

A MAN EXPLAINS HIS POSTURE

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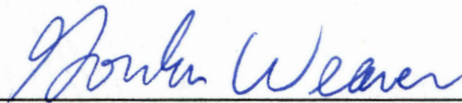
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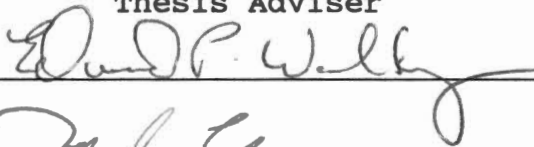
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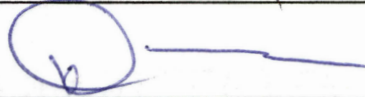
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INTRODUCTION

The poems in this collection represent a search on two levels. First, these poems represent a personal search for my identity as a writer--in essence a search for style. I have experienced a great deal of growth in my understanding of what poetry is and my approach to writing it. Second, the speakers in these poems spend their time and make their utterances either trying to figure out, or trying to explain, who they are. In the course of these activities, they consider their feelings, the environment, and the people around them. Sometimes they speak aloud to other characters in the poem, sometimes aloud directly to the reader, and sometimes simply to themselves. By speaking, whatever the mode, they explore who and what they are, trying to make sense of themselves, their world, and their place in that world. I am figuring out who I am and what I want to do as a writer, much as the speakers in my poems are trying to figure out who they are as people. And, just as the speakers in the poems often find themselves in a state of flux, I see my style as dynamic, developing all the time. These poems, then, serve as explorations, even experiments, in identity.

I have long been looking for a style, the poet's stamp

of personality that makes his work individual. I have come to realize that style is a complex thing, made up of a variety of technical and non-technical elements, and ultimately controlled by the poet's vision. I see style as idiosyncrasy within the tradition, a unique combination of conventions, used to frame reality, in essence putting boundaries on it to foreground what I believe is important.

I am part of a unique generation which has a unique view of reality and the world, and my poetry reflects that. We find it virtually impossible to believe in any absolutes or ideals. The only truth we know is the one we fabricate, and ultimately it seems this is a truth that is based on, and simply accepts, confusion and mystery as a way of life. In short, nothing, no received forms, are to be trusted. Growing up in the midst of the cold war, experiencing Vietnam, and being ruled by an essentially corrupt government under Nixon left us with little to believe in, and thus art, in my case poetry, becomes a way to represent this disorientation, confusion, and alienation. Everything we do seems to be an experiment: how do we get along in a world that very well may not exist tomorrow? The only fact that we accept is things as we know them won't last long, so we must simply accept what comes and often simply look the other way, avoiding direct engagement of questions that seem useless to try to answer.

This view is reinforced by recent history as well; as

adults we've seen constant shifting and change. Even the fall of communism, hailed by many, serves only to disrupt what stability we have in viewing the world. Twelve years of Reagan/Bush and paranoia over the environment have only served to reaffirm the confusion of the world we grew up in during the 60's and 70's. It is important to understand that this is not pessimism, or even cynicism, because we've never known anything else, anything comfortable. And because reality is so uncertain, so is our art.

As Charles Simic points out, in a world which holds "a long list of intellectual and aesthetic events which question, revise and contradict one another on all fundamental issues how . . . are we capable of being in anything *but* uncertainties?" (51) My poems, thematically and formally, I believe, represent this idea, that "modern poetics is nothing more than the dramatization . . . of . . . disruption" (Simic 52). The world we grew up in forced us to learn to live with uncertainty and confusion as well as crises of identity and self-consciousness, an extension, in a way, of Keats' notion of negative capability: ". . . that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Simic speaks of my generation when he explains it this way:

To be 'capable of being in uncertainties' is to be literally in the midst. The poet is in the

midst. The poem, too, is in the midst, a kind of magnet for complex historical, literary and psychological forces, as well as a way of maintaining oneself in the face of that multiplicity.

. . . . One longs for self-knowledge while realizing at the same time that under the circumstances self-knowledge can never be complete. When it comes to poetry . . . who or what vouches for the authenticity of the act?

(51-2)

What we have to do is create our own authenticity, to speak by and for ourselves, and that has led, admittedly, to an "eclectic age without a unified period style", but unified instead by the sense of mystery and uncertainty it focuses on (Breslin 35, 36). Because we are confused and find ourselves in a confusing world, the search for identity and style is natural. Simic again explains:

The aim of every new poetics is to evolve its own concept of meaning, its own idea of what is authentic. In our case, it's the principle of uncertainty. Uncertainty is the description of that gap which consciousness proclaims: Actuality versus contingency. A new and unofficial view of our human condition. The best poetry being written today is the utterance and record of that condition and its

contradictions. . . . [Our] poetics have
 to do with the nature of perception, with being,
 with psyche, with time and consciousness. Not
 to subject oneself to [our] dialectics and
 uncertainties is truly not to experience the
 age we have inherited. (57-8, 57)

Thus my poetry is born of an age without absolutes and thus you'll find no "wisdom," at least conventional wisdom, here. While people have long turned to the poets for instruction, both philosophical and moral, this notion is a holdover from the days when poetry was the primary genre of literature. Since the nineteenth century, however, the rise of written histories and philosophies has taken precedence in cultural and moral instruction--due to the combination of wide-spread literacy and the popularity of the so-called "scientific," or objective, approach to the world. At the same time, the rise in the popularity of fiction, the novel in particular, has allowed it to take over the job of instruction by imaginative example.

