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Greenbox to Barbershops

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GREENBOX TO BARBERSHOPS

by

Willie Wilson

B.A. December 2018, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

GREENBOX TO BARBERSHOPS

Willie Wilson
Old Dominion University, 2022
Director: Prof. John McManus

This thesis is a collection of poetry that reflects the heartbeat of the inner-city. The poems in this collection highlight the struggles and explore the tensions within but they also celebrate the tempered strength of those who traverse its streets. The meeting place is the metaphorical center of my thesis. For me, two of those places were the greenbox (juvenile) and the barbershop setting (adulthood).

This thesis is dedicated to the members of my family who sacrificed portions of time so I could sit with the words.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There really could never be enough space to thank the many people who have had a role in shaping the poet that I have become today. I extend tremendous thanks to the members of my committee for their eagerness to contribute a portion of themselves to my development as a writer; through time and patience you have fed the fire that was sparked from a glimmer of seeing what words could do. The untiring efforts of Remica Bingham-Risher to get me to look deeply into the true work of the poet deserve special recognition.

I am grateful to the editors of these journals for the initial opportunity to house some of the poems herein:

“the total sum of squares” and “beats” poems were published in *Oyster River Pages Fourth Annual Issue*.

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CHAPTER I

conjure

I turn the air
into a rose
and the rose
into a wand;
I wave this wand
around a room
until the petals
splash on the ground.
I mix a bowl full of colors;
it transforms into letters.
I take a sheet of paper,
say a spell, then wait
for the magic.

the greenbox

it was really just an electricity transformer, but we made it—our launching place for backflips and base during games of hide-and-go-get; where we would meet after school to talk about nothing and everything; our hub for eating the treats we tracked down from the ice cream truck in summer; where we would gossip about life and Mrs. Neal, our favorite teacher, who'd break up fights so hard her face would turn red or Dee-Bo getting his ass kicked in *Friday*; it was the spot where Chris's mom popped him for foolin' in class, she just walked out back and said your teacher called, and we all knew it was over; the place puppy love found Kita and Dre; we'd huddle around this greenbox, powering the projects; premium real estate with limited seating and when they would fill, it'd be standing room only.

the good hair: prep

I can still hear Mom telling my sisters
to hold their ears or risk the sizzling hot comb

and when they weren't brave enough for that,
she'd say *Don't scratch, you know I'm 'bout to perm that head.*

And then I'd watch them, their fingers afraid
of the follicles they brought into this world.

My sisters were made to think
something of theirs was crooked,

like a smile needing to be fixed or the bark
of the bonsai bending toward light.

beats

When I think about getting older,
I think about them saying listening to loud music
can cause permanent hearing loss

and when I think about loud music,
I think about my Beats and losing myself
to the symphony of smooth in Marvin's voice,

the way an old soul was born from the notes
of *Trouble Man*. And then I think back
to all those years ago, when I wished

I had some noise-canceling headphones
every time dad would beat mom
with his words because at a young age I learned

that his hands would always cut in. Whenever
he got mad because he thought she wasn't falling
in line I imagined myself listening to Barney

sing *I Love You* and of course I needed Marvin
to transform the tracks of her broken
idea of a husband into something else

I only wish it were as simple as slipping
on some Beats by Dre & washing away
everything I never wanted to see.

unexpected life event

First, don't trust anyone—
not your friends, not the police,
not the person donating
their spare time to a soup kitchen—
to save you.

