

TURNING IN STILL WATER:  
A COLLECTION  
OF POEMS

By

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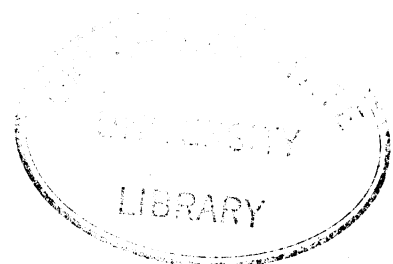
Bachelor of Arts

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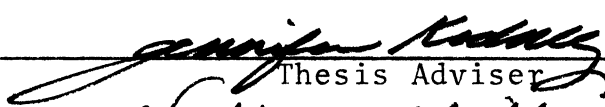
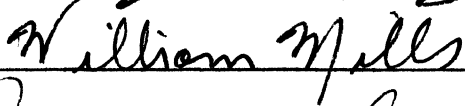
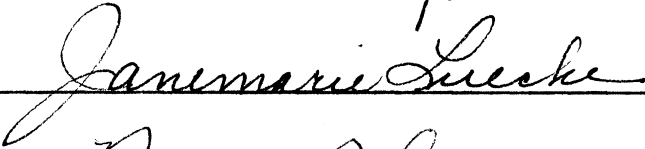
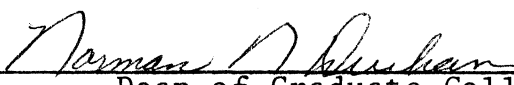
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OF POEMS

Thesis Approved:

  
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## PREFACE

"Turning in Still Water: A Collection of Poems" is a microcosm of my understanding of art, literature, and poetry. There are some good poems in the collection and there are some better poems in it of which it is almost impossible to defend, but at least I can offer some explanation in that direction. The introduction attempts to outline my understanding of free verse while still keeping my poems at a distance. It is always difficult for the author to critique his own poems because he is likely to envision things within the poems that other readers do not.

I would like to acknowledge the following magazines for their kindness in printing some of the poems in this collection in earlier drafts: the Flint River Review, Word Garden, and Kudzu.

I should especially like to thank my committee for their time and work: Jennifer Kidney who has shown patience with my idiosyncrasies and a keen insight into the art of poetry as well as into my own poems; Janemarie Luecke who introduced me into the complex world of prosody; and William Mills who instilled within me the courage to be clear. I would also thank my parents, Albert Joe and Robinette, for giving me my chance. And to Lisa, my wife, I dedicate this to you for

your kindness, love, and time; I thank you. These people have given me understanding, faith, and encouragement while making this project worthwhile. These poems are for you.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### A Short Exegesis on Free Verse

Poetry does not exist solely with the author, with the printed poem, nor with the reader, but it owes its existence to some synergistic correspondence or contract between poem, author, and reader. When poetry was a pre-eminent art form, it was not difficult to discern what was or was not poetry; Anglo-Saxon poetry was accentual verse, Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Century poetry were accentual-syllabic verse, and then, with the approach of the Twentieth Century, poetry became primarily free verse. Free verse induced a gigantic chasm in discerning the difference between poetry and prose. Samuel Taylor Coleridge states in Biographia Literaria that the essential difference between poetry and prose is meter;<sup>1</sup> but with so many writers writing in free verse, we must now seek other distinctions between the two genres. In attempting to differentiate free verse from prose, poets have relied upon arguments that are vague and evoke some subliminal notion of heightened imagination. If one were facing the prospect of defending William Carlos Williams' poem entitled "Poem" as poetry, then how would one illustrate its heightened imagination if to most readers it sounds like

a simple, if not bland, description of a cat stepping into a flowerpot? If one were to examine "Poem" in an attempt to enumerate its poetical conventions, one might possibly note its proximity to syllabic verse and that the four stanzas contain three lines each, but one could do better if he were not confined to denoting it as poetry by that which has ensconced itself as convention. If "Poem" is a poem, then it is so because it establishes patterns: patterns that exist on the phonological level, the semantic level, the syntactic level, or, possibly even higher, on the stanza level.<sup>2</sup> I shall define pattern as any combination of elements whose juxtapositioning is a significant deviation from our language norms. Sonic devices, alliteration, meter, etc., form patterns; clusters of substantives, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and function words form patterns; and lines form patterns; therefore, poetry is not intertwined with meter but pattern, and free verse has simply substituted alternative patterns for those which have been previously employed.

