

How the World Was Made

prose poems by
Christien Gholson



Flight to Venus © Mark Flowers

number 20 in the 2River Chapbook Series

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You have stolen my labor
You have stolen my name
You have stolen my mystery
You have stolen the moon

Proletarian in Abstract Light
Thomas McGrath

number 20 in the 2River Chapbook Series

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“St. Graveyard Shift” and “Witness” appeared in *The 2River View*.

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Mining

I have been traveling into the earth since before my great-grandfather was born. It is something I do consciously, connecting back to the dead. I am not saying this from inside a dream. I have an alarm clock next to the bed.

I can hear the tunnels beneath the floor. Each tunnel has a different word that it repeats, has been repeating since before my great-grandfather went down into the earth. I follow each word down until it blends into another word. "Sell" dissolves into "Sin." "Sin" dissolves into "Salute." There are men still cutting tunnels down there, so the permutations are endless. I am not saying this from inside a dream. I have a knife next to the bed.

I've seen my great-grandfather down there. I've seen yours. He has quick scavenging eyes, albino skin slick as a cave fish. His claws reach out, tear at the earth. His nails are sharp, long. He doesn't need a pick-axe or shovel; he doesn't need a light. He has become a perfect digging machine. He lifts dirt to his mouth, chews, swallows. I am not saying this from inside a dream. I have a pair of gloves next to the bed.

Our ancestors keep eating. I hear them chewing and swallowing. They do not know how to stop. They will replace the earth. I am not saying this from inside a dream. I have a book of matches and a gallon of gas. I will follow the word "fire" down until it dissolves into "fish."

St. Graveyard Shift

Undressing in candlelight, I see the quick shadow-movements of a rock-cleft Madonna in the corner of the room. Some proto-Mary, flickering through a series of caves.

At this hour, blue-glint off a black dog's back.

My last boss told me he and his wife sometimes scattered cash across their bed, then fucked. He needed to confess this to me.

At this hour, the charred woman stirs inside her mother.

Every dollar bill I have ever stolen I've pasted onto my bathroom wall. When I move, I will slip out in the middle of the night, leave the bills behind. The landlord will spend hours — days — slopping the wall with water, gently peeling one dollar from another.

The Water Cure

Glass vials rolled down a thin chute. I measured their length, width; placed them gently on a rolling belt that rattled through a long hot oven. When the vials collected at the other end of the oven they made a soft clinking sound — so delicate — like water falling from an icicle onto hard snow: The signal to leap from the stool, stack them quickly in a wood crate, then run back, start measuring again.

I was at the factory six months before I asked the night foreman what the vials were for. “Detonators for landmines,” he said. The woman who sat across from me, headphones on, looked over, smiled.

After work I plunged my hands in a puddle of black ice-water. Two days later I was laid off.

Sparks sail over a black river. A friend of mine once lit a stump on this beach and a handful of locusts flew out of the flames. They took off across the river, right in the middle of winter. I imagine they kept flying right through the night — bright as stars — until they found that farmhouse at the edge of the earth, the one with all its lights blazing, a woman standing at the front door, the one who waits for all of us with open arms.

Vision

Fluorescent sheen on macadam; Nazi tattoos on walls facing abandoned rail tracks; dream-freight entering mountains to the west (carrying away yesterday's mattresses, radios, rubber gloves...): Everything is beautiful because it is ending.

Venus burns over the skyline — bright, brighter, straining the heart. In the 7-11 parking lot a retarded man whistles and clicks like a starling next to a busted payphone. Another secret language, gone before it can be deciphered.

In the rail yard, she balances on a rail line, naked, arms out, eyes straight ahead, dollar bills pasted across her torso, thighs. This is what I have been waiting for my entire life. Silence trails behind her, pulls me towards her.

The Woman Who Mistook the Sun for the Moon

Figures inside the factory lift seventy pound squares of butter onto a conveyor belt. A machine of whirling blades cuts the butter into sticks. Every hour the machines are shut down so the operators can change wrappers. Same butter, different brands.

First smoke-break: A parking lot full of cars. Curled barbed wire. The black husks of old milkweed pods next to green ones. No one speaks.

Second smoke-break: Natalie talks about the eyes of a deer she almost hit on her way to work. The cliché: Caught in the headlights, unable to move. Years ago, someone at a party once told me that gravity was the origin of love: Particles speeding across the cosmos towards each other. I don't know about the origin of love, but I think I may have found the origin of gravity.

Third smoke-break: Dolly points at the rising sun — a gray ball through gray haze — and says: "I didn't know the moon was full." I tell her it's the sun. "No, silly" she says, "that's the moon." And for a split second I can't tell whether it's sun or moon.