Next, learn where to piss.
If there are no public restrooms,
be certain to mark the places
no one will ever see. Lastly,

when sleeping at the whims of the weather,
the main concern is dodging lightning,
playing Russian roulette with the clouds
beneath the crooked guise of a smiling moon.

pendulum

behind willows women weep

for seeds once

pressed to the bosom

nappy

headed mug

shots fill backs

of milk cartons

white only

in black font

no colors

the price of rent

throwing bones

beneath

the blues

sycamores so full

you can feel

the faint wind

of screams

still wet

across counties

where the names

of schools ache

to be recast

in better light

for the right

to dream

again without fear

of dying

of watching the news

at 11pm pin

suicide to body

as it swings.

clinton: on “three strikes”

I signed a bill,
that shifted people

into the currency
of chains.

within the all of it

To the brown boy: an ocean
of blue lights flashing on your face,
recall the warnings of your father,

who demonstrated on the kitchen table, the proper
positioning of hands when driving while black,
the love from a man who preached

how a calm voice can ease panic,
who told his son how to reach
for things that might be asked for:

license, registration,
a reason to be
found anywhere.

For the boy now grown, driving
through a field of landmines
toward home.

flowers (for Sandy Hook)

Wilted, stunted seedlings,
eyes shut never to open

again. These young hearts
knew no crime other than coloring

outside the lines. Blurred
between rights and wrongs,

the painful position
parents are put in. Decisions

once seemed so simple:
chocolate or white milk;

bread: crust or none;
what do you want for Christmas?

Today I pass the time thinking about
whether or not to send my daughter

to school. It feels like eating piping hot soup,
burning my tongue

over and over. I walk
and can't see the beauty of flowers.

how strange this gaze

watching dandelion petals grow anxious
to sail on currents of wind. This is how I view
your metamorphosis. I remember that

first fear-soaked ride—you in your car seat
and the way I managed to keep a naturally heavy foot
in check, simultaneously inspecting the road ahead

for hazards. Here you are, some sixteen years later
and this is your inaugural ball behind the wheel.
It's strange now because all I hear is my mother's voice.

I see her again in the passenger's seat—when I didn't know
how nerve-racking watching growth could be, learning to trust hands
steeped in eagerness, and what it is to imagine the possibility of crashing.

for the homie

We gather every year to honor Baldie.
Energy pours in waves of liquor
from Hennessy bottles,

we watch starlight blend into
tear-stained ground. Kenny kicks the dirt
in frustration and Dre wipes his eyes.

Some of us are here—we spent
so much of our youth surrounded
by violence, imagining

the ways iron evaporates
our enemies, but not enough time
thinking what it might do to our friend.

This is something I think Spunk sees
because just before it gets too heavy,
he breaks into the silence with a *remember when he*

*was running from Keyshara's kiss
and he flew over that big ass gate
without touching it like Superman or some shit*

and we empty the night,
the circle of us, an eclipse
of smiles and echoes.

not everyday was a syrup sandwich day

Some days would be dandelion petaled
and full of promise. Mom would come in
arms filled to the elbow with Food Lion bags
and stamps to spend on more. Once a month,

my siblings and I would have it
made. Six of us, twelve palms twisted up,
reaching for new ways to gobble
Mom's pennies before she could feel their weight.

Most days our stomachs would growl,
but we were blessed with a flower
whose crown was aimed at holding on
to her seeds until they were ready. She'd squeeze

possibility into meals—I remember the thrill
of watching her peel potatoes, stomach primed
to taste ingredients she'd stream into tuna hash.
Imagine the feeling of feeling like you could float,

as if for a moment
you could be like those petals—
white, with the world as planting ground
and a never-ending breeze at the rear.

CHAPTER II

hourglass

Days crash into days—
a brief maelstrom of dashing,
drawing what's to come.

the greenbox: rendezvous

Shelly and I crept to the greenbox one night
after *Friends*; I had just seen Rachel and Ross kiss
and I was curious to find out why this was something
worthy of audience applause. Shelly made her hands
into little circles and placed them over her eyes—
as if they were binoculars, as if somehow
her five-year-old fingers were ready to explore
the world our parents rushed to ensure
we'd never discover—when the coast was clear
Shelly sat on one end of the box and I on the other,
neither of us knew how close we had to go.

middle passage (an l. hughes cento)

America
Cause you don't love me
Any place is dreary.

Lawd, I wish I could die.
Didn't know my mind
Looks like what drives me crazy.