I have employed the term free verse instead of others--cadenced verse, vers libre, or non-metered verse--for convenience since it seems to be the most widely accepted term for poetry that is not governed by a definite meter; however, I do note that the term is oxymoronic as evinced by T.S. Eliot's statement that "No vers is libre for the man who wants to do a good job,"<sup>3</sup> and Theodore Roethke's statement that "free verse is a denial in terms" since "the ghost of some other form, often blank verse, [is] behind what is written."<sup>4</sup> To recover the ghost form is an impossible task

at times, but free verse tends to manifest itself in two types: one type is designated by John Hollander as the oracular, which "exhibits unvarying line integrity, often with anaphora,"<sup>5</sup> as in Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and  
 cross from shore to shore,  
 Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,  
 Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north  
 and west and the heights of Brooklyn to the  
 south and east,  
 Others will see the islands large and small. . .<sup>6</sup>

and another type is designated as the meditative, ruminative, or private<sup>7</sup> as in Roethke's "Fourth Meditation"

What is it to be a woman?  
 To be contained, to be a vessel?  
 To prefer a window to a door?  
 A pool to a river?  
 To become lost in a love,  
 Yet remain only half aware of the  
 intransient glory?  
 To be a mouth, a meal of meat?  
 To gaze at a face with the fixed eyes  
 of a spaniel?<sup>8</sup>

Thus, free verse aims at creating verse through patterns which provide texture without metrical regularity, without rhyme, with typography, and with catalogue as in Roethke's "Elegy for Jane: My Student, Thrown by a Horse" which begins without rhyme, without meter, but with conventional typography and a catalogue:

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as  
 tendrils;  
 And her quick look, a sidelong pickeral smile;



And how once startled into talk, the light syllables  
 leaped for her,  
 And she balanced in the delight of her thought. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Miller Williams suggests some techniques on developing the line which when applied to free verse may aid the reader in establishing patterns within his poetry: one may employ a noticeably longer or shorter line than that which has been established,<sup>10</sup> as one sees in the last three lines of stanzas one and three in "Elegy for Jane: My Student, Thrown by a Horse"; one may employ a pattern of terminal rhyme where none existed before or one may modify the existing pattern of rhyme,<sup>11</sup> as one sees in Roethke's poem "Flower Dump"<sup>12</sup> where the terminal words, in order by line, are "slag," "stem," "pile," "cosmos," "leaves," "roots," "veins," "hair," "pot," "limp," "top," "head," and "dead" (notice that the phoneme /p/, which belongs to the same general category-- stops--as does /t/, in "top" is not an exact rhyme with "pot," but does initiate the expectation of the terminal rhyme which follows in the last two lines); and one may exchange end-stopped lines for enjambed lines or vice versa,<sup>13</sup> as one sees in Roethke's "The Lost Son"<sup>14</sup> where the last three stanzas have three, three, and one end-stopped lines per four line stanza respectively.

Although this is only a brief outline of some of my tenets and understandings of free verse, it may provide background and insights into the poems which follow.

#### An Apologia for the Poems

The lines "Beginner,/ Perpetual beginner," from Theodore

Roethke's poem "What Can I Tell My Bones?" states as succinctly as possible the frustrations and doubts that I endure in attempting to write. Today, after several years of training, I still feel like a beginner: not a beginner in the sense that I am writing something innovative which will forge new frontiers in poetry, but in the sense that this thing, writing, is a process which I have never entered into before. I face writing with the blind mouth of a child when he first encounters the one inch lines on a Big Chief tablet with an over-sized pencil wrongly placed between his second and third fingers. The awe of writing is never released from this perpetual beginner syndrome. Writers' answer to this syndrome is that they work within a set of conventions which they have employed previously, and thus patterns emerge from their work. I should like to discuss the poems that follow in this thesis in regard to certain patterns that I find I have employed on the typographic, sonic, linguistic, and imagistic levels of the poems, and then in regard to the poems' organization as a thesis.