Poetry, in short, has become a more personal struggle with the "real" world, seeking more to illustrate than explain, a struggle which, since the early twentieth century, is no longer considered as utilitarian as aesthetic. In this tradition, what you will find in my poems are one poet's experiments, and searchings, in an attempt to find a way to cope. That search takes place on a personal level

through experiments in style, especially the use of voices. The characters I give those voices to, in turn, search for their identity, and by seeing the world through their eyes, it gives me, and hopefully you, a new perspective on the world.

What these specific poems do for me is help develop and reveal a personal definition of what poetry and my poetic style are to me right now. That definition arises from the work itself. We figure out what poetry is by reading it and writing it, not by talking about it. We recognize poems, in effect defining them, by reading poems, a lot of them. Our sense of what makes a poem is individual, the sum of our memory of poems; and as a blatantly artificial convention, poetry, and its clockwork, prosody, depends on convention shared with readers (Hartman 7). As Robert Pinsky rightly points out, even avoidance of convention helps define them; avoidance of convention confirms its force.

So finally we look to the use of formal convention, or the lack of it, to see how the poem we're reading right now fits with the other poems we've read. It is important to remember as well that the definition of poetry implicit in these poems is indeed developing--always changing and growing.

We try to gauge whether or not a poem works by comparing it to other poems we know, but this is difficult

because the tradition of poetry is fluid, dynamic. As T.S. Eliot made clear in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," all poets are judged, thus appreciated, according to their relationship with dead poets. However, this is more complex than it first appears because the whole existing order of poetry is altered every time someone writes a poem. The tradition shifts a bit, because each individual's input into it is different, thus redefining the tradition itself. We like a poet's difference from his predecessors, but he still needs to be close enough to them so we recognize his work as poetry.

My poems spring from a specific poetic tradition, that of free verse. I believe free verse has reached maturity in the past few years--we understand it well enough now to really experiment with it--though many critics of poetry these days would have us believe it is already dead, as more and more poets return to the traditional prosody of syllable stress metrics and rhyme. The free verse tradition is an old one, beginning perhaps with the King James Psalms (Steele 4) and developing through Blake's "Prophetic Books" to Browning's, Whitman's, and Hopkin's eventual dislodgement of syllable stress verse, the act of maintaining a certain number of stressed syllables in a line to create a pattern. Free verse became a full blown tradition with the moderns, especially Pound, Eliot, and Stevens.

That's the tradition I'm working in. In my poems,

you'll find no regular metrical pattern, but you will find attention to rhythm in general, as in "Things to Do on Spring Break" or "Fool" where rhythm is generated by the repetition of the word "you" at the beginning of lines. Grammatical parallelism drives the poems, pushing the reader from line to line, revealing a pattern created by the whole poem, not just within individual lines. There is consideration for sound, but no overwhelming, or distinguishing pattern. Depending on the poem, a line may sound like ordinary speech, as natural as "Of course you've heard it all before" or as loaded as "his dirt farm / dried and died and his family / blew away like dust." You'll find I usually break lines according to syntax or phrasing rather than a set number of stresses or syllables. This technique helps control and establish voice as well as provide emphasis. It also frames or foregrounds individual phrases or images, thereby allowing me to create and control attention as well as disrupt the reader's preconceptions. Sometimes, when I really want to get your attention, I work syntax against line breaks, as in "Because your name / is bed spelled backwards," a line break that works almost like punctuation by placing emphasis on the word "name"--because it comes at the end of the line--that it would not normally receive syntactically. I employ techniques such as natural speech rhythms in dramatic monologues like "The Torturer Talks to His Date." Other times, I utilize Whitman's non-

metrical prosody of enumeration, parallelism, and syntax manipulation, as in "Song of Yourself," "Fool," and "Things to Do on Spring Break."

I look to my predecessors for subject matter too, making the familiar unfamiliar, stealing Browning's technique of putting ordinary people in extraordinary situations (or vice-versa) and listening to what they say--as in my title poem, "A Man Explains His Posture." Just as Whitman sees the course of a nation and a culture in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" played out through his personal observations, so do I try to connect my inner life with history itself in the respectful parody "Song of Yourself."

There are other approaches which help further classify my work. Within the free-verse tradition of modernism, there has been a further split, a split based on aesthetics and beliefs on what poetry is supposed to do. As Stanley Plumly points out, we have tended to see divisions "between reactionary and radical, conservative and visionary" (179). Perhaps even more clear-cut is the division we see characterized by the poetry of T.S. Eliot and W.C. Williams, the former a tradition based on poetry where the individual is of little over-all significance contrasted with the "anything goes" approach of focusing on an individual's perception of, and reaction to, the things that go on around him.