To holler, cry, and moan,
(Maybe nobody knows)
If that water hadn't a-been so cold

Between me and my dream
And dreams like me
Dying in the dark

Bowed by
The tearless
Cool face of the river.

metamorphosis

How scary it must be,
inching into greenness,

newborn caterpillar,
chew the rays of a freshly lit sun.

Last night, I saw you again—
you were almost a butterfly this time

and I swear you could sense the pollen
hugging a flower in spring.

A part of you wanted to tell
the story of how black and white

could merge onto lines,
but stopped just before

to let the world see that your true power
was finding a way outside the cocoon.

an officer's field/pocket manual

Concerning the wild
behavior¹ at times:

while these are rare²
events, travelers³

seeking to watch⁴
wildlife⁵ should keep

a safe distance
from any animals

they encounter,
experts⁶ say, "You're safer

in a national park⁷
than you are in any city⁸

if you use respect⁹ and allow
the animal a comfort¹⁰ zone.

¹ **policing**

² **certain to happen if citizens are black**

³ **patrolling units**

⁴ **stop, frisk, shoot**

⁵ **looters and thugs/ niggers**

⁶ **the privileged**

⁷ **Suburbia**

⁸ **ghetto**

⁹ **fear**

¹⁰ **patrolled**

chauvin's report

The form said: "incident"

The form renamed the thing.

Renaming gave it new form:

Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction.

At no time were weapons of any type used by anyone involved in this incident.

The form never said: Kneeling
was a weapon. Kneeling could be
praying. Kneeling could be preying

again. Never said kneeling
could be waiting for you
to stretch out
to heaven
and screech
for an already passed
mother to save you.

when George Floyd dies, we remember

We don't sing
our gospels

in barbershops, we
spread our tales

in front of coffins,
aim promises on *we gotta stop*

meeting at funerals
and then we meet again.

Our eyes have become deserts,
rain clouds are drying

in Minnesota, where
memories of friends

mix with graves of people
who share our smiles.

the good hair: just before it burns

Nick was my friend, but he didn't know how envious I was of his smooth and shiny straight and gifted hair. I remember the tears. Crying so loud to my mom. Praying for grades I saw lifted high in shampoo commercials, in commercials about hardware, in every commercial, you could see somebody looking right. Somebody was looking white and didn't know how appealing it could be. And that was Nick and his head of hair, gliding in to remind me of something perfect that I could never touch.

ways to see homelessness

Tremors inside the belly, aching
for fullness and being taunted
by a ceiling of stars. Faith poured
on cardboard, no one
seems to see. Concrete as a pillow.

Will work for change

outside Lincoln Park,
where green lights become
a natural enemy. Whittled world:
from loaf to crumb.

therapy

Yesterday I heard your voice again in the walls.

This time it was laughing and I wanted to peel
that sound away from any outlet. Progress was slow.

I found myself outside staring at moths

and remembering that poem

I wrote about suicide

and how bugs kept flying
into the blueness
of zappers. Underneath this house
is a hollow beat and I want so much

to heal from the sound. I think

I will sit in your chair tonight

and watch the sun fade

with my notebook and pen

and a swig of our favorite poison.

the greenbox: on virginity

1997. Me, Dre, and Kenny
playing hookie on the greenbox,

feeling its electric hum
on our legs, the soft heat

rising as the sun simmers
in the blue. Outside,

there are birds and there are bees,
and the conversation turns to sex.

Kenny asks Dre how many girls
he's been with and I shrink

into thinking what it might be like
to *have* someone for the first time.

Dre tells us he had broken
a cherry two days before,

he fails to say that it was with Kita,
Kenny's cousin who lived down the street.

All the while I am imagining everything
I'm going to make up when it's my turn to talk.

any other place than here

*this is home. the place that earthed you. it's a sore/a wound/this ground/
the place I grew up in.*

—Sharon Bridgforth

Everyone wants to write about home,
but no one wants to imagine Sherman

stuck under a ceiling of stars,
having only the rain as a blanket.

