

## HANGMAN

First, a box for the scaffold. Next a pole, hooked,  
where the noose will go. Then seven spaces underneath,

like the broken centerline the father will cross when he feels  
under the seat for the bottle, because it is a long way to town,

the road a running scar through the dense woods, and you  
watching hard in the dark like he tells you for something

that might run out, suicidal. *Ready* you call, and he says *E*,  
like you knew he would, and you make a circle, happy

for this word without an *e* and because the father is the best  
driver in the world, able to steer with just one knee,

or a thumb looped through the wheel. *R*, he says, *and T!*  
and you mark these next to the head, like the first dumb

thoughts of a man with only a straight line for a body  
and another for a leg, a man who will probably be dead soon,

or else missing something important—hands, maybe, or a nose—  
something he needs to live. *Y* comes next, an odd choice

you think, so you ask *why Y?* and he says *because because*,  
and you both laugh, washed in the headlights that slice

through the cab like a quick and painless incision, knowing,  
one day, after you have a name for it, that this is joy—

tucked safe in the kerosene smell of bourbon that is the sweet,  
sharp spoor of the father—how you know you could find him

if he were lost in these woods, the way animals know their own  
kind, could save him with your amazing sense of smell.

*H-I-J-K!* he shouts, and you add ears because it looks bad  
for the hanged man, the sad stick body and curving frown,

the way you will picture the father thirty years later, after  
they find him and the coroner tells you not to look. *O* he says,

and there are two of these—not together as in *booze* or *doom*—  
but separated, you know, by *l* and *c*, which, when you say it fast,

sounds like *luck luck*, what you wish now for the father who loves  
to win, and for the condemned man, who might be innocent after all,

his fate hanging on the alphabet and on this word you've been saving  
so long. *S* is for sorry, as in *Sorry there is no S*, and *F* is for fireball,

which happens in movies when they crash through the guardrail  
and tumble down the canyon because the father is not at the wheel,

but some bank robber who gets what he deserves, and A is for the ashes that are left, white and clean, dropping straight down through your hands

into the bay. *In the midst of life we are in death*, each in our little car, driving through the long day and the long night till we get

where we're going. G, he says, quietly, lighting a cigarette, and because you agreed on no fingers you hang a heart on the skinny chest, like a note

left on a pole, and he can still get it you know he can if he just concentrates, so you hand him the bottle, taking the wheel as he leans back, eyes closed,

thinking. *N goddammit!* he says finally and you say *Yes, yes*, then silently, like a prayer, *L is for lava that flows from the molten secret heart of the world*,

*down the mountain, toward the slumbering village*. Then stops. The way the father stops dead—*Volcano!*—in the middle of the road, then peels off

grinning, the lights of the town coming into view, the man on the page safe now, hanging by an eyebrow.

## BIG TREE

If life is but a dream, and time, a collapsible cup,  
then who's to say the stranger in the car next to yours—

smiling at the big tree you have strapped into the front seat  
of your convertible as you drive home from the nursery—

was not, after all, the most felicitous of husbands,  
better, even, than you'd dared to hope?

Simple enough to shift what might have been into what *was*,  
to remember how you dug the hole together, lowered it

trunk and root, turning it like this, like this. That was when  
you were just starting out, the way running straight and long

through the town where you lived; not yet the treacherous  
curve; not yet the cross at the side of the road.

And how much a family car can hold! Detritus of decades  
brimming from boxes, bleeding through paper bags,

your hand light on the wheel through the long drive  
and the children asleep in the back, or singing *merrily, merrily*,

love, like breath, fogging the windows; small fingers  
tracing their names. And if it all passed in an instant,

a comfort now to know you had your life of ordinary good,  
of love's tart fruits, its showery blossoms.

And now he is gone, lost up ahead somewhere and you  
won't see him again. But that, you recall,

was the deal you made when you smiled back: the past,  
once yours, you wouldn't trade for any other,

ringed by the past you're living now—here,  
beside the big tree, whose spreading arms will shade it.