The poetry of Eliot is often characterized as

difficult and elitist, because of its dependence on obscure allusion and confusing incorporation of foreign languages and twisted syntax. Williams, on the other hand, is considered more accessible because of his straight-forward approach, no matter how complex his conceptualization of the poem may be.

My approach to poetry clearly aligns me with the Williams camp, and I see that happening for two reasons: one is that my poetry is personal and the other is that I believe it is accessible. While Eliot sees poetry as an escape from emotion (10-11), and a "self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (7), my poems are essentially the opposite. Personality, I believe, controls my poems, whether the personality is very close to my own as in "Desperate Measures" or "Waiting on the Call," or that of an invented speaker as in "Jess." The personality of the speaker is almost always what shapes, what frames the reality of any given situation. There is no attempt to reveal truth by the manipulating of "cultural" or traditional truths simply to see them in a new light. As a writer who believes in few, if any, absolutes, an approach like that of Eliot's would lead to obvious, and boring, manipulation of pre-digested material.

The truth I seek tends to be more personal and much less clear-cut, a truth that must constantly be questioned. This, I believe, aligns me more closely with Williams, and

reaffirms an American approach to poetry of which he is the modern leader. As James Scully writes, Williams is American because "America has claimed a tradition of revolution, because he believes that the truth, or what passes for truth, must be periodically redressed, re-examined, and reaffirmed in a new mode" (69). The truths I explore, though the use of voices, is a personal truth which is far from absolute, and can, in fact, change from specific occasion to occasion.

The other way I have rejected Eliot and followed Williams is closely related to the influence, and use of, personality in poetry. Accessibility is important to me. One needs only to peruse *The Wasteland* or *Four Quartets* to see how Eliot's mind does indeed function as a "catalyst," bringing together disparate materials so that we can view them in a new way. The problem here is that, to be honest, the echoes and allusions Eliot so heavily depends on are familiar to only an elite few, and even those few, I dare say, must work at reaching an understanding. This use of allusion is what tends to depersonalize the poetry, but at the same time it breaks down communication, and in my view poetry that fails to communicate directly, and relatively immediately, is what has given poetry a bad name. I, too, employ allusion, though sparingly, as evidenced in "Easy Kills" where obvious references are made to both Shakespeare and Elizabeth Bishop, but they are hardly

obscure. They function, I believe, to further develop the speaker's view of danger and how he irrationally associates death with sex. Ultimately, I don't believe my use of allusion baffles anyone; I believe it only serves to give depth to the poem, and in a way all can understand. If you miss the allusions, the poems don't self-destruct because they are not overly dependent on them.

Poetry, in Eliot's view, is only for scholars, and perhaps a few other poets, and that seems to violate poetry's traditional and long-standing function of speaking, much like myth, to the hopes, fears, and anxieties of an entire people. Jonathan Holden, in *The Fate of American Poetry* discusses how those who follow in the traditions of Whitman and Williams, rather than Eliot, have, by "shedding the elitist vestiges of modernism" redemocratized poetry, making it readable again (14). I, like many poets of my generation, no longer invest poetic authority in a "scholarly, tweedy professor figure whose authority [is] institutional rather than personal" (Holden, 51).

Instead of cultural mythology, clearly rejected in a poem like "Oklahoma" as being absurd, and therefore less than useful, my subject matter is personal, and because it's personal my poems are ahistorical and open to everyone, "regardless of intellect, caste, class, education, or geography" (Holden, 21). It takes no research, or deep cultural knowledge, to understand the snoring, alcoholism,

loss of a loved one, or alienation and isolation which characterize so many of my works.

In short, the poems are accessible; they're straightforward and easy to understand. I don't think a person can easily miss the sadness and sense of betrayal in "Just North of Liberal, Kansas" or the embarrassment and disgust in "Kurt at the Sleekbeaver Showbar." Even when the emotions are a little more complex, as in "Song of Yourself," I don't think people will get lost.

I want to avoid poems that people would want to avoid reading. I find no need to be complex, intellectually troublesome, or clever in order to make poems. I want to be direct, because that's what I think poetry is all about. If I worry or distract you too much by making puzzles out of my poems, I'm afraid you might concentrate on that and miss my real point altogether. I don't want you to get bogged down.

Beyond accessibility, I see a lot of other things going on in these poems. I see them as transitional: I'm learning things with each new poem I write. These poems are different from what I've done, and with luck they're different from what I will do. I plan future experiments with multiple voices, as in "A Poem Without Underwear," and new ways of creating tension through the narrator as in the Bert Clark poems. I have moved from a virtually confessional approach to poetry, making my personal life my

subject matter, to more entirely invented characters and situations. Where I used to employ imagination to transform my life into poems, I'm trying now to employ imagination to create entirely new premises. And there has been growth, at least change, as evidenced by looking at the approach taken in an earlier poem like "Oklahoma," a personal narrative, and a later poem like "Song of Yourself," a less personal, more abstract work.

