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## The Next House: A Fragmented Sequence

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**The Next House: A Fragmented Sequence**

**A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Jeremy Michael Reed  
May 2019**

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# **DEDICATION**

For Marshall

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## ABSTRACT

*The Next House: A Fragmented Sequence* treats the effects of an 1848 court case, later used as precedent for the Fugitive Slave Law, concerning residents of the author's hometown who helped a formerly enslaved family escape to Canada. The collection investigates how the story of a confrontation between slave owners and abolitionist-minded townspeople was told to create and police community identity over the next 150 years. The dissertation uses excerpts of the court case and historical newspapers, text from state historical markers, interviews with residents, the author's personal experiences, and ekphrastic treatment of contemporary visual art to interrogate race and power in a predominantly white, rural Midwestern space. *The Next House* combines documentary poetics, whiteness studies and critical race theory, and a hybridization of poetry and nonfiction genres to enlarge the conversation about race in contemporary poetry. While racism and racial violence are often thought to "take place" in the Southern regions of the United States or in urban cities, *The Next House* emphasizes the rural Midwest's embeddedness in a racialized American history in order to expand contemporary poetry's understanding of racial imaginaries to regions wrongly thought to be dissociated from discrimination and danger.

## **PREFACE**

This dissertation is inspired by true events but is concerned with cross-generational oral storytelling. As this dissertation is attempting to ascertain the stories told in Calhoun County about the people who have lived there throughout its history, and as much of those stories are unable to be substantiated, this book does not claim to be an accurate portrayal of any real-world individual. It is the opinion of the author that several descriptions of the characters to follow may have been at least somewhat fictionalized as the stories have spread throughout the region and from one generation to the next. The author has tried his best to accurately portray the stories as they were told him, but inevitably certain stories or points of view have been lost, were not included here for the sake of clarity, or were not included due to lack of ability to verify them.

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## INTRODUCTION

On September 24, 2017, poet Kaveh Akbar tweeted: “Serious question: what white poets have written about race in interesting or useful ways?” The responses to Akbar’s question took two forms. Some offered up ideas about why there are so few white poets writing about race, including fear of criticism and a genuine desire to leave space for historically underrepresented voices. Others supplied a list of white writers who have done important thinking on race, from Jake Adam York and Martha Collins to Tess Taylor and beyond. While acknowledging their responsibility to work carefully with the subject of one’s own whiteness, York, Collins, Taylor, and other poets like them question established American histories that elide and actively erase the complexity of violence, language, laws, and learned uses of imagination that center power around whiteness and white people. In addition to identifying challenges posed by this kind of self-interrogative work, Akbar’s public discussion of white writers working on race served to highlight the diverse approaches they have taken. The conversation made evident to young poets the multi-faceted importance of American consciousness of race as one of the foundational topics of American culture and literature. Finally, the exchange emphasized the continued need for more white writers to engage in investigating their own whiteness.

When I read Akbar’s tweet and its responses, his question was particularly alive to me. I had been asking myself a similar question: how do I understand my own whiteness and how has it affected my worldview in my writing and my life? This question came to me in part through studying Toni Morrison’s work and the questions around American understandings of race she raised in her fiction and nonfiction. In

particular, a portion of her first conversation with Charlie Rose in the early 1990s had stuck with me where she talked about the foundations of white supremacy. She looked at the white television host and said:

I take your race away, and there you are, all strung out and all you've got is your little self, and what is that? What are you without racism? Are you any good? Are you still strong? Still smart? Do you still like yourself?... If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is white people have a very, very serious problem. And they should start thinking about what they can do about it. ("Toni Morrison.")

At the time I was studying Morrison, the Black Lives Matter movement was marching across the country and simultaneously Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* was topping the *New York Times* charts in nonfiction (a serious marker of its joining the larger cultural conversation around race as it was a book marketed as poetry, a genre that newspaper doesn't recognize with its own category of bestseller list). In response to the deaths the marchers were protesting, a quote from Rankine's book gained popularity online:

"because white men can't / police their imagination / black men are dying" (135). All three of these elements (Morrison, Rankine, and the Black Lives Matter Movement), informed my interest in studying race more closely, especially in the ways a system of power such as racism manifests in my own communities. I took to heart Rankine's observation and Morrison's charge and began writing about how whiteness worked in me and my imagination to shape the world as I understood it. Those poems began a drafting

process that, bolstered by the conversation surrounding Akbar's tweet, eventually became this dissertation, *The Next House: A Fragmented Sequence*.

*The Next House* explores themes of race, whiteness, and the systems of racial power, including those found in history- and story-telling, through specific examples in the city of Marshall, my hometown in Southwestern Michigan. I investigate these concerns through two interconnecting themes: documentary poems treating a foundational story of thwarted racial violence and its legacy in my hometown, and poems written in response to racial oppression and violence occurring throughout the United States in my lifetime. Structured as a continuous, though narratively fragmented, book-length sequence, *The Next House* is loosely split into three sections that incorporate the above themes in different ways. The first section uses historical markers and documents in addition to oral storytelling to offer a correction or complication of the often-told version of Marshall's hospitality as stemming from participation in the Underground Railroad and the particular example of helping Adam Crosswhite and his family escape to Canada to avoid re-enslavement. The second section imagines the voices and perspectives of various figures in the Crosswhite story while examining how the narrative told by Marshallites today was largely invented over the course of the twentieth century. The final section incorporates reflections on the continued violence of whiteness in American society, sometimes through ekphrastic responses to contemporary visual art, and discusses recent changes in Marshall through reckoning with how "good" white history functions. Each section is interwoven with the two major themes of historical and contemporary depictions of citizens involved in constructing Marshall's story of its own

whiteness, including historians, mayors and city councils, community members, and myself.

### Whiteness and Documentary Poetry

*The Next House* investigates one of the foundational stories of Marshall, Michigan, in order to better understand the history of rural, predominantly white, Midwestern communities and to explore my own development as a person formed by the narratives of whiteness that towns like Marshall uphold to this day. Like all communities, Marshall's public identity rests on a set of standardized narratives. One of these is the story of the Crosswhite family. The poems in this thread relate how Adam and Sarah Crosswhite and their children escaped their enslavers, the Giltner family in Kentucky, upon discovering they were to be split up and sold to different owners. After narrowly escaping recapture in Indiana, they settled in Marshall for a few years until they were found again. Enacting a planned response, Crosswhite's neighbor rode to town and alerted the white citizens to the danger at the Crosswhite house. The neighbor returned with a group of townspeople to stop the capture of the Crosswhite family, and the slave catchers were ordered by a local judge to go home without them. Certain abolitionists in town, including George Ingersoll, helped the Crosswhites escape to Detroit and then to Canada in the period between the judge's decision and the return of the Giltners to appeal the case. The Marshallites lost the ensuing Federal case and local banker Charles Gorham was ordered to pay \$4800 in damages on behalf of the city of Marshall for helping the Crosswhite family escape re-enslavement (an equivalent to \$138,000 today) ("160 years

ago...). This court case was one of hundreds of precedents for the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

The story of helping the Crosswhites has become an integral part of Marshall's own account of its communal identity, a self-proclaimed identity of hospitality, care, and neighborliness (Marshall's nickname is "The City of Hospitality"). Versions of this story can be found on historical markers around the city and bolster a reputation of involvement in the Underground Railroad (a purported involvement that is disputed by some local historians). My dissertation investigates not only the relationship of Marshallites to their version of the Crosswhite story but also presents the traces of white violence and racism in Marshall from 1848 to the present day. In particular, the heart of this manuscript shows how Marshall and many white towns have used stories of past action in the face of racial violence to elide historical and current realities of racial animus and discrimination against people of color through intimidation, redlining, and other forms of segregation. By starting at the Crosswhite case (which took place only about a decade after Marshall and the State of Michigan were established) and moving forward through the uses and repercussions of that narrative in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I aim to show the complexity of histories of the racial imagination in rural, Midwestern spaces. *The Next House* explores how these histories have come to the fore once more in the last few years, as Marshall's public school system undergoes a de facto desegregation and community groups make efforts to establish conversations and relationships between residents of Marshall and the racially diverse neighboring town of Albion. Tracing the ways communal identity narratives can be used to discriminate,

mask, and divide is important not only to understanding Midwestern whiteness today, but also to imagining the more just and inclusive communities Midwesterners could create.

In order to investigate Marshall's community narrative, *The Next House* centers a white, self-questioning perspective on race and whiteness, as demonstrated in the poem "Marshall as Written by a Resident." Directly in this piece, the narrator puts forward the common story, a history "homogenously white," and then partially lists the complex confluence of people who actually inhabited that history: "escaped Africans alongside Potawatomi alongside / Northeasterners alongside frontiersmen..." The succession of communities named as part of early Marshall history leads to the recognition that the story Marshallites tells about themselves is an intentionally white-washed one which, in its repetition over decades, has had marked effects on the white residents who now make up the vast majority of the town's population, limiting their imagination and understanding of self. As the narrator writes: "This whiteness / holds a birth of its own, sticking, pulling." Histories like the one told in Marshall of its white citizens helping black families escape the country do not recognize the diversity and complexity of the communities towns like Marshall once had. Changing that history to reflect a white-washed, imagined reality also shifts how many American towns like Marshall understand their present-day reality. Instead of recognizing their community as participating in an era of increased distrust and ostracization, Marshallites are able to imagine that they are taking part in a slow march toward justice. In the face of imagined histories like the one Marshall tells, more inclusive futures are harder to create because the version of the story taken for granted sticks to one's mind and limits what one sees as possible.

In opening up that imaginative landscape, *The Next House* creatively engages some of the critiques of whiteness posited by Critical Race Theory, defined by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic as “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (3). As Delgado and Stefancic write, “The [Critical Race Theory] movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” (3). My work engages similar critiques of hegemonic understandings of American society, with Marshall’s telling of its own history as my primary focus, through questioning the foundational understandings of self, community, and identity in predominantly white, rural Midwestern towns. *The Next House* explores a more complex reality in Marshall’s history and in turn allows Marshallites to understand themselves as part of a more complex, ever-changing community.