Witness

They speak to me: The half-eaten chicken wing in its bright red Colonel Sanders box; the orange polyester shirt discarded on railroad gravel; the Polaroid nude tossed from a car window into dry grass; the twisted neck of the coyote on the road's shoulder.

I hear them scrape across the sand outside the bedroom window at night, mumble words to songs hundreds of years old. In the morning I sometimes find them hanging in leftover spider strands stretched between the bleached branches of the dead juniper in the back yard. They look like empty flies; nothing left but transparent skin.

I bury them. They keep returning. Scattered rust-nails, a wad of used toilet paper, cigarette butts in tin foil, a black glove. I can feel them out there, hovering near the ceiling in every bedroom in town where young couples are trying for a kid, impatient for some seed to take, give them a new body to enter, begin again.

When I walk past the elementary school in town I scan the children's faces on the playground, look for the ones that made it back in human form. Some point, laugh. Some run. Either way, I want them to know I know who they are.

Sleep Deprivation

A monotonous bass line thunders through the tinted windows of a rust-colored Thunderbird parked in front of the building across the street. Down at the Laundromat last week I saw the big, curious eyes of a little girl peer through the back window of that T-bird. The bass line inside the car was so fierce it made the unused wash-machine I was leaning against buzz and shake.

The kid across the hall has parties long into the night. I bang on the door but he doesn't bother to answer anymore. The landlord says the kid's father is paying for the place because he can't handle him at home. Why should I pay because his father fucked up? One night I heard two drunk kids blubbering "I love you, man" to each other in the hallway. A bit later — fists, bottles breaking. In the morning there was a trail of blood smeared along the wall above the railing.

Yesterday, a girl came to the door with pamphlets about a place where the US government teaches torture-technique to soldiers from South America. "It's why bananas are cheap," she said. She looked cold, so I invited her in, gave her coffee with whiskey. I kept her talking because I wanted her to stay the night. She wasn't bad looking. I imagined her standing next to the bed, streetlight falling across her naked body. She knew what I was doing, but she was tired from walking door to door all day, so played along. An hour after she left the Thunderbird pulled up to the curb below the bedroom window.

Right next to the Laundromat someone was shot dead for seven dollars. The papers talked about the horror of being killed for so little money. That murder wasn't about money.

Patterns

Paint over wall-splatter on the kill-floor and certain patterns arise: Spiders, the Florida peninsula with all its lakes, my grandmother's wrinkled hands. After the kids have been put to bed, I pull out a notebook, put the patterns down as best I can.

Some tell the future by examining entrails. Examining what's in the stomach will tell you something about the land around you. I draw lung bronchi, broccoli, veins inside a bulging eye, molars of a sow, a pair of dice.

When the wind shifts south, slaughter-smell crosses the river, stings the eyes. It burrows into the skin, into my closed-eye bathroom thoughts. It's stronger out here than when I'm down on the kill-floor.

Inlets and the branching creeks across the back of a leaf, the willowy currents around knots of wood, seams of coal, the levels of a sagging wedding cake: A trail. I dip my brush in the bucket of whitewash, make a long stroke with one side of the brush, make a long stroke with the other, cover it all up.

Something's been circling over the river these past few nights. It's no bird. I paint walls in the morning, draw patterns at night. I am trying to keep it from coming through one of the windows. The scream it makes is the scream that comes between the first and second blow.

I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night

The past is all around us; beneath the streets, falling from the sky. Sometimes fire, sometimes ice. When raccoons appear from gutter drains, crouch under streetlight, their eyes are tunnels, caves. Leaves swirl, mix with diesel smoke. It might snow.

I cart all my furniture, records, and books down to the street. Charlie peers through a crack in his door, watches me push my couch down the hall. Outside, its gray skies, a prophecy of crows. An intern from the hospital walks past, looks over his shoulder. I sit cross-legged on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. I am the prophet of snow.

A garbage truck pulls to the curb. The driver hops out, nods hello. He buys "One Dimensional Man" and "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844". When he drops two quarters in my hand, I remember who I am. I turn, get back into the truck, drive home.

I am the last. I am writing a poem tracing the genealogy of the garbage I collect. I am stealing back everything that has been stolen from me. When I finish, I turn off the lights, open the window, let in the snow. Large flakes float past books scattered on the floor. Marx, Gandhi, Vallejo, Césaire. A snowflake lands in the palm of my hand.

Black Hood

A yellow school bus passes. All the figures inside are wearing orange jumpsuits, black hoods. This is the fashion. I am not saying this from inside a dream. I found an owl scat on the doorstep: Hair and crushed bone.