The most conventional aspect of these poems is the typography; the first letter of each word of each line is capitalized because I seek to provide a counterweight to the end of each line which normally carries more meaning than the beginning of the line. For some writers the beginning of each line has more weight or meaning and then the end of the line trails off. I attempt to keep the line ending weightier in order that the reader may be propelled and not allowed to become lost at the end of each line; if the

beginning of each line carries more weight than does the end of each line then the reader is not likely to have the propulsion to finish the poems, but if the end of each line provides the reader with enough impetus then he will be carried through the poem. All the poems are titled, all the titles appear with their letters capitalized, all the titles are separated from the poem's body, and none of the titles begin the poem as a first line. Using the title as the first line of a poem is a tenable ploy, but in these poems I have chosen rather that the titles remain distinct and attempt to introduce a tone or setting to the poem prior to the reader's entrance into it. "Friday or When the Cat's Away" suggests that the reader approach the poem with some playfulness, "The Conscious Voice" is a direct statement announcing that the persona is quite aware of the diction of the poem, and "The Two P.M. Lunch" establishes the context from which the reader should approach the poem. The typography, therefore, is conventional and does not tax the reader's imagination, but rather attempts to be as unobtrusive as possible.

The sonic level is the most complex in every poem. Sonic devices cover a spectrum of elements: rhyme--slant, sight, internal, masculine, and feminine--alliteration, assonance, consonance, dissonance, repetition, onomatopoeia, and meter. Discussing the sonic devices in one line of one poem can be an extensive project, but I trust my cursory remarks will evince that I am cognizant of sonic devices and do employ them although not extensively. With the exception of the

two epigrammatic quatrains and a couple of ghost sonnets, the poems are unrhymed. In reference to Mr. Williams' comments I alluded to earlier about introducing rhyme at the end of the poem where none existed prior, I am fond of employing this tactic and do employ it several times, as in "Scholasticism, Marriage, and the Component Parts," "Caney Creek: On the Absence of a Son," "The Two P.M. Lunch," "Friday or When the Cat's Away," and "Time and the Nature of Art," in an attempt to provide unity and project closure through the introduction of pattern. The rhymes I do use are ones that I hope are not expected; expectation reduces effectiveness. Rhyming is an almost dead art and one in which I hope to develop more competence. Alliteration is a tricky device that must be handled with restraint or it will induce clangs and interruptions in the poems' rhythm, and thus impede the readers' progress. I do not use alliteration extensively, but I do allow it to emerge at times. In "Little Crabs Crawl" the voiced bilabial stop /b/ is employed and demands attention; in the last four lines, seven out of twenty words begin with /b/ and its closest competitor /ə/ begins only three words, all of which are structure words. Assonance and consonance are not as foregrounded as rhyme and alliteration in these poems; thus, they are employed only to provide harmony of tone in an attempt to avoid dissonance of tone. Repetition is employed on all levels.

Most of the poems are written in free verse. The predominant ghost form behind the poems are iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter. Extra unstressed syllables

are added or deleted in an attempt to give more range to vocabulary and syntax and to introduce extra syllables in an attempt to keep the lines from becoming expected, contorted, or alien to the spoken idiom. A number of lines are embedded with two or three syllables occurring together without interruption from unaccented syllables in an attempt to slow the reader and remind him that the lines are poetry--not prose.

I have already alluded to the language somewhat, but I would say that I have attempted in these poems to convey a language with diction as close to the spoken language as possible without lapsing into prose. I admire the language of Roethke and Dickey in their longer meditative poems in which they attempt to do likewise. Except at times when I want a specific allusion to a certain style of diction, I have attempted to make the language as specific as possible, and thus I am fond of introducing concrete specific elements into the poems to lend to their solidarity. In "Little Crabs Crawl" I speak of "Agawam's current" and "Buzzard's Bay" which are a river and a bay in southeastern Massachusetts. As an extension of the language, the imagery is concise and hopefully does not introduce any artsy ornamentation of which poets are so fond. The similes and metaphors provide an easy entrance into the poems. The poem "Scholasticism, Marriage, and the Component Parts" is in the metaphysical conceit tradition, and thus I attempt to correlate a quad-stereo system with modern marriage.

