The speaker is the young black man
Susan Smith claimed
kidnapped her children.

HOW I GOT BORN

Though it’s common belief
That Susan Smith willed me alive
At the moment
Her babies sank into the lake

When called, I come.
My job is to get things done.
I am piecemeal.
I make my living by taking things.

So now a mother needs me clothed
In hand-me-downs
And a knit cap.

Whatever.
We arrive, bereaved
On a stranger’s step.
Baby, they weep,
Poor child.
MY HEART

Susan Smith has invented me because
Nobody else in town will do what
She needs me to do.
I mean: jump in an idling car
And drive off with two sad and
Frightened kids in the back.
Like a bad lover, she has given me a poisoned heart.
It pounds both our ribs, black, angry, nothing but business.
Since her fear is my blood
And her need part mythical,
Everything she says about me is true.
WHO AM I?

Who are you, mister?
One of the boys asks
From the eternal backseat
And here is the one good thing:
If I am alive, then so, briefly, are they,
Two boys returned, three and one,
Quiet and scared, bunched together
Breathing like small beasts.
They can’t place me, yet there’s
Something familiar.
Though my skin and sex are different, maybe
It’s the way I drive
Or occasionally glance back
With concern,
Maybe it’s the mixed blessing
Someone, perhaps circumstance,
Has given us,
The secret thrill of hiding,
Childish, in plain sight,
Seen, but not seen,
As if suddenly given the power
To move through walls,
To know every secret without permission.
We roll sleepless through the dark streets, but inside
The cab is lit with brutal imagination.
SIGHTINGS

A few nights ago
A man swears he saw me pump gas
With the children
At a convenience store
Like a punchline you get the next day,
Or a kiss in a dream that returns while
You're in the middle of doing
Something else.

I left money in his hand.

Mr. _____ who lives in _____,
South Carolina,
Of average height
And a certain weight
Who may or may not
Believe in any of the
Basic recognized religions,
Saw me move like an angel
In my dusky skin
And knit hat.

Perhaps I looked him in the eye.
Ms. ______ saw a giant of us
On which highway?
On the street that's close
To what landmark?

She now recalls
The two children in the back
Appeared to be behaving.

Mr. ______ now knows he heard
The tires of the car
Everyone is looking for
Crunch the gravel
As I pulled up,
In the wee, wee hours
At the motel where
He works the night desk.

I signed or didn't sign the register.
I took or didn't take the key from his hand.
He looked or forgot to look
As I pulled off to park in front
Of one of the rooms at the back.

Did I say I was traveling with kids?
Who slept that night
In the untouched beds?
MY FACE

If you are caught
In my part of town
After dark,
You are not lost;
You are abandoned.

All that the neighbors will tell
Your kin
Is that you should
Have known better.

All they will do
Is nod their heads.
They will feel sorry
For you,

But rules are rules,
And when you were
Of a certain age
Someone pointed
A finger
In the wrong direction
And said:
All they do
Is fuck and drink
All they're good for
Ain't worth a shit.

You recall me now
To the police artist.
It wasn't really my face
That stared back that day,
But it was that look.
SUSAN SMITH'S POLICE REPORT

My shape came from out-of-nowhere.
The way some things don't belong
That's the way

I clanged up to the car
Trapped by a badly timed light.
Her poor kids never saw our image

Swell in the rearview mirror.
I was the danger of bulk; fast,
Nervous fingers

Barked the unlocked door open
And in I flooded, all the heartache
A lonely stretch of road can give.

Then she was alone, blinking in
The sight of an indifferent moon
Above the pines.

This, she swore, was the sound
Of my voice.
WHERE AM I?

Looking for Michael and Alex means
That the bushes have not whispered,
That the trees hold only shade
That the lake still insists on being a lake.

I flicker from TV to TV. My flier sits
On their grandmother's easy chair. I hover
Over so many lawns, so many cups of coffee.

I pour from lip to lip. The town blossoms
In yellow ribbons, sprinkled like bread crumbs
Or bait. I crackle from cell phones and shortwave,

I am listened for in alleys. Looking for Michael
And Alex means each car is scanned at the
Drive-thru windows, that sightings are hoped for

At the self-serve pumps. Clerks long for the crook
Of my arm, reaching for diapers and snacks.
So many days I have loped from ear to ear,

From beauty parlor to church. They count the days
Till someone comes back. We've never left.
THE LAKE

When called, I come.
My job
Is to get things
Done.