In complicating the notions of white goodness prevalent in Marshall, my work takes up Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine’s understanding of racial imaginaries, building on Toni Morrison’s groundbreaking scholarship on whiteness and imagination in *Playing in the Dark*. Loffreda and Rankine define racial imaginaries as “the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and situations, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors” (22). In the context of my hometown and others like it, my dissertation opens up the way American cultures have imagined a

community so that we may imagine different futures. Part of this work of expanding imagination requires making visible how “Whiteness is in this country a race,” as Eula Biss said in an interview with Krista Tippett, as well as what Martha Collins writes in her essay “Writing White, an Introduction”: “we’re all writing race whether we realize it or not” (33). I believe white writers have an ethical duty to understand their unconscious writing of race and how it affects their understandings of power, and I am attempting that process myself in this project. As Loffreda and Rankine write in their introduction to *The Racial Imaginary*: “A writer’s imagination is also the place where a racial imaginary—conceived before she came into being yet deeply lodged in her own mind—takes up its residence. And the disentangling and harnessing of these things is the writer’s endless and unfinishable but not fruitless task” (21). Through poems and prose like “Marshall as Written by a Resident,” my dissertation works toward disentangling the structures of imagination white residents of the rural Midwest use to understand themselves and their neighbors.

In my pursuit of disentangling white imagination, I often employ a documentary poetics approach, incorporating elements of the testimonies from the Giltner v. Gorham court case, newspaper archives, and interviews I conducted in summer 2018 with citizens and local historians. By incorporating these elements, I follow in the traditions of writers who have developed such an aesthetic in recent years, including Martha Collins, Tyehimba Jess, C.D. Wright, and Jake Adam York. These writers are expanding the documentary poetics lineage, which arguably began with Modernist texts such as William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* and Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” series.

Williams, Rukeyser, and their contemporaries used archival sources and voices beyond the narrators' and the poets' personal experience to speak to social questions, such as labor organizing, the ethics of war, and repercussions of slavery, to name just a few themes, starting a practice of historical examination that continues through contemporary practitioners such as myself. What Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson write in the context of Native storytelling holds true for the self-awareness of history that documentary poetics aims to enliven through its aesthetic choices: "the stories we tell about ourselves and about our world frame our perceptions, our relationships, our actions, and our ethics. They change our reality. The stories we tell each other tell us who we are, locate us in time and space and history and land, and suggest who gets to speak and how"

(3). Documentary poets recognize, as Nikky Finney said to open her National Book Award acceptance speech, "We begin with history" to understand better the questions we can ask of how we live and what our future could be.

In *The Next House*, a primary example of using archival sources to show historical context is the incorporation of newspaper articles in the second section of the dissertation. Moving from a contemporaneous account of the confrontation between the Kentuckian slave owners and the Marshallite abolitionists to a written memorialization of the confrontation in the early 1920s, I present an initial shift in Marshallites' interpretation of events. While the initial newspaper article from 1847 lauds Marshall's citizens for standing up in this moment for the right political position, the 1920s Marshall reporter groundlessly claims the incident as the sole cause of the Fugitive Slave Law and thus the Civil War. He frames Marshall as unjustly overlooked for its historical

significance to the American story, thus privileging self-importance over moral integrity. The ensuing newspaper accounts from the 1950s and 1970s, the era historical markers were installed around town, show just how far afield the evolving story has taken Marshallites in their self-understanding. One reporter even states that “the ‘Adam Crosswhite Affair’ of 1847 at Marshall was, in some ways, of more significance than the Dred Scott Decision from the Supreme Court a decade later.” While the obvious absurdity of this claim is evident to today’s readers, the sheer expansion of hubris in these reporters’ understanding of their town’s history over just fifty years shows the incredible pervasiveness of insular storytelling. When a town excludes differing points of view or a return to the historical record, the majority’s version of the story not only stays but increases in its own estimation, gaining a stronger foothold piece by piece.

Crucially for *The Next House*, what was originally understood as a single ethical collective action came to be interpreted as a significant national historical accomplishment, as highlighted in the newspaper articles and my own prose pieces such as “Marshall is known as the City of Hospitality...” Basing community identity on historical significance rather than continued ethical practice allows the town to ignore the ethical implications of their present-day policies and actions. In essence, Marshallites need not worry about whether they are currently engaging in redlining, de facto segregation, or other racist practices because their self-understanding excludes those practices from being identity-creation traits. If one’s identity is already set by historical example, it becomes harder for it to be affected in one’s own imagination by modern-day decisions and attitudes; Marshallites are “good white people,” as established by their

origin story in the Crosswhite case. A major part of my dissertation's aim is to point out the discrepancy between the story of Marshall's past and reality of its present, and by unveiling this particular white hypocrisy, to effect meaningful change rather than just self-questioning or guilt.

In pursuing that goal of new action through documentary aesthetics, *The Next House* models its approach to community storytelling on C.D. Wright's *One With Others*, which tells the story of an anti-racist teacher Wright had as a child in Arkansas. As in the following section, Wright uses learned modes of nostalgic storytelling to upend notions of white supremacy embedded in versions of stories often told by her community:

It was hotter then. It was darker. No sir, it was whiter. Just pick up a paper. You would never suspect 66% of the population was invisible. You would never even suspect any of its people were nonwhite until an elusive Negro was arrested in Chicago or the schedule for the annual Negro Fair was published... and then, the lists of long long suffered degradations backed up and overflowed:" (129).

After two statements of a difference between the past and the present, Wright makes clear the racial element of Arkansan history she converses with throughout the book.

Describing how racial violence was excluded from the public record most of the time but markedly evident in other instances, Wright reads white newspapers' records of race against the erasures of violence, motive, and law that whiteness often takes as its foundation. My use of newspaper articles similarly brings to light white Marshallites' fragmented understanding of their own language; as Martha Collins wrote in her groundbreaking *Blue Front*, examining white people's language on race can show the

circular logic to internalized racism: “was what they said it always was was why they said” (21). In the second section of my dissertation, I aim to point out the faulty logic of Marshall’s story by interweaving newspaper articles and more character-based portraits of those involved in the Crosswhite story. In the wake of that reexamination, rather than dwell on Marshall’s guilt or offer one model for living an adult life founded on ethical convictions, as Wright does with her teacher in *One with Others*, I try to imagine the creation of a more racially just community in Marshall.

In the hope of finding partners to pursue a more just future, *The Next House* engages with C.D. Wright’s thought in *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* on what to do with ourselves and our voices: “be critical and sing” (61). To this end, I chose to close the manuscript with a description of what new homes we can build, what new narratives we can make together to create better, more inclusive communities than we currently have. As I continue to wake up to the discrepancies and inadequacies of the histories I have inherited as a person and a writer, *The Next House* “break[s] open inside me the question of what home we can build to hold this kind of a wake, what home,” as the penultimate prose piece of the dissertation describes. Before ending this introduction, however, I want to look more closely at the use of current events throughout the dissertation and particularly in the final section.

### Bringing History into Conversation with the Present Day

The beginning of the second to last prose piece of *The Next House* ends with questioning what we can build, but begins with the accompanying question: “What do we

do with what we've made?" *The Next House* is interested in establishing a place from which we can create a new kind of community, but it is also interested in making sure we have the questions we need to continue asking ourselves as we move forward into that different future. How can we make sure that future does not become a reiteration of our inequitable past? The establishment of a newly interrogative stance toward one's own power as a white person requires a constant self-questioning. As Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "The master narrative could make any number of adjustments to keep itself intact," and a clear-eyed awareness of this ever-present challenge is required for white poets desiring to contribute to the conversation around race and whiteness in contemporary poetry (51). In order to practice some of this self-awareness and critique in a living, complex, always incomplete way, the third section of *The Next House* incorporates current events more than do the other sections of my dissertation. Featuring poems engaged with important contemporary topics such as police bias, the continued killings of black men and women in America, anti-racist protests after the 2016 presidential election, and ekphrastic responses to contemporary visual and protest art, *The Next House* combines the personal and the communal in its historical and political acts of narrative complication.

In combining historical and current events in my poems on whiteness, I follow the work of Layli Long Soldier and Solmaz Sharif, who have used traditional forms, stylized repetition, documentary approaches, and fragmentation to emphasize their discussions of race in the United States today. In particular, I emulate Long Soldier's *Whereas*, which contains historical accounts, such as those of the thirty-eight Lakota Sioux men ordered

killed by Abraham Lincoln, as well as a poetic series in response to the 2009 Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans. Importantly, *Whereas* also recognizes how Long Soldier's personal and familial relationships are part of these larger narratives. In the midst of her "Whereas" section of the larger book, for instance, she takes on the form of the Congressional Resolution of Apology in order to tell a different story, in one section discussing her father's apology for how he had acted when the author was a young girl. She begins that prose piece by writing, "WHEREAS I heard a noise I thought was a sneeze," which turns out to be her father beginning to cry (65). Taking on such a personal interaction through the distant legal linguistic construction of whereas statements, Long Soldier sets up a comparison between her father's apology and that of the U.S. Congress. In that comparison, the congressional apology, given as an addendum to a larger bill and not read to any tribal representatives, falls flat in comparison to her father's "*I'm sorry I wasn't there sorry for many things*" (65). Because her father's apology is personal, recognizing, at least in part, both blame and loss, it warrants and receives Long Soldier's forgiveness. In contrast, the government's apology is inadequate in acknowledging either blame or loss. This documentary poetics approach to critiquing the government's legalistic language (and the history of such language's relationship to the lives of indigenous people) recognizes the role played by what Derek H. Alderman calls "textual politics." As he writes, "Language is not simply a matter of semantics or merely a natural reflection of reality. Rather, the choice of words used to represent the past (and one's place in that past) lie at the heart of the struggle to be remembered (or forgotten) for social groups traditionally excluded from dominant

historical narratives” (357). Long Soldier shows just this kind of awareness of language’s centrality to being remembered or excluded from history.

The combination of personal and social histories is an important characteristic of contemporary American poetry that I join. As with the poets Juliana Spahr discusses in her introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, my writing is grounded in the lyric tradition, with performances of interiority and leaps of language and comparison, while “the social and the cultural keep intruding and developing an aesthetic frame” (2). In pieces like the essay “On Good White History,” I situate the socio-cultural aesthetic frame, as we understand it in contemporary American poetry, through a documentary-inspired approach. Braiding my memories of growing up in Marshall, in particular of the town’s inability to incorporate cultural sensitivity toward or community inclusion of a nearby native tribe, with stories of my family’s interactions with various forms of prejudice, I mirror the larger stories of Marshall’s whiteness with my own. In doing so, I recognize how individual voices are not enough to change the communities in which we live. Any single good action done by a white person is not enough, even though white histories and identities are founded on such instances. Instead, I hope to find a more community-based position from which to act, like that which the Marshall City Council took in response to a community member who singled out individual council members and used racially coded language while protesting new medical marijuana laws. The council’s decision to speak together showed an awareness of the need for community action in the face of racially coded language, an action I hope others will follow.

