

## **We Were All Dead Once**

Back at the grave, when I talked about the night I left  
and how I killed that dog by accident, I left out why  
she followed me in the first place, the quiet of a stranger's  
yard at dark. The truth is, dogs leave. Dogs die.

Their fur sticks to a road soaked in rain. Storm run-off  
floods ditches, a notice of eviction gets nailed to a fence.  
The guts it takes to leave and come back again, to crawl  
out of the past and into the plot. I left out all the years

I spent crawling through highway grass, how I found her  
there and kept her, until she bit the kids and tried to kill  
me in my sleep. I left out later that night, how I pushed  
on the dark with my son in tow, my daughter in my mouth.

But the truth is, I knew which side of the road to be on  
and she didn't. The hole was already dug when I found her.

## **When a Dog Comes Back Rabid**

Sometimes a dog will come to bed  
with something dead in its mouth  
to hide its kill under the covers.

My wife strips the sheets and burns  
them with the dirty clothes because  
it's the only way to get blood out.

Sometimes a dog will put its nose  
where it doesn't belong. My wife  
knows this and keeps a pistol  
under the mattress just in case.

The fact that a dog would root  
for a soft opening is not alarming,  
not when there's blood in the air.

Sometimes a dog will cower when it begs.  
Sadly my wife knows this too.

But when a dog comes back rabid  
it cowers at nothing, comes in teeth  
first, doesn't beg. When a dog comes  
back rabid it measures the space between  
beast and being as nothing more  
than skin to chew through. It will bite  
at anything no matter how it's made  
or how long it takes to make it.  
My wife knows the signs when she sees  
them, aims downward, then empties.

## Natural Selection

Cats patrol my neighborhood.  
They roam slack-back and don't give a shit.  
Always one or two, rarely more than,  
following each other at a purposeful distance.  
They cross the street heads up. Stodgy and smug.  
Cool and beautiful. And I fucking hate them.  
My neighbor, from across the street sees me,  
walks over looking at the tabby squeezing  
into the drainage culvert. "He's the sassy one,"  
she says, "the book says so." She tells me  
she was an art teacher at an all-girls college  
in the northeast. She tells me how she's retired,  
taking care of her 93-year-old father,  
how she reads books about cats on her porch.  
She asks me some questions: what do I do to live,  
how many kids eat here, can I believe the weather  
we're having. But before I can answer, she moves  
on to something else, tells me how she takes  
photographs of trash on the side of the road  
(doesn't say whether she picks it up after),  
how her husband can barely walk these days,  
and she complains about the irregularity of mail.  
I quit trying to speak and leave her running  
commentary to the sunset. Two more cats slip  
into the culvert. "I don't like the dark one,"  
she says, "it's always teasing the dogs at night."

## An Interview with Ray McManus

**ASW:** Would you begin by providing us with an overview of *Punch*, your fourth book of poetry, from Hub City Press?

**RM:** *Punch* explores the working class. I come to it with roots. I won't go so far as to say that it celebrates those roots, I mean I celebrate them, but I felt that would be a bit cliché for what I wanted this book to show. It's a book based on the reality of many in the working class—you work until the day you die. That is the mantra of the blue collar. That's how the First Shift and Swing Shift work. I wanted to pay some sort of homage—to say 'thank you' would be wrong though—for shaping what has been an integral part of my identity. So I went with the experiences I had, the jobs I worked, and where I worked them. That was somewhat of a challenge — the act of remembering. It's not like one works behind a counter or lays brick or cuts down a tree and thinks, "I need to remember this. This is important." It can feel so unimportant—the work we do.

The speaker in the book wants more though. He wants air conditioning. He wants to work without bleeding. He wants to do better for himself, so he moves on to a white collar world where sweat equity is cashed in for boredom. Such a bleak existence. While it is still too easy to stereotype the working class as blue collar, the definition is also much broader than that. Blue collar, white collar, hourly, salary, part-time, full-time, private, public—all fall into the general category that they work, or have to work. It is unfortunate that the class is often divided by race, but I think that this issue and definition of "work" is more complex than that. It's that complexity that unifies us working class folks—the worker who lives paycheck to paycheck managing two jobs (or more) and the emergency room nurse, the adjunct and the associate professor, the ditch digger and the public defender—all share the responsibility of serving others. Because the working class is so complex, often "in the shadows" working thanklessly, and comprise almost every facet of our daily lives, it is easy to forget how important they are. The working class is not a class. It's a damn nation. And at times a damnation.

**ASW:** How do you define Southern literature and where do you see your work in this line-up?

**RM:** I think when I first read Faulkner, I was in my early twenties. Then O'Connor, Welty, etc. I connected with the themes, but the accent wasn't right for me. The writing was just brilliant. I mean damn. In fact, it's probably what turned me toward Southern poets. But I couldn't ingest it fully. I suppose I could blame some professors for that. But one day I read Harry Crews—*A Feast of Snakes*—and all hell broke loose. Then James Dickey. *Helmets* and *Falling*. I mean damn. The story telling, the voice, the cadence, the

control. I was hooked. Yet, it was easier to think of Southern Literature as an almost singular thing. And I suppose there are certain recurring themes that makes us think that. But contemporary Southern Literature pushes past that. There's the voice and there's the expansive geographical niches, but take that away, and suddenly the South is not a monolithic region but a diversely cultural space where differences in social class, race, gender, language, and religion profoundly shape how writers understand what they are given. And we are invited to participate in that understanding in more ways than perhaps we've ever had. So many living Southern writers like Ron Rash, Will Wright, George Singleton, Terrance Hayes, Adam Vines, Nikole Brown, Jillian Weise, Ed Madden, David Joy, Natasha Tretheway, John Lane, Nikky Finney—and hell I've only scuffed the surface—all have such command and bravery. If my work can line up with any of them, I'll be happy with that. I've always been drawn to literature that isn't afraid to get rough, to get real. I hope someone sees that in my work.

