Thesis-1985D-B931v

Dissertation

Bugeja, Michael J.

Page Number 94

- ☐ Images
- ☐ Foldouts
- ☐ Maps

- ☐ Scanned
- ☐ Clean-up
- ☐ PDF

☐ Archive MSF ☐ Projects

25 Verified

8/26 Date

THE VISIONARY

By

MICHAEL JOSEPH BUGEJA

Bachelor of Arts
Saint Peter's College
Jersey City, New Jersey
1974

Master of Science
South Dakota State University
Brookings, South Dakota
1976

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
December 1985

THE VISIONARY

Thesis Approved:

Janemarie Brooks
Thesis Adviser

Thomas L. Ware

Mark Nelson

Edward P. Walking

Norman N. Durham
Dean of the Graduate College

PREFACE

I thank all of those who have offered their support and encouragement to me during the last five years in the English and Journalism departments at Oklahoma State University. I especially thank Dr. Edward Walkiewicz for his critical expertise and Dr. T.R. Hummer, now at Kenyon College, for his literary guidance. I am also grateful to Dr. Paul Klemp, Dr. D.S. Berkeley, Dr. Janemarie Luecke, Dr. Tom Warren, Dr. Marlan Nelson, Dr. John Milstead, Dr. Gordon Weaver, and Dr. Leonard Leff for sharing their knowledge with me during the course of my studies. On a more personal level, I wish to thank Diane, my wife, for her love and inspiration; Lori Sears, for her enduring bond; Jeanne Adams Wray, for her friendship; and Erin Marie, my daughter, for making life more meaningful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Poetry, for better or for worse, is identified as lyric or narrative. Lyric poetry is said to retain the musical origins of the art while narrative poetry keeps the oral, story-telling tradition.[1] There are other ways to describe each type, but the myriad of methods implies that occasionally the conventions meld or are difficult to identify. Eventually, each poet adopts or invents his own definition. I inherited mine from T.R. Hummer, my only mentor in poetry, who maintains that the reader can sense the passage of time in a narrative poem but cannot in a lyric one.[2] For me, the ability to identify a poem as lyric or narrative was the first step toward understanding the intent behind a work, the blueprint upon which a poet bases his art. Moreover, the definition drew me to the works of lyric and narrative masters during the early stages of my apprenticeship when reading was as vital as writing.

I came to realize that poets readily wear their lyric or narrative badges. Prestigious journals such as New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly conduct narrative and lyric contests to identify the best writing in either tradition. A lyric or narrative label helps the writer define the poetic self, package it for critics, and generate future work. It also implies that a poet is past his apprenticeship and has

come to terms with his talents and limitations. This was the case with me. At first, when I enrolled in Hummer's workshops, I tried to emulate his narrative style because it so impressed me. I soon learned that the lush Hummer-like poem is often a tour de force that a novice can hope only to enact but not match. To succeed as a poet, I looked to the lyric as model. I was attracted to Ben Jonson, who mastered the epigram, and to James Wright, who enlightened the lyric with colloquial diction. Through these influences, I was able to write publishable poems and begin to define my personal poetics. The narrative and lyric at this point in my career became means of expression that made the writing of verses easier and more effective. However, I had not yet comprehended the full range of possibilities in book form.

About this time, I suffered a personal setback: the loss of an infant. This would be the subject matter of dozens of poems as I struggled to overcome the tragedy and reconstruct it through art. Initially, however, I found myself doubly blocked: I had become a lyric poet with a story to tell and needed a new diction to accompany a potentially sentimental topic. The loss of a child has been a frequent topic of great occasional poetry, from Jonson to Jon Silkin, but rare as subject matter for a collection. Jonson's epigrams, "On My First Daughter" and "On My First Son," were examples of how powerful the lyric could be about the subject. Silkin's much-anthologized "Death of a Son" employed a contemporary diction that relied heavily on metaphor and simile. But these, at

first, did not motivate me because the impulse was to tell a story that, certainly, dealt directly with the death of an infant as Jonson's and Silkin's poems did, but that also encompassed the entire experience of anticipation, shock, grief, and healing. I wanted to do what Hummer did so well in his first major volume The Angelic Orders: express emotion through a storyline that allowed the reader to feel the same emotional pitch as the writer.

Hummer, at this point, was completing his next book, The Passion of the Right-Angled Man. He had written the type of poem I yearned to pen about the very subject matter I was struggling with--the death of my daughter--an elegant and moving narrative dedicated to me and my wife: "Circumstance: The Vanishing."[3] The block was becoming insurmountable, even though I had established myself as a competent poet, with publications in several dozen journals. Because of such success, Hummer entrusted me with the proofing of his new volume when it was accepted by the University of Illinois Press. In going over his book several times, I realized that the narrative poems therein were about a lyrical concept: passion. The poems seemed influenced in parts by Wordsworth, one of Hummer's favorite poets. Thus, it became apparent that Hummer had crossed lines as Wordsworth did in his narrative Prelude, whose lyrical constructs were joy and passion. If such poets as Hummer and Wordsworth could transcend their narrative badges in book form, then it seemed likely that I could do the reverse: write lyric poems, appropriately

arranged, that could tell a story.

Shakespeare's sonnets came to mind. I had studied them along with Jonson's Epigrams and had deemed the latter more to my liking. When I returned to the sonnets and epigrams, I did so to determine how well each author's poetry succeeded as a book. Now Jonson's poetry seemed inferior, a collection of lyrics about a variety of themes, while Shakespeare 154 sonnets seemed unified as a volume about love. The structure of his book begins with sonnets that address a young man, urging him to marry and have children. The poet turns from the platonic love of the gallant to focus in the next grouping on a mysterious dark lady. The nature of love changes to lust, candor, and guilt when the poet suspects the lady has seduced a friend. The sonnets then focus on the friend and on a rival poet competing for the man's atention. Shakespeare deals with love in its many phases. Through the sonnet, which Wordsworth is said to have called the key that unlocked the bard's heart,[4] Shakespeare had told a story.

The sequencing of lyrics is common in English literature, but I had only begun to appreciate its impact in book form. Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, juxtaposed, tell a story about the human psyche with as much impact as his narrative Jerusalem. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, employing the Petrarchan form, dedicates a love story to her more famous husband in Sonnets from the Portuguese. Although individual poems in that collection are inferior to Robert Browning's dramatic masterpieces, her book of sonnets endures

as much as any volume by her husband. Emily Dickinson's poems, when read in sequence, express her faith with as much vigor as Milton in his narrative Paradise Lost. Whitman's Leaves of Grass, an epic about the self and a touchstone for the moderns, sings in sequence to this day. It became clear that superior books of poetry often crossed the lyric-narrative border. Pound did it in Cantos to create an epic through vision and voice; Williams in Patterson to create epic and myth through personal testament; and Crane in The Bridge to create American myth through diction and metaphor. I was ready to put together my collection, The Visionary.

Crane's book was a guide. He sequenced his lyric and narrative poems to create myth and controlled that myth through metaphor. A "bridge" allows no deviation as it leads from the familiar to the unknown; moreover, it joins rather than separates in the Blakean spirit of unification. In Crane's opening poem, "To Brooklyn Bridge," a manmade wonder lends myth to God. In the next, "Ave Maria," about the quest of Columbus from the Old World to the New, the bridge becomes a ship. In other poems, love bridges the gap between races in "Indiana"; a song, between fear and the unknown in "Cutty Sark"; and Whitman's voice, between science and modern diction in "Cape Hatteras." The book also takes a heroic structure that augments the quest motif, with poems in the middle of The Bridge falling to the nadir, graphically in "The Tunnel," which acts as bridge and descent. The author begins his ascent in "Atlantis," in which music and diction become

bridges through the image of radio cables that link sound across the expanse of sea. Crane returns to the city with new knowledge. In "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," he would join these archetypes of intelligence and beauty to save modern man, sullied by greed and technology. Finally, in "Voyages," Crane sings a la Whitman about the sea and journey that unifies man through imagination, word, and memory.