The final section of *The Next House* also incorporates communal action through two other main forms. First, I gather interviews of local citizens and historians in the form of a chorus. One of the aspects of poetry that distinguishes it from other genres is its history as an oral art form. Every time I read poetry I think about how the author imagined me reading the poems aloud and in my own voice. The chorus form allows me to put that specialized trait of poetry to use, asking my readers to imagine speaking communally the words of their fellow citizens' sometimes conflicting opinions on their hometown. Through this action, I hope to engender an awareness of what Allison Cobb writes of documentary and investigative aesthetics in general: "Investigation is a way of asking how, now, to be alive. The question is not only a personal one. It is communal, and it staggers under the weight of what is at stake" (50). An internally conflicted chorus that continues to speak its members' thoughts is a democratic attempt at recognizing the importance of Cobb's question of how, now, to be alive together.

Second, I engage communal action by conversing with other artists' work throughout the dissertation but most obviously in the final section, where I offer a series of ekphrastic responses to visual art. These poems exhibit a longstanding interest I've had in conversations between different art forms that help me question modes of viewership as well as the visual understandings of whiteness in ways that build on and complicate the discussions of the themes treated throughout the rest of the dissertation. In these poems, I engage with the work of De Andrea Nichols, Kerry James Marshall, and Myra Greene, among others, and I have follow in the ekphrastic footsteps of poets like Terrance Hayes, Robin Coste Lewis, Rankine, and Wright. Of particular influence to this

part of my project is Robin Coste Lewis' *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*. Lewis creates her title poem by gathering titles of art work that dramatizes and focuses her readers' attention on the inherent racializing effect of Eurocentric art curation: "Statuette of a Woman Reduced / to the Shape of a Flat Paddle // Statuette of a Black Slave Girl / Right Half of Body and Head Missing // Head of a Young Black Woman Fragment / from a Statuette of a Black Dancing Girl" (43). As the beginning of her poem attests, the fragmentation of black women's bodies by the art curators cataloguing such pieces has reduced what modern interpretations of beauty, artistic representation, and history can imagine and accomplish. While my poems take up a similar interest in visual art's history, they respond not only to portraits or statues but also to modern protest pieces like De Andrea Nichols' *Mirror Casket* and Cannupa Hanska Luger's *Mirror Shield*. The former is a casket made of mirrors that was carried through spaces where black men and women have been killed by police and is now housed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. *Mirror Shield* is a design of particle board and reflective paint reproduced by protestors at Standing Rock and intended to inspire self-reflection on the part of riot police breaking up the Oceti Sakowin camp and its protest of the Dakota Access Pipeline. In my poems responding to these pieces concerned with black life in America, my position as a white poet must be acknowledged, but responding ekphrastically allows me to take up questions raised by the visual artists about perception, layering, and depth as integral parts of representing American history and society in relationship to race. In these poems of the final section, whiteness sees itself as part of a larger fragmented community in America, then looks for ways to piece

together an identity through engagement with the imagination of a more cohesive future.

### Conclusion

Through the poems and nonfiction pieces of *The Next House*, I join documentary poet and essayist Philip Metres in his hope “that documentary poetry keeps moving from ways of textual knowing to a knowing that moves us into our bodies, that moves us toward connections with other bodies and beings, that moves our bodies with the double-awareness of what’s happened and all that is possible” (73). *The Next House* practices what I have studied in other writers and artists: the mutual support and tension of poetics and ethics in one’s work. I have used the poems in this dissertation to pay close attention to the ethics of my poetics, investigating further the narratives that have contributed to my life. In bringing together poems on current conversations in American politics and a documentary-style approach to history-telling, I hope to contribute to ongoing conversations about history and racial imaginations in American poetry.

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## **THE NEXT HOUSE: A FRAGMENTED SEQUENCE**

“I am trying to learn something new.” – C.D. Wright, *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil*

“even memory can forget itself / and be written into another history / while everyone is looking at something else.” – Jake Adam York, “Elegy,” *Persons Unknown*

“When you are able to articulate something that is terrible that is inside you, that lives in you, and you no longer deny it, you are able to bring regeneration.” – Joy Harjo, *The Spiral of Memory*

all eyes open inward, outward

As the plane takes off, I realize I am migrating home to my ancestors' future the same way they did, from East Tennessee through Detroit and, eventually, to Marshall.

When entering Marshall from the East, coming into town from Detroit, as my family did, as I continue to do, a boulder stands on a triangle of land, a small city park, on the state road, an Indian trail, followed by a railroad, made into a city street, paved into a highway. On this stone, a plaque reads:

*NEAR THIS SPOT  
900 FEET NORTH, 8 DEGREES EAST  
STOOD THE CABIN  
OF  
ADAM CROSSWHITE  
THE SCENE OF AN ATTEMPTED  
SLAVE RECOVERY  
JANUARY 26, 1847  
THIS AFFAIR  
WITH OTHERS OF LIKE NATURE  
LED TO THE PASSING OF THE  
FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW  
AND ULTIMATELY TO  
CIVIL WAR  
ERECTED IN 1923 BY  
CALHOUN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

At the center of town, a fountain as large as a house, sending streams of water into the sky. At night each stream a different color, in day each stream refracting sun into freckled light. In the summer, the grass surrounding acts as city park, families spending time, citizens discussing their weeks, listening to music, watching cars, waving to neighbors. Across the circled street from the water and the park, the gathering place and the talk, a state historical marker reads:

## **MARSHALL**

Founded in 1831 by Sidney Ketchum and settlers from New York and New England, the town was named in honor of Chief Justice John Marshall. Townsmen Isaac Crary and the Rev. John Pierce planned in 1834 the innovative Michigan public school system. Marshall's early hopes of becoming state capital were not rewarded, but the coming of the Michigan Central Railroad in 1844 increased prosperity, and the town remained a rail center until the 1870s. In 1863 the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers was founded here. Many of the citizens held strong abolitionist views, and in 1847 they prevented the return of fugitive slave Adam Crosswhite to Kentucky. The architectural excellence of Marshall's homes is known throughout the Midwest.

MICHIGAN HISTORICAL COMMISSION REGISTERED STATE SITE NO. 375  
PROPERTY OF THE STATE OF MICHIGAN  
1972

As a child, from my backyard I could see an oak tree taller than any house. I would think to myself about how my city block used to look, how many people would have known that tree. I would imagine a tire swing, or something like it, perhaps a wooden board on a rope hanging from its branches, and a boy, much like me, spinning around in tight circles with his head back, arms wide.

Through the cornfields, we drive to a family friend's house. This is how we celebrate the Fourth of July. In their backyard, we light illegal fireworks and drink beer from the coolers while sitting around a bonfire. The various mortars and finale sets that were bought in Indiana the week before arc over our heads in reds and yellows. Firecrackers explode behind camp chairs to surprise.

The undertree leaves over our heads reflect the firelight to look like cotton.

In relief, behind the tree, stars stretch across the entire black into a kind of uniformity of grey, each pin prick distinguishable if I squint, a wash of light pollution if I unfocus my eyes.

My childhood was a happy one, an oblivious one, a violent one in that it benefited from violence.

Warm summers, snowy winters, open spaces, loving family. But as Li-Young Lee says in his poem "Furious Versions," *Memory revises me*.

Now, I look back and see: white, white, white, white made so, color lacking, snow piled over every living thing, a new landscape of snow, added hillocks, shifted trees, so many new slopes the undercolors become invisible, become white, all white.

Marshall as Written by a Resident

*after Gregory Pardlo's "Written by Himself"*

I was born to a city living in created time.  
To this day, it tells a history of itself,  
homogenously white, when in reality:

escaped Africans alongside Potawatomi alongside  
Northeasterners alongside frontiersmen alongside  
French fur traders alongside schoolteachers alongside  
Ivy League educated alongside railroad workers alongside  
alongside alongside.

I was born alongside a city  
once vibrant and shifting that then stopped  
in its place, stood in the ashes of the Perrinville fire,  
understood the opportunity it presented: all covered  
in white.

I was born on a border between two cities,  
but it took me decades to recognize the one I was in:  
en-ashed, involved in casting history, encased in plaster,  
embedding stories in my skin.

This whiteness  
holds a birth of its own, sticking, pulling.

My interest in the history of this place is in part the stories and experiences that aren't told or remembered by everyone the same way. For instance, as an adult I recognize how the racial makeup of Marshall, over 90% white, was and is constructed, a purposeful goal, not mistake or happenstance, and is something to be worked against, something that's possible to change. But I also know I didn't always recognize that reality and wasn't told much growing up about that element of my region. Here today, all the nineteenth century storefronts are not as familiar as they once were to me, now more like sets of an old Western film, as if behind their facades are stilts angled for support, as if with the right breeze they could all fall forward, and I wonder, *What have we still not recognized or begun to work through? What makes a breeze?*

I know when certain Marshallites read this they will think, *He doesn't make sense. No violence took place here. He's imagining. He's from here. He's lived here and was perfectly safe.*

There are two kinds of memory at least. One is what I myself have experienced, in my body, directly. This is a very specific part of life. But there are also all the ways that specific life touches so many others, alive at the same time as me, before me, ahead. And too often we do not see these other lives, the way they read a landscape differently than we do, the ways they can never simply see a tree without the crowd. Too often we don't acknowledge how we could see the crowd there too. We're just used to looking, pointing, somewhere, anywhere else.

My father was recently mayor of our town. A nearby town, Albion, more diverse than Marshall, lost its school system to bankruptcy, to lack of funds due to students choosing to go elsewhere. After a long debate, Marshall's school board annexed the school.

When I was a public school student in Marshall, I remember a handful of black students. Now, more than a handful. A success, some would say. A model.

But we should ask how we came to need such a success in the second decade of the twenty-first century, nearly two hundred years after the city's founding, one hundred fifty years since the Civil War, sixty years since school desegregation, fifty years since housing desegregation, more, more, so many landmarks to judge by, so little progress.

We are seeking how to be human with each other, but certain habits of living rust us, limit our range of motion, who we can imagine as ourselves.

My parents moved to Marshall in the early 1990s. My dad had a job with a lot of travel and the city sat on two highways. It was quaint. Schools were good.

When asked where they were from they said “the Detroit area.” They came from the city closest to the airport. To Detroiters, this would read as Not-Detroit. To their Marshall realtor, this read as Not-From-Here. She showed them houses in other towns that might prove “a better fit” or “more in their price range” given their past residence in a trailer park.

My parents found the house they live in to this day on their own. They showed it to the realtor. “Sure, I guess, we could check that one out if you really want to. I’ll see if there are even any appointments available.”

If this for them, two white parents with two kids and a good job, what for others?

I explain the demographics of Marshall and Albion to a professor in Tennessee. He says it is a common occurrence, that when one town is as white as mine there is often a nearby town nearly equally its opposite. He poses the question, "Is it listed in the Green Book?"

The Green Book was a travel guide for black motorists, a list of places they could safely go. That is how I found myself looking in a list for my hometown's name to see whether it was safe.