Most of the poems have been written over the last year; however, the poems were not written or conceived as an

organic whole, but rather independently of one another, and thus the most challenging element in completing this thesis has been the organizing of the poems in a manner which would garner meaning and synthesis for the arrangement. The collection is divided into the two sections "My Memory, My Prison" and "Man Learns From Silence." In agreement with Roethke's statement that man must go backward to go forward,<sup>15</sup> I begin the collection with poems that entail children and childhood memories. "Caney Creek: On the Absence of a Son" and "Conversation at Royal Gorge" appear to present a dichotomy in that in one poem, "Conversation at Royal Gorge," the persona has a child and in the other he does not, but actually both poems have the son--child--separated from the persona, and thus both poems seek a union between man and son. The separation of the child from the father is symbolic of the father, persona, having lost the child within himself which he must regain to progress; thus Roethke's statement is similar to Wordsworth's maxim that the child is the father of the man.<sup>16</sup> The other poems in the first section deal with the difficulties inherent within male-female relationships. The poems confront a range of situations from Mr. Bloom's lack of concern for Mary in "Mr. Bloom's Notion of an Eclipse" to the killing of a doe in "Slaughtering" which is symbolic of the persona's desire to disassociate himself with his wife. The "Man Learns From Silence" section deals with man's conflict within himself, especially with his lack of ability to communicate with others; thus in "Anna Kuerner: Still in Conversation," it is Anna who,

although she does not speak, creates the dialogue with the persona. The two longer poems in this section, "Iowan Grave" and "Burying," have as their subject death. In "Iowan Grave," the persona is aware that death is the end result of life, but it is not an ultimate act to him; in "Burying," the persona identifies the grave and the burial act as the ultimate act of man, and thus the last line, "I left him all I had," is a statement affirming that all man has is his death.

When I began this thesis it was with trepidation, but now I feel comfortable with it. I am now pleased with the poems and I believe I can defend them as poetry. I have learned more about literature having entered into the act of it than I would have if I had studied it as a passive observer. I have given it all I have.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, in English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), p. 472.

<sup>2</sup>William Carlos Williams, "Poem," in The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Shorter Edition, ed. Alexander W. Allison, et al. (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 482.

<sup>3</sup>Erza Pound, Literary Essays of Erza Pound, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Fussell, "Free Verse," Antaeus: Poetry and Poetics, No. 30/31, (Spring, 1978), p. 304.

<sup>5</sup>Fussell, p. 300.

<sup>6</sup>Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass: Authoritative Texts, Prefaces, and Whitman on His Art Criticism, eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 160.

<sup>7</sup>Fussell, p. 300.

<sup>8</sup>Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), p. 163.

<sup>9</sup>Roethke, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup>Miller Williams, "The Line in Poetry," Antaeus: Poetry and Poetics, No. 30/31, (Spring, 1978), p. 309.

<sup>11</sup>Williams, p. 309.

<sup>12</sup>Roethke, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup>Williams, p. 309.



<sup>14</sup>Roethke, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup>Richard Allen Blessing, Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 198.

<sup>16</sup>William Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up," in The New Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250--1950, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 502.

CHAPTER II

TURNING IN STILL WATER

My Memory, My Prison

CANEY CREEK: *On the Absence of a Son*

The sun angled the edge  
Between the boys and me.  
They were ten and in the shadow  
Building a dam.  
They dismissed conversation  
And concentrated on engineering.

I, too, played with mud  
Built dams  
That would never hold  
And cleaned the mud from  
My fingers with sedge.

The boys, attracted to some other project,  
Leave the dam and I walk over  
And watch the water carry it away.  
I pick up a plum sized remnant  
And squeeze it between my fingers.

If only the boys had talked to me  
I could have instructed them in the laws  
Which would eliminate their structural flaws.

*CONVERSATION AT ROYAL GORGE*

Deaf in the wind, I attend the bridge's  
Screaks as my son waves from the bedrock.  
Once I knew the language of the water  
Cuddling on the rocks, but now the gorge's  
Depth keeps my son's voice; I see his hands  
Cupped around his mouth, the strain on his throat.  
Above, on an upper edge, I lean on the bridge  
And the ropes ease in tautness.  
I know the distance of the step  
To my son, the depth of his voice,  
And wave with one hand free.

*CHRIS' WORLD*

Playing army with the ants  
Is a child in the long day  
That springs from the prairie.

A March breeze blows his hair  
Above the grass as the marigolds  
Mark his distance from the target--

Ant Hill 12. His eyes  
Are his aerial reconnaissance;  
Two degrees left. Fire One.

He shouts as fire control officer,  
And a "Black Cat" mortar shell disables  
The ant's red battalion. Fire Two.

Ground Zero. The ants are gone.  
A few managed to scuttle underground leaving  
Chris with the March wind above the spear grass.