In the spirit of imagination, word, and memory, The Visionary attempts to unify a family. The three sections loosely serve the structure of hero-separation myth. Each section ends with a poem to the Virgin Mary, a mythical-religious figure also found in The Bridge. She is the book's controlling metaphor, the symbol through which the narrator's grief and his family are healed. The book also begins with a poem addressed to the Virgin, "Invocation," which sets the tone for the volume. Although Mary is mentioned or alluded to in other poems, lyrics that end each section deal with religious doubt in "The Idol Worshippers," with revived faith in "For the Sculptor Whose Mary I Sing to in Oklahoma," and renewed vision in the title poem, "The Visionary."

The first section, "Virginity," features mostly lyric poems that comprise an all-encompassing narrative about the loss of an infant. The poems descend from the elation and unity of a family in the making as expressed in "The Life We Share," to the tickertape of hospital gadgetry in "The Benevolent Machine," to the operating table in "Duty," to the

grief and doubt in "Mary's Heaven," to the unsuccessful attempts to conceive again in "The Watched Vial," and to the fringes of mental breakdown in "The Flagrant Father" and "The Knowing."

The ascent is swift in the next section, "The Transformation." The couple adopts a baby and has to cope with the responsibilities of their sudden parenthood. This transformation is expressed in the first two poems, "Adoption: The Fulfillment" and "Confused About the Latin Antonym for 'In Memoriam,' I Settle for The Last Appeal." In the first poem, the narrator unifies the death of his own child with the life of the adopted newborn. In the second, he expresses his joy through poetry when the unknown father of the adopted baby fails to make an appeal to retain custody. The poems then deal with the process of husband and wife becoming father and mother. "The Transformation of My Wife to Mother" concerns the coldness of adoption law. "Fontanelle" brings husband to terms with his transformation to father. A series of "warning" poems communicate dangers in the home, from poisons to toys. These poems also cope with the specter of disease as expressed in "The Ressurection of Smallpox," with the threat of robbery in "The Visit," and with the fear of nuclear holocaust in "Words That Will Terrify Our Children." In the two poems that end the section, "East, West: The Politics of Passion" and "How to Look at Mirrors, A Love Poem," the focus is switched from the baby to the mother and from child-rearing to love as the narrator recalls his feeling for two other

women.

The third section, "Prophecy," continues the love motif with "The Last Napkin." A lyric epistle to the narrator's wife, this poem serves as a reminder to both that their marriage can end in divorce and fragment the family. Love and its Jonsonian humors are vehicles in following poems as the family flourishes and the couple matures. Then, in the midst of happiness and ascent, the narrator suffers a flashback in "The Present" and must relearn how to overcome his grief. The poems turn more religious with "The Adoption Story," in which the narrator expresses the doubt of all adoptive parents, even archetypal ones; with "The Old Trick," which resolves that doubt through the Solomon story; and with "The Visionary," an epistle that celebrates the Virgin Mother and the narrator's wife.

The structure of the book was planned after a majority of the poems had been written. The search for a new diction had its roots in Jonson's "On My First Daughter" and in Silkin's "The Death of a Son." Although I admired these poems, I initally thought they fell short of my goal to encompass more than the elegy in my work. They had lasting impact, however. The specter of Mary that unifies my collection is extant in the Jonson epigram:

> Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,
> Mary, the daughter of their youth;
> Yet, all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,
> It makes the father less to rue.

At six months' end she parted hence
With safety of her innocence;
Whose soul heaven's queen, whose name she bears,
In comfort of her mother's tears,
Hath placed amongst her virgin-train. ...[5]

The Jonson poem, which resurrects Mary as minister to lost babies, is an influence for "Mary's Heaven," whose opening stanzas carry the theme a step further:

Unchristened, they come here:
Babies lost in the womb,
Breech babies, the aborted,
Babies with bad liver,
The hopelessly premature,
Crib deaths and miscarriages.

Each delivery is miraculous.
If the cord slithers
Around the throat, she uncoils it.
She restores all missing parts.
She separates Siamese twins with light,
Wakes stillborns with a kiss.

Each is cradled against her bosom
Like Jesus, placed in identical mangers
Only the parents may visit:
Child-beaters mysteriously calm,
Alcoholic mothers sober,
Unknown fathers led by a star.

In addition to evoking Mary as Jonson did in his epigram, these lines are based in part on the metaphor of heaven as hospital. Infant mortality is indicated in the first stanza, surgery in the second, visitation in the third. The Silkin poem is powered by the same metaphor. The subtitle to "Death of a Son" evokes a medical setting: "(who died in a mental hospital aged one)." Moreover, Silkin avoids sentimentality through the diction of simile and metaphor:

Something has ceased to come along with me.
Something like a person: something very like one.
And there was no nobility in it
Or anything like that.

Something was there like a one year
Old house, dumb as stone, While the near buildings
Sang like birds and laughed
Understanding the pact

They were to have with silence. But he
Neither sang nor laughed. He did not bless silence
Like bread, with words.
He did not forsake silence.[6]

The remaining stanzas deepen the metaphor of a son as house, "a house of flesh/ With flesh of stone// And bricks for blood," concluding with two great tears that roll like stones from the son's eyes at the moment of death.[7] Only in the ending stanzas does Silkin discuss his son directly, and

the effect is stoic rather than sentimental after such a metaphoric start. I attempt the same in "Mary's Heaven," putting metaphor aside in the last stanza and dealing directly with the lost daughter:

> Our time is almost up. Finally
> I get to see your face,
> Your mother gets to hold you
> Another day. You can stay
> Only so long. You are kept
> Waiting in this heaven
> As long as we live.
> Not one moment more.

The Silkin poem also influences "The Benevolent Machine," another lyric steeped in metaphor. The machine traces the heartbeats of mother and fetus on a scroll of lined paper that could be sheet music. Thus, music becomes metaphor for the baby's "hopeless line" when the mother's heartbeat is redoubled by the machine: "For hours it wrote// That jagged lyric, then stopped./ A jukebox suddenly unstuck,/ It piped something like an infant/ Heart: very like one." The Silkin line--"very like one"--re-emerges underscored in my poem, a conscious influence.

The poets whose diction most influences this collection are not Jonson or Silkin, but Sylvia Plath and the contemporary writer Sharon Olds. Both women discuss topics as risky in poetry as the loss of an infant--suicide and child abuse--

and employ metaphor and irony whenever possible to stress important points. Metaphor, as used by these writers, has an ironic effect on diction: it allows the poet to discuss taboo topics without actually discussing them. Metaphor and irony keep Plath masterpieces such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" from falling into sentimentality or melodrama, but these poems achieve greatness through voice as dramatic monologues. Earlier Plath poems such as "In Plaster" succeed primarily through stylized diction and have more impact on poems in my collection.

"In Plaster" is about a woman, in a full cast, recovering from an accident in the hospital. The woman personifies the cast and speaks of her own encased body as a soul that blooms out of the cast "as a rose/ Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain."[8] The cast, white and beautiful, is said at first to have a "slave mentality" that seeks attention, but as time passes, "she wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,/ And I've been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful--/ Wasting her days waiting on a half-corpse!"[9] The body-soul metaphor is extended through 56 lines, culminating with this last stanza and never mentioning the word "suicide," although implying it all along:

> I used to think we might make a go of it together.
> After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
> Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
> She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
> But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.

I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,
And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.[10]

Sharon Olds evokes irony through metaphor with the same precision. As in the Plath poem, the metaphor in "Quake Theory" works on several levels without mentioning the victims of domestic violence:

When two plates of earth scrape along each other
like a mother and daughter
it is called a fault.

There are faults that slip smoothly past each other
an inch a year, with just a faint rasp
like a man running his hand over his chin,
that man between us,

and there are faults that get stuck at a bend for twenty tears.
The ridge bulges up like a father's sarcastic forehead
and the whole thing freezes in place, the man between us.

When this happens, there will be heavy damage
to industrial areas and leisure residence
when the deep plates
finally jerk past
the terrible pressure of their contacts.