My mother asks me often if Marshall was a sundown town, a place black people could only live in daylight. "I've heard it was. It might have been. I've talked it over with local historians. Let me know what you find out," she says.

Marshall wasn't in the Green Book.

A former reporter told me he was researching Marshall housing in the early 1980s and came across a figure he ran past the city government.

“I was told that Marshall had a 10% black population, roughly that. It was higher than I expected. I said, ‘I came across this figure and I can’t reconcile it with what I see in Marshall.’

“They said, ‘Well, you know where that figure comes from.’

“I said, ‘No, I have no idea.’

“They said, ‘That involves all the inmates of the Calhoun County Jail,’ which at that time was in Marshall and which Marshall was allowed to include in its population estimate.

“Under the rules of the Housing and Urban Development agency that made Marshall eligible for HUD grants, housing grants, which it was indeed making itself available to, which it was applying for based on these figures, based on the fact that these black people did not live in residences but in the jail. And I said, ‘What’s the legality of this?’ And they said, ‘It’s perfectly legal.’”

When Marshall annexed the Albion schools the *Battle Creek Enquirer* ran an article titled “A Tale of Two Cities” and wrote: “Consider the demographics: Nearly 79 percent of the students attending Albion public schools are people of color, compared with about 9 percent at Marshall. The disparity in economic opportunity is just as stark: All of Albion’s students qualify for free or reduced lunch, where as less than a third of Marshall’s students are low-income.”

Over beers with a Marshallite who's recently started a community program to bring Marshall and Albion's communities together on purpose, he says how surprised he was to discover Albion's population is only 40% African American.

"I mean, that's a much higher percentage than here, but the way my friends and I used to talk about it – it was like it was 100%."

I nod, hide my own surprise, write down the number.

Two days later, I find out it's a little less than 30%.

On my trip home for research, I am in the public library looking at a list of major events in the town when I'm caught short: in 1924 and 1925 Ku Klux Klan rallies were held at the county fairgrounds. This book's timeline is the only place I'll ever hear of this.

I am aware of the Klan's reach this far North. I am aware of the racial makeup of the town, over 90% white, and how that's "better than it was" according to everyone. I am aware of the comments made by citizens at the annexation of the school system about concerns for their white children's safety, concerns about drugs, concerns about standards. And yet, the Klan.

Why do I recognize the Klan so much more easily than any other marker? If my history books in school or the historical markers in town had described the city as dangerous, would we understand ourselves differently? How differently? Instead, I wonder how many cities there must be, outside the Green Book, inside their own whitened history, a trace left only in a part of a book in the back corner of a local library.

As mayor, my father began a new tradition when the schools came together. He joined meetings and community events between the two cities, and he asked some of their community leaders to get dinner or coffee and they did, going to one city one month and the other the next. Yet, whenever the meeting was in Marshall, one Albion man wouldn't show.

My dad asked around and finally got an answer. Something had happened in the 1970s, the last time the man had stepped foot in town.

Imagine being so scared by whatever happened that you would not return even for an hour at the invitation of the mayor, even with him sitting beside you, even fifty years later.

I ask my dad, “Did you ever wonder whether it was the right decision to move here rather than somewhere else? It must have felt odd coming here after living near Detroit, after being in a place with so many more kinds of people.”

He says, “I don’t think I noticed it as quickly as your mother did. I went to work. I was gone. I would see you in the evening. But after a few months I started to notice that everyone in the town looked the same. I went to your school and realized you were all the same. I wondered whether we’d made the right decision. I wondered how it would affect you.”

## On Childhood

remember the skeleton key slipping into iron lock  
in heavy door searching for the key in every drawer  
when the way to front yard was suddenly blocked  
open pathway become wall impenetrable some  
small inner piece of iron ear settled into place  
remember falling down the stairs head  
over arms hands under feet shoulder  
hitting last step to splay before the door  
our mother yelling to call an ambulance  
to call our father to pick up the phone  
every number caught in throat remember  
me standing there above you your eyes rolled  
body shaking my skin crawl body shaking  
remember every after every before  
the rose bush garage door playground  
hard candy heartbreak the blond boy  
your marriage remember the skeleton  
of the inner lock my broken lip our run  
around the beds down the hall each piece  
words screamed into throat's edge over the phone  
of iron lattice you there me  
here held in place searching for  
a number a name

## Interview Questions I Write on the Plane

- 1) How would you describe your community as a whole? What would you say are the defining key traits of your community? What sets your community apart from others in good, bad, or neutral ways?
- 2) How long have you lived here? What's your earliest memory of your community? How would you describe the town as it was then? What changes has the town undergone?
- 3) How would you describe the relationships between Albion residents and Marshall residents over your lifetime here?
- 4) When did you start working to bridge the various distances between the Marshall and Albion communities?
- 5) How would you say the combining of the school systems has gone for residents of both communities?
- 6) How have you worked to help that school system combining process and what kind of work still remains to be done in your eyes?

## Answers I Write for Myself Months Later

1) *I remember the first time I recognized race. It was not here. It was in the wake of here. The family that had been at my family Christmases my whole childhood, whose children I played with every winter, whose parents hugged me when I came in from the cold – after Marshall, I asked why they were part of us. My parents told me a story: their father growing up with my father and uncles, my grandparents taking them in after their mixed-race marriage wasn't accepted by their parents. I felt good about my parents, grandparents, myself by relation, but I still saw their family as apart from whatever us meant to me then.*

2) *In my time here, I grew three feet. I went through several rounds of clothes sizes. I went through every public school grade. I was friends then not friends then friends again with my sister. I had a group of friends then no friends then the same group of friends again and then I found some people who were actually like me. I had a first love and began to wonder what that meant. I existed here as if it were the entire world, or nearly so, and then it wasn't.*

3) *My community is a whole in pieces, as all others are. Each strand of narrative slinks loose, bunches together, untwines like a model set in a high school classroom, pieces clinking together and apart as the teacher spreads their arms.*

4) *I remember my mother working there, my working there, my locking the car. I remember beginning to unlearn locking the car.*

5) *It depends on who you mean. There's a different future possible now at least.*

6) *What are all the things we do not say when confronted with ourselves.*

where it's gone

sometimes i open my mouth in private  
and nothing comes out but sound  
i do not understand we share  
a language degrees of light i open  
my mouth light hear another's voice  
light and yet alone sometimes  
nothing or not nothing only  
birdsong rain filling a space  
playing to itself what has happened  
to my light i reach down my throat  
and up it comes a bulb glass  
empty and i set it on my desk  
see myself in its reflection but  
nothing else so i wait wait  
i try to be patient overcome  
with waiting i take it outside  
bury it i won't  
tell you where now i sing  
about where it's gone i'm quite  
successful so much to sing about  
but i'll tell you all the singing  
has me wanting it back i've dug up  
whole stretches of yard i can  
not find it at night i don't  
want the neighbors to see me  
i dig in the dark and all the grass  
glows a little

(SECTION BREAK)

Marshall tells the story of itself in many ways: welcome sign, historical markers, the annual home tour, personal explanations from people trying to be helpful, to bring people to their town, to become themselves part of the town, to make the town part of them.

When asked about our history, how we began, Marshallites will tell you that Marshall was part of the Underground Railroad, and they will continue telling, in fits and starts, pointing to different kinds of proof, fingerprints left from a prior era, one they will say creates this script: *Crosswhite*.

## White Townspeople Claim the Underground Railroad

In Ketchum Park, where the Kalamazoo  
drifted past wildflowered river bank,  
curved near playground and teenage trysts,  
where the water flowed over rock face, down,  
there, under the fall, was a door, locked.

~

Downstairs in the inn near the back door,  
in the telephone booth, beneath the seat,  
a false wall leads to a cramped room.

~

In the second story bedroom, behind the wall.

~

In all of these locations in town,  
stories told and retold within families:  
“You know why this is here, right?”  
“Have you seen the-“ “Come see this-“

In the local library, I find a contemporaneous version of events in an abolitionist newspaper:

### **Recapture of Slaves**

Our village was thrown into a fever of excitement day before yesterday, by an effort on the part of four Kentuckians, to arrest a family of colored persons, alleged to be fugitives from slavery, and take them back to slavery.

One of the Kentuckians was here a week or two ago, and on Monday night the rest of them arrived; on Wednesday morning about sunrise, aided by constable Dixon, they proceeded to the house of Adam Crosswhite, a mulatto man, which they broke into, and attempted to bring him and his family before a magistrate. A crowd soon collected, and some strong and noisy demonstrations were made; the result of which was that the Kentuckians gave up the immediate pursuit of the object.

Meanwhile a civil action was commenced against them for breaking into Crosswhite's house. This was tried yesterday and resulted in a verdict of \$100 and costs all against the Kentuckians. Following it came an action for assault and battery on C. Hackett, a colored man, by one of the Kentuckians, which was in progress when we went to press. [Marshall Expounder.]

We are further informed by the Expounder, and other sources, that the colored people are in Canada, where the protection refused them in a Republic, will be extended to them under a Monarchy, against the assaults of wicked men. It is a credit to the citizens of Marshall, that, in this instance, they showed themselves alive to the feelings of humanity and justice. We should like to know what business constable Dixon had to aid these Southern slave catchers? It is said that our fellow citizen, John Van Arman, Esq., made a splendid speech on the occasion.