In these poems, I've tried a variety of narrative approaches. I've tried poems based almost entirely on images, like "Lost" where I concern myself little with transition, narrative context, or time frames. It is the twists I look for here, and the over-all effect of the poem, rather than any individual element or image. What I want is a feeling that goes beyond what's actually there, so that we arrive at a cumulative impression that can't be explained by ordinary discursive thinking. Other times, as in "Prodigal" or "Spring Break" there is more of a narrative frame for the images, though in "Prodigal" it is more contrived. The images, too, in poems like "Prodigal" are different, connected only by a device--a pleading voice in "Prodigal," an accusatory voice in "Spring Break." The image connecting devices are designed so they don't interfere with the effect of the cumulative images. In "Spring Break," the images themselves are distorted into little narratives, not clearly defined by the senses, yet

all familiar to us because they are the cliches of American culture, especially the west of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, the reader visualizes "lynched card players" according to something they've seen in the movies instead of something they've experienced in real life, which hopefully distorts the effect of traditional imagery in a way that engages the reader on a different level than he's accustomed to.

My recent poems depend heavily on the use of direct address, to either a specific or non-specific audience, but almost always with a clearly defined speaker, as in "The Bait Seller Gives Advice." The voices we hear in these poems have recently become an important element in defining the over-all approach I take to poetry. The voice of the speakers has become a tool, a rhetorical device which I wrestle to control and use to its best advantage in any given poem, and it's often radically different from poem to poem. It is an element manipulated and controlled in order to achieve a desired effect, especially tonally.

The use of voice in my poems suggests much about the way I view poetry. First, as poets find themselves lost in a state of confusion about reality and what reality actually is, use of voice provides a technique I can conceive of, hold on to, and manipulate. Use of a specific technique is common among contemporary poets, as explained by James Breslin, who suggests that "the unity of the

current poetics derives entirely from technique, rather than from a shared set of implicit assumptions about poetry and reality" (35), because, of course, reality itself is confused and uncertain. Technique, then, is all we have to hold on to, the one thing we can share with some certainty, and it therefore becomes a basis for communication without reaching for a shared philosophy. Use of technique, of course, varies greatly from individual to individual, and experiments in voice are one technique I am focusing on right now. Voice, what we hear when we read a poem, allows me to frame reality in the here and now, from a variety of perspectives. And it allows me, once again, to make my poems personal, and not subject to preconceived notions of what reality is. Even though Robert Pinsky, in *The Situation of Poetry* writes that contemporary poems tend toward coolness and detachment through the use of voice (3-4), I believe they work just the opposite, as Holden points out, by restoring "the dignity of individual personality in poems" because they must "be spoken by a particular individual from a particular historical moment" (25).

Use of voice allows, as well, a natural way to introduce narrative into the work, a way of telling a story which will be of interest to readers. Detachment from audience and lack of purpose is a common charge leveled against contemporary poetry. Joseph Epstein registers a common complaint against contemporary poetry in his essay

"Who Killed Poetry?" as he laments the current dominance of the art by the lyric mode:

. . . in taking up the lyric as its chief form, contemporary poetry has seriously delineated itself. It thereby gives away much that has always made literature an activity of primary significance: it gives away the power to tell stories, to report on how people live and have lived, to struggle for those larger truths about life the discovery of which is the final justification for reading (19)

I naturally disagree with Epstein about the importance of revealing "larger truths" (other than mystery itself) but my poems answer his charges in another way as well. The use of the dramatic monologue, such as in "Thelma Sees the Northern Lights" does, I believe, tell a story and reports on how people live. Thelma reveals to us her heartfelt concerns and exposes her misconceptions, both of which teach us about her and her view of life. It is obvious she misses Earl and his dog, though she cusses them. It's clear that she, like me, is infatuated with things she can't quite understand, and believes, as well, in making up explanations so she can go on. Further, Holden explains how the dramatic monologue, as a mode, is natural for story telling, and how it thus functions as a sharp retort to critics like Epstein:

When the speaking persona . . . is different from the author, so that the reader is required to interpolate the circumstances of the speaker and the occasion of his (or her) speech, the verse will acquire a pronounced element of a story and avail itself of a wider range of subject-matter--subject matter beyond the personal concerns of the author. (8)

In short, it tells a story and leads to discoveries about identity at the same time. Holden goes on to explain that creating a persona enables the poet to speak in a story-telling voice and allows digression "while retaining some of the relentless forward movement and intensity of lyric" (36).

So contemporary poems do indeed have the power to tell stories, and many times, as in a poem such as "Friday Night Perspectives," I believe they can do it better than prose because the scene can be dramatized with economy and from more than one point of view, which not only increases the immediacy and power of the situation, but allows easier access for the reader to take part in the experience. The frame placed on reality in such a way foregrounds, and focuses us on, the experience without distraction. Hopefully, this gives depth to the poem as well, as we read the perspective of the male, then the female, and then realize that we've been forced into a perspective of our own as

voyeurs. The title, then, takes on the added dimension of referring to the reader as well as the characters, and perhaps the poem even becomes ironic if we realize that we've just witnessed, in effect, an acquaintance rape that has gone unrecognized by the characters themselves. If the moderns are impersonal and have "no regard for audience" (Doybns 194), then my poems are different by telling stories. Story-telling, as explained by Robert Stone, is an intrinsically communal activity: "Fiction is, or should be, an act against loneliness, an appeal to community [We ask] What does this mean? What is at the heart of this strange story? What can I learn from It? How does it bear on my situation?" (73-4). My storytelling, then, is necessary, and helps break down the isolation intrinsic in the contemporary world. It helps me, and my characters, to identify ourselves through contact with others, and helps us to accept who we are.