The earth cracks
and innocent people slip gently in like swimmers.[11]

The metaphor serves the topic of the poem because domes-

tic violence causes emotional tremors as much as an earthquake causes physical ones. The diction is appropriate for both reactions: "plate," "scrape," "rasp," "stuck," "bend," "heavy damage," "leisure residence," "pressure," "contact," "cracks," and "innocent people." When Olds uses similes in the first three stanzas, she sets up her family situation--and actually depicts her father--through the sterile image of the "fault," the key word that sparks tension between mother and daughter. "Fault" comes across as rift, flaw, and the blame that engulfs innocent people.

Metaphor in the mode of Plath and Olds is found in many of the Visionary poems, chief among them "Duty." Perhaps the riskiest in the collection, this poem deals with a stillborn being taken from its mother in the operating room. The title and military diction save the poem from melodrama. The narrator compares what he is seeing to war, although he has never fought in one. Military terms are used to relate a ceiling fan to a helicopter, to set the scene:

> I never guarded bodies or unloaded
> Bags of black plastic
> From a chopper. But I did my best
> In your room with the ceiling fan
> Hovered over the bed, the doctor
> Ordering you to push, breathe.

The second stanza again repeats the war theme, comparing parts of the stillborn's body to shrapnel. Ultimately,

in the final stanza, the narrator puts his body between the stillborn and wife, so that she cannot see it. But he does not consider the act heroic:

> I wasn't the fighter who carries
> His friend across front lines,
> Who points a weapon at the medic
> And says: make him breathe.

The doctor has been transformed to medic, but the husband feels helpless. The best he can do is block the wife's vision. A real soldier would have done more. Of course, this is implied through metaphor, and the ending is meant to be ironic.

Irony is stressed again in "No Strings," about the couple returning home from the hospital to junk mail and free samples. A list of such items as Johnson's "no more tears" shampoo, along with strategic line breaks, generates tension:

> They arrive with offers from a company
> No parent can refuse, clean diapers
> Being next to God. The Ivory Snow mother
>
> Thinks so in baby magazines on trial
> Subscription. ...

Each of the above lines has meaning as a unit. The line as horizontal unit with meaning unto itself is found in

the best poetry, from Jonson to Silkin. The meaning of one line changes drastically when read in context with the next. For instance, the line--"No parent can refuse, clean diapers" --suggests that no father or mother can pass up an offer for clean diapers. That meaning will serve the ending of the poem. For the moment, it joins the next line--"Being next to God. The Ivory Snow mother"-- and once more changes meaning. That line implies metaphor, simply by positioning the words "Being" and "God" next to "Ivory Snow mother." As of yet, the reader has not been told within the poem that the couple has lost an infant. That is saved for the final four ironic lines:

> We send for everything. They don't know that
> After the stillborn, somebody forgot
> To pull our name from the mailing lists.
> We'll write, if at any time we're unhappy.

Another poem, "Virginity," also functions through irony and metaphor. Its title is in keeping with the controlling metaphor of the collection, the Virgin Mary, but its content concerns a couple making love one month after the stillbirth. The woman's belly is as soft as baby fat, her skin tender "where the needle pricked" to dry up her breasts. Hence, the couple is naturally hesitant in their embrace, as if both were virgins (the metaphor operating here). The irony is blunt and direct: "By instinct/ I suckle you, not knowing/ If the shot, like my seed, has taken--/ I don't want either

take--the warm/ Sweet spurts of you, the virgin milk."

Other poems in this book's first section are similar in regard to metaphor, irony, and line. The love-theme recurs in "Snowhead, After the Accident," when the couple builds a snowman, an act of healing and a metaphor for the baby they lost. In "The Watched Vial," the diction of alchemy allows the narrator to discuss a urine sample and speculate whether a ring has formed to indicate a pregnancy. In "The Knowing," the woman becomes distraught because her fingers remind her of her baby's, so much so that she speculates hacking them off, again through metaphor: "She reaches in the sink// For radishes, long white ones/ Pointing at her grief. She fixes on/ Stubby, tapered roots to make bony/ Hands across the cutting board,// Hands seeming to beg for something just// Beyond grasp."

"The Knowing" is the last poem in the sequence recounting the experience of losing a child. Remaining poems about the adoption of an infant and the adaptation of the couple to parenthood rely less on metaphor because the subject matter is less taboo. These poems display a variety of poetic techniques and experimentation. Voice is the primary concern of the second section while form dominates the third. Also, I include two narrative poems: "The Visit," whose short lines generate tension, and "The Present," a Hummeresque poem whose theme concerns time. Both works are meant to enhance the second and third sections, respectively, by balancing the lyric sequence with narrative poems that unify the

family so it can overcome fear and flashback, topics of each poem.

"Fontanelle" is one of the first poems to attempt unification by overcoming fear. Its voice is influenced by James Wright's "Entering the Temple in Nimes" from his last book, This Journey. Fear colors the Wright poem, but the feeling is suppressed in the spirit of Frost and subservient to subject matter. The narrator plans to walk "all through and around/ The Temple of Diana" to pay reverence to the goddess "whom the young Romans loved."[12] The narrator is dying, although we are not told that explicitly in the poem. We hear its echoes through voice, however, in these final lines that suppress fear:

> This evening, in winter,
> I pray for the stone-eyed legions of the rain
> To put off their armor.
> Allow me to walk between the tall pillars
> And find the beginning of one vine leaf there,
> Though I arrive too late for the last spring
> And the rain still mounts its guard.[13]

Voice plays a similar role in "Fontanelle," a word I define for the reader in the first two lines of the poem and the last four. In between, the narrator makes a gesture to suppress his fear, much like Wright's gesture of prayer in his poem, by cupping the daughter's head in his palm and trying to heal the pain of her infancy "in a glass cradle/

Owned by the state." The beginning lines--"We get the word from the young French/ Who called it 'little spring'"--define the word whose root is "fountain" by focusing on water imagery. This is echoed in the final lines, again through voice and similar imagery in keeping with the definition:

> There is only so much time.
> If I waste it, the slabs of skull
> Will fuse and the gap between us
> Widen like a river.

Perhaps the most radical experiment in voice occurs in "The Resurrection of Smallpox." The viewpoint in this poem is that of the germ. The influence again is Plath, whose range of voices impressed me from the start. In "Frog Autumn," for instance, she assumes the amphibian's viewpoint:

> Summer grows old, cold-blooded mother.
> The insects are scant, skinny.
> In these palustral homes we only
> Croak and wither.
>
> Mornings dissipate in somnolence.
> The sun brightens tardily
> Among the pithless reeds. Flies fail us.
> The fen sickens.
>
> Frost drops even the spider. Clearly
> The genius of plenitude

Houses himself elsewhere. Our folk thin
Lamentably.[14]

The poem, of course, is not about a frog but about the dying of things in general. The archetype of summer descending into fall, the season of death, combines with domestic diction of "mother," "palustral homes," "mornings," "sun brightens," "plenitude," "houses," and "folk." The archetype grates against the diction, producing tension. The reader associates that tension with voice and, ultimately, with the poet.

I attempt the same in my poem, evoking Edenic imagery as archetype and infusing the poem with scientific diction: "cultures," "survive," "vaccine," "germ," "lab," "sanitary," "petri dish," "doctors," "link," "pox," "virus," etc. The archetype grates against these words and voice becomes sinister. The reader is meant to associate that tension with voice and make connection again to the narrator, who presents a case for destroying the remnants of the disease before human error releases a plague of it to kill again as in Dicken's time.

Another experiment in voice led to a complex poem, "East, West: The Politics of Passion." The poem makes several leaps in logic as do many Oriental poems. The effect is much like that produced by the implied metaphor in Pound's famous "In a Station of the Metro." The reader is left to fill in the blanks, juxtaposing one stanza against another for meaning. The poem has its roots in the Japanese tanka,

a five-line stanza whose syllable count is 5, 7, 5, 7, 7.[15] The original version of "East, West: The Politics of Passion" bore a different title and diction too radical to include in The Visionary:

Eurasian

I.
Hands that do not fold,
Lips that do not chant or pray,
though I may want to
hoping to feel the tingle
if I sit still long enough. ...

II.
In the space between
my palms a baby should be,
belly agurgle
with milk, hair the hue of jet,
eyes eclipse of moon on sun. ...

III.
Man with no patience
who cannot see how lovers--
one American,
the other Chinese--build walls
no magic can scale, or moon. ...

