
as they escape the trees,
long eyes drooping
pointed and brown.
These two hearts beating
next to mine, brother and mama
a quick muffled rapping—
like shoes on wet stone.

The lamp light casts everything:
shadow, long blades of light,
forest of window and blue curtains.
I think now, I am a good boy—
quiet, unmoving, silence like a gift,
like all the time in the world.
His tail wagging, orange legs
striding, melting into the grass.
The Man in the Silver Cannon

There’s a big fat lady in front of us,  
her sausage fingers hooked  
into her purse digging.  
The Big top’s blowing like laundry  
on a line, tent pegs loose, ropes twisting  
like the crazy copper heads  
grandpa showed us on the fourth,  
mouths puffy and pink like bubble gum.  
My brother Jimmy’s kicking the ground,  
and the fat lady’s found her ticket,  
 thick pig fingers, ticket smooth and orange.  
Mine’s all dark and sweaty against my palm,  
thinking about the elephants,  
the man in the silver cannon,  
and my dad squeezing my mouth  
with his fingers, spitting  
This is your ticket—it’s the only ticket you get,  
don’t fucking lose it!
Talking to this Rhythm

It looks almost like blood,

wet on my shirt and pants,

smells strong down in these weeds.

My brother in the dirt with Marcie taking her

apart with quick fingers.

And she wrestles him,

like a clock winding down,

mouths giggling, talking to this rhythm

in my head, the cricket buzz, the sound

of my mother hands over her ears;

wine escaping across the table.

My father’s fist is in the air—a rocket.

And it’s too late;

the wine is pouring into my lap.
PART TWO

PART TWO
Sometimes I have to sleep
In dangerous places

—James Wright, *Living by the Red River*
With the umbilical of utility lines, more or less a permanent home, connected to utility lines. This shack built for moving, subtract a permanent foundation, but more or less a permanent home, in thin sheets of plywood against an aluminum shell. Vanilla paint laid down in siding ridges, all steps across the floor rolling shock waves, one big room, thinner walls, walls shaking in the heavy wind, shaking with the depth of our breathing. All shelves rattle and impossible not to hear? More or less a permanent home, living room to bedroom, thin walls of an aluminum shell, thin walls of a singular, unbroken—shell.
Super Bowl XVI

Cliff Branch stretched his arms,
an angel, the crowd roaring like my heart.
My smile's open wide like the oven door,
TV dinners smoking in a blaze. Dad's howling
with his arms over his head—Dr. Frankenstein,
beer cans flopped to the floor,
look's like he's dancing. Mother's out of bed,
her rubber legs spilling out of her nightgown.
And she can't believe him, her finger pointing,
voice shrieking. Smoke fills the kitchen,
and I can see the crowd is on their feet—
voices rising above me in a wash.
Dad staggers forward laughing and singing,
shouting things that make no sense,
but to my stupid heart.
September 1983, Age 10

Like a Car, No Brakes

Dad's car is already rolling
as I catch my stumble from the moving door.
Grandpa's oak tree stands before me,
leaves coming off one by one
flaring in the wind.
The screen door opens.
Hello Bub! he says,
the top of his shirt buttoned up,
his red punch bag face
soft and waxy like my mother's.
But we're the only ones here
on olive plastic chairs
sitting at the table.
He lifts his eyes to me,
and says something dumb like,
Don't you worry, you young!
You get old like me and time speed by
like a car, no brakes!
And I can't feel anything moving.
I watch the clock on the white-washed wall,
watch the second hand
move endlessly in a circle.
Something That I Need

So I have her, the smile on her face
baking me unconscious.
My head is down,
her shoes filling up the scene—
knotted laces, a frayed race stripe
coming off at the side. Her legs
work back and forth keeping her
balance, and she picks one leg up,
toes rubbing against her shin,
blue jeans shaping a wave.
I've caught the football again,
can feel the leather
in the cradle of my arm.
I know this is something to hang onto,
something that I need.
But when I look up, she's gone.
Voices calling for the ball,
I put the weight in my hands,
and its spiraling trace
shadows this earth like a bomb.
Coach's son's a doughnut boy,
always staring down at me
from the pitcher's mound—machine gun pillbox.
When I'm out in right field
I watch the small parachutes explode,
white dandelions blasting
with the swing of my feet.
The umpire is dusting home plate,
and I listen to the vibrating air,
the hover and bounce
of my practice swing.
*Hey Batter Batter...*
Parents in the bleachers
shaking me loose. Last night,
she woke for a moment,
beer bottles scattered
at the foot of her bed.
Mother said, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry my baby.*
I am twelve now, the batter is out.
All Night in this Bedroom