In turn, as voice emanates from the poem's speaker, it helps control the formal elements of the poem itself. What would this speaker say? Especially when talking to this or that person? Why is he saying this in the first place? These questions, or something like them, guide me in my choice of detail or deletion of it. They control tone and diction. Elevated diction simply isn't appropriate to most of my speakers, so it isn't employed in most poems. How would they really say this? How would this speaker make

this point? For example, despite the traditional idea that no word should be wasted in poetry, the speaker in "Prodigal" uses the word "all" several times, times where such redundancy would be inappropriate in a strictly lyric poem. Ultimately, voice controls the technical aspect of the poem as well. Would this speaker make this comparison? Would he really use metaphor or simile? Sonic devices?

Of course, this approach has its limits, in that I'm always there too, and in the end I have to make the decisions. After all, I've created the speakers. Sometimes I violate the speaker's voice to get a point across, and this usually results in irony or judgments such as the term "fake fuck" in "Kurt at the Sleekbeaver Showbar," or "Silly? You Bet" in "Lost." I may understand a situation in a way that the speaker can't. We learn things about the speakers in "Friday Night Perspectives" by what they say and how they say it, things which they don't realize or understand themselves. The titles, which most often violate the voice, reveal irony as well. Even though we know from the title Thelma is seeing the Northern Lights, she believes they're a UFO. Working in the opposite, a title may tell us that Bert Clark is "bouncing back," but the poem itself shows Bert slipping further and further into desperation.

Use of voice allows prosodic discovery as well, in much the same way that formal prosody, or the use of

accentual verse, may force a poet into discoveries he didn't expect in both language and form. The traditional poet may discover a new idea when forced to fulfill his pattern; likewise, I may discover a totally unthought of idea by being forced to think in terms of a speaker.

I sometimes experiment with voices in more complex ways. In the Bert Clark poems, the narrator, a god-like consciousness, intrudes on the character's life and addresses him about his behavior, asking "What ARE you doing?" in such a way that the voice itself, and its tone, develops an alter-ego for Bert (is he talking to himself? Or is it a narrator talking to--or for--us while playing like speaking to Bert?). Bert's personality, in any case, is revealed to the reader in a way that speaks to us emotionally, and we learn far more about him than we ever could with straight-forward narration. The readers' (and Bert's?) attitude is shaded without them being aware.

In other poems, two distinct voices are heard--"A Poem Without Underwear," "Friday Night Perspectives"--in one case carrying on a dialogue, and in the other two monologues. Other times the dialogue seems to take place with the reader as in "'Prairie Fire': A Painting" or another specific character in the poem as in "Occasional," or to the speaker himself in "Sleeping on My Side," a case where we simply overhear his thoughts.

The point is that by experimenting with voice I'm

learning more and more about poetry and how it works, as well as about human nature. In a series of experiments on work that was preliminary to this collection, the result once again revealed a philosophy, a belief in mystery and confusion. I wrote a series of poems, in distinct voices from a variety of perspectives where speakers explained what they saw when they experienced a UFO. The result was an aggregate experience that seemed to confirm that we each create our own reality through our biased perspectives, resulting in something like Melville's view of history. Some of those poems appear here, revised, though they are no longer UFO poems, including "Friday Night Perspectives," "Thelma Sees the Northern Lights," "Jess," and "Taxpayer Looks at the Night Sky."

Voice also forces poems to deal with specific situations, but I rarely feel the need to establish a clearly defined context as in "The Soon to be Immortal Talks to Himself," a situation which, I believe, can be taken as literal or figurative. And more often than not, the poems avoid direct emotional engagement.

While they may suggest powerful emotions at work, as in "Sleeping on My Side," the speakers tend to veer away from any direct statement of how they feel. They may tease, but ultimately little self-analysis takes place. This is a survival strategy employed by speakers, in a stylistic way, that reveals not only a consistent

"personality" in the poems, but in the writer as well, and stems from the idea that it is possible to exist comfortably in a state of uncertainty.

At times, poems like "Robins" or "Solutions" may seem to be silly and superficial, but they aren't. The people or the situations may not be real, but the longing, desires, hopes, fears, dreams, and anxieties of these speakers are, if only in an indirect way.

The speakers of these poems raise feelings so we can dwell on them, consider them and their importance, and in that way they touch us and the rest of the outside world. They help us see relationships between things--whether they be events, people, places, objects, or just colors--we might have missed before. The poem "Oklahoma" is held together by the color red and variations of it, so that a simple statement about the Doppler effect, "Red is the color of things moving away," begins a chain reaction of associations between the color of a state's soil, to beer drinking, to blood, to death, to a brewing storm. We make such associations all the time, but we spend little time considering them and what they do for us. So these poems help us see the outside world a little better sometimes, help us see things that should have been clear to us all along but for some reason weren't. It may be a world where little makes sense, but everything is still connected. Because these speakers take the time to stop and consider

everyday happenings we normally ignore, we can learn from them.