The chill of Chicago night,
a cold so heavy

it embroiders nightmares to bone,
on a bench in Skinner Park,

Sherman rattles with fears of waking up
frozen somewhere on the other side.

When there is no more room at the shelter,
he lines his jeans with the sports section.

Anything to Help

a Vet pressed onto a cardboard sign,

its owner dies a little more
each time the light turns green.

He doesn't blame those not seeing him—
the promise of a real bed is enough

to make a mind go blind. He knows
most see his begging hand and a syringe

or open bottle. Sherman knows
tonight they will pray to a god

who he is convinced has stopped
listening and that tomorrow

is a synonym for not
visible and empty.

P.D.A.

Kita and Dre carved their names
into the skin of trees.

With a heart-shaped sign
they announced themselves,

before anyone knew anything
about experience

and change
or how important finding someone

to filter away
the hardness

of life really was,
they sliced into the bark

for all to see
the letters holding hands 4-EVA.

renig

Four fathers play spades, trying to resist
becoming the graying figures they once called old.
In the background, on the TV there is breaking news:

*another fatal shooting, somebody's son died on B Street
and won't make it home tonight,
and tomorrow someone wakes to a forever*

missing child. One of the four breaks
across the coverage to say *what's really fucked up
are the missing parents, the ones we thought we could count on.*

Staring at the black cards in his hand, he flashes a quick smile
almost ready to guess which ones will bear the greatest fruit.
He hates when he fails to count which ones will make books.

Before he bets he calls out to his son,
who has his head sunken in his phone.
When he is within eyes reach of his father's cards,

he is shown how to play the game:
How to be vigilant and keep faith,
even in things that may never show.

june 30, 1985

After Lucille Clifton

i will be born tomorrow
to a woman with a halo
of frowns and a man whose hands
will scrape them across her face.
she will lead me to delights
of spring. he will carve me
into winter. he will line his words
with gasoline and light fires
with his fists. he will make flames
not even 34 years will douse.
none of us know
i will grow into a man
who hates his father or
that she will not live long
enough to see me turn 33,
or that the smoke he will make
will spread too thick
for any tree to sprout

into their temporary joy.

CHAPTER III

ars

Enough about heart and soul.
I want the words marrow-deep,
for them to pull me toward the promise
of a freshly made bed. I want to sweat
all day, turn the sky into a furnace
and every cloud full
and fledged from the nest.

the greenbox: fist fight

Summer: everybody chillin', sun razors everywhere.
We were bored so we started swinging
at our shadows. All of a sudden Lee wanted to swing shadows
with me. Somewhere in the middle of aiming at all that air,
I accidentally connected and drew blood. I didn't know
if it was the swipe at his pride or the cut on his lip
that stung harder; all I knew was that I was fighting a homie—
a friend who just two years before had shown me
where we could meet up to shoot the breeze—
and just like that one of us was losing a seat.

between a love and a hard place

Somewhere between Earline's brain cancer
and the moment she died

I decided the design was unfair. She was
my mother, she couldn't give you the shirt off her back

without her pants and shoes too.
I think death took the wrong parent.

I close my eyes tight, remember nights
my four-year-old legs ran away from the screams.

I can still see the chocolate melting
from her head when you threw your bowl of ice cream at her.

How come death didn't come for you, a man
who's fist could tear into this woman?

How did she keep on being strong?
I can remember how the threat of you would build

on her forehead until her only shelter
against you was running

to a home in the projects
because *anyplace* away

from you was the *best place* for her kids.
And now today, eight months after she's passed,

your weakened voice visits the phone with regret
when you start to say you have AIDS and

speak of all the ways you loved her,
all the ways you still love me.

the good hair: big afro

Thinking beauty could only be found boxed
in *Dark and Lovely* no lye. I was conditioned
to hair addicted to the ritual of being made
manageable. I have spent my nights fighting tangles,
an entire world bent at pressing
images into my mind and make me
question who I am at the root.
Tonight, I want eyes that make love
to a woman with an afro so big and blown out
that it reminds me of that time I recited my favorite poems
at the Venue. How the mic was pulling me. How it was all
I could imagine. Its spine straight with a fuzzy head
that commandeered every listener's wanting ear.