My door’s cracked open to hear
the sound of my heartbeat, the slop of noise
that may come from the front door.
In a room this empty I can’t hide
it anywhere, beneath the bed, inside
the peeling lime green dresser
my old pile of clothes lying naked
on the floor. She’s wearing high heels
with golden straps, her body arched and open
across Playboy pages, across satin pillows
hands clutching the naked weight—
a chest of bright red nipples.
All night in this bedroom,
a disaster of happy secrets, a magazine,
the flashlight flickers beneath ragged sheets.
My Head is no Anvil

Mr. Billy's swinging his head  
like his brain is loose.  
His white face frozen  
like my left hand dig  
into the emptiness of my excuse—  
that's not going to wash  
the smell of my blood out  
or wake my mother from her stone drunk  
to tell him that my head is no anvil.  
This is the third time again,  
lose your homework and  
Mr. Billy makes you pay up.  
Teachers got their faces turned  
upside down to understand me.  
At home there is soup on the burner,  
the metal rings glowing red and empty;  
my head held so close to the stove  
that I think my eyebrows will melt.  
I am thinking about the holes  
in Mr. Billy's wooden paddle,  
thinking about homework, about the math,  
thinking about zero.
PART THREE

PART THREE
Out here the weather
works its salt into the heart,
darkens all the faces
then lights them up.

—Greg Pape, Out Here The Weather
Tornado

Super-cells building above the plain for hours, dark clouds thrashing, thick swelling vapor muzzled above the heated ground. Energy pulses its tail in the wind, forked tongues, black arms dragging across the sky. A lowest ear-popping pressure, breaking its cool, rustling its black stockings through the chain-links, through the farm where birds and rabbits have long since departed, dogs and cats burrowed in the grass, following the clockwise sky, its long rotation of Q's, its whistling in the trees. In the distance the great body of an elephant, water-stained trunk nosing between reliefs—the crest of a hill, tops of houses. Ceilings and branches unfurl, the storm lashing in small suction vortex, to break one house to leave another behind.
We Pass All the Houses

Ten at night, this sky is a full amber glow.  
My head burning sniffed gas grows  
above my shoulders, my feet to pedals,  
bike whir to my left, to my right,  
crazy Jeff, John, motherfuckers.  
Each pedal stroke takes me out further,  
dumb dads in the road screaming  
for their kids to come home. We pass  
all the houses, throats cooked, parents shaking  
their fists like it's supposed to mean something.  
The wind blows through us  
as warning sirens begin to speak;  
our ears are open, hearts spilling  
into the motion. All questions are empty,  
make no sense. If the tornado comes  
we'll fly.
Jeff and John flick the lighter, and the walls ascend. Ferraris and tanned models stretch thin posters. The Professor doesn't like the look of it—a package that could be from anywhere. The trick is to hold it in, says Jeff, sucking in his chest, stomach almost disappearing into the folds of his hooded green sweatshirt. My eyes are stretched out of their sockets, gaping at the bedspread, at bicycles chasing winding trains and beige airplanes in all directions. Back on Gilligan's Island the castaways have eaten giant radioactive fruit, and I'm somewhere between the palm trees and a blue green lagoon, jumping wildly at the tropical sun. And now they're swallowing soap—the only antidote, a thousand miles to the mainland, mouths blowing, blowing these huge glistening bubbles, and everyone just floating.
How Could He Be Singing

The Winter of Our Discontent
is about the food, I say.
The classroom pauses,
shuffling heads fill with energy
angled against me. I look to the book,
and back to the room. I’m missing it.
Mrs. Cole leans towards me
with sacrifice eyes, my own eyes
drifting away to the window
to the thin willow just beyond the glass.

I can see him in the store, alone
as dawn splits the display window,
he’s singing softly. No music,
melody suffocated in his chest.
The food is emptiness
looking him in the mouth.
He stares each can down, each packet
of crackers stacked neatly
with a twist of his wrist.
I can hear his song, a struggled moan
as the ice cubes break up, as the dust settles
on twelve grain bread. And I think
Steinbeck must have it wrong.
How could he be singing?

The classroom is rumbling,
Mrs. Cole asks,
Did you read the book Frankie?
The class erupts with mad laughter.
Like Small Fires Against the Snow

When the ashtray fills up,
she calls me over, says
Dump it.
But I’m not moving.
Her mouth’s dropped open,
drunk lips struggling a question mark.
On the tv a newsman’s talking,
his eyes flickering like small fires
against the snow. He says,
In downtown Anchorage
a moose drags a backyard swing set
down Northern Lights Boulevard,
his horns tangled in the chains of a swing.