I dismantled the poem, but kept the three stanzas and leaps in logic in the revised version. I also changed focus

to a Western viewpoint, putting a medium called Hong between an American longing to contact a lost love--identified in the dedication for clarity--who bore his child in Sweden. The focus is more on Sweden than America or China, again accomplished through diction that even recalls a foreign word--lussekatter. Some of the original tanka form is retained, however, and the voice retains an Oriental flavor:

> My hands are not folded. From a distance
> They may seem so. Nor am I praying
> As the Swedes do this time of year,
> To Lucia, Christmas saint. I hope to feel
> The tingle my Chinese friend promised
> If I would just sit still long enough.
>
> But Hong has no faith in me, nor I in her
> Trick: in the space between my palms,
> Your baby should appear, belly gurgling
> With your milk, skin the color of your blood,
> Hair scented with whatever you are baking
> For your husband, lussekatter maybe.
>
> I'm too easily distracted. Hong says
> Buy a plane ticket. She cannot comprehend
> How two old lovers--one an American,
> One a Swede--can blot out each other's life:
> A political act, an idea only
> Westerners are capable of, this wall.

The poem is included in the volume, despite its Oriental influence in parts. The voice might seem in contrast to that of such poems as "The Resurrection of Smallpox," but like the latter poem and others in the collection, it is funneled through strategic line breaks. Here and in other more formal poems in the third section, the line as unit augments voice. Although the timbre of that voice may vary from poem to poem, the delivery of it through a common line makes experimentation possible without harming unity or storyline.

As the book nears its premeditated conclusion, a celebration of the Virgin Mary, the poems are founded less on the risky subject matter of earlier poems and more on personal relationships. I purposely excluded rhyme from first-section poems because sound and beat seemed at odds with content and because formal restrictions were too great to convey experience accurately. However, as the book approaches epiphany, I pay more attention to sound and form. I include a Shakespearean sonnet about a couple attempting to make love through the din of a baby parroting their passion. The sonnet with its turn in the couplet seemed appropriate for the humor I was trying to echo. Yet, I wanted a more classical form to lead up to the title poem, which I hoped would unify theme and resonate through the entire collection.

I chose the verse epistle. The prototypes were epistles on moral or philosophical subjects from Horace and ones on romantic or sentimental subjects from Ovid.[16] Petrarch used the form, as did Donne, Jonson, Pope, and others,

including the modern W.H. Auden and the contemporary Paul Zimmer. I employ the Ovidian type in two poems to my wife, "The Last Napkin" and "Autobiography." Both entail the romantic and sentimental.

In the first, the narrator discusses a napkin from the couple's wedding, "Brown and gold, the serifs of our names/ Woven like tendrils through a wedding ring,/ The date embossed in bolder font to jog/ A husband's memory: September 15, 1979." The couple has boxes of leftover napkins from their reception; however, after four years of marriage, only one remains. It comes within seconds of "wiping our baby's butt," but the narrator puts it aside and imagines a more fitting end for the last napkin. Finally, he realizes "there is nothing unsentimental" to do with a napkin, but leave it in the bottom of the box to remind the couple "How easily we can waste a good thing." The epistle avoids sentimentality because, in addressing a person, it treats subject matter--in this case, a napkin--with familiarity that can employ humor. Often that humor undercuts the narrator, and the gentle self-mockery saves the poem from becoming mawkish. The moral about taking a good thing for granted becomes symbolic because the napkin represents marriage; thus, the letter is a plea from husband to wife to strengthen their bond.

Humor recurs in "Autobiography," another epistle about a potentially sentimental topic--a photograph of a baby. The poem employs the same type of self-mockery found in "The Last Napkin." Moreover, it adds a new dimension in that the

epistle is penned by a poet-husband to his photographer-wife. Art in these forms is discussed, and the moral in the last stanza goes a step further bringing home the point:

> Never have I written of the woman and her art
> So clearly in focus, who daily documents
> Her family and therefore is missing from it,
> Whose acclaimed self-portait is her shadow
> Dutifully poised over the shutter,
> An image that should end this lyric.
> You would forgive it. You would be amused
> At the attempt, however clumsy, to render you
> Permanent as the negatives you fix,
> The pictures you bring home from the lab,
> Knowing who really keeps the life story.

Emphasis is placed on the wife and her photography. In the earlier epistle, "The Last Napkin," the lesson applied to husband and wife. Here, it applies to the husband alone and forebodes the title poem to the Virgin Mary.

"The Visionary" is meant to reply to "Invocation," which begins the collection. In the first poem, the narrator's wife has just lost a baby and refuses to enter a church. The narrator, closer to the Virgin Mother, prays for his spouse in the concluding stanza that compares the wife to the deity:

> Sculpted forever
> To your baby, you can turn

Light to life. Do it
Again. Do it for the mother
Who holds her infant
Only once and in that
Moment is as holy.

In the course of the book, the narrator becomes more religious. He has been given a second chance through adoption and expresses his gratitude in "For the Sculptor Whose Mary I Sing to in Oklahoma." By the end of the book, in the title poem, he places the Virgin Mary above Jesus and feels more deserving of a vision than his wife, "who kept her distance," an allusion to "Invocation." Thus, in this epistle, the narrator no longer deals with the romantic or sentimental but with the moral and philosophical. I employ the Horatian form to augment decorum, relying on mostly hexameter lines, plain diction, personal details, and questions. There is no hint of self-mockery in the narrator's address to the Virgin, in which he calls himself "a would-be saint." The mockery, instead, is focused initially on the "foggy-eyed" wife, whom he has seen "welcome the pastel world with a passion// Clearly myopic." Every chance he gets, the narrator promotes himself above his wife, whose vision he doubts is authentic. Thus, he compares her to Eve, the archetypal temptress, "who sighs when she puts on/ Her glasses and I, waked there, loom into view." The diction, in keeping with form, is direct and personal:

What was I to think! A man, a near-Jesuit,
I wanted proof only the pious will give,

An answer not to prayer but inquisition:
When she comes to you, this Mary, what colors
Do you see?

He questions his wife because she lacks religious training to witness such a vision. However, in his role as priest, he is startled by her reply and converted. The wife reveals Mary's cloth with such accuracy even the husband is "cleansed by color." Now he is pure enough to admit the lesson to the Virgin, that his wife has experienced a vision "with eyes weaker than mine,/ A sight the learned say is barely correctable,/ A woman who wakes beside me with perfect vision."

The cycle is complete. The narrator and his family have emerged whole, their faith intact, with new knowledge about the world and its ways. The wisdom is Miltonic: the couple experienced tragedy but triumphed because it was able to bring good from bad, the lesson of Paradise Lost. The Visionary as a book continues that theme. The writing of such loss at first was difficult, entailing new diction and influences. In attempting to tell my story through the lyric, I encountered the stories of others and learned from them. In reconstructing personal loss through art, I confronted that loss and healed myself in part through poetry. From the bad, I strove to bring good.

Notes

[1] James William Johnson, "Lyric," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 460.

[2] T.R. Hummer, "American Contemporary Poetry," Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 12 Jan. 1981.

[3] T.R. Hummer, "Circumstance: The Vanishing," The Passion of the Right-Angled Man (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 68-71.

[4] Hallett Smith, Introd., "Sonnets," The Riverside Shakespeare, by William Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 1748.

[5] Ben Jonson, "On My First Daughter," The Complete Poems, ed. George Parfitt (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 41.

[6] Jon Silkin, "Death of a Son," Poems New and Selected (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966) p. 19.

[7] Silkin, p. 20.

[8] Sylvia Plath, "In Plaster," The Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 159.

[9] Plath, p. 159.

[10] Plath, p. 160.

[11] Sharon Olds, "Quake Theory," Satan Says (Pittsburgh:

University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), p. 12.

[12] James Wright, "Entering the Temple in Nimes," This Journey (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 3.

[13] Wright, p. 3.

[14] Plath, "Frog Autumn," p. 99.

[15] Earl Miner, "Tanka," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics, p. 842.

[16] Roger A. Hornsby, "Epistle," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics," p. 248.