Thematically, topics establish themselves through repetition, and learn toward a search for identity both on the part of the speakers and the writer. Identity is established for the self through memory, and in poems where the speaker is particularly close to me, memory is employed: Who was I then? Who am I now? Poems such as "Oklahoma," "Just North of Liberal, Kansas," "Occasional," and "Sleeping on My Side" are all built on memory.

The first three incorporate another predominant theme, that of identity associated with geography and a sense of place, a theme taken to its limits (for me at least) in poems like "Lost" and "Song of Yourself." Many of the poems illustrate identity gained through association with people as well, and these comprise most of the "dramatic monologues" such as "Thelma Sees the Northern Lights," "Friday Night Perspectives," and the Bert Clark poems. Also important are the animals that tell us, in their own way, who we are, as in "Working it Out" and "Easy Kills."

At times, themes combine, so we have memories, places, people, and animals in "The Dog Touches a Sore Spot." Hopefully, though these themes are old ones, they have a new twist. I hope my personal approach, my developing style, is new enough and interesting enough to keep people reading.

More specifically, in the pattern the poems make and the shape the book takes, there's progression. The book itself is divided into three sections of loose (by that I mean far from absolute) associations of themes and voices. Overall, I see movements from isolation to community, personal concerns to historical/contextual concerns, desperation to solution, and bitterness/loss to acceptance. The speakers discover that what answers there may be to our questions are neither entirely outside nor inside the self, but in a combination of the two, or, more commonly, that there simply aren't any answers. We just make do; while we can't live in isolation, neither can we depend on others.

I've called this collection *A Man Explains His Posture* not because I think it's the best poem here, but because I think it most clearly umbrellas the rest of the work. To explain your posture, to me, is to explain who you are, and as I've already said, I think these are poems about identity. Posture goes beyond the physical, to reveal a spiritual and philosophical stance in terms of this collection. The opening section, "Desperate Measures," is a group of poems dealing essentially with place, as the various speakers do their best to come to grips with their environment and who they are in that environment. The speakers are like good Kansans, in the tradition of Dorothy, who find themselves out of place, and trying desperately--if not to get back to where they came from--to

at least figure out where they came from. Associations between landscapes and ancestors, as in "Oklahoma" and "Just North of Liberal, Kansas" leave speakers trying to explain who they are and how they came to be where they are. Throughout the section, speakers search, travel, and find themselves lost physically or emotionally, always struggling. A longing for what was or what could be pervades, and implies a general sense of unhappiness.

The opening poem, "Prodigal," sets the personal tone of the section through direct address to a non-specified audience. Images of isolation and confusion, associated with the landscape--a mystical river--and a metaphorically altered environment--the changes in the house--suggest disorientation, a feeling repeated in poems throughout the section. In "Prodigal," the returning teenager, who's already forgotten where she went and why she went there, serves to bring others together to discuss her situation. In this way, she serves as a catalyst for family unity, but ultimately the speaker focuses more on the coming together than the return and the teenager herself, which suggests a misunderstanding of what's truly important in such a situation.

Misunderstanding, or missing the point altogether, is a characteristic of many of the poems in the section. The next poem, "Oklahoma," deals with a speaker's somewhat detached attempts at explanations, a search for "roots,"

so to speak, and the creation of myths, both personal and cultural, in a vain attempt to explain where we've come from. The search, though probing, is ultimately futile and the speaker concludes that trying to find oneself just doesn't work: "some things . . . you just can't . . . make sense of."

Speakers throughout the rest of the section find themselves with "no place to go or stay," metaphorically "folding maps and [their] lives flat." Another attempt to find identity through place ends unhappily in "Just North of Liberal, Kansas" where the speaker ultimately feels betrayed by the environment, the loss of childhood, and broken promises. Realizing that "none of us have really done / what we came here to do," he suggests "mak[ing] tracks / before it's too late." The section has movement, however, as the speakers move more toward acceptance of what they cannot change. While the tone of poems like "Lost" and "Oklahoma Spring" is far from cheery, "Lost" implies acceptance by giving in to a land where nothing makes sense and even the images don't add up. The speaker is truly lost, but there's nothing he can do about it.

Section 2, "Prodigal," is comprised of poems where speakers tend to go on despite their surroundings and predicaments. In this way, the tone lightens considerably and the speakers are happier with themselves. Things aren't right with them, of course, but if they don't care, why

should anyone else? Such an attitude, one of acceptance, suggests a survival skill, however less than perfect and less than admirable it may be. It allows the speakers to at least see beyond themselves to others, and allows me to create poems about relationships in general and love specifically. The speakers take life as it comes and try to work through it. Sometimes, they even gain an insight, as in "Working it Out." The situations may be tough, as in "Wading," odd as in "The Torturer Talks to His Date," or even desperate, as in "Robins," but the speakers at least try to deal with them, coming to terms with and learning about their situations even if they are unable to take action or things are simply out of their control.