take me back

to summer
and the Fresh Prince
to sections of chicken
cooking on the grill

to episodes of Martin
that seemed like
they were too grown
for us to be watching

and my momma's biscuits
baking in the oven
to afternoons after school
me and Josh watching DarkWing Duck

jumping off the couch
in the front room
knowing better
than to let mom see

to Lincoln Park
projects before the gates
before anyone had a reason
to believe we couldn't escape

a bottle of water, a quarter, or a few wrinkled bills

Something left to clean: a street teeming with night
and a half-dead racoon, moonlight beaming on an old Twix wrapper,
that homeless woman standing at the median on Jefferson and 5th.

Time: only three years before today, she didn't know
the bundle of pride a person would have to trash
to prove they needed a meal.

Not me: she remembers saying she'd never end up like this,
cutting coupons on her way to Kroger, taking
whatever route she could to avoid a cagey hand.

And then it was: beneath a month's worth of ash and a wind-torn face,
she rests uncomfortably in front of sliding glass doors, seeking
whatever kindness one might leave behind.

strange crowd swinging 'round a poplar tree

They stalk the running man who looks like me running
on a stretch in Georgia where the feet are the first to burn

they break into the quiet with echoes of a peculiar tradition,
pack their clanging into buck shots, and watch the runner topple

to the ground. Claim the pieces where they lay after the clamor:
an ear at times, the skin for wallets, the screaming mouth was last to go.

as if my voice might be the one (to save you)

Glass and shards bottles breaking a grenade
exploding in my ear—
 the doctor's words
mix awkwardly inside my brain:

hospice *terminal* *final care*

A moonless night
the pain
finding out she has cancer.

Contemplating the crashing
world ahead.
Moving through mazes

I bundled my days in suspended air,
into cycles of prayer, attempts
to convince the Lord of the imperfection

of time. Five months. One hundred and fifty
two days. Three thousand and six-hundred hours left
to conjure the correct blend of words

for miracles. *Come on God, this is me*
and when she started calling me
by my brother's name I answered.

the total sum of squares

written after thinking of Eric Garner being killed by a policeman for selling loose
cigarettes/squares

The first time
he pressed
around my neck
I could hear
how the direction
from a chokehold.
in the center
he created,
watched without
again, and
How silly
if I could
circumstance
spun around me,
breathe.
that carousel of hate,
begin to double—
of heaven,

I said
the sum
so hard
my spine
of a soul
I couldn't
of the oblong
while the eyes
blinking. I can't
his heavy breaths
it all seems.
go back
pulled me close
I would.
I remember
just before I
I gave my breath
seared,

I couldn't breathe
of his weight
I thought
scream. Crazy
can be slingshot
breathe I said—
circle
of cell phones
breathe. I said it
taunted me.
Truth is:
to before whatever
to the suspicion
I can't
how it felt, inside
felt my selves
to the white
raw and permanent.

freedom

Leaping form:

Arms and legs
splayed at either side.

Jump.
Kiss the wind

with your face.
Smile so hard
each cheek hugs an eye.

Float over an eagle,
realize you, too, may fly.

stolen miracles

Breeze swinging in from a window,
the wind chimes over the blinds,

somewhere in the house I am just now waking
to the smells of breakfast and my lady's voice

Bae, come sit down to eat.

When I wipe the sleep from my eyes

I am surprised
by how wrong this feels,

eating fork fulls of eggs, thinking
nobody is supposed to make them better

than Mom's. I close my eyes,
battling the taste of perfect

amounts of cheese and pepper. Mom said if you wanted them fluffy
you had to add milk, how can my lady know this secret?