PART I

VIRGINITY

INVOCATION

Till the sun falls
Below that tree line
And light stops
Coloring stained glass,
I want to talk
With the Virgin Mother
Who the saints say
Always listens. I won't

Worry about my wife
Who waits outside
The mountain chapel.
She has a pastel sky
For company, though
She must share it
With tourists at the peak

Season. She refuses
To share her grief
With you and the stone
Jesus, cold at your breast.
Our child was colder,
Even in the red
Sunset that was a gift
In the birthing room:

Sculpted forever
To your baby, you can turn
Light to life. Do it
Again. Do it for the mother
Who holds her infant
Only once and in that
Moment is as holy.

THE LIFE WE SHARE

I can feel it,
As if this swimming were of my own
Body, beyond maleness, able to sustain
The life it spawned.
My wife, six months pregnant, sleeps
Lightly atop me, her yellow hair
Covering my chest,
A ringlet on my right nipple,
Belly to belly the way she likes
Most after love. We need this
Fusion of skin kept apart
Too long. Her body,
Once hard for the sleek fashions,
Has softened in motherhood, developed
Curves that mold to my flesh so perfectly
We are almost one,
Closer than the coupling that made our child,
The fetus that moves to find more comfort
Between us. Hardly breathing
I lie, not wanting to wake
The wife who could end this
Feeling with a yawn,
With a slow roll to her side,
Whose pregnancy has become
For the moment, mine.

DUE

My wife is on the floor
Watching her belly, impressed
No longer with the mere movement.
She rubs the rise of skin
With baby oil, locates

The bulbous head. She thinks
I am peeling an onion
For salad. The table is set,
Candles beginning to dribble.
We have waited so long.

She traces what must be
A hand pushing upward.
With thumb and finger, she grips
The tiny palm. I want
To sit with her and feel

The slick belly aglow in yellow
Light, but brace myself
For the onion, sliced to half
Moons like so many months.
Heart, rising fast.

THE BENEVOLENT MACHINE

It boomed her heartbeat in the birthing room
And traced only one life on a scroll
Underscored by the baby's
Hopeless line. For hours it wrote

That jagged lyric, then stopped.
A jukebox suddenly unstuck,
It piped something like an infant
Heart: very like one.

The nurse knew how to figure
Probability. She held out
Her hand as if to celebrate with my wife,
And felt her pulse.

I don't blame the machine's sensors
For redoubling a heart-echo. I don't blame it
For the scroll we should have kept,
A first sympathy card.

DUTY

I never guarded bodies or unloaded
Bags of black plastic
From a chopper. But I did my best
In your room with the ceiling fan
Hovered over the bed, the doctor
Ordering you to push, breathe.

I swear we were in a war.
There was blood, and in your belly
The shrapnel of stillborn
Pulled out piece by piece: a foot,
A leg, the tethered body finally
Cut from you. He put it on plastic,

On a table you couldn't see
With me standing there. No hero,
I wasn't the fighter who carries
His friend across front lines,
Who points a weapon at the medic
And says: <u>make him breathe</u>.

NO STRINGS

We keep finding on our doorstep
Rattles too big for the post box.
They arrive with offers from a company
No parent can refuse, clean diapers
Being next to God. The Ivory Snow mother

Thinks so in baby magazines on trial
Subscription. And if we don't want
The bedtime books, we still get to keep
The Disney mobile. It hangs above the crib
Littered with coupons for free formula,

Gerber, Johnson's "no more tears" shampoo.
We send for everything. They don't know that
After the stillborn, somebody forgot
To pull our name from the mailing lists.
We'll write, if at anytime we're unhappy.

VIRGINITY

Barely a month since our blue newborn
Lay wrapped like a breadloaf, cooling,
We are virgins, afraid
Your half-healed stitches will bleed
Like the hymen another man broke

Years before we met. You move
Over me, your belly soft
As the baby fat my first lover
Blushed so much about in my steamy
Plymouth, where I took her. Teenagers

Again, or so it feels, our coming
Together is as ill-timed, the outcome
As dreaded. Your face is askew
One moment in pleasure, the next in pain,
Your skin tender where the needle pricked

To dry up your breasts. By instinct
I suckle you, not knowing
If the shot, like my seed, has taken--
I don't want either to take--the warm
Sweet spurts of you, the virgin milk.

SNOWHEAD, AFTER THE ACCIDENT

That year, that awful year I'll remember in the next century
When somebody's striking daughter rings up $19.81
For whatever I'll be drinking then, I want you to remind me
The snow was whiter than we'd ever seen it in Oklahoma
And that for one chill day toward sunset, we stopped
Crying as a baby would stop, suddenly, to play
In it and roll in the back yard one huge belly-
Ache of a snowball, layer on layer until stripes
Of dead grass showed below the bedroom window;
How hour by hour the form we never planned took shape,
From bulbous head to lump-bottom, arm to outstretched arm
Welcoming us as if just arrived, as if to say: I am still
With you: beckoning the moon that night to cast those arms
And head across our pale bedspread that seemed a continuum of snow
Covering our bodies, not touching, until you reached
Over me for the curtain, missed it, and by accident, found me.

MARY'S HEAVEN

Unchristened, they come here:
Babies lost in the womb,
Breech babies, the aborted,
Babies with bad liver,
The hopelessly premature,
Crib deaths and miscarriages.

Each delivery is miraculous.
If the cord slithers
Around the throat, she uncoils it.
She restores all the missing parts.
She separates Siamese twins with light,
Wakes stillborns with a kiss.

Each is cradled against her bosom
Like Jesus, placed in identical mangers
Only the parents may visit:
Child-beaters mysteriously calm,
Alcoholic mothers sober,
Unknown fathers led by a star.

(new stanza)

Certain nights when we believe
The unbearable pain is behind us,
We visit this place.
We bring stuffed animals
So perfect in your manger.
Mary watches from the wings
That weigh heavy as mortal sin
On our backs, a sign

Our time is almost up. Finally
I get to see your face,
Your mother gets to hold you
Another day. You can stay
Only so long. You are kept
Waiting in this heaven
As long as we live.
Not one moment more.

THE WATCHED VIAL

We sit at the vanity, a makeshift lab,
Waiting for a dark ring
To form in the vial of your fluid.
We've failed this test before.

Our alchemy has given us
False weeks to invent names, chart
Due dates, consult prenatal books.
This month we loved with precision

Of scientists: mercury,
Not passion, rising to divine
The lost ova. We did it
By the book. We counted

Days like beads of an abacus.
Now you're late, but the vial's clear
As our future: gold
On our fingers, the only rings.

THE FLAGRANT FATHER

Backward in their squealing
Carts, the babies where I shop
Reach beyond the stacked Gerber,

Hungry for love. One gets it
In the express lane, an Arab
With his son, not yet aware
That everyone except the cashier

Watches. She rings his total
While he rings his son's
Face sloppy with kisses, each

Smack opening the olive eyes
Wider for the world. He holds
The boy between his palms
As if gulping a bottle of pop.

Their hands are curiously
Alike, a few curls and scalp
Bright in fluorescence:

(new stanza)

Look, you overgrown cherub,
You're luckier than me.
My family would be
At home among your cedars,

My blood would mingle better
With your hidden wife's,
And my daughter, had she lived,
Would make me as love-struck

As your son, laughing
While you come up for air,
While you dangle him
Dangerously within reach.

THE KNOWING

She cannot live
With her hands without
Thinking of her infant's lifeless
Fingers, so much her own

She hopes for their lopping off.
Every task reminds her.
She has given up
Softening her skin with baby oil,

Polishing her nails. The gloves
She once wore to rinse vegetables
Could belong to the surgeon.
She, too, can handle a knife;

Unzips the black cutlery case and pulls
The largest from its sheath: power,
So little of it lately, is hers
At last. She reaches in the sink

For radishes, long white ones
Pointing at her grief. She fixes on
Stubby, tapered roots to make bony
Hands across the cutting board,

(new stanza)

Hands seeming to beg for something just
Beyond grasp. She brings down the knife,
Imagines the pain lasting a long second
Before shock would set in, and hacks

What's left to nubs, chunks
Flying to the floor, her fingers
Nearing the edge
She prayed never to cross. Then

Light like a promise
Catches the gold of her ringfinger,
Reflects on the tilted blade
Her hand--distorted--her future

Hovering with the knife, the knowing
It has come to this. ... Tears
Blur her aim, pelt
The stainless steel and bead--

With all her might,
From each bruised vessel of her being,
She slips the blade
Gently, gently in its sheath.