THE CONSERVATION OF ENERGY

Thermodynamics' second law  
Isn't nature's own frugality:  
It reflects God's sexuality  
While rubbing women raw.

*MY STUDENT OF THE THIRD ROW*

The burlesque of tuition is my student  
Of the third row. She does not question  
For her amenity is in a ritual with spring.  
She unfolds for me in each overcast class,  
Unbraids her muffled neck, undrapes her coat,  
Pitches her shoulders back, and unfurls those breasts,  
All within view of the chestnut's unbudded wintry top.  
She is my lark in winter and my rite is  
In her throated ease. She dresses in stolen  
Earth hues from October's minerals and acids--  
Sienna, straw, and sorrel.  
Her cheeks draw color as bushtits catch song,  
But Nature must store its great things  
For its spring bloom, while my student sings  
Through winter with a lark's yellow melody.

A NOTE ON YOUR TURNING TWENTY

The hardwoods stand as your attendants  
The ground greens under your step  
But there are darker eyes in you

And as you turn towards twenty  
Dance with the golden fish  
Image upon image  
Before the narcissus leaves with the sun

And as you turn into the wind  
Drawing back from this pool  
The gulf will pull you south  
And roll you in its foam  
Things will fade, but will not disappear



SCHOLASTICISM, MARRIAGE, AND  
THE COMPONENT PARTS

Baby,  
Victrola's come a long way.  
She isn't cranky anymore  
With her skirt trimmed oak  
Decorator cabinet  
Laid out in components,  
Direct-drive-turntable,  
Kenwood amp, tweeter, woofer,  
All laid supine on a shelf.

Modern fidelity is menage à quatre.  
Reproduction is the key.  
So it is with us.  
Duty obliges faith by decree.

MR. BLOOM'S NOTION OF AN ECLIPSE

Mr. Bloom sat in the Anchor Inn. "Another,  
Barkeep, easier on the tomato though,  
My Mary's waitin' at the house." The barkeep  
Shook his apron and roaches flopped out  
Like paratroopers, and then, embarrassed,  
They crawled back into some other night.

Mr. Bloom had had enough. He stepped out  
Into the light that seemed niggardly dun.  
Like someone had dusted the sun.  
The streets were a bit too long, too narrow.  
Mr. Bloom thought maybe it was his vision,  
But Mr. Bloom, how does one tell?

It's like when Mary goes to get on top  
And her ass obscures the electric light.  
It puts you in a shadow with that hair ablaze  
Like Moses' burning bush. Mr. Bloom says,  
"Woman, come a little closer," and how she came.  
Mister, tomorrow, I'll drink her a tall one.

## THE TWO P.M. LUNCH

With the blinds and the windows open  
We watch the wind bring in the rain.  
Mr. Bloom shuffles out and seats himself  
Tugging twice at his trousers.  
He checks his watch.

And now,

Let us too.  
Let the *too* become an hour again.  
Let Mr. Bloom into our afternoon.  
Let it rain.  
Let Mr. Bloom.

## FRIDAY OR WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY

With the lights, the fan, and the sheets  
Turned down, she slides in under me.  
I reach and snub her cigarette out.

Saturday.

The house is the same  
Except for the ashtray with its nine  
Marlboro butts. She'd smoked them  
Until she burned the gold band--  
A band like my wife wears.

Sunday.

The smells gone  
But I've kept the butts; I hadn't noticed before  
But she hadn't left any impression on them;  
Any man could have smoked these.  
There wouldn't be any lip smudges  
And I was clean.

With the cats, the dog, my wife  
In bed at night, I often imagined my other  
Lover, but now I imagine my wife.

## SLAUGHTERING

I remember those brown, brainy eyes checking the way,  
Her nostrils flared and twitching, wet from the wind,  
Her stepping out from the brush offering her flank.  
I brought her down from 200 yards with my Russian rifle;  
It was clean and I was back in Berlin  
In 1945. She laid down like a child.

I bound her legs, legs as delicate as any woman's,  
And hanged her from a head high limb.  
Her brown eyes met mine for a moment  
With that look a woman has on her wedding night,  
But my knife took it away and the blood covered  
Her eyes. A light steam came off the body  
And I warmed my hands.

Her stomach was white like the eyeball of a nigger  
And damp with little crystalline balls of water  
That melted as I rubbed my cheek against her warmth  
And remembered my daughter at home asleep.  
I felt childhood, Christmas, and christened.

