

BORN IN THE USA

We were pumping our fists with Springsteen,
chanting the chorus as Reagan galloped
the campaign trail, still pretending
to be a cowboy, and the old man who lived

in the blue house with the white fence
lined with rosebushes was handing out mints
from a bowl made out of a buffalo skull.
Uncle Bob chopped off his thumbs

in a metal press on his first day on the job.
My father returned to Khe Sahn sleepwalking
past our bedrooms, shouting out the names
of smoke and moon. *He had a woman he loved*

in Saigon, sang The Boss. Across the bay—
Ferris wheel lights and roller coaster screams.
Child Services found my grandmother unfit
to adopt. An ambulance in front of the blue house

with the white fence lined with rosebushes.
A white sheet. The bones and feathers
of a dead seagull—a ship wreck
on a rocky shore lapped by green waves.

On their lunch break, my father, my uncles,
and both my grandfathers, their names
embroidered on their grease-stained shirts,
stepped out of the factory and coughed up

their paychecks to their wives idling in Regals,
Novas, and Gremlins. *Out by the gas fires
of the refinery*. My father's handlebar mustache
terrified me. My brother built me castles

out of blankets and chairs, larger than the house
that confined them. Taught me how to leap
off the couch like Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka,
how to moonwalk and breakdance. He’d go on

to teach me that disappointment’s a carcinogen.
My father took cover behind the Lay-Z-boy
in his underwear. My grandmother offered
a pregnant runaway a place to stay in exchange

for her baby. When the plant relocated to Mexico,
my father brought home a pink slip heavier
than a Huey Hog. The rosebushes became thorny
switches. Over ham steaks and mashed potatoes,

our parents poured out their divorce.
We had to decide who we wanted to live
with before leaving the table. I’d go
wherever my brother went: that meant Mom.

My father took a job out of state.
My mother took a boyfriend, who
dragged his unemployment into a bar
called *The Pit*, then staggered

into our house knocking over houseplants,
and I was the one ordered to clean
the carpets with the wet/dry vac. We’d sneak
out of the house at 3AM to swim

in the neighbor’s pool, or ping rocks
off hurtling freight trains. The city condemned
the blue house with the paint-chipped fence.
My mother’s eye, blackened. We slept in parks,

better than home. She stood at the sink,
sobbed, scrubbed blood-splotches
out of her white jacket with a soapy sponge.
Wouldn’t press charges. My brother bought

a dime bag and a revolver from a guy named Kool-Aid.
My mother was crowned a welfare queen, and drove
a Cadillac assembled out of political mythology.
I smoked my first joint on the roof of a movie theater

with my brother and the stars. An after-school ritual:
stepping over the passed-out boyfriend to grab
a Coke out of the fridge. We spray-painted
gang insignias across the boarded-up windows

of the blue house with splintered teeth. The boyfriend
could whip up one hell of an omelet. We didn't hate
him on Sunday mornings. My mother's stiches.
We swiped a bottle of Mad Dog, drank it while eating

peanut butter & jelly sandwiches. My mother stashed
bottles of gin in the leather boots my father bought
for their last Christmas together. Twice they called
me into the principal's office because a knife fell out

of my pocket at recess. We turned abandoned factories
into playgrounds, busted out the windows with tornadic rage.
Somebody was asking for it, and somebody was going to get it.
I overheard a teacher tell my mother, "He's going to grow up

to kill somebody." Thanks to the Black Panthers,
this white boy had free breakfast at school.
My brother waited until the boyfriend was drunk
on the toilet to burst in swinging a baseball bat.

Later that night while taking a bath, I fished
out a tooth biting me in the ass. Backhoes
and bulldozers devoured the blue house
with the collapsing roof. We rewound

and played back the catastrophic loss
that plumed over Cape Canaveral
on our VCRs. The boyfriend slammed
a stolen van into a tree. She'd pour me

a bowl of Cheerios, pour herself a Scotch.

The boyfriend's dentist kept good records.

"I'm sending you to your father."

Son don't you understand now? Front-page news:

firefighters dousing the mangled inferno.

Got in a little hometown jam.

I stood before a judge, pled guilty to

shoplifting Christmas lights, the kind that twinkle.