**ASW:** You found poetry in the high school during mandatory in-school suspension. Tell us about this experience and where it took you from that day forward?

**RM:** I didn't grow up with poetry in my house. I didn't know poetry beyond Poe or Shakespeare, and what I knew of it was very little. I got in trouble one day for smoking in the bathroom and the principal gave me in-school suspension (I had missed too many days already and they couldn't suspend me from school anymore). The librarian gave us books to read and we had to write one-page synopses on the books and turn them at the end of the day.

I don't know if it was divine or a joke, but she gave me stack of books and in that stack was *Sound and Sense*. I read Frost and Yeats and Eliot, and I fell in love. I had never encountered language like that. The images. The cadence. I loved the book so much, that I stole it. I joke around and say stealing poetry saved my life, but it's really not a joke. That was tenth grade maybe. Somehow, I ended up at Waldenbooks and picked up a copy of *Howl*. That was the first book of poetry I ever bought. Ginsberg opened up everything for me—poetry became accessible, honest and at times brutal, about anything and everything, and it was everywhere. By and through Ginsberg, I found Whitman, William Carlos Williams, di Prima, Bukowski, and everything just exploded from there. Suddenly everything just connected and made sense in away that had never happened before.

I was really into the punk rock of the 70's, but I couldn't play an instrument. So I just ended up breaking things. But with poetry, suddenly I had direction, an articulated reason (whatever that means), and I was given access to a tool, a mechanism, that would drive my spirit for the rest of my life.

*Sound and Sense* gave me a chance to see poetry (really) for the first time,

but *Howl* opened a vein. I used to write lines from the book on the desks and walls and my high school, but instead of writing it in obvious places, I would find random spots where most just didn't think to look. Somewhere under the bleachers in the gym, written in sloppy handwriting is the line: "who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons." But I think I misquoted it and said "their skeletons" ...in Sharpie, of course. I hope one day some kid finds it. Who knows? Maybe it will turn them around too.

It wasn't long after that that I began writing my poems. Perhaps at first just imitation exercises. I was trying to find my voice. And the people I hung out with didn't read, didn't give a shit about any of it. So I left. Found my way through a tech school campus, transferred to the University of South Carolina, and I never have never left.

**ASW:** Did these experiences, and growing up as "bored and angry" have anything to do with your commitment to bringing Creative Writing back into standard curriculum in public school districts in South Carolina? (Your commitment to Split P Soup outreach program is heartily applauded by Trucker Editor crew, by the way.)

**RM:** Amy Susan Wilson—and Trucker Editorial Crew—thank you for saying that! Yes. Most definitely those years motivated me. And, I can't help but wonder what my life would have been like had I just had an opportunity to explore poetry much earlier.

When I started Split P Soup, it was just to give students an opportunity I didn't have. It was undeniable that writing poetry opened so much for me—the command of the language, owning it, and the confidence I needed to do, well, something legal. Before poetry, I was like most boys I grew up with—why explore the nuances of language when all you needed was a jar or a fist because for some reason that was cool. So stupid and unnecessary. I got lucky.

I just thought there should be more to life than just getting lucky and finding hopeful opportunities, especially in South Carolina, a state of endlessly hopeless opportunities. It would haunt me not to. Every student I work with reminds that I'm still lucky.

**ASW:** You're a busy dude: three kids, academic career, poetry career taking way off the map, marriage, teaching at University of South Carolina—how do you find the time to write?

**RM:** I wonder the same thing sometimes. You know how it is, when it's something you love, it never feels like work. But the truth is, I don't sleep. I run on Cheez-Its and love.

I work now like I was taught to work—all in, out, gone. I don't really think about it though. Every job I have is important. I love it all equally, but I feel more like a failure than I do anything else. Mainly because I'm impatient.

I don't know if my kids will need therapy or not. I mean it has to be tough growing up with poet as a Dad! I've probably ruined every birthday party trying to find a poem in it. I don't know if my students will graduate and do the amazing things I think they can do. I don't know if what I'm doing matters or will matter in the years to come. But I know this, I can't fake anything. Hit or miss. But finishing a poem is such an immediate feeling of accomplishment for me. It's the best drug I've ever had. Ok the second best drug I've ever had. And it doesn't take me long for me to start jonesin' for that fix. (I wish I had a better metaphor.) It drives me to get to a space when I can write the next poem. Sometimes that is 11:30 p.m. Or it could 5:00 a.m. I'm always up for it.

**ASW:** What's on the horizon for you, and what are some works Trucker fans can look forward to?

**RM:** I'm close to finishing the next book and I'm not even close to finishing the next book. There's a chapbook idea floating around. I'm especially excited to be working on a collaboration with my wife, Lindsay, who is a very amazing poet. I'm especially excited to be reading in Durham and in Greensboro, North Carolina this June with Mark Beaver and his new book, *Suburban Gospel*. More stuff, but this is what comes to mind.

**ASW:** Thanks Ray McManus for visiting with me, this has been fun. All of us in Trucker Land look forward to more and more of your work. Do keep us apprised.

**RM:** Thank you, Amy. It has been a real pleasure.