I remember Mom waking up early Saturday mornings
hollering over the cartoons, calling my brothers

and my sisters to the table;
we would pray to dark-skinned Jesus,

thanking him for every piece of food on our plates.
So when I taste this portion for the first time,

she thinks when I close my eyes
that I am doing it because I'm pleased

what she doesn't know is just how difficult it is
to love something you were never supposed to have.

enough

When I was young, my mother played this game—
one-by-one, she sat me and my siblings in her lap

and lightly tapped us with her fist while saying *you think you rough,*
you think you tough, let me know when you've had enough.

As I grew older, I learned the games we play in childhood
are meant to prepare us for our futures,

then my mother left me and I had to learn when to say I've had enough:
enough of the shadow your voice makes in my ears, enough

mirages of a smile so big you could hear the cotton candy in it. I am tired
of attempting to recreate you from the memories

I was too foolish to write in permanent ink. Enough
being taunted by a laugh that was so full of an authentic mother,

who only wanted the best parts of the projects
for her kids. Enough of being haunted

by wishes and trying to dream you close again—
like when we all wrapped around the television,

prone and settled to binge watch the last season
of *The Walking Dead*. Enough

mining thoughts of you in my head and having them
railroaded by the idea of your never return.

a project waltz (for my brother Josh)

after Sean Thomas Dougherty

Beneath the bourgeoisie, a hooded boy bumps through a city of ash, a place seldom touched by light. The crunch of glass: the night's lullaby. The beat is a basketball bouncing, muffled by the sound of dark figures vying for position—sweat breaks from their bodies, through a sea of slur and slang. The price of admission: stifled hope and a single prayer, sung by his mother for his safety against everything unholy under a weighted blanket of stars. Her pain stains the four walls of the one-room apartment each time he leaves. She opens a window and steps onto the fire escape for a drag from the Newport cooking in the wind. She closes her eyes and fantasizes with the breeze, seven stories up, away from every malicious intent stewing below her feet. Practicing the waltz with exhalations of smog. So late even the fast-food is asleep. Who may weep over the sudden loss of innocence? Except my brother. *In the eaves trough of unknown strands of memory, a hornet's nest of regrets buzzes in his brain.* He closes his GED prep book, blows a lung full of disappointment through his cell, and ponders. In his forehead, my brother sees a better future for himself beyond incarceration. He awaits the day he is cast past the arduous locks life has given him. He opens his ears and becomes a bluebird, soaring over the greenest pasture toward the horizon. He smells the sweet scent of dawn that envelopes his wings on his way to his nest. Here, he could not wish to be freer. He listens to the clouds as they sing to him—my brother, for once, you do not have to worry. His worn frame slumps on his bunk, his head still moves, pressing him on. *What is ugly*, my brother says, *the imagination will destroy.* My brother discovers dreams: my brother forgets how to suffer.

NOTES

The title for “*within the all of it*” comes from Ta-Nehisi Coates book *Between the World and Me*

All of the lines in “an officer’s field/pocket manual” were taken from Elaine Glusac’s 2016 *New York Times* Article “What to Do When a Wild Animal Attacks”; footnotes are the author’s

The title for “*unexpected life event*” comes from the following article on the Guilds website: “How do People Become Homeless” <https://guildservices.org/how-do-people-become-homeless/#:~:text=Unexpected%20life%20events%20can%20cause%20homelessness%2C%20such%20as,also%20experience%20homelessness.%20In%202018%2C%2038%25%20of%20homeless>

All the lines from “middle passage (an l. hughes cento)” come from *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* and can be found on the following pages of the collection (from the order they appear in poem):

Stanza 1: 296, 41, 40

Stanza 2: 42, 43, 45

Stanza 3: 46, 49, 121

Stanza 4: 11, 51, 69

Stanza 5: 77, 91, 88

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[%20of%20homeless](https://guildservices.org/how-do-people-become-homeless/#:~:text=Unexpected%20life%20events%20can%20cause%20homelessness%20C%20such%20as,also%20experience%20homelessness.%20In%202018%2C%2038%25%20of%20homeless).

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