Man Learns From Silence

## LITTLE CRABS CRAWL

A boat brought his world and let it drop  
Circles came with each wave's crest  
Bubbles came with its descent

Water equilibrates  
And its rate of motion slows  
Agawam's current burrows it oblong

Beneath the algae  
Near the sea-weed that bends  
Like new dancers in the drift

Its coat of arms is washed away  
The sand smoothes a strait in its neck  
Crabs drag themselves into this world

And shed and grow and now can't go  
Incarcerated in Buzzard's Bay  
Among the brass rimmed portholes  
Bronze propellers and ships' bells  
All in a world brought by boat

*THE CONSCIOUS VOICE*

The lilies, on edge and in silent poise,  
Spin fall color into spiral earth tones  
As the eremite pans form from these  
Waters: a cantation bred into bone;  
A hermetical balance of fragrance  
In salt and sand circled in foam.  
The simple water's panned ripple cadences  
Shadow into a blind rhythm  
That translates the embodied light to form.  
The sun blonde bones seem veiled, rested  
Beneath the green petals; the eremite  
Slides the lilies over like a blanket.  
The silt settles as tissue on the bones  
As the infant blood issues new and unknown.



ANNA KUERNER: *Still in Conversation*

Hoary and tight, her hair  
Pulled in the menial worm's  
Spiral climb, she ascends  
From cellar with cedar and pork.

Thin and dressed in brown,  
She curtsies with a plank smile  
As her unhewn birch face stares  
To Stuttgart with untenanted eyes.

Scraped and tanned, her ash cheeks  
Blanch and blur. Unmassacred  
By New England's snow and stones,  
She procures the splintered fuel

Cut and measured from a pile of oak.  
She spreads the coals as if to warm  
My spoken Anglo-Saxon rhythm.  
She addresses me in an air that cures.

## A BENEDICTION FOR PAPA

In the clear of the dark, Papaw,  
My father's father, a father who's lost his son,  
Kindles his prayers. His black beads warm  
To his fingers; he balances his rosary  
Better than Simon at Golgotha.  
He kisses his cross *IN NOMINE PATRIS*  
His incantation binds me in my sheets  
In my room that opens into him *ET FILII*  
The clock strikes the half-hour.  
The sun invades my dark *ET SPIRITUS SANCTI*  
And pushes his shadow nearer to me  
Nearer that elusive place  
Where magic edges and ends.

TIME AND THE NATURE OF ART

Lightness and darkness, nearness and distance,  
Man then God, but in time.

For time breeds chance, chance change,  
And change, by chance, is in the nature of art.

Man's art's lost in carnality and currency,  
Technology's haven's beyond the stars  
Beyond the pilot from Galilee.

DELIVER ME FROM THE ENEMY

The woman maneuvers the highway contours  
Like a pilot; she hums a counter-pointed  
Rhythm while her windshield holds  
A glint of sun dulled by blue-bonnets

And in the next moment  
An introspective voyager spreads himself  
Across her shield with his arms  
Splayed to receive his earth.

The intrepid one had vaulted  
As cargo from the hull of a plane.  
His leviathan had lost its fitness.  
Its riveted armor, the metal scales,  
Burned like straw struck by lightning.  
The plane spurned its sojourners  
While she had but a while to go  
And his earth had been made whole.

PRIOR TO A MIGRANT WORKER'S MEAL

It is a cruel month that harvests sweat  
From the brows of men in melon fields  
Who haven't time to clean under their nails  
But lean against the shade trees waiting.  
Their thoughts are with the storms  
Far from the fields above the tree line  
That lures their tanned sons  
With the elemental glitter of stone.  
The stones tremble in the water.  
Their sons plunge into the branch  
That etches its history in their bed.  
The men wash in the mountain water;  
They gather its stones for their wives  
Who call them in from the far fields.

## AN IOWAN GRAVE

Snowplows may clear the farm roads  
But in winter Iowa's graves are obscured  
By the snow and our tires won't hold firm  
In the black gum and post noon snow.  
We curve like the signs say, slow,  
And look for steeples on each coming hill.  
Council Bluff's graveyard is fenced  
with wrought-iron and the old stones surface  
Like the conning tower of the Nautilus.  
We drive on into the next closet-town  
Hunting East Liberty Church and Grandma Barker's  
Grave. The town's having Sunday Services.  
We buy cheese, crackers, and peanut butter  
For lunch and ask directions to East Liberty  
From the station attendant. He isn't sure  
But a stubble bearded man whittling  
In a back corner thinks it's back three miles  
And then east on past the railroad tracks.

