

Jackson

papa's twin kept his distance	until	distance kept him
the west tamed	long after	other men
somewhere the hole-in-the-wall folks	Jackson stayed	between and paradise
even when he stole horses	back home talked	nothing else word came seeing as how Reconstruction unnecessary and all of us
made horse	thieving	
waiting to see	his mug at the post office	riding Isom Dart
a price on his head more than	he was worth posted by the door	
photo <i>wanted</i>	a sepia blur leaving him	some glass plate stamping him
came looking	just before	sidestepping the sheriff for black outlaws
leaving him	under every bush hiding Brer Rabbit scared	
the family's	Jackson	
tall and lanky	pride	and a crying shame
he stole	Papa's double	
was in his blood off Hollywood hills	wild as the horses still hustling	a regular cowboy
	anything was possible	folks said
		even with that house where in those days

The Hanged Man

when the hanged man shits
we know death has taken over
the drool on his lips harden
where the tongue gargoyle out and
his eyes squeeze on a bit of last light
more often than not his genitals stiffen
then hang tumescent as if they
like him have lost directions
the rancid breath rales clicking
like vultures feeding or something
hissing toward candle flame
only the dead can see while
legs dance joyously to a melody
only the hanged man hears
feet pointed as if to pirouette
while hooded figures job done
disappear in the copse of trees and black
faces look up into the even blacker
night full of screams fading into the wind
like the hooting of owls or bull frogs
croaking in muddy shallows
throats expanding contracting
the story passed on and consumed
in a single photo in a family album
an uncle a cousin or brother
Ethel's boy or Roman's eldest
dragged from his bed by men
in shiny boots and white hoods
and slung from the boughs of a tree
a grainy reminder of what
grief we have never digested
and the tree itself still twisted
and misshapen a century later
as if despite the southern sun
fire still burns brightly at its roots

Gandy Dancer

Son was a high yella man
skin the color of russet potatoes
eyes the color of agates or cats
even women whistled when he passed
so pretty he could have been a changeling
“Indian from them high cheek bones,”
the old women laughed—“and them eyes”
they said “them eyes could charm
the stink out of a skunk”—so naturally
the women in the family tried
to hide him from the world
and its 1930s rage and hunger
but he busted loose—broke out
stayed so long that when he returned
the family hardly knew him
“as I live and breathe” they said
looking at his white Panama hat
two toned shoes and empty pockets
he just wasn’t the same when he came
back from the Zone—all pins and needles
said he lost the way things smelled
his senses plugged with odors of death and dirt
where the bossman said the canal was to be
and his mother wailing nearly every hour
the handsomest of all her boys downcast
instead of staring holes through any woman
and Son washing himself in Fels Naptha
slicking pomade in his hair with little finger waves
his good clothes in a paperboard suitcase
the note to his mama on the kitchen table