In the plaza, an old man suddenly turns, looks back at me. No one he knows. I am a hand that slips on a wet rail; all stairs gone. I am not saying this from inside a dream. I have cut the lines between cause and effect into my skin with the edge of a black aspen leaf.

The man who usually hawks newspapers on the hospital road is handing out stones. I am not saying this from inside a dream. A crushed black snake on the road's shoulder stirs, slips into high grass (Another dead soldier, trying to return). I am not saying this from inside a dream. Drop sage-dust into an open flame, it sparks like gunpowder.

How Trinity Site Was The-Last-of-Days-Angel And Could Not Find Those Who Needed Him Most

All leaves fell in one night. Then, voices, far off. Trinity Site looked over his shoulder, through a net of bare branches, could not find the source.

He understood beauty, the symmetry of fire sweeping dust down a black street. But still, he could not find those he was sworn to protect. He disappeared inside the ring waking off a dropped stone in a still lake, found a rusted can, a tire, thought: "This time. They're close."

Sage and blackbrush. He stalked a naked figure pasted with dollar bills walking a desert rail line all night, but it was nothing, led nowhere: Prickly pear and broken glass; wadded toilet paper where someone had once squatted between the ties; a red-striped caterpillar crawling across lightning charred bark.

All Hallows

A black plastic strip hangs on wire, wind-ragged. Beyond the wire, pumpkins. Beyond that, cars and trucks on a straight road.

Dust rises off a field. The column twists. Funnel-spirits of the dry plowed earth: Ancestors, still twisting with pain, searching for the reflection of the water-skate's body in black water; for the bluish-green phosphor lamp of marsh light; for the salamander dangling, suspended, between surface and mud floor in a cold pool.

When a door opens between worlds, the skin on the back of the neck becomes thin, lets in the wind. When lines become liquid, the hand inside the pumpkin knocks back. When rain becomes a burning bush, the mouth that was taught "yes" and "no" dissolves.

But there's no rain here.

The black plastic strip twists this way, that. A struggling Houdini.

When I was a child, I was smoke, could slip through keyholes.

Dollars

The old woman lay on a mattress of dollars, watched wind and light sneak through a crack in the boards above her feet. She got up, crossed to a pile of dollars in the corner of the dark room. Chickens out in the yard clucked, scratched.

She pulled a few bills from the pile, dipped them in a bowl of rust-colored water, pasted them across the crack of light in the wall. The wind pushed against the wet bills as they slowly dried against the old bills that already papered the wall.

Outside, she looked east. The sun was rising above the edge of a flat plain. She opened the wire mesh gate of the chicken coop, knelt in dust, pulled some dollars from her pocket, tore them into tiny pieces. The chickens gathered around her. She told them the story the way her mother had told her.

“Dollars bred dollars,” she said, “until there were too many. They clogged every room, every closet, every bed. No one could breathe. People clawed through the dollars, toward their windows. And the windows burst with dollars.” The chickens pecked at the bits of paper scattering in the wind. “People in the streets pushed and shoved each other,” she said, “shouting for joy, clutching at the rain of dollars, stuffing bills into their pockets, growing heavy with the laughter of so many dollars.”

“Dollars flooded the fields,” she said, “washed down into the ditches. Mama and her family ran outside, dancing. And the dollars descended, whirling over everything just as it was promised...”

The old woman finished dropping the pieces of paper, struggled to her feet. “And that’s how the world was made,” she whispered. Everything loose in the yard flapped softly.

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About the Author

Christien Gholson is the author of *On the Side of the Crow* (Hanging Loose Press, 2006), a book of linked prose poems, nominated as one of the top five first books of poetry for 2006 by *Cold Front Magazine*; and the chapbook *The Sixth Sense* (Modest Proposal Chapbook Series of *Lilliput Review*, 2006). His work has appeared in *AQR*, *Big Bridge*, *Cimarron Review*, *Ecotone*, *Mudlark*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Santa Fe Poetry*, *Broadside*, and *Sentence*, among others.

How the World was Made is the second section of a new manuscript, *TGZ (true ground zero)*. *The Black Edge* and *The Sixth Sense*, the first and third sections of the book, appear online at [Mudlark](#).

About the Artist

Mark Flowers has exhibited his work throughout the United States and in Europe, and in the Fall of 2003, exhibited his sixth one-person show with Hodges/Taylor Gallery in Charlotte, North Carolina. His relationship with that gallery now spans more than 21 years. Most recently he was named one of the 100 Art Alumni for the Centennial Celebration at Western Michigan University.

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About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

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Richard Long, Editor

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