

WORLD'S LARGEST BALL OF PAINT

CHARLIE PECK

When Luke calls and tells me he's sober, I say,
 Good for you, though in my sauté pan of pity
 for his life and his liquor-slips, I taste nothing.
I hang up and sit on the deck, first hot day
 of spring, the stupid fox squirrels getting laid
 in the trees, squeaking and thrusting against

each other. I'm rarely happy for anyone.

 Each time I hear a beautiful voice I loathe
 the cords in my own throat, their clumsy
vibrations souring each note, so I drift into karaoke
 nights at the local dives, and feel less
 alone in my own bad song. In 1978 my mother

was kicked out of her church choir, she was so flat,
 a fact she loves to mention to this day, bragging
 those howling hymns. That same year she drove
her Volkswagen bug through the North Dakota
 night to a cabin on the Canadian border,
 whipping through birch trees and juneberry bushes,

choirs of cicadas. She fell asleep at the wheel
 and rolled her car six times. As a boy I pressed
 the scars on her legs where she no longer has
feeling, the nerve endings burned out beneath the skin.

 I was once asked to cook spaghetti for 400 people.
In those days I drove around so dope-loaded my path

was more rumble strip than road. I worked as a cook
in a ten-table Italian restaurant, and after the head chef's
dog died, we dug a hole between shed and swamp
and lowered that furred mess. Later, the knife slipped
and the tip of my finger landed among diced onions.
The nurse rubbed the nub and bone-studded end

with alcohol and stitched my hand closed.

I still feel nothing there, middle-finger,
left hand, maybe as punishment for those numb
years I lived. The gas station down the street has the best
fried chicken in town. Most nights walking home
I pop in for a fried tender, the batter forming a crust

under the heat lamps, golden layer sauce clings to.

Sitting on the curb under that fluorescent sign
I love to watch the cars at the stop lights, music and smoke
pouring out of windows. Clouds of brake-light-red
exhaust. Thursday I drove with Kate to a potshot,
no-inn town to marvel at *The World's Largest Ball of Paint*.

In the shed behind a farmhouse it hung: baseball
that's been dipped and smeared so many times
it now weighs two tons. Visitors fly from all over the world
for the chance to paint on a fresh coat and become the next
World Record Holder until another tour group
comes along. Even laughter is its own species

of grief. The couple who owns the ball told us they add one
layer every single day, a different color than the last,
so the cross-section of this thing must be a gigantic jawbreaker.
Kate and I smoothed rollers over the ball until the coat
dried. The couple told us, *That's a World Record!* Dumb,
gripping the still-wet tools, we watched that paintball swing.