THE IDOL WORSHIPPERS

They would have me believe
You are just another statue
With chipped feet. Even the priest
Who owns you in the dark
Corner where I pray,
Thinks you are so much

Plaster and paint. A little blood
Would take his mind off
Bingo, but that only plays
In the Latin countries. This is
Oklahoma, where Oral Roberts
Last sighted your son at 900 feet.

Sure, I love Jesus. I love
Every man nailed to his cross.
But born-agains who want to see me
In hell, believe you are no better
Than Diana, the only virgin
They can remember in Rome.

(new stanza)

Mary, I did not want blood.
I did not want your son
Towering over Tulsa.
I just wanted to pray
Again, and believe, and now
They'll spoil even that.

PART II

THE TRANSFORMATION

ADOPTION: THE FULFILLMENT

for Erin Marie, 1/6/83

A Thursday typical enough,
One class to teach,

Some grading. I wrote
Three checks for the usual items:

Food, books, a little wine.
Already you were born

Though we did not know it.
You were taken from a woman

Who did not look, whom I love
For not looking, as if the sight

Of a surgeon placing you in her arms
Would smother the plan: she wanted

To be a student in the city
That did not include you.

Now there is another woman
Whose story you should know:

(new stanza)

Her child was taken
Still from the womb.

I did not see the face.
That Monday we will never forget

In November, my wife described her
For hours. She had hair

Long as yours, dark as yours,
And wonderful composure

In her mother's arms.
She had the courage to look

And hold only once
The baby whose life yours became:

So there are two women, both brave,
Two days that changed our lives,

And two babies who could be sisters,
Who even have the same name.

CONFUSED ABOUT THE LATIN ANTONYM FOR "IN MEMORIAM" I SETTLE FOR *THE LAST APPEAL*

There are better titles
In books of the dead poet,
But the writing would be easy
And his death was not.

I was reading *To the Silver Sword*
Shining on the Edge
of the Crater
When the call came.

Erin Marie Bugeja, who's part
Japanese, whom I call Samurai
Because she must bow to burp,
Is legally free to adopt.

The man who fathered her
Has decided not to appeal
To anyone's heart.
He's writing her

(new stanza)

Off as easily as I might
Write another elegy
For the poet who gave me
A voice. But I'm in no mood

Now for the obvious
Sword-and-Samurai metaphor,
Which James Wright will never hear.
Yet I hear him distinctly

Telling me as I type
The correct title is
<u>Today I Was Happy</u>
<u>So I Made This Poem</u>.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MY WIFE TO MOTHER

I find her crying, legal papers
Like quiltwork on the bed.
The agency was here. Now we know
The natural mother's name,
The boyfriend with unknown
Whereabouts. There's more to it.
She shows me how the court
Described our daughter-to-be:

Deprived, illegitimate, unwanted.
I tell her they are only words
The lawyers need to anoint us
As parents. But they're talking
About her girl now,
And it hurts, the names hurt.

FONTANELLE

We get the word from the young French
Who called it "little spring."
The first time I saw it, pulsing
As if the brain were on the verge
Of great discovery, or nightmare,

I cupped my daughter's head
In my palm and tried to decipher
A dead language. Who knows
What lies in the unconscious
Vault of her infancy: uncertain months

In the womb of a woman who drank
To forget an unwanted pregnancy,
The week in a glass cradle
Owned by the state, the foster homes,
And then us, adoptive parents

Who made all the mistakes
For love? There is only so much time.
If I waste it, the slabs of skull
Will fuse and the gap between us
Widen like a river.

THE LAST RESORT

My daughter stops long enough
For me to chin a fiddle. She's propped
Between pillows and the family mutt.
She's been fed, burped, diapered--
The crying has gone on all night.

The dog who naps through anything
Except blue grass
Bolts up to howl. The baby keels
Like timber across his tail,
Setting both of them off. I run

Through Cripple Creek, Mississippi Mud,
Amazing Grace bowed mournfully.
By now I'm enjoying myself,
The fancy licks, the curious
Accompaniment. I try a breakdown

For special fiddlers, orange blossoms
Puffing rosin from the strings. I play
Like Vassar Clements, not stopping
Though the baby does and the dog's tail
Beats her head like a metronome.

WARNINGS

I. Keeper of the House

Any child who can scale
The bars of a crib
Can burglarize a bottle,
So I stash the medicine
High on the shelf with sundry
Poisons, pastes, and aerosols.

These are the crossboned
Killers identified by any parent
Sharp enough to shackle
A doorknob. A warden, I watch
For stray and steely objects:

The match that got away
When a carton-full fell
Like pick-up sticks, shards
Of china under the sink,
A tack in the den.
Relieved by the swoosh and clink

(new stanza)

Of domestic shrapnel, I vacuum
The rugs while my prisoner
Screams in her pen:
The crime is a catlike curiosity,
The punishment cruel and unusual.

II. The Flier

The similarities are macabre
But effective: wanted
For strangulation of infants,
Interstate alert, alias

Embo Elephant or Hummingbug
Known by serial number and snapshot
On the poster from my pediatrician.

There is a reward of sorts,
A refund for each toy
Strung by ear or wing, innocent
As the new sitter nobody suspects

Would choke a child
For squealing. We see the fliers
In the post office, baby-faced

(new stanza)

Killers we'd let in our homes--
Bedrooms, if the mood is right.
We've been warned since childhood
To refuse candy, to recognize

The wolf under wool. In my case
It's a hummingbug, hovering
Over the crib like an angel.

THE RESURRECTION OF SMALLPOX

Three cultures survive in London,
Atlanta, and Leningrad, aswim
In egg, the taste of life.
The vaccine has saved more lives
Than the guardian angels of all
In those cities and now is bored
As Milton tells us Satan was bored
With the good deed. The germ

Enjoys the lab's sanitary air,
Paradise regained. The apple's
In the petri dish. Doctors, misled,
Hope to link the pox to monkey virus,
Though they never to stop to question
Evolution. Conditions are ripe:
Eve's in white again, her breath
Reeks of vodka. It wouldn't take much,

A waxy floor at CDC, an underpaid tech
At teatime. It longs for a lovely
Factory, wonders if London has changed
Since Dickens. People haven't;
Their vices keep the germ alive,
Sure as clockwork. There's no hurry.
The Urals are nice any season,
The kudzu always thick in the orchard.

THE VISIT

We don't know what
He wanted: my wife
Roused from bed,
Mumbling about the knock

In the pipes, afraid
The baby will wake,
Leaves me trembling
With current I trace

To no blanket, no blue
Spark in the night,
My hands burning,
Weightless under the sheets--

Then lights everywhere,
The crashing of things,
Scream of a thief
In the house, and me

Naked, blind without glasses,
Oblivious to all but the feel
Of a presence
I loved, feared, mourned,

(new stanza)

That overcomes my body,
Overrides it like a father
Who knows his child will fail
If something isn't done,

And something is done,
A voice I am allowed to hear
Rise from my gut,
The words pushed out

By no breath, no vibration
In the throat, the accent
Unmistakable, booming:
Bas-'tard, out of my home!

He ran. The door banged
Exactly three times
Before whoever it was
Gunned his engine and screeched off,

The baby crying
In the arms of her mother
Too shaken to cry, to ask
What was beyond knowing,

(new stanza)

Anger all over us
As if a rule had been broken
On my behalf, and now someone
Somewhere had to answer.

WORDS THAT WILL TERRIFY OUR CHILDREN

We use them everyday. We in our innocence
Do not know what horror the word scenario holds
In A.D. 2024. Or quadrant. We say them
And the syllables roll off our tongues

Without pang or feeling, as our grandfathers
In their prime could mouth malignant or megaton.
It's like that. A word will sire a line
Of benevolent meaning, the queenly connotation,

And then turn on us. It terrifies a generation
Before it fades in half-life or simply hibernates
Like holocaust. Or we can fuse ordinary words
Into mutants: anti-personnel device, first strike.