This spark of at least accepting responsibility makes the tone in this section lighter, though perhaps not encouraging, and the fact that many speakers don't even question the out-of-the-ordinary situations they find themselves in, or strange behavior they witness or exhibit, suggests hope for their condition. There's more to do than whine, in other words. The speakers remain self-centered, but not so severely handicapped by this that they can't reach out. The speakers eventually feel confident enough with themselves to criticize others and their behavior, as in the Bert Clark poems and "Wading." While this would not normally be considered positive, it is indeed growth toward something better than what we saw in section 1 where the

speakers were almost always unhappy. Accepting one's own behavior, no matter how bizarre, and reaching out to others as well, must be seen as signs of hope.

In section 3, "The New Garden,"--a title suggesting rebirth--we find speakers who have moved beyond isolation and have accepted their lives to the point where they not only reach out but make contact. In this way, the section provides a happy ending to the collection. The world may be strange, but it's okay too--tolerable at least--and the speakers are able to go beyond their personal concerns to become involved in a broader context. The world becomes a place to start over in. Thus, the Oklahoma that leads to isolation and despair in the opening section becomes a part of the speaker (or the speaker is a part of it) in "Song of Yourself." Place, then, does provide identity, rather than simply confusion, as personal history and cultural history become one. The focus goes beyond self to others, and beyond others to return to place. Speakers feel comfortable enough to confront their problems without trying to explain them; to live in the world without trying to change it.

We see speakers accept love in "After Earth, Air, and Water," learn new things in "The Bait Seller Gives Advice," and blend with history in "Things to Do on Spring Break." In several direct address poems, speakers confirm that the world is okay, moving finally to a speaker confident enough

to address poetry itself and the traditional way poetry has long addressed larger concerns. The parody "Song of Yourself"--half Whitman, half Ginsberg--illicitly celebration in chaos and explores how we learn to bitch and to care. It is also a poem about writing poetry, as it gives the illusion of unfolding--of actually being written--right before the reader's eyes. In a way, it questions the poet's authority and where that authority comes from, because we see the faltering steps that seemingly come from virtual free association and the struggle of trying to figure out how to express it. At the same time, poetic authority is confirmed, simply because a poem has indeed been produced.

The speakers of section 3 are still beset with follies, as a natural condition of life, but can understand or at least "buy into" important issues and can finally give and feel love without question--and beyond the limits of space--as in "Occasional." Ultimately, self becomes not only identified with place and others, but confused with them, providing a sense of completeness or wholeness. This confusion becomes a place to belong, a place to feel comfortable in, because the self avoids the frightening prospect of drawing boundaries which ultimately lead to further isolation. While this may be a psychologist's nightmare, it suggests a solution to, and in many ways, solves the problems speakers have confronted in the two

earlier sections, though not easily or prettily.

Finally, the collection finds confusion to be a place in and of itself. Though it may not necessarily be comfortable, it is certainly worthy of consideration, and if one can understand and accept that they live in a constant state of flux, he's gone a long way toward defining who he is. This, I believe happens in the book. I am a little more certain of who I am as a writer, and the speakers of my poems are a little more certain of who they are.

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PART I
DESPERATE MEASURES

PRODIGAL

Of course you've heard it all before.
And listening to her, I know, is like
searching for a new job,
like the roof collapsing in a storm.
But please, stick with her, with us.
She has, after all, brought us all together.
I will listen if you will. You can't catch a cab
at this hour anyway. Sit down, sit down.
Let's all be ourselves; let's let her have her way.

After all, she was the daring girl
who ignored our orders to stay away from
that dangerous river as it disappeared
into a cave. She is, after all,
a patient after a head injury
who can't recall how it happened,
this defiant daughter returning home,
falling through the porch,
finding a wall removed from the old living room,
yet somehow unaware
this is all absolutely awful.

So give her a break, sit here.
This is no kitchen cocktail party for me either.
See? I believe the river is about to resurface.

Give it a chance and this water, clean and clear now,
filtered through stone, cold and good
like a new found spring, makes sense
though it doesn't remember where it's been.

OKLAHOMA

The earth here is red. Deb, eager,
makes one myth after another
in explanation. I nod, drive on,
looking at cattle, knee-deep
in orange ponds and wonder myself.

Red is a primary color, she notes,
a color in all spectrums unmixed,
the color of things moving away.
This, she decides, still thinking
of explanations, is where it begins
and ends, a natural then and now,
here and there.

I tell her that the creator,
hating man, sent Powerful
Sekhmet to destroy us, all. I tell
how she waded, born evil,
in blood and exultation until Re
relented, fearing obliteration,
and put in Sekhmet's path seven-thousand
jars of red beer. She waded in, lusting,
became drunk, and only that could
stop the slaughter.

Maybe, I say, that happened here. This,
she replies, is Oklahoma, not Egypt,
and besides, what could be the moral
to a story like that? I drive on;
she works up ideas about the red men
who lived here, their genesis,
their tears, their blood, and I think
more and more about beer.