A year after the incident, the Kentuckians sued the Marshallites for their lost property. In the court documents, a man records the testimonies. He writes all the official language first: where they are, why they're there, who's speaking, and then it shifts, his pen's voice mimicking that of the witness, explaining everything he'd seen:

*State of Wisconsin  
County of Milwaukee, S.S.*

*Be it remembered that on this twenty third day of September in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and forty eight at Milwaukee in the county of Milwaukee in the state of Wisconsin came personally before me a communication under the laws of the United States Samuel Camp a witness produced to be examined and his deposition taken to be used in a case pending in the Circuit Court of the United States for the District of Michigan, wherein Francis Giltner is plaintiff and Charles T. Gorham, Oliver C. Comstock, James Hurd, Planter Mofs, William Parker, Charles Bergen, and James Smith are defendants and having been by me carefully examined and cautioned and sworn to testify to the whole truth did depose and say as follows - -*

*Samuel Camp being duly sworn to tell the whole truth – answer to all questions asked him within his knowledge deposes and says as follows, that I was residing in Marshall – Michigan, in January eighteen hundred and forty seven; some time in the middle of the latter part of that month a son of mine informed me that four gentleman from Kentucky had gone up to a Colored Man's house and had found his wife and was going to take the whole family including Crosswhite away to Kentucky; the information excited me so that I went immediately there. When I arrived in front of the house I found these Kentucky gentlemen standing out the door one of whom was called Troutman, another Giltner, another Ford, and another Lee. I walked up to Mr. Troutman and asked him what business he had there in the morning breaking open people's houses and making disturbances. His answer to me was, "he wanted to take those colored people away to the Magistrates, and pass then to Kentucky." I think I was about the first of the white men there, excepting those from Kentucky. I then went into the house. There were some colored people in the house. I commenced talking with them.*

*When I arrived at the house of Crosswhite the four men from Kentucky were standing around and did not seem to be doing anything in particular. After I had been in the house some twenty minutes I looked out of the door and saw several people coming from town. Some had got as far as the gate. They kept continually coming until there was a hundred and fifty or two hundred persons present at the house. While I was in the house Mistress Crosswhite sent away two of her children to a neighboring house. The children went away as directed. The children who went away were two boys next to the oldest in age. After quite a number of men had collected at the house there seemed to be quite an excitement at the front of the house, and remarks were made by many different persons, that they did not think the Kentuckians could take the slaves away; one person from Kentucky remarked that they would take the colored persons away if they had to bring a*

*regiment of men from Kentucky to do it; upon that I made some pretty strong remarks, and I believe Mr. Gorham was not present at this time and did not arrive until a large crowd had collected. About the first I saw Mr. Gorham was subsequently when the Excitement was getting to be high, and I was making some pretty strong remarks. Mr. Gorham came up to me and cautioned me to not be excited or use any strong language – that he did not think they intended to take the slaves away: I do not remember seeing Mr. Gorham on the grounds previous to his cautioning me, and during the time Mr. Gorham was there I did not see him do anything except to conciliate and allay the excitement, and saw him induce a Colored Man named Patterson – who was armed – to be on the grounds. I remained on the grounds from the commencement to the end of the affair and until all had left the place.*

*After quite a crowd had collected, I saw Doctor Comstock come into the gate and come up to Troutman and as he came up he appeared to be quite Excited, and remarked to Mr. Troutman that he could not take those slaves away, and Troutman asked him his name. He gave him his name, and Mr. Troutman set his name down in a book. Troutman then asked him if he was a responsible man, and Comstock I think told him to ask his neighbors. Troutman then asked Comstock – if he meant to say – that he should not take those slaves away? Comstock appeared to refer to the excitement of the persons present as a reason why he could not take them away. When Doctor Comstock first told Troutman he could not take those slaves away, I think he said to Troutman he could not take them either by moral, legal, or physical force.*

*I saw James Hurd on the ground at the house of Crosswhite about the time I first saw Mr. Gorham. I did not observe that Mr. Hurd took any active part in the affair, and when nearly all had left the grounds he offered a resolution (in a joking way as I supposed). “that the Kentucky men have two hours to leave town or be prosecuted for breaking open peaceable Citizens houses.” At that time I made some remarks at which Mr. Gorham again cautioned me as he did Mr. Hurd. The first I heard of any resolutions was when nearly all had left the grounds and were going away. I then heard Mr. Hurd offer the resolution as above. Immediately after Mr. Hurd’s resolution Mr. Troutman offered a resolution – “that we adjourn to meet at this place at two o’clock and you will feud me upon the grounds.”*

*Up to about the time of Mr. Hurd’s resolution after Doctor Comstock had given his name to Mr. Troutman, I was in and about the crowd, and heard no resolution offered by Mr. Gorham, and had a good opportunity of hearing all and anything that was said. At the time Mr. Hurd’s resolution was offered, none of the Kentuckians except Mr. Troutman were present. The other three had gone away towards the village. When I first went to Crosswhite’s house, there was nothing to hinder or prevent the Kentuckians then to take Crosswhite’s family away if they had been disposed so to do, and there was no effort made on the part of the Kentuckians to remove Crosswhite’s family or any of them.*

Local banker Charles Gorham showed his role as an important man of the city by being named as lead defendant in the case the Kentuckians filed against Marshall, and when the Marshallites lost to the slave owners he approached Zachariah Chandler, his friend and the eventual Mayor of Detroit and U.S. Senator who was just then starting his political career, to help them pay.

Gorham became one of the founders of the Republican Party in 1854 in Jackson, Michigan, advocating for its abolitionist stance. Later, he'd serve as Minister to the Netherlands and Assistant Secretary of the Interior under President Ulysses S. Grant.

At every step along the way, his role in the Crosswhite case was his origin story, as it has been for Marshall, showing him on the right side of history, in the thick of the action, as he'd tell it.

In comparison to all the roles Charles Gorham played, George Ingersoll only played one. Son of a well-known community member, Ingersoll stepped forward and helped the Crosswhites escape to his flour mill, where they spent the night hidden. The next day he stowed them away in a carriage and drove them to Jackson with his friends where the next train station was located. He and his friends went up and down the station asking people where they were from to make sure none were from the South. Then when the train came in, they did the same with every car. Then he rode the train with the Crosswhites to Detroit, found someone to take them across the river to Windsor where they'd be met with someone who knew the way to Buxton Settlement. Of all the people in this story, his position is the clearest.

## A Portrait of Adam Crosswhite

taken as an older man, after he returned,  
hair uneven, beard patchy, but not out of style,  
clothes clean, just so as if to make an impression,  
shoulder held uneven, his left lower or farther behind  
his right, long neck angled toward camera,  
Adam's gaze, open-eyed and clear, connects,  
an open curiosity etched in eyebrow, while serious  
here, a hint of smile, how his face would move  
if he were home with Sarah, his children, friends. I sense  
that home's an active thought to this man aware  
of just how far he's come for his face to find an openness,  
unforced, to having a future when his picture  
will be passed to loved ones, his story told.  
It's as if he can see them even now  
through the lens, all they represent to him.

I realize I know almost nothing about who Adam Crosswhite really was. All I have are transcripts and stories. He lived here with his family and then they found him. He fled. He lived in Buxton Settlement in Canada. After the Civil War, he returned to Marshall with some of his children. Sarah, his wife, didn't return. I don't know why.

How did Marshall get from Adam and the court testimony to self-proclaimed notoriety? How did Adam's story fade beneath the town's? It built over time, but began in earnest with Harold Brooks in the 1920s.

As a local historian tells it: "Harold Brooks, who was the mayor, had written several articles saying this was the birthplace of the Civil War, that it was where the first shot was fired in the Civil War when Adam Crosswhite fired his gun outside his cabin to alert the townspeople that the posse was in town. The argument went that the agitation caused by the Crosswhite case led to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and that was a demonstrable cause of the Civil War."

He continued: "Harold Brooks was not a historian. He was a community booster."

He continued: "The Crosswhite case was not the case that made that happen. It was one of hundreds if not perhaps thousands of cases like it."

THE ENQUIRER AND EVENING NEWS (Fall 1922)

**BOULDER TO BE DEDICATED IN MARSHALL THIS SPRING WILL SHOW  
BIRTHPLACE OF CIVIL WAR**

Calhoun Historical Society Marks Spot Where Historic "Crosswhite Affair" Transpired  
and Awoke Nation to Horrors of Slavery

-

(Enquirer and News Marshall Bureau)

Tugging, straining workmen, a short time ago, placed a huge, grey granite boulder in a park at the intersection of State and Mansion streets. The chances are they saw little of romance in the work.

The immense stone stands alone in the park, a little aloof, as though it realized it is a thing apart and that it has had an honor conferred upon it. Wintry winds, now, buffet it but soon spring flowers are to nestle 'round its base and little children will touch its surface wonderingly.

**The Spark of War**

And the same spring which will bring the flowers will witness the attaching of a small bronze plate, bearing the above inscription, and for a day many people will come to stand about it with bared heads while others speak concerning the deed of which it is a memento.

Years will pass. Hurrying thousands will, likely, pass the spot with never a glance. But the stone will stand, bearing mute witness to a deed as important as any which ever aided in the moulding of the destiny of the nation.

Few are the people still living in Marshall who remember the circumstances surrounding the "Crosswhite Affair." ...

The Poet Tries to Write the Story in A Simple Form, Catches Himself

Having escaped from Kentucky  
after learning his family would be broken apart,  
Adam Crosswhite and his family found haven,  
member by member, arriving separately  
to short-lived refuge, in Marshall, Michigan.  
And when still others came for them, the townsfolk  
made themselves into a crowd, placed  
the group of men from Kentucky on trial,  
took the Crosswhites to Detroit, to Canada.

~

See there, in the second sentence,  
it's already occurred. Go back for it. Look.  
Suddenly, I've stripped all agency  
from Adam, Sarah, their children.  
You are reading a poem  
written by a person in the story  
trying to shift old, learned habits  
of telling it. Don't forget me.

Erasure is an act of power. Taking the story to mean yourself is an act of power.

The historian says, “Marshall has been guilty of covert, clandestine racism for decades. It wouldn’t be overt. I was asked just the other day, ‘Was Marshall a sundown town?’ Marshall was never that overt, what I would call destructive, evil. But you can be evil in insidious ways, and I think that was Marshall.”

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FINAL

THE CROSSWHITE SLAVERY CASE

*THE "UNDERGROUND RAILWAY"*

- HAROLD C. BROOKS -

The name of Marshall was on the tongue of almost every man in the North and South between the years 1846 and 1850. A little whirlpool, started among her citizens in defense of escaped Negro slaves spread into the high courts of two states and eventually reached Congress, resulting in the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, one of the brands that fired the great Civil War. This law and its application stirred so many great cyclonic winds that the starting point of the storm was forgotten and Marshall's name was lost in the churning events that tore the nation asunder for four terrible years...

## The Slave Owner's Son Goes to the Crosswhite Home

David stands on the stone steps of the local inn,  
looking across the city center, spots Adam as a threat.

He follows Adam's sons around town, watching them  
until their identities are clear to him, threateningly

quiet, a few paces behind, listening. He writes for the posse,  
and they join him in mid-January, snowstorms threatening,

horse breath shaking snowmelt into air.  
He steps up on the porch, knocks threateningly –

no answer. Two boys run out the back  
to the neighbor's house, and – *threat*

*threat threat* – he knocks again. He breaks  
down the door. David stands there before the family, a threat.

Having known him as a boy, the family  
sees him now a man, a thread

who followed them north,  
found them walking freely, unthreatened

in town, picking up mail, purchasing  
groceries, making a place not threatened

by slavery's prison,  
what David would call *home*. The thread

of the story: a family could be broken  
at the sound of foot tread.

David glances, recognizes what his father claimed  
Adam to be: thinking himself free. And then another threat

enters David's mind: what *family* meant.  
Crowd be damned, become boy again, threatened,

David begins to weep, unable to see them  
as more than they were to *him* – that the threat

is not the family; the threat  
is the family as threat –

even as his before-world's shown another,  
a person's home, children happy in the yard, unthreatened

by any need, cared for like he had been  
as a boy in their same mother's arms, thread

to thread to thread. He stands there before the broken door hinges,  
unable to say more than: "Come home.