I dump the ashtray,
tv spaceship blue lighting the walls,
and mother raises her head.
I hope you don’t never smoke, she says.
But I can feel myself already burning,
the tv flicking in my brain, a dark star
moving beyond myself,
this uncontrollable tearing
at the speed of light.
Watch the Water Rising

No paint on the inside of these walls,
no drywall or plaster sweating.
But I'm sweating this house,
daydreaming lakes of ice,
mornings the streets glaze over,
cars and pickups spinning into a ditch.
When I was little, I'd run
the hose through the grass,
watch the water rising
between the splintered blades.
An inch or two would cover
the burning half of my body.
So hot, the couch is unbearable,
So hot, mother will not sleep.
From the porch I watch
the wooden sides warping in the heat,
so hot the houses are silent.
Mother says, I cannot take much more of this.
White shaggy Alsatian,
a shower of high pitched yelps
rocketing against the afternoon,
neighbor’s dog barking.
Mother is gone.

For how long?
Once or twice thinking
and putting it down, crumpled cans,
flayed newspapers tossed in the room.
The swell of my voice mocks
the shaggy Alsatian, barks of pop-pop,
this fluting bellow flaring in my mouth,
for once, her room, the couch unoccupied.
Little flames in the mind—
a world beyond this world.
There is something to go to.
The dog is barking,
the dog is silent again,
and I am almost happy.
I haven't said a word all evening. A hand has been raised within me, commanding a silence.

—John Haines, *Waiting*
These Names I Know

When the beer is finished
it's just a matter of time
until somebody gets hurt.
Around the porch light moths
swing in moonstruck arcs forgetting
their breathless bodies touching heat.
I hear the break of bottles sliding
off the coffee table, can feel the firecrack
plunge of fists falling toward each other.
These names I know, bouncing
in their orbit, this scuffle
of drunk feet filling the silence.
Outside, it's October.
I walk into the evening street,
submerge in the vacuum.
I leave the front gate open,
let the dogs range the neighborhood.
I notice as each one follows me,
their tails wagging at the sound of my voice
as street lights slowly begin
to awaken.
Wichita Indian

Outside the classroom window
a wind scrambles beneath gray bands of cloud.
Pieces of grass spin against the window.
In the room, Mr. Hilts pulls a map
across the green chalkboard, says
*We are open to page 154.*
Before me, a dark photo
taken by U.S. Field Artillery 1907.
A Wichita Indian sags on his horse,
as three squaws squat
before a grass thatch lodge.
In black and white the lodge flickers
like a pillar of flame; faces blackened
in shadow. Against the sky
I can see their beaded shirts,
pants laced with beads and leather fringe.
As I turn the page I notice a child
in the corner of the photograph.
He sits at its edge, a spot of sweat
reflecting the tiny features of his face.
Out on the street the wind is pushing,
a trash can has turned over
dumping garbage. Somewhere
twirling in the mess
of paper bags, I can see
the boy. This building, the walls,
and the green board it holds,
Mr. Hilts, and all these classrooms
may rest on his body. Eighty years ago,
and he is gone—his face taken
as a point of light.
In the Projection Room

Blood still pumps in the background, my body twitches. This dark pool grows like the face of a small lake, the twenty-foot man dropping his head, the smell of blood on his fingers, lingering and wet in the sensitive parts of his brain. The camera swings up to his wide blue eyes, and there is no failing heart pumping in the background.

I touch my throat to feel it intact, and watch the light change to candles, a bedroom where a twenty-foot woman stands, her thin robe dropped to uncover the heat of my thoughts, a pair of bronze legs shining.

I walk down the aisles, theater one, remind everyone to keep their feet down, their voices down, and then the film breaks. In the projection room upstairs, I remove four split frames of a bar room brawl. Invisible to the human eye, thirteen frames flip a second, the manager says, the death clutch move takes a full twelve, that now I've made it quicker.