Our hands grip the wheel
As I steer toward
The lake.

The children and I
Have been driving
For days.

Ever look someone
You know
Straight in the eye

And have them look
Right through you? That's been
Our fugitive lives.

They think:
They'll have to sleep
Some time,
But we don't do things
The way you do.
They think:
Sooner or later
They'll have
To eat,

But a deal's a deal.
Our appetite behaves.
Our day seeps
Through yours.

Ever try to say
Something,
And know what you said
Slid past an ear?

That's the way these headlights
Rake the road along the lake.
That's the way
Her children yawn in the
Back seat.
THE LAW

I'm a black man, which means,
In Susan's case,
That I pour out of a shadow
At a traffic light,

But I'm also a mother,
Which is why she has me promise,
"I won't hurt your kids,"
Before I drift down the road.

I'm a mother,
Which is why we sing
Have mercy, come home,
No questions asked.

But I'm black, and we both know
The law.
Who's going to believe
That we had no choice
But to open that door?

Who's going to care
That it was now or
Never,
That there was no time
To unbuckle them,
That it was take the car
Or leave the car?

I'm black, which means
I mustn't slow down.
I float in forces
I can't always control,

But I'm also a mother,
Which is why
I hope
I'm as good as my word.
WHY I AM NOT A WOMAN

How far do you think we'd have gotten
If I'd jumped in her car, a car I wanted
For who knows what,
A woman,
And not noticed the paraphernalia?
The rattles, the child's seat?
Had smelled the spills, the dried pee,
The cloudy musk of old formula?

Even if I had pushed her out, head wild
With all I guessed I'd taken,
How many minutes,
After my foot brushed a ball,
After my eyes cooled down and focused on
The rubble of play,

How many lights do you think I'd run
Before all the stuff they'd dropped
Over the years
Into the small cracks; the straws, the cold
Fries, the pacifier,
How long do you think the cops would listen
Had Susan not sworn
I was black, I was a bad dream,
The children didn't mean a thing
To that woman.
ONE TRUE THING

I was made to be a driver, but the truth is, I was, from the
Beginning, Susan's admiral. The sheriff suspects
I sped the car into the lake like the christening of a great
Ship. The fact is, momentum has more than one cure.
You should think of a rowboat, a prank of tiny holes drilled
Into the bottom. A fast car hits the water like a wall of brick
And glue. But a car, gently pushed, quieter than a cop's
Imagination, will bob out, fill up, then roll like a leaky can.
Composite

I am not the hero of this piece.
I am only a stray thought, a solution.
But now my face is stuck to lampposts, glued
To plate glass, my forehead gets stapled
To my hat.

I am here, and here I am not.
I am a door that opens, and out walks
No-one-can-help-you.
Now I gaze, straight into your eye,
From bulletin boards, tree trunks.

I am papered everywhere,
A blizzard called
You see what happens?
I turn up when least expected.
If you decide to buy some milk,

If you decide to wash your car,
If you decide to mail a letter,

I might tumbleweed onto a pant leg,
You can stare, and stare, but I can’t be found.
Susan has loosed me on the neighbors,
A cold representative,
The scariest face you could think of.
In 1989, in Boston, Charles Stuart killed his pregnant wife and shot himself in a scheme to collect insurance money. He told the police the assailant was a young black male.

CHARLES STUART IN THE HOSPITAL

Susan Smith now knows what
Charles Stuart knew in Boston:
We do quick, but sloppy work.
All these details:

How tall was I? the police asked Charles,
And ask Susan,
But I vary; I seem smaller and taller
After dusk.
What was the tone of my voice?
Did I growl like a hound as I waved
The pistol in their face?
Was I as desperate as a teenaged boy,
Horny for a sweetheart's kiss?

Here’s what I told Susan:
“I won’t harm your kids.”
But if the moment was mine,
Why would I say that?

I sit with her at the station
The way I sat with Charles
At the hospital:
A shadow on the water glass,
Changing hues,
The slant of my nose and eyes.
Depending on the light
And the question.

Charles rocks in bed with the bullet
We gave ourselves.
*How far away was I?* We never stopped
To think.
We were in a hurry.
In Boston and South Carolina
I was hungry for a car
And didn’t much care how I got it.
*Deadly impatient,* Charles tells the cops,
But if I couldn’t be seen,
But why would I do it that way?
Why do wives and children seem to attract me?

