



# NARRATIVE

POETRY



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Photograph by Dana Levin.

## Frost on Fire and Other Poems

BY DEAN RADER

### Frost on Fire

**SOMETHING THAT MELTS** can also burn, like a  
Thicket of ice in the pond, the cold net  
Of stars, even the hard white ax of the  
Heart. A man can freeze without getting wet

Just as he can lose without being lost,  
But winter finds everyone, even though  
We spend our whole life eluding it. Frost  
Reminds us of what is to come—the snow,

the sky, the trees, the skin, the sleet, the sleep.  
How often have I woken in fear, blind  
In my unknowing? The woods are dark and deep,  
Even in the day; still the mind will find

Its way into the light, into the bright  
Thaw of this life, where we, both flake and flame,  
Fire and fall through. Let sun daze, let night  
Show day how to blaze, let death drop its name.

### Self-Portrait with Obfuscation

**THE TREES TURN**  
in the evening air

from black to blacker  
even though the moon's

tiny headlamp lumbers

along through the dark  
shaft of the sky's deep  
mine. Twilight, strangely  
dull, climbs into its  
train and chugs back  
to the surface where  
everything goes on  
as before. How does  
something acquire  
luminous meaning?  
How does anything  
not happen? What men  
in another age called  
revelation is blurring  
at the edges. Nothing  
is clearer than that  
which obstructs us.  
I'm tired of description  
the way I'm tired of  
possibility. I want  
the light on the other  
side of the light.  
I want the dark  
the darkness darkens.

## Self-Portrait in Time

**BLACK BELL**, ring the blue boat  
of my bones back to the beach  
of this world, make me an ear

so that I might hear the sound

from the deepest, make me  
a mouth—don't let me drown—  
don't let me sink the way lives  
sink, the way the dead drop into

the endless hum of the end  
as when the wind rends the rake—  
make me bend the way notes bend,

the way waves blend into the long  
crash of the last song, the way  
the body bows to the blur of sea and air.

## Geographic Self-Portrait

*After Bruce Snider*

**ONCE UPON A TIME** in Oklahoma,  
there was no such thing as Oklahoma.

When I look out off the coast of California,  
I am standing on our farm in Hinton, Oklahoma.

Answer: Because Texas sucks and Kansas blows.

Question: Why is it so windy in Oklahoma?

Knife wind, ice wind, blind wind, hatchet wind, stone wind,  
skin wind, dust wind, and must wind all whisper *Oklahoma*.

All roads might lead to Rome,  
but all trails take you to Oklahoma.

Where are you, Rhonda Harder, the first girl to kiss me?  
I'm sorry your name became a joke for the boys in Oklahoma.

I have often wondered if there is more oil  
or blood beneath the soil of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The stars dragged along in their wagons of dust,  
the moon on its cot, the last long light of Oklahoma.

Pawhuska, Nuyaka, Wewoka, Taloga, Oolagah,  
Okeema, Eufala. O the missing maps of Oklahoma.

I heart the left in San Francisco,  
But I left my heart in Oklahoma.

I think of Bruce Snider floating above the corn of Indiana.  
Is he waving at Jesus rising above the wheat of Oklahoma?

My second baptism was in the First Baptist Church.  
My first was in the summer rains of Oklahoma.

State amphibian: bullfrog. State beverage: milk. State soil:  
Port silt loam. State mammal: bison. State song: "Oklahoma."

The first corpse I saw was my friend Kevin Wright's.  
I was six years old in a funeral home in Weatherford, Oklahoma.

It's time to talk about the scent of Denise Barker's cautious  
skin. It was like mist on a summer sidewalk in Oklahoma.


Recently uncovered manuscript from Ovid, in  
which the gods learn to play football in Oklahoma.

Put down your pen, Lord Death. The names of  
my parents are not yet on your list for Oklahoma.

If you ask me what one is to do with this world,  
I will tell you that the answer is not to be found in Oklahoma.

Poem of the open prairie, couplet of the spread-out sky,  
metaphor of mistletoe and milkweed: who will write Oklahoma?

God has bequeathed himself to the grape leaves of Sonoma  
and the fog of San Francisco. Is his next gift to Oklahoma?

My grandfather and my son share the name Dean Rader. This  
morning, my son  
sinks into our bright bed; my grandfather into the dark dirt  
of Oklahoma. 

*From Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry (Copper Canyon Press, 2016).*