I have a theory. It requires linguists, much talk.
We will not gather at Geneva, that virginal city,
Nor at Hiroshima or Auschwitz, cliches in our time,
But at some place likely to chill our offspring,

The Urals, let's say, or Omaha. There we will scour
Dictionaries and cull the dangerous words.
We will place them delicately on the table.
Then we will figure how to diffuse them.

EAST, WEST: THE POLITICS OF PASSION

for Lena

My hands are not folded. From a distance
They may seem so. Nor am I praying,
As the Swedes do this time of year,
To Lucia, Christmas saint. I hope to feel
The tingle my Chinese friend promised
If I would just sit still long enough.

But Hong has no faith in me, or I in her
Trick: in the space between my palms,
Your baby should appear, belly gurgling
With your milk, skin the color of your blood,
Hair scented with whatever you are baking
For your husband, lussekatter maybe.

I'm too easily distracted. Hong says
Buy a plane ticket. She cannot comprehend
How two old lovers--one an American,
One a Swede--can blot out each other's life:
A political act, an idea only
Westerners are capable of, this wall.

HOW TO LOOK AT MIRRORS,
A LOVE POEM

You get what you see,
Or nearly: the scar or birth
Mark misplaced, reversed
Letters squiggly as genes.

These you learn to overlook
As I have overlooked
My wife's twin, identical,
Or nearly: a question

Of height, the tinier
Mole, a few millimeters
Difference in the eyes. Ah,
The eyes: you had better look

Closely if you believe
In love at first sight.
Closely, then do not think
Twice about it.

FOR THE SCULPTOR WHOSE MARY I SING TO IN OKLAHOMA

She is blond and blue-eyed as a heroine
In a country song. Even at sundown
When windows color her shawl and candles
Blink her shadow, I'd rather sing to her

Than pray. She is the last goddess
Between Tulsa and the Aventine,
Where Diana reigned until Rome turned
Holy. At least one plebeian,

Weary of lions, sang in her temple.
Maybe he strummed a fancy lute
And was forgiven, as the cowboy
Sculptor who painted Mary's face

Was forgiven for never having known
A Jewess. This much is certain:
He knew pure women, and loved one.
This is how she looked.

PART III

PROPHECY

THE LAST NAPKIN

Dear Diane,
We were broke, and they were a good buy.
Brown and gold, the serifs of our names
Woven like tendrils through a wedding ring,
The date embossed in bolder font to jog
A husband's memory: September 15, 1979.

The honeymoon spent on Interstate 35,
We carted boxes of them to Oklahoma,
More we thought than any couple needed
To set a table, till death do they part.
It took four years. I came within seconds

Of wiping our baby's butt, a fitting end
For the last napkin, bravely set aside,
Considering the matter at hand. Honey,
I wish I knew what to do with this square
Of tissue that nobody would have missed,

That I make great issue of, it seems,
As if there lies beneath the fancy folds
A message. Imagine: had we divorced,
I could dab a final tear with it, then
Press it like a leaf in <u>Paradise Lost</u>.

(new stanza)

But there is nothing unsentimental
To do with a napkin, nothing symbolic
Except to leave it where it belongs,
The bottom of the box, to remind us
How easily we can waste a good thing.
Yours,
Michael

LULLABY, WITH BALLOONS

Another lonely weekend, and we cannot wait
For you to sleep. We sing lullabies and leave
Balloons above your crib to instigate
Distraction. In the next room we try to love
Without laughing, though you giggle and goad us.
Maybe the heart-shaped Mylar seems funny afloat
Or the ribbon-tails tickle? You make ruckus
Because you are good at it. You shriek a note,
High C at least, whose pitch and treble amaze
Yet do not stop us. We sigh and moan and so
Do you--echolalia--a silly phase
We think that you are going through. Now go
To bed with your balloons and quit the fuss:
Your serenade's off-key. But we'll adjust.

ERIN, AT EIGHTEEN MONTHS,
INFORMS US SHE WILL RUN AWAY

She has tasted discipline and doesn't like it.
We are unjust, unreasonable. We have denied her
The inalienable right to wang a Smurf radio
Against the color picture tube, and now she wants

Bye-bye for good. She faces the door, totters
Tiptoe on webbed Nikes, the ducktail of her diaper
Waddling as she swipes for the knob. She flails for it,
Too weak to fly, and crumples on the carpet, broken.

We watch her there. This is the child who stuns us daily,
Who wangs the TV so she can boogie to her radio, who knows
An inalienable right when she sees one. So we laugh
The way parents laugh when they know what's coming.

HOMAGE TO THE MUCH-MALIGNED HEAD
OF HUMAN SERVICES, SOME OF IT DESERVED

In a state whose airports are named for men
Killed in plane crashes, Will Rogers and Wiley Post,
You made your mark: hero to unwanted children.
You handed us one. We entered the building
Bearing your name, subject of exposes,
And gave thanks like Sicilians gave them, warily,
But with respect. We took the baby and wondered
Who to pay off. Why us? Liberals
Who swallowed every slur against you,
Northerners even, we felt the guilt Sicilians feel
When for no good reason or act of faith
They get lucky. We can deal with it now
That you have been silenced Oklahoma-style:
The Pension Program. I can't speak for the children
They say were ruined under you. I don't know anything
About that. Lloyd Rader, giver of babies,
You were a don in your day. If you wore a ring,
I would kneel down and kiss it.

HUMOR AND PROPHECY

When the twister does and twisters do, I don't
Eke out a Hail Mary nor foresee the flashcards
Of my life nor proclaim Death be not proud,
But huddle in a closet with a toddler who poops
Her Pampers and fiddle with a Smurf transistor
Crackling McKuen-Muzak: "the clouds are so low,
You can touch them and so come out to the meadow..."

And I think, how black the humor of calamity,
How the blackest hour brings out the Lenny Bruce,
A million godly gags--millennia of one-liners--
From Noah's neighbors, waterbearers worried about work,
To Pompeii's prostitutes, forever clamped to clients,
And I count myself among them, picturing
The coroner who will pry the Smurf from my fingers...

It all passes over our house, brings down another's,
And wooshes heavenward, leaving me in stitches,
A laughingstock with one humdinger of a story,
There's this poet with a Smurf radio who hides
His kid in a closet and lives to write about it,
Even though he misses the metaphor--armageddon--
When no one will be around for the punchline.

THE CLASSIC

I pay what I would have when I wanted it
More than Mary Beth, whose Opel saved her
For somebody else. A Mustang with all
The right numbers: 64½, 4-barrel, 289.

My wife, unimpressed, calls it classic
Middle-age crisis, the need to feel power
Shift on demand. She pats the tire
My waist has become, whispers "I love you."

I look her in the eye: <u>prove it</u>, I say,
And drag her to the drive-in. She smirks,
So I play "Johnny B. Goode" on my 8-track
Until we giggle. We make up

For lost time. When I close
My eyes in her embrace, I see a beach
With white sand and a man on a stallion
In full gallop, surf breaking at the hoof.

THE PRESENT

To Marsha Caldwell, nurse

The Past: "The odds were a thousand to one, I know,
but you were the one and the odds were
lousy."

The Future: "Just when you think you're over it,
you'll cry again. It might be a gray
day or a cold one. But you can count
on it."