I sat with Charles the way I sit
With Susan; like anyone, and no one,
Changing clothes,
Putting on and taking off ski caps,
Curling and relaxing my hair,
Trying hard to become sense.
UNCLE TOM IN HEAVEN

My name is mud; let’s get that out
Of the way first. I am not a child.
I was made to believe that God
Kept notes, ran a tab on the blows,
So many on one cheek, so many on
The other.

I watch another black man pour from a
White woman’s head. I fear
He’ll live the way I did, a brute,
A flimsy ghost of an idea. Both
Of us groomed to go only so far.

That was my duty. I’m well aware
Of what I’ve become; a name
Children use to separate themselves
On a playground. It doesn’t matter
To know I’m someone else’s lie,

Anything human can slip, and that’s enough
To make grown men worry about
Their accent, where their ambition might
Stray. It doesn’t help anything to tell you
I was built to be a hammer,
A war cry. Like him, nobody knew me,
But in my prime, I filled the streets, worried
Into the eardrum, scared up thoughts
Of laws and guns. How I would love
Not to be dubious,

But I am a question whole races spend
Their time trying to answer. My author
Believed in God, and being denied the
Power to hate her,

I watch another black man roam the land,
Dull in his invented hide.
UNCLE BEN WATCHES THE LOCAL NEWS

Like him, I live, but never agreed to it.
A hand drew me out of some mad concern.
I was pulled together
To give, to cook
But never eat.

So I know this fellow, this guy
They’re overturning the world
To find. He and I were
Stamped from the same ink.
I look at them look, high, low,
Over, under. I know
What that white lady thinks,

She’s as sad and crazy as the smile
They’ve quilled under my nose.
JEMIMA'S DO-RAG

I crown her secret, the hair
The world seems to dread.
At night, alone, after work has loosened
Its grip, and the muscles of her smile
Can relax, at the dresser, beside the
Washbasin, down comes the beauty
They try so hard to bind.

I hear there's a man on the street,
Eyes dead as marbles, dodging
The law. They say his cap is made
Of wool. If he sleeps, I bet he dreams
Like we do, scalp uncoiled, nobody's helper,
No one's aunt.
BUCKWHEAT'S LAMENT

My family tells me this white gang I run with will
Grow up, and leave me behind. Our bones
Will change, and so will their affection. I will
Be a childlike man who lives in a shack. Just
Wait, they promise, my hair will become
Hoo-doo. The white girls will deny how we rassled,
What we saw. They laugh

Wait 'til you're grown. And I hear this sad place
At the middle of that word where they live,
Where they wait for my skin to go sour.
STEPHEN FETCHIT READS THE PAPER

Not the dead actor,
Historically speaking, but the ghost
Of the scripts, the bumbling fake
Of an acrobat, the low-pitched anger
Someone mistook for stupid.

This so-called bruiser rattling the streets,
Heavy with children, I'd like to
Tell him what a thankless job
It is to go along to get along.
All the nuances can and will
Be rubbed smooth and by the time
It's over,

By the time you're dead and the people
You thought you were doing this
On behalf of are long forgotten,

There's only an image left that they
Name you after, toothy, slow,
Worthy of a quick kick in the pants.
I used to have bones, I'd tell him.
It was a story that
Rubbed out my human walk.
THE UNSIGNED CONFESSION OF MR. ZERO

No car, no road, no tires, no hands, no fingers, no feet,
No gas pedal, no turn signals, no stoplights, no watch cap,
No legs, no pants, no worn shirt, no blank eyes,
No heavy lids, no cold voice, no threat, no dark skin,

No lying in wait, no click of a handle, no mother’s scream,
No silence at her questions, no height, no weight,
No strange needs, no sense of adventure, no breath,
No nappy hair, no memories, no one to impress,

No hunger, no shit, no piss, no weariness, no reaction,
No family, no ideas, no history, no favorite song,
No blood pressure, no guilt, no sleep or dreams,
No steering wheel, no rearview mirror, no ID.