Why don't you want to come home?"

The historian continues: “That’s really what the plaque is alluding to. White people helping black people. ‘We’re great.’ That’s the message. And, yeah, it is great. I don’t discount that at all. It’s just that the overall picture, the bigger picture is far more complex, far more interesting, and tells a human story that is both good and bad and is a real picture of what this part of the country was like 150 years ago. To my mind, if you look closer at it, you learn more about humanity than you do from that very simple statement: white people are good, we help black people.”

Feb 13, 1972 Enquirer News

## ‘Crosswhite affair’ affirmed Abolitionist role at Marshall

There were a number of “landmark” decisions on slavery in U.S. and state courts in the four decades preceding the Civil War. One such outstanding case was a Michigan “affair.”

Indeed, the “Adam Crosswhite Affair” of 1847 at Marshall was, in some ways, of more significance than the Dred Scott Decision from the Supreme Court a decade later.

For the Crosswhite case was one of the events leading to the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; the Scott decision of seven years later only reaffirmed what had been law as a result of the Marshall affair; it only made the Civil War’s outbreak more certain...

On the Crosswhite myth, another local historian says of those who lived in Marshall:  
“They lived with that kind of sense of their own self-goodness and so they were comfortable to live with that myth whatever happened after.”

As one Marshallite said: “You know, oral history, you can tell the story any way you want.”

adam returns to marshall as lazarus upon his second death

*after Lucille Clifton*

i have been here before  
the dirt the sun warmed rock  
the stone closed heat  
stays in a place even  
in bristled dark all  
i've lived in years since  
that first eclipse rolled away  
the carriage all enhuddled  
me my wife our children  
i remember us wrapped  
limbs held tenderly by straw  
by blankets my body  
we have been here before  
muscle tensing as if against warmth  
of a summer night sarah's  
arms mary's arms martha's  
careful folding this heat  
will hold me in itching wool  
bodies pressed i've never  
stopped leaving this place  
overgrown green on this hill  
this river these names  
and now i am here again  
and my body is here again  
and my family is home again  
but what in this ever unleaving heat  
does that mean

borderbreaking

history : poetry :: archive : longing  
conversation : narrative :: cicada hum : birdfight  
cicada hum : gathering :: archive : paperflight  
history : conversation :: birdfight : song  
death : an escaped county :: love : sent along  
the next house : another country :: distance : sight  
front door gone : borderbreaking :: bulb : firelight  
narrative : gathering :: love : front door gone  
another country : death :: the next house : poetry  
gathering : firelight :: borderbreaking : love  
parenthood : heart muscle :: no law : leave  
hiding : train car :: windgust : dove  
dove : heart muscle :: parenthood : leave  
borderbreaking : firelight :: the next house : hum

In Buxton Settlement, Sarah Remembers Teaching David How to Walk and Decides Not to Return to Marshall

*after Wanda Coleman*

To be barged in on in my own home,  
to have a home, to have the ability to have,  
free and clear, to have a family, my own,  
my spouse, my children, to call them mine,  
to recognize all this in a young boy's face  
that I know and care for, still so small, and yet  
to give him back to all else he is away from me,  
again, again, arms out, he stands, takes a step,  
and I can see it in his face, his father, mother,  
and I wonder if anyone will look at my son this way,  
second step, third step, if they look at him,  
will they see Adam there, see me, or will he  
be alone, a boy reaching out, confused, seeking.  
I didn't really know that other boy. He was not mine.

This history asks me to hold up a mirror, ask myself who I am: am I the white townspeople like George Ingersoll helping others when it's needed, am I the white townspeople like Charles Gorham whose connections make the court case possible while also bettering his own career, am I the white townspeople like Harold Brooks concerned with telling my city's story without recognizing the fullness of history, am I the white townspeople who for decades after take up the story while keeping others and other versions of themselves at arm's length, am I the white court recorder who takes over other's voices to create some kind of trace not knowing the effect he'll have, am I all of these.

(SECTION BREAK)

Out of the earth, through the streets, through the grieving and the living, seeing what I am in the face of these traces, Adam and I carry back to a place we share, all of us, my family, his family, my neighbors, his neighbors, my home, his home.

Air: A Stone Sculpture

*after Chen Chen's "Chen [No Middle Name] Chen" and using lines from  
Christopher Gilbert's "Tourist" and "Chris Gilbert: An Improvisation"*

I total the bits of me. I am I am.  
I speak a stone sculpture, air.  
I am the bits of me. I total. I am.

I to the bits of me am. I I am,  
speaking not only breath but sound.  
Am of the total bits. I me I: the am I.

Am I total? I bits the I am of me.  
Coughing, I hurt in swallowing  
the I am of me total bits. Am I I?

I total the bits of me. I am I am.  
I try to remember to undermine.  
Am I, am I the total bits of me? I?

I am the bits of me. I total. I am.  
But what is this sense of distinct, separate  
me, of total I am, I, the I bits, am?

None of me is me without more.  
Each gulp of air shared, each  
I total the bits of me. I am I am.  
I am the bits of me. I total. I am.

## I Mean

*after Aracelis Girmay's "On Kindness"*

I mean to tell you of myself, not of others, not to dispel any attention from me.

I mean, I'm culpable, to own up to that, to make clear who I've been, can be.

I mean to tell you of my home, its attentiveness to me and others like me  
to the point of unpreparedness for living.

I mean for how to live in any real world, not the artificial one  
they made us to claim as our own.

I mean to tell you my world is fractured when I once thought it whole,  
and I am more alive because of it, more my own.

I mean to tell you my own name is in the book of history, as is yours,  
as is his, as is hers, as are theirs. Let's write our names  
in our own hands and

mean it. That's all. That's all I want. To mean my name on its own terms,  
knowing it carries with it a wind I speak with and against,  
in my own voice and with others.

Chorus:

*from townspeople interviewed in 2018*

*Marshall was lily-white for a long time. I don't think it was done purposefully. I never heard anything like that. It was just like a lot of other small towns. You know, Homer and Tekonsha. I don't know why Eaton didn't hire more blacks. We had the opportunity to do that, but they didn't.*

*They thought their life was like everybody else's life. They thought when they got up in the morning they had the same stresses and the same challenges of commuting to work as a person of color commuting to work. That is not true. A person of color lives in this world in a profoundly different way than I live in this world.*

*When you're growing up in this bubble you think, "Oh yeah, everything's just like this everywhere." But when I went to Battle Creek there were black people. When I went to Albion there were black people.*

*It certainly did not prepare my older kids for living in the world as well as it could have.*

*I think the integration of the school systems is just more real, more representative of what the world really is. We just happen to have this very artificial thing where the vast majority of black people don't live in Marshall, they live in Albion.*

Every Newspaper Prints the Same Scene from Different Angles

*after the images from St. Louis protests in 2017*

an image broken into pieces by its light.  
white beams from each person's phone.  
there are pieces of everyone here. heads tipped.  
hands up. mouths closed. eyes crying.  
how the photographer captured this moment.  
the implicit question. the implicit answer.  
there's no original to a mirror.  
the innumerable who've passed before its face.  
carried it into view. held it while one gazed.  
the fractured image. blinding light.

*Untitled (Studio)*

*after Kerry James Marshall*

behind the portrait the figure  
behind the clichéd table of paints  
the subject under the table  
a simple dog used to artist studio  
adjusting subject a woman  
behind arranging a red curtain  
background for painting back  
ground for light behind red a man  
changing clothes behind transforming  
into he who leaves a window  
emptied of nearly all that will come  
all that is still spread before it  
juxtaposed on the near side of glass

A local historian tells me Adam had many jobs: mail carrier, carpenter, railroad worker, day laborer, any job that needed being done. As he was telling me this, he looked up at me and said that all the Victorian homes in town would have been built around Adam's lifetime and he wonders every year which buildings full of tourists showcase work Adam did with his hands, the Honolulu House, the Governor's Mansion, and I agree, but I also wonder how many other Adams there are whose arms and tools created the planes and curves to each of these buildings I recognize like the faces of people I've known since childhood, how many other Adams are there who've helped create the structures of living we share, that my own living also helps shape, who I have not seen until now, and how many Adams do I still not see, and how do I work to see them.

*My White Friends*

*after Myra Greene*

One summer home from college,  
my friends visiting for the festival,  
we sat on the curb after barbecue,  
listening to electric guitar blues,  
and someone asked which of us  
was the whitest. "I mean, have you  
listened to the music in my car?"  
"I am not the whitest though." "We've  
seen you dance." All laughed. All looked  
at me. I responded, "I mean, how many  
renaissance fairs have you been to?"  
All laughed. We looked up. All laughed.  
Lawn chairs spread across Main Street.  
The only black people on the stage.

## On Good White History

*“The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.”*

*James Baldwin*

In Marshall, Michigan, there is the appearance of safety. In part, this is due to a lack of action. No one running through the streets, no loud sounds you can too easily place. It is a town that has made correct decisions: they are known for saving a family from slavery, known for being hospitable, known for combining school districts with the local bankrupt-low-income-diverse-student school.

~

While teaching a workshop on memoir, we discuss taboos. Taboos of writing, taboos of reading. Sex, power, class, hidden histories. Throughout the class, we return to a simple idea that strikes me: taboos are rendered so by our understanding of an audience, by that audience’s understanding of the subject. Continuously shifting multiple audiences for a piece require a speaker’s voice willing to range widely as well as come up close; to echo Adrienne Rich, narrators approaching the concept of truth in life must endeavor to understand the metaphor of the wreck *and* the wreck itself, seek both.

Race is one such taboo.

~

A metaphor of the wreck: a red-faced mascot, a native face and headdress, a racial epithet. My hometown used this image for a mascot for decades.

Before I started high school, a student brought a lawsuit in the early 2000s against the Marshall Public Schools to change their mascot, arguing that both the word and image were discriminatory. In response, the town’s lawns were filled with protest signs to save the name, the newspapers were filled with op-eds and letters to the editor, the image was put in every public place, and any voices speaking out to support the student had to be careful about when and with whom they spoke, if they were able to speak at all. Four members of the school board were recalled after they decided to change the name, and the school went without a mascot for several years. Then, as I entered high school, the students decided to find a new one. By the end of the year, a vote was held, organized by the student council of which I was a part, and the student body voted to become the Redhawks, keeping the school colors so they wouldn’t have to repaint and remake the school completely. We felt we had done the right thing, and I think, in general, we did.