A friend who also lost a baby, you freed us
From the present. I live now in that present
With good odds--a wife, a daughter, and 65 percent
Fertility. Even on gray, cold days
I count my blessings. But today it happened

As you said it would, of all places
At the Pontiac dealership, Mr. Goodwrench
In a lab coat, a computer-scope at each bay.
We were going to the zoo and I was making sure
The car was up to it, when without warning

In front of the manager, my radiator burst,
The hiss and fog like bad weather, water
Puddling on the floor. He sent me to a room
With white walls and lounge chairs and last year's
Time and *Life*, nobody near except the cashier

Making appointments behind a glass window.
You know where I thought I was. It was only a car,
But I didn't have much money and had already told
My daughter about the zoo. She was counting on it.
Then I had no daughter, and my wife was near

Death again, and I was waiting for the doctor
To give the news. So I cried. So it happened
At a service station where a man among men
Should never cry. And the cashier saw it,
A woman your age, who might have been you:

She stared at me, crushed a cigarette, and got up.
Her day had been filled with tune-ups, brake-jobs,
Alignments, and mufflers, and maybe I was a curiosity.
Maybe. But she came to me convinced
I had somewhere to go, somewhere important--

A wedding, let's say, or a funeral--
And wouldn't make it. You know where the somewhere was.
She put her arm around me, called me "honey," and said
The car would be ready lickety-split, and wherever
I had to be, I'd get there, sure enough.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Dear Diane,
What I do with words, you outdo with an Olympus
And a little hydroquinone in the dark.
As I type, I glance at the photo you took
Of our daughter, a baby still, whose eyes
Need no star-filter to glitter. She knows
What her mother is up to and will learn
Soon enough how to pose, how to keep pure
Feeling from the siphon of your lens,
As I had to learn to live with a papparazzo:
Anything, at any time, can be captured,
Framed, and hung for public scrutiny.

Pigeon-toed in your portfolio, my feet
Offset another's incredibly oriental
Pair. My hairy torso has been praised
As a backdrop for a bald apparition.
My buttocks, lightly pasteled, were showcased
And blue-ribboned at the campus gallery,
A gesture that makes me particularly proud.

(new stanza)

I have returned the favor, depicted you
In the throes of agony and orgasm,
Won prizes for poems that revealed more
Than secrets--a breast, a belly, a mole--
Read them in that falsely plaintive voice
At that same university, my God
With you present, with <u>everybody</u> present.

Never have I written of the woman and her art
So clearly in focus, who daily documents
Her family and therefore is missing from it,
Whose acclaimed self-portrait is her shadow
Dutifully poised over the shutter,
An image that should end this lyric.
You would forgive it. You would be amused
At the attempt, however clumsy, to render you
Permanent as the negatives you fix,
The pictures you bring home from the lab,
Knowing who really keeps the life story.
Yours,
Michael

THE ADOPTION STORY

When the order went out by star
Over Bethlehem, there was doubt,
Not so much of birth and delivery
Unto this world of a savior,
Which Mary and Joseph believed,
As over matters far simpler:
Whether the child would love
And take for his own
Such gracefully chosen parents.

I picture this on the first clear
Night of winter, so warm in Oklahoma
I can wrap my daughter in wool
To follow the early Christmas
Lights around the block.
She coos at the flickering
Colors that drape nativities.
Baby, she says, and opens her arms
To the lacquered ceramic: baby.

(new stanza)

She brings me again to the boy
Told his true father was not
A worker of wood, but of wonder,
And how blood in this mission
Meant nothing. Then the temple,
The mother rebuked for her worry,
The husband's saintly silence.
I have considered silence
And the risk of no risk-taking,

Allowing my daughter to be all
Her blood--even now--would believe
Of itself, of my body. The spirit
This season is truth,
And somewhere tonight I fathomed
The need to pray for such grace
As given a carpenter and wife,
To tell my humbler story
And ease my larger doubts.

THE OLD TRICK

It happened once that a woman who couldn't conceive
Paradise without her adopted daughter,
And the natural mother who all her life held out
Hope for a celestial reunion, approached

The wise judge, prepared to yield custody
At the sight of a sword. Beyond Solomon
A girl scaled the pearly gates like an acrobat.
"Hi, mommy!" she called, and both women waved.

That didn't work. So Solomon heard the arguments,
How the natural mother labored while the other
Simply waited, and how the adoptive mother
Forsook career while the other followed her fancy.

Neither gave an inch. Then be it decreed,
Said Solomon, that the natural mother keep
The child for the nine months she carried it,
And the adoptive mother keep it for the time

She lived on earth. Then what? they wanted to know.
This was paradise and supposedly eternal.
Who got the child next? Solomon shrugged.
Depends, he said, and noted how heaven was

(new stanza)

That-a-way, through the gates the girl played upon
But hadn't quite entered, if they got his drift.
The women beheld each other in new light.
"You're very beautiful," the natural mother said.

"She has your eyes, you know," said the adoptive mother.
They embraced. Then Solomon sang hallelujah,
And the girl did a triple toe-loop on the highest bar,
And the women strolled the gates, arm in arm.

ALLEGORY

You ride the stroller in the garage
When it rains, the dog trailing us
As in a Swedish movie. We go miles

Before you sleep. We pass
The duffel bag, the bike in traction,
Rackets on the wall like stop signs.

These are the dead ends
Of my life, a sort of mobile
We save for a rainy day. The moral,

I suppose, is someday I'll hang
The stroller with the rest, wishing
<u>One more time</u> to go round again.

THE VISIONARY

Dear Mary,
My wife, who kept her distance, awakes foggy-eyed
Without her glasses. I have seen her, lovely
On her back, welcome the pastel world with a passion

Clearly myopic. I did not ask what she envisions
In the blur that must greet her each morning. No,
I waited. A would-be saint, I waited patiently

For revelation: you, whom I place above your son,
Whom I genuflect for at prayer, pass over me--
In my bedroom--and come for her. She told me

Last night on the terrace, the stars she couldn't see
Flickering with dozens of fireflies, a scene
Proper for confession. I was the priest

With big plans for penance, who nudges each word
From lips of the sinner. And all along
It was you, you in the cloud her 20/800 eyes behold

At first light. I wanted proof. I had looked
Each morning and seen nothing but a woman
Eve-like in innocence, who sighs when she puts on

(new stanza)

Her glasses and I, naked there, loom into view.
What was I to think! A man, a near-Jesuit,
I wanted proof only the pious will give,

An answer not to prayer but inquisition:
When she comes to you, this Mary, what colors
Do you see? I tell you, she lacked the training,

The Latin I learned at the altar, the wine I took
For blood, to reveal as a witness reveals the cloth
So blue and skin so white even I was cleansed

By color. She sees this with eyes weaker than mine,
A sight the learned say is barely correctable,
A woman who wakes beside me with perfect vision.
Respectfully,
Michael

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auden, W.H. Selected Poems. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Blake, William. The Complete Poetry and Prose. Ed. David V. Erdman. New York: Doubleday, 1982.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. Sonnets from the Portuguese. 1856; rpt. New York: Avenel, 1961.

Crane, Hart. The Collected Poems. Ed. Waldo Frank. New York: Liveright, 1933.

Frost, Robert. The Poetry of Robert Frost. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Holt, 1974.

Hummer, T.R. The Angelic Orders. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University, 1982.

_____. The Passion of the Right-Angled Man. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Jonson, Ben. The Complete Poems. Ed. George Parfitt. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1982.

Milton, John. Milton's Poetical Works. Ed. H.J. Todd. London, 1809; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1970.

Olds, Sharon. Satan Says. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980.

Pound, Ezra. The Cantos of Ezra Pound. New York: New Directions, 1934.

Plath, Sylvia. The Collected Poems. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

Preminger, ALex, ed. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Shakespeare, William. The Riverside Shakespeare. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Silkin, Jon. "Death of a Son." Poems New and Selected. Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966.

Whitman, Walt. Leaves of Grass. 1891-2; rpt. New York: Modern Library, 1979.

Williams, William Carlos. Patterson. New York: New Directions, 1963.

Wordsworth, William. The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: Norton, 1979.

Wright, James. "Entering the Temple in Nimes." This Journey. New York: Random House, 1980.

Zimmer, Paul. Family Reunion. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983.

2

VITA

Michael Joseph Bugeja

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE VISIONARY

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Hackensack, New Jersey, May 24, 1952, the son of Michael Carl and Josephine Bugeja. Married to Diane Sears on September 15, 1979. Adopted Erin Marie Bugeja on February 3, 1983.

Education: Graduated from Lyndhurst High School in May 1970; received Bachelor of Arts in German from Saint Peter's College in May 1974; received Master of Science in Mass Communications from South Dakota State University in May 1976; completed requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University in December 1985.

Professional Experience: State Editor, North and South Dakota, United Press International, December 1976 to August 1979. Assistant Professor of Journalism, Oklahoma State University, September 1979 to present.