I turn the film back on, and listen to the flutter. Each frame passing through projector light, light coalescing with speed, applause from the theater below, everyone satisfied to see the end they recognize.
No Idea Why He Continues

A blood speckled can of beer.
9:30 in the morning, he is counting out loud:
thirty-seven fields will irrigate... 
take the truck and the new piping to Bill Perry's in the afternoon...
His face weak and metallic,
tongue clucking painfully as he swallows—
the sound of my spoon
against the bowl of cornflakes.
No idea why he continues,
cotton fields, cold cases of beer
morning into night. He mumbles
about a flat aching
somewhere deep beneath his ribs,
looking off, looking off somewhere,
at the heaving gap between refrigerator
and the peeling linoleum floor.
It's getting old; its coming up.
The Spinal Tap

My brother couldn’t face the monster locked in his cage. The man who lay drunk on our couch while we sat two hours in the snow waiting for his hands to unlock the door. I remember Jimmy, mouth tight, fists pounding, his math book wedged between skinny knees, while I measured the wind with a pale gloveless hand, amazed to find the stinging sensation disappearing.

And now I hold Dad’s hand. The blue veins trace like thin ribbons against the peach of my flesh. The doctor says in a flat tone

This will hurt,

sticks the needle under dad’s low moan. And Dad lifts his eyes to me, his face fading white to the blue stretcher, and he gives me this look— this look like a baby to its mother the moment his eyes first open.
After seventy days
of wind and sun,
of wind and clouds,
of wind and sand,
after seventy days,
of wind and sand and dust,
a little
rain
came.

—Karen Hesse, *Breaking Drought*
March 1990, Age 17

I Watch the Baby Breathing

The baby yells, round
face inflating, eyes lurching
towards me. I look at its snot
covered hands, the bright pink
blood racing in capillaries
across its forehead.
Mouth open, mouth closed.
I wipe its hands quickly
with the sleeve of my shirt,
place the milk bottle in its mouth.

From the television there is the sound
of Stukka dive bombers—
the strange whining howl
as they fall forward
releasing their bombs.
On the screen the explosions
flicker a black and white light,
mounds of dirt rising from the ground.
My hands are sweating.
I watch the baby
breathing as it eats—
so warm, so nearly silent.
I can feel its tiny body
pulling against my chest.
With that Side of You

I look at your feet
poking through the sheets,
one foot dangling
over the side, sleepy.
I'm with that side of you,
that part that drifts
away from this sweating house,
and the fan's crooked spinning.

I can hear your baby
barely moving next to us—
the creak of her crib.
Above her, each line,
each crack on this ceiling
could be the shape of love
to those wide eyes.
I imagine her body
inside you, try to imagine
us all inside each other
kicking softly.

Asleep now, as I lie awake
watching single flies
pulling in the half-light.
They move through the split
in the screen window,
drifting toward the open soda
on the night stand.
I watch them as they wing
in this brand new space,
in this their single day
of sweet madness.
The Postcard

The blue ocean stands up
against an impossible beach.
Florida—the word in blue letters
like a penny in my mouth.
Small people break the waves,
white splashes like bullets hitting the water.
All of this is framed in red.

Now on the roof
I hear rain falling,
imagine the trees bending
to the thing they can’t resist.
My fingers ride the knife grooves
in our old countertop,
and it’s hard to remember
her smell that used to fix the air
so heavy, so quiet, my brother and I
creeping the house, her hangover
ticking, expanding beyond us—
on the back she writes

Never Looks This Good Sweet
To Have Him For A While

His head works from side to side
against the hospital's disposable sheets.
Dad's eyes drift all crazy through the room
like his arms that sometimes try to touch me:
my hand, sometimes his own head,
tugging at his hair that pops
like tufts of wet grass. I wait for hours
to hear him speak, pieces
of carrots and green peas crushed
against his shirt. Dad starts mumbling
about this animal show, and we're almost there—
back at the house, sitting together on the couch
watching this Suicide guy wrestle a python.
He seems to have him for a while,
rolling, and twisting in the mud,
gripping him so tight, that he says
he can feel its big heart beating.
And then that's it, he lets him go.
Lucky Buddha

I'm nineteen today.
A small package sits on my dresser
decorated with a woman's handwriting
that's spelled my name wrong.
Grandpa says,
Ain't you gonna open that package?
So I get it, and tear the paper
down to a small box
until I can read the label.
Lucky Buddha

Inside is a small green statue
its round plastic belly
five times the size of its head,
and I remember my letter to Jimmy.
...Just read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance...

The Buddha is the size of my hand,
on the bottom stamped in plastic
the instructions:
Rub the belly vigorously
and you will get money.

I imagine my brother's girlfriend visiting him
behind the one inch thick plexi-glass,
her permed hair shaking as she writes
the wrong letters of my name
in a bright red cursive, my brother dreaming
of my hand rubbing a small green belly, smiling
with this bright thought shining
like white snow in his mind,
absolutely convinced that this life
could be so easy.