Somewhere near the bushes. On the periphery.
A noise you can’t easily locate. I am the heaviness
The sheriff thinks he detects on Susan Smith’s tongue,
The story she tries to hold between her teeth and gums.
WHAT I’M MADE OF

Susan fills our hands with plain objects,
Key, door handle, steering wheel,
But my hands are nothing:
A song you can't remember
The words to,
The button that pops
Off a vest, a comb that
Falls out of a pocket
Or purse.

Susan fills my lungs with air,
But what do I breathe out?
Parchment, ink, low growls, the
Blank gap between words.

Nothing fits upon my back,
Nothing actually catches my eye,
I am hidden and found,
I am North, South, East, West,
My dark skin porous, in-between.
Susan claims my name is muscle,
Bone, calls me tissue
And sinew, fills in my blank
With the absence of her boys,

But I am water, pebble,
Silt and gravity,
Evidence under her nail.
WHAT THE SHERIFF SUSPECTS

Each time the town tells the sheriff
To look harder, my nose straightens and
My hair uncurls. I rustle like wind upon
The surface of a lake. I wink just
Below Susan's cheeks.

The sheriff has shuffled my deck all week.
So many miles, so many deeds.
I do not tire. I can't stop driving. I can
Wrangle kids in broad daylight and never
Be seen or heard. I'm not doing this for ransom.
When I'm about, things simply don't add up,

A short distance becomes too large, clocks run amok,
Stop signs change into traffic lights. Now he wonders
Why he's never noticed the way Susan's body can't sit still,
My accent rising from her alibi.
NEXT OF KIN

The black man in town
They thought looked like me,
Without the dreamed-up cap
And wardrobe.

The police have him now.
He sits in a small room.
They turn him this way
And that.

He'll cool there for hours.
How do you think he feels?
I whisper we're innocent
Into his ears.

He looks so much like me,
We could be brothers.
Already, folks
May have their doubts:

He's poor enough.
Where has he been?
He has his needs.
What do they know?
Neighbors call him quiet,
A new knot of stress
On the tongue.

It's been a hard week
To be black in Union, S.C.,
A black woman tells a reporter.

The whites aren't civil.
They look at you and then
Reach over and lock
Their doors.

Now he is it.
Susan has lent me
His cheekbones,
His gait.

For a while,
He is as close as
They'll ever get.
W HAT I S K N O W N A B O U T T H E A B D U C T O R

The sheriff reads off a list of things I have not done: I have not called on the phone. I did not discard the Childrens’ clothing they found by the highway.

I wasn’t the man who robbed a convenience store In a car the same color as Susan’s. I didn’t drop Off the child they found, in Seattle, in a child’s Seat like hers; the baby someone thought they Heard crying in the woods; not there, none of My doing.

Bloodhounds cannot catch a whiff of me. Divers Ra ke the bottom of John D. Long Lake. I give Them a snootful of silt. Who am I? Nothing Says the sheriff, can be ruled out. A teenaged girl Sees a man, covered in mud, walk out of the woods.

The heat sensors of the helicopter they send fail To light my soggy footprints. Nothing can be Dismissed. A psychic tumbles through a dream. He nods as the children point everywhere but In my direction. I am zip, my Face and reasons an educated guess. All week the police computers grind,

But I am that number after the decimal that keeps Stuttering, won’t resolve.
INTERROGATION

The children were fussy,
Susan tells the FBI agent,
So we strapped them in the back seat
And drove off to go shopping
At Kmart.

How can a black man drive
An old, beat-up Mazda
In a southern town
With two white kids
In the backseat,
And never be seen?
The agent would like an
Explanation.

He binds our arm to the
Polygraph,

But we swear we were in the
Parking lot,
In the hours before
I officially arrive,
Under the brute light
Of the mercury lamps.
Who could have missed us, diving
To find a bottle, wedged
Under the back seat?

Who didn't notice us
As we walked the aisles,
A cranky family among
The other cranky families?

He insists: what we say
Is not what we mean.
He tries to spike our heart.

We say, as evenly as we can: the children
Were twitchy bombs
Of sugar; first
We exhaust their eyes, then
Cruise the town,
Like any family,
Bargaining for sleep.
MY EYES

Susan hopes the sheriff will recognize what she's stitched
Under my lids. Perhaps I'm a young boy whose dark skin
Ricocheted off her and her friends on a playground.

Now I drive about, my gaze a blown switch. Maybe I'm
The first time she noticed where they say I'm fit to live: the
Wrong side of the tracks, chocolate town, coonville.