My grandmother thought of this as a significant experience. She collected newspaper after newspaper that included any mention of the student council, and she sent them each to me. I kept them in a drawer I’d rediscover years later, preparing to move across the country. She’d been proud of me and those like me for standing up for change.

While researching for this essay, I discovered a Michigan Public Radio story on another school undergoing a similar change. Marshall was used as a comparison for how hotly contested such a change can be in a community. The article's writer notes that a local hardware store a decade later still sells Redskins paraphernalia in addition to the Redhawks sweatshirts and signs. The man working the counter tells the reporter they outsell the new mascot nine to one.

~

As a college student, I join my father on a drive to a nearby town. We drive south of Marshall, and there must have been construction on the highway or an accident or a detour, because we take backcountry roads. As we pass the fields and fields of grain and soybeans and corn stalks still low to the ground, I look up and see a sign that says: Welcome to the Huron Potawatomi Reservation.

“Is that a reservation?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “You’ve never been out here?”

“No, I had no idea.”

“We have meetings at their conference center sometimes. They’re in charge of the casino and come to town for meetings with the township if something’s changing for whatever reason.”

I sat there in the passenger seat, slowly realizing: in all the conversations about changing the mascot name, the lawsuit and the arguments, the lawn signs and op-eds, no one had taught me the names of the original tribes that once lived where we live, the languages they spoke, the names they held for themselves, that Marshall would have been the place many of the people were gathered before being forcibly removed to the Plains states, that in all these ways no one told me of my own history. But beyond that, no one told me a tribe currently lived less than twenty minutes from my front door.

~

I don't remember how the conversation started. I had graduated from college and was back in Marshall, and the whole family was eating lunch at the Country Kitchen restaurant chain my grandmother preferred. She slapped her bacon back to plate and, red in the face, stuttered, “I just – I’m not proud of this, but for years I didn’t trust Asians. Even when you had your friends and everything, I didn’t think ill of them, but I still didn’t – trust them. I mean – after the war, with all they’d done – I just couldn’t – but I thought it had gone until – well, until you went to Japan – and I realized I still felt that way, and, people, they feel that way sometimes, and I’m not proud of it, but I was one of them until you went there and came back.”

And we all sat quietly.

~

In his own small town in Michigan, my grandfather had started his own business after getting his dental license and working for a few years at the Army base in Kansas. It was years later, after the uprisings in Detroit but not long after, that a little girl had a dental emergency, and she and her mother went to every dentist in town and were refused treatment because their skin was black. My grandfather fixed her teeth, without a question.

The same grandfather does not like Trump, for which I'm glad. But he voted for Reagan and his War on Drugs enthusiastically, the first Bush and his continuation of the same, the second Bush and his decimation of public schools. He voted for their policies, upholding those beliefs while serving as that local family's dentist, a whole family that wouldn't see another dentist except him until he retired more than twenty years later.

~

Speaking of Marshall, an Albion resident says to me, "They were okay with being the Redskins for a long time so maybe that will tell you something about their complacency with being homogenous."

~

In the 2010s, Albion Public Schools went bankrupt after many years on the brink of failure, due in large part to what was called school of choice laws. White and more well-off families in Albion were sending their children to Homer, Tekonsha, the Math and Science Center in Battle Creek, or to Marshall, taking the money allocated to each student with them. And decisions made in response to the problem by the Albion Public Schools' leadership led to irreparable budgets.

The State of Michigan decided to give Albion Public Schools a grant, several million dollars, to help with their transition to a new school district, wherever they ended up going. When Marshall annexed their system, they received the grant in addition to the reputation for having done the "right thing."

Most of Albion's black teachers retired out in the first few years.

~

I almost didn't write about the stories of the school system and of my family. Both cases might seem a bit off the worn track – no Crosswhite, an eventual answer on the right side of history. But the more I remembered Marshall, the more I realized I was writing on whiteness as much as prejudice, exclusion, selective histories. My aim is in the balance of telling history that hasn't been told in full while also having a personal approach so that I'm inculcated, so I see myself as involved in these histories and as having been affected by them. I've realized these stories of the schools and my family have the same underlying foundations as the way we spoke into existence an identity from the Crosswhite Affair to the present day, regardless I want to say but maybe in full recognition of how we lived from day to day.

~

I'm on a walk with a native friend in Montana and we're talking about what we've been reading lately. I say, "I've been reading a lot of articles on native issues and I sent you some the other day. I'd love to know whether you think they're any good, whether the coverage is any good or not. I just – you know –" I trail off.

She replies, "Sometimes I want to say to white people just be yourself."

~

I could tell you about the times my father has asked why black students were afraid in Marshall schools, didn't want police visiting their classes for safety talks, or why Marshall families wouldn't visit Albion to get to know their, in a way, new neighbors. But those conversations would be all too familiar. Instead, I'll show you an instance only I know.

After the school systems combined, making Marshall's a much more diverse student body, and after the arguments on every side over protocol, money, safety, and test scores, the State of Michigan passed a medical marijuana law. In response, the Marshall City Council drafted a set of conservative rules outlawing the sale of medical marijuana within city limits but allowing growers to set up facilities at the edge of town near the other industrial parks. In part because of the tax windfall the city would receive from the growers, the city council unanimously approved the plan. Months later, an old real estate agent of the era that had kept African Americans from living in our city attacked the council in the newspaper for destroying the town, saving his most direct vitriol for my father as mayor, saying he was personally responsible for letting "them" in.

The man had placed ads in the paper for weeks naming my father, his church, and his employer, saying he'd not only been unethical but acted illegally in order to let drug users and bad actors into the city, always racially coded, if barely, calling his bosses to try to get him fired from his full-time job, talking to law enforcement and other city employees to get them to join in recalling the whole council starting with the mayor. My father was advised to retain a lawyer for defamation in case he lost his job, a fact my mother told me as she cried over the phone. The city council agreed that the regulations for marijuana should stay in place as they were first approved but knew a response needed to be made as the numbers of citizens in their meetings grew, both in support of the man and his attacks and in opposition to him. My father prepared a statement for the next city council meeting, but he was never able to enter his thoughts into the public record because his fellow council members spoke up on his behalf. But he sent me a draft of what he'd planned to say, one part of which read: "I am sorry you feel that Marshall does not need to change, but the leaders of Marshall made a decision some time ago that we can no longer stand still and watch things continue as status quo... I would like to address the numerous times you have talked about 'those people.' I would like to say to you today, this is... 2017 and I welcome anyone of any race, age, gender, religion or sexual orientation into my home and this community."

I hadn't realized he was ready to say those words quite so openly, quite so clearly under such pressure. I have to admit I almost wished my father had gotten to speak his piece. But looking back on it now, I think there's more to learn in the communal action the council took than in a single man, mayor or no, speaking.

In Marshall and the many cities like it in America, there isn't really a need for solitary white men to speak up, at least not on their own. Instead, there is a need for a collective reckoning with our histories, a need to see them as more diverse than we once thought they were, to see ourselves as more complex than we thought ourselves to be. And then, there's a need for collective action to make things right, to use the power white citizens have taken over time to open the door and change the home my father spoke of, to not just let others in but to join with them to change how the community works.

In my town, in this case, as in others, the collective action worked. The rules stayed in place. The schools combined. The mascot was changed. The Crosswhite family escaped. But these acts can't stand alone. We have to fundamentally change who we are.

## Sightlines

Two months past November, I drive I-59 through Mississippi,  
having passed the president-elect's name  
spray-painted on a highway overpass in Alabama,  
and leave behind medianed police cruisers, aware  
they are not pulling out after me, and if they did  
I most likely would not be afraid, that I am not far  
from Bogalusa, Komunyakaa's birthplace, the name  
of the river I didn't have to know Emmett Till was sunk in,  
the curve to Medgar Evers' driveway. Two months  
ago, I'd stayed up late keeping watch, woke  
to my shift at the college unprepared. I walked  
through campus, not making eye contact:  
not wanting white students' camaraderie,  
African American students glancing away.  
I approach the gulf afraid of myself: the speed  
with which I am able to drive, the power  
given me I learned to take.

*Mirror Casket*

*after De Andrea Nichols and team*

two caskets side by side    three  
tilt the mirror    it exists indefinitely  
the casket is the mirror    the mirror  
a simple sheet of glass    glued  
to wooden frame    I wonder about  
each rectangle's reverse side  
what color paint hides mercury  
silver    aluminum    my fingers  
cannot grasp the mirror's edges  
each fingertip imprinted    pressed  
by metal all the same    what  
substructure allows the work  
of reflection    and what's its cost

Already Today Another, from the Pharmacy Parking Lot

*after the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile*

each breath stalls, wheezes,  
like climbing into a hot car in July,  
temperature pressing on chest, skin,  
eyes, as they are closed, all closed,  
+ i feel contained, bordered, a body,  
but i know my pores are opening,  
that my body attempts stability  
by opening, sweat pouring, a kind  
of vulnerability not shared by not-  
dead dead, the not-shaking body,  
the not-sweating body, the not-  
breathing body i envision as i  
sit where i heard the second name  
in as many days, refuse to start  
the car to feel the heat, to listen,  
+ only muted music + held breath,  
but my body disobeys, continues,  
+ after a moment i start + drive,  
+ with the a/c on my sweat congeals  
into a coldsick feeling i cannot shake

Chorus:

*We have applied logic and debate and all our cognitive abilities to deal with all the problems including racism, but we very seldom, in some coherent way, express how we feel in a way that is not combative.*

*We have to exchange and really know each other on a different level. Know ourselves, and be able to listen to the reality of other humans who are not like us.*

*Do I have relationships with people outside of my community? And if I don't, why don't I?*

*When you're in a circle of people and all your fellow humans are looking at you and all your shit – you can't hide from that. It's hard to hide. And we all want to hide, maybe for different reasons.*

*The goal is not guilt and shame. Guilt and shame can be a byproduct of realizing what you didn't know, but we also say guilt and shame is not a place to stay.*

*Before you got glasses you didn't realize the leaves were that sharp and that things had hard lines. Everything seemed a little fuzzy. So when you finally have your eyes opened it's like, "Oh, that's how the world is."*

## Confederacy

to see six pick up trucks  
confederated, flagged,  
driving together, young men  
down Michigan Avenue,  
turning to go around the fountain,  
eyes forward, heads hatted,  
forward, not turning to see  
who drives up beside,  
who listens to what music,  
whose car makes what whine,  
aware they will be seen,  
aware they will be derided,  
expecting it, untiringly,  
waiting to speak, to be  
confronted, called on,  
to speak out their demands  
when all they've ever done  
is speak

On reuniting with old friends, remembering being small town teenagers out late

*a golden shovel after Joy Harjo's "An American Sunrise"*

We didn't know how to find ourselves. We were looking for the straight path away, were hearing railroad sounds in the distance running, all the bells and dings and wheels moving out of town. It was almost as if a dream of a slightly different world, not out of breath, able to sing and dance and leave as the people we were, the secret people only we knew ourselves to be. Toward that dream, we ran and ran and ran, seeking, if not to make it out entirely, maybe just to meet, someday, that other clearer version of ourselves. I'm not sure we've made it. We, in some version of last night's conversation, were still standing in that railroad's street, but surfacing maybe, even briefly, able to look past the city's ever-approaching edge. The hope of that remembered imagining of another place to live beyond our pasts made me think of our ancestors' memories, their loved ones' names, homes, fights. We still live among them now and the work before us might be to be ready to enter those stories once again, to enter openly with a hope that can strike, not to empty our names' power or forget it, the place called home, but to know it was as complex as we see ourselves, as difficult as what we know living is as adults, to take the place and people in our arms, not to lose clear eyes, but to know the movement of days.