East Liberty's doors are wooden  
And locked. We know from Grandma Barker's diary  
That the farm-family burial sites  
Were all moved to East Liberty;

The wheat fields must be expanded to profit.  
 Grandma Barker was six when Mrs. Briggs was moved.  
 The pine casket was light. It contained only  
 Her wedding ring she had worn as a watch fob  
 After her fingers had grown fat with age.  
 The farmers of the nineties are gone. The Christy  
 Brothers and Mrs. Briggs are dead.  
 Their monuments are silent like the church bells,  
 But if these old farmers were to exit  
 From their Sunday service, they would spot  
 Our tracks where we stepped lightly from our car  
 Half-calf into a stiff snow that rounds the hills.

I go right and my wife goes left towards  
 A cedar she thinks the grave's near. I yell  
 From thirty yards beside a weathered stump--  
 My words form in frost. I scoop away  
 Snow from the half stone. My wife flounders,  
 She sinks near the edge and brushes aside  
 The remaining flakes. The sun melts the ice  
 From the furrows cut to the name:

*Helen Marysfield Barker, 1878-1966.*

My wife, the granddaughter with her chin, smiles  
 And I ask her to step back a little to snap  
 A picture. Her shadow hovers upon the stone.  
 Her chain and brooch dance with the glint of sun  
 As children danced once in these fields.  
 I snap her picture from the edge of the grave.

It's a fine stone marker submerged  
Beneath the snow; it's silent like East Liberty.  
We eat our crackers and wash the dry lunch down  
With snow ice cream. We drive on and curve  
Like the signs say, but the hills are steep.



A NOTE ON WALLACE STEVENS

I've looked for that jar in Tennessee  
Upon each hill where wilderness had dominion,  
But Stevens has engaged us in some vagary:  
A jar is bigger than a hill in his opinion.

## TURNING IN STILL WATER

Thirty steps from the stubble grass,

He rushes in up to his hips;

The current drags at his thighs,

The sandy, clay water shines

Under his groomed shadow.

The sand grasps his toes, his feet.

The wavelets roll him back. Again,

The current drags at his thighs.

The water moves to him, to stillness.

Turning in still water is not easy.

The cimarron current waits its turn.

The water floats his arms, his shadow.

A MAN MUST GO FAR TO FIND OUT WHAT HE IS

It is my porch in late afternoons and evenings--  
I read, smoke, and keep the paper folded to shade the sun;  
I am as tired as the plants of the day's conversions.  
The lawn, with its crushed green, is tired like Ireland.  
The cat bathes in the dust.

Light takes the porch  
And I move onto the lawn in the shade of our pecan tree.  
Dust sets the sun down like a Magritte painting,  
The moon, the yellow perch moon that smiles like my  
Third-grade teacher, sits on the porch's white beam  
And the dandelions call out as the crickets warm up.

## BURVING

The swollen earth sank under our steps  
Leaving the impressions of a hundred  
Pairs of feet scattered upon the graves  
Of his mother, father, and grandfather.  
The watered ground diffused the distinctness  
Of our foot prints, of the fire ants that  
Crawl from the dead with this rain, with every  
Rain, and then burrow back into the roots and bones.  
The mourners left for home--  
Baked beans, ham, pecan pie, company in comfort.  
The rains slacked off, but I stayed on.  
I wanted to know it all.

A negro crawled in the half-empty grave  
To bail out the water. The sides seeped in  
And the grave walls came out with the water.  
He braced the plywood vault with half inch  
Cedar limbs that smelled like linen closets  
Which will scent the grave as they rot.  
With a hemp strap slung under the coffin  
At each end, we let the casket push its  
Own way down. It was an awkward fit  
As if earth refused to honor its guest.

Standing beneath the tent that covered the grave  
That sagged along the edges with pockets of water,  
I could see that one drop collecting,  
Waiting for the impetus to fall.

I piled the abused carnations on top  
Of the grave. With him, in his casket  
Are a yellow rose, his wife, and three  
White carnations, his daughters.

I left him all I had.

I buried him.

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