Haven't you seen those eyes before? she asks him, that ache
So close to yearning, the heart's fallen architecture as you see
How this world really works, the empty stare that tracks off
The map, somewhere beyond negotiation.
WHAT ISN'T KNOWN ABOUT THE ABDUCTOR

No name, no known jobs or affiliations.  
Was I working alone, was someone else  
Waiting to help? Did I intend to rob, carjack,  
Or kidnap?

Why won't I stop? Am I afraid, do I think things  
Have spun beyond my control? Why won't I  
Simply drop the kids off somewhere?

Was I paid to do this? Did Susan promise me  
Reward for taking her children?  
Did I do anything sexual to her?

Why did I go for that particular car?  
What sort of carjacker  
Lies in wait on a deserted road?

No age, no preference, no known associates.  
How long have I lived? Will I strike again?  
Did I grab hold of a random opportunity?

Am I someone who lives in town?  
How can I keep moving yet never be seen?  
Why us?
PRESS CONFERENCE

And this is my life now.
I am a faint hum behind
The sensation, the blur of doubt
At the corner of the flashbulb.

These are my names these days:
Hungry, senseless, man of little
Schooling, ninny, fraidy-cat.

If I had an opinion, I guess
I would tell you all I'm tired,
Days and days of near misses,
Almost snapping into focus,

The in-between feel of circling
These streets, a rumor.
If I could, I'd let our weariness
Bite into the sheriff's ear.

Susan steps to the mike.
How do we feel?
There's a crack in our voice.
SYMPATHY

The sheriff's too good to be true.
He tries to urge Susan and me to part.
He trusts a friendly cup of coffee will skim me loose,
But we're hard to untangle.
I won't be easy; we know his help
Is poison. He is courting us.
We run a cold sweat
While he waits.
He is too good to be true.
I am not for his ears, Susan knows.
She tries not to weep; he attempts to lean toward us,
We bob together in the god-awful silence.
CONFESSION

There have been days I've almost
Spilled

From her, nearly taken a breath.
Yanked

Myself clean. I've
Trembled

Her coffee cup. I well
Under

Her eyelids. I've been
Gravel

On her mattress. I am
Not

Gone. I am going to
Worm

My way out. I have
Not

Disappeared. I half
Slide
Between her teeth,
Double

Her over as she tries
Not

To blurt me out. The
Closer

Susan inches me
Toward

This, the
Louder

The sheriff
Hears

Me bitch.
The italicized language
is from Susan Smith's
handwritten confession.

BIRTHING

When I left my home on Tuesday, October 25, I
was very emotionally distraught

I have yet
To breathe.

I am in the back of her mind,
Not even a notion.

A scrap of cloth, the way
A man lopes down a street.

Later, a black woman will say:
"We knew exactly who she was describing."

At this point, I have no language,
No tongue, no mouth.

I am not me, yet.
I am just an understanding.

As I rode and rode and rode, I felt
Even more anxiety.
Susan parks on a bridge,
And stares over the rail.
Below her feet, a dark blanket of river
She wants to pull over herself,
Children and all.

I am not the call of the current.

She is heartbroken.
She gazes down,
And imagines heaven.

I felt I couldn't be a good mom anymore, but I didn't want my children to grow up without a mom.

I am not me, yet.
At the bridge,
One of Susan's kids cries,
So she drives to the lake,
To the boat dock.

I am not yet opportunity.

I
I had never felt so lonely
And so sad.

Who shall be a witness?
Bullfrogs, water fowl.

---

When I was at John D. Long Lake
I had never felt so scared
And unsure.

I've yet to be called.
Who will notice?
Moths, dragonflies,
Field mice.

---

I wanted to end my life so bad
And was in my car ready to
Go down that ramp into
The water

My hand isn't her hand
Panicked on the
Emergency brake.
And I did go part way,
But I stopped.

I am not Gravity,
The water lapping against
The gravel.

---

I went again and stopped.
I then got out of the car.

Susan stares at the sinking,
My muscles aren't her muscles,
Burned from pushing.
The lake has no appetite,
But it takes the car slowly,
Swallow by swallow, like a snake.

---

Why was I feeling this way?
Why was everything so bad
In my life?
Susan stares at the taillights
As they slide from here
To hidden.

I have no answers
To these questions.

She only has me,
After she removes our hands
From our ears.