Alongside Adam, I Imagine Myself

The mirror casket is already made,  
before us, glued shut, ready to be  
taken up, shining. Each of us  
carries this coffin weight, carries  
tamped down hesitant, habitually  
learned repetition, a looking away,  
looking ahead, at each other, at steps,  
casting side glances at reflections.  
I knock and it rings hollow, empty,  
as if cored open to nothing, closed.  
I imagine the push of metal tool,  
blade against wood, chipping dust.  
I do not fear the pinewood smell,  
but I do not smell it, casket made.  
I am a pallbearer as all the rest.  
I am wooden, waiting, stepping  
forward, wood on shoulder, step.

Chorus:

*We get tired of this talking, talking, talking and no change. Nothing changed. I'm just as poor today as I was yesterday, and all we're doing is talking about it. How does that create change?*

*People that are disenfranchised, people that are poor, people that believe that race is an issue – they want to see change. Can annexation create change? Will annexation give our students a better chance for their education?*

*Do you want to save one community or save them both? You can merge the two together and look at the diversity of the communities and see what's the strength of both.*

*We've got to transform ourselves.*

*Do we trust each other? Do we respect each other?*

*A lot of people think change happens by accident instead of by a planned journey along the way.*

*extra mile, extra step*

Marshall is known as the City of Hospitality. Hospitality identifies a group as caring but also marks a difference: we are hospitable *in comparison* to other groups, other communities.

To be a self is to be one among many. To be a hospitable self is white American gentility, to understand who we are based on culture rather than on actions. An ethics proven by identity, a city of hospitality, rather than one evident from practices.

Marshall changed. No one's quite sure how. At one point there were men like George Ingersoll and at another those who welcomed the KKK. At one point a whole community of families who'd escaped enslavement and at another 90% white. It could have been the loss of Perrinville in the fire that took all the jobs with it, the loss of men in the Civil War, the legislated freedom of so many slaves and the subsequent white fear of them, economic straits in the 1890s, even the first World War or the Red Scare could have contributed. I am not sure. But whether cause or effect, it's easy to understand oneself as hospitable when the opportunity to act seems invisible, needed elsewhere but not here, and not coming.

On Reflection

mirror casket  
catches reflections  
as it's carried on the shoulders  
of family friends community members  
collecting all the fragments  
putting back a body into place seeing selves  
in refracted glass shuffling away  
light doesn't discriminate,  
flings itself  
into all  
our eyes

Chorus:

*When you came through, Albion was almost like a faraway city. Your existence weren't part of our everyday decisions or anything. But the school annexation changed that. All of a sudden we're part of each other.*

*Every community in the nation is changing. Which ones are we going to be? Are we going to be successful or not?*

On Question

who am I  
in the mirror casket  
reflection not attempting  
to escape but to understand  
better how glass functions  
to keep me blinded  
by light

Chorus:

*It's not just that the history isn't what I thought it was, but it's: "What's my history? What's my personal relationship with race, relationships, otherness, my choices, my comfort?" If you don't get to that part, you can cram all the new history in your head, but if you don't get what's going on with you and how you're making decisions about your life then nothing changes.*

*Eventually we can get to the place where it will be an integrated city. If not by moving the city limits it'll be because we move our minds and hearts. Because it ain't have to be about the city limits, but it does have to be about your mind and your heart and what you're committed to.*

## Keeping Air

*using lines from Christopher Gilbert's "This Bridge Across"*

*each moment is a boundary –*  
I attempt to link sounds in breath.  
*I will throw this bridge across*

empty space, openness, to recall  
each breath taken also gives.  
*each moment is a boundary*

but what lies on either side,  
what tensions, what textures, is hidden.  
*I will throw this bridge across*

my understanding and climb, hand grasping  
for a solid line, all unknown below.  
*each moment is a boundary*

every time I breathe a phrase while I remember  
bodies are not made safe through voice.  
*I will throw this bridge across*

because I aim to keep air in me,  
an emptiness where  
*each moment is a boundary*  
*I will throw this bridge across.*

On Community

mirror casket  
catches reflections  
as it's carried who am I on the shoulders  
of family friends in the mirror casket community members  
collecting all reflection not attempting the fragments  
putting back a body to escape but to understand into place seeing selves  
in refracted glass better how glass functions shuffling away  
light doesn't to keep me blinded discriminate  
flings by light itself  
into all  
our eyes

Chorus:

To state the fact of change: *There's the irony that the black community was Marshall. Now it's not. Albion became the black community by comparison. The two flipped.*

To state a hope for change: *I think it's also not true that people in Marshall are racist any more than other people in the world are racist. We are products of our history here as well, and it's not all pretty, but I think that the future for us could be very much more of an integrated community than it is. I hope to still be here to see that happen.*

## Another Way

Eight thousand people return  
every year to a town of eight thousand  
to walk through their Victorian homes,  
bringing business and garden tours, bringing  
period costumes to guided narratives,  
return to walk through history, with an aversion  
to remodeled spaces, up-to-date appliances,  
to seek an authenticity.  
Turn it another way.

I get nervous in crowds, always expecting  
some unexpected noise, some other reality  
to shift into place: gunfire, fight, epithet.  
I am used to open spaces and hearing everything,  
eyes scanning sky, skin alive.  
I am afraid of crowds engaged  
in any one activity: chant, listen, march, enrage.  
I find myself there all the same.  
I want to be part of something,  
but wish it were open to our  
turning it another way

in part because of these eight thousands.  
The eight from town: I recognize them,  
cleaning their houses, starting up AirBnBs,  
selling antiques, being part of making a narrative,  
being in the narrative you've made.  
The other eight who travel for varnished  
Northern nineteenth centuries, an all-white  
version of history less diverse than we were then,  
in fact, far more like now: I worry that  
it's aspirational, too. Change the past –  
the future seems not the same.  
Each guided narrative becomes its purpose:  
to show a painting of a mirror, history's archive,  
crystal ball, for an old idea of new authentic self.  
Turn it another way,

if we can. Constant return, inconstant aim,  
moving from one direction, seeking another. Look,  
there in the rain, between houses, each of us,  
history's face paint washing away, running

from home to home, stepping in  
as if to a museum, wet and dripping,  
shame-faced, laughing  
at ourselves, apologetic, feeling  
cold and warm at once in the entryway,  
more ourselves than we were before.

Chorus:

*People are amazing and wonderful and flawed and I still believe capable of change.*

*If you sit back and watch the destruction of something – why would you want to do that?*

I Find Myself in a Crowd

*11/8/16*

What happened to the flag-wrapped young woman  
who bounced on the balls of her feet  
who screamed spit on the face of a young man,  
who told him to return to Mexico, a place  
he's never been. What happened  
to the handful of young men  
who pushed each other into the others  
standing near them, pushing me,  
all others around me, into those closer  
to the center. What happened  
to the young black woman who turned  
and recognized in me potential violence  
before she recognized features of my individual  
face. What happened to me who stood,  
not chanting, unable to speak, in awe at what  
I'm still unable to name in poems a year later.

On writing a poem about whiteness as a white man in a white town

I still have work to do.

## Break Me

Break me up, me.  
Break me up. Make  
of me a useful item.  
More than a hammer,  
more than a stake  
or a tent or table,  
more than clothesline  
or mountain trail.  
More than mountain.  
Break me up, me.  
Break me up into kindling.  
Break apart the glass,  
get to the casket, make  
it wood, just pieces  
of wood we can use.

*Mirror Shield*

*after Cannupa Hanska Luger and the Standing Rock Protests*

break these caskets to shields  
hold masonite boards forward  
make 100 alone make 500  
with a group of friends  
keep making keep making  
stand alongside ukrainian  
women who went  
in their homes came back  
mirrored stood before riot  
police with hall mirrors  
bathroom mirrors hand  
mirrors any mirror they  
could find here  
in North Dakotan mid-winter  
in snow covered in coats  
holding reflections hands  
gloved shaking waiting  
for the protected to see

Dear Adam,

This year is one hundred seventy years  
from the year you left this country.  
I have never left this country  
the way you did: family huddled,  
crouched on the train George  
Ingersoll and his friends searched  
before letting you climb aboard.  
It feels like a full hundred seventy years  
some moments, then the next as if you're here  
today. There are others so nearby,  
a few hundred miles, doing the same  
as you did: walking, climbing, hiding,  
any way to find yourself in a safer place.  
At times, I think you would not know  
what to do with the marches, the elections,  
even just this letter-writing between us,  
two strangers who happened to live  
in the same place. I'm trying  
to understand why I write you:  
to learn, to learn, to learn,  
and yet for what? I ask myself  
more questions every day,  
but, really, I'm trying to exist  
in a way that makes this history  
shift enough so each of us can live.  
Each letter I write: an attempt  
to ask for help, to reach myself,  
to invite you in.

What do we do with what we've made? Mirrors making caskets, making shields, making changing portraits, making pasts and futures, making image after image, this home of mirrors to carry with me, a chorus of voices under my own, making my own, speaking with me, breaking open inside me the question of what home we can build to hold this kind of a wake, what home.

Chorus:

*This is the journey. This is how it's going along the way. This is how far we've come.*

## VITA

Jeremy Michael Reed was raised in Marshall, Michigan. He earned a B.A. in English, Spanish, and Humanities from Valparaiso University in May 2012, and he earned an M.A. in English from The University of Montana in May 2014. Afterward, he continued to work in Missoula, Montana as a college preparatory tutor and college admissions consultant. In July of 2015, he moved to Knoxville to pursue his Ph.D. in English (Creative Writing) at the University of Tennessee. While there, he co-founded two reading series, and he served as editor-in-chief of *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, associate poetry editor of Sundress Publications, managing editor of a forthcoming Norton anthology of Native American poetry, and assistant to Joy Harjo.