My father lived here once, for a year
in a tiny trailer. He was a
rough-neck, a red neck, and followed
his work. I visited once and
remember most the sky, the uninterrupted
blue without trees, hills or clouds. I
wondered what could hold such a sky,
untouchable, like a goddess on all
fours. I don't remember the red earth.

Years later, Dad visited at school.
Early, hungover, we went to a workers'
bar and drank beer with tomato
juice to settle our stomachs for
breakfast. We met some line workers, drank
beer, then bourbon, all day, and when we
left the bar the sun was pink through

the clouds, the sky red above it.
It was winking, proud of us. When I
puked, I thought it was blood.
I thought I was dying.

When Dad died I was drunk and they drove
me into a pink sunrise to the
airport. I flew with the sun at my
back into a sky that grew bigger
and bigger and landed in a dusty
plain of blue and brown, red-eyed and
hurting. By the time I arrived he
was dressed and resting. They never
got the red of his nose right;
the lifeless yellow showed through.
Three days later, we were both home.

Some things, you know, she says,
you just can't paint or make sense of.
I nod at her, at this sky held on
poles, and try to find, on the perfect,
unwrinkled horizon, a cow wading.

Travelling this red earth by car,
I watch the sky grow darker and
darker purple, red mixed with blue,

a storm brewing between here and
there. We are approaching the sand, the
place where the earth changes color, silently.

THE MAP

I rub the rough paper,
erasing it with my finger
to white, no, more grey than white,
like this third day of rain:
no sun, horizon or distance.

Left open in the rear window
the map has lost its color.
The lakes are the same yellow
as the prairie, outlined only,
in faint blue. And we are gone,
our dot and name wiped out.

And no lines out: no roads,
no bridges, no airports, no
tracks. No cities, no rivers,
no where to go but yellow.

So we stay in, sit on the floor, lost,
wavering between here and there,
no place to go or stay,
folding maps and our lives flat.

"PRAIRIE FIRE": A PAINTING

This is Turner gone inland:
the slave ship sinks into
the earth, burned and burning,
stretching all the way
to the horizon, black and blacker,
ashes like flotsam,
flames like seaweed,
and we are the only survivors,
painting while it burns,
painting while it sinks,
painting over the pitiful voices.

Don't you wonder what brought us here
like this, helpless and not wanting
to help, not even liking what green
is left in fact? Wishing it were all,
all black, even the furrows filled in,
even the sky charred, an absolute
ending of sky and earth, all black
melted together, fused and gone.
It's going now, and we should too.
Swim for it.

JUST NORTH OF LIBERAL, KANSAS

A sarcophagus, of sorts,
this truck-shell has set
for thirty years,
claimed by the dry creekbed
of my childhood.

Up the hill,
the house I raided
like a pyramid,
pillaging bottles
of blue glass, newspapers
and tins
for my museum,
a room within my room,
six shelves full.

No road leads here now.
Never has, not since
I was old enough to come
up the creek by myself,
always warned, always wary,
of flashfloods
in this desert of slim grass and cactus.
I've seen water here only twice.

But it must come.

The bed never shows weeds,
and the hard walls
I once called a canyon are always
a little different,
the truck a little more
or less buried.

And from this ridge
I can see the Mighty Sampson,
the largest trestle of its day,
spanning the river
this creek is tributary to.
Like all great bridges,
there is a man still encased
in a concrete pillar, a sacrifice,
buried alive
so people can pass through
this land without stopping.

It is, of course,
the man with the truck,
saved, he believed, by the WPA
as his dirt farm
dried and died and his family
blew away like dust.
When he saw that first cloud coming,

he pulled his bandanna
up over his nose,
never knowing that fifty years later
his farm would be famous,
marked on maps in museums:
the geographic center of a land
that got up and moved itself.

I sit on what's left of the truckbed
and tell him it's the same:
two years of drought
have sent the river
underground and the wind's picking up.
No one even tries to farm.
At night, though,
you can see them from here,
working in the refinery
that shines with towers and lights.

And none of us have really done
what we came here to do.
I am overtaken by a gust of sand.
Perhaps it will rain, I think,
looking to the tall
thunderheads in the west.
Maybe there'll be a flood.

I should make tracks
before it's too late.

SECRETS

As a collector of hobbies I
have them all: the stamps, butterflies,
plastic fish and elephants, paper clips,
crayon drawings, plants.

Anything will do, and I find
myself at flea-markets
in tin buildings on the south
side of town, sifting through ashtrays
and stuffed poodles, child safety seats
and belt buckles until I find
just the thing.

The finding's the thing:
then I know a feeling
like I have returned from the dead.
Then I know what it is to be a
wildcatter striking it rich in the
blowing sand, throwing his hat
into the wet black sky and watching
it flutter back down to earth like an
unwitting ghost.

Things I want till I need,
and once needed, it all falls away.

Hopeless.

I want these rhinestones
for a drawer I'm filling.

And it's almost full. And then
it's on to something new.

But I'm not saying a word about that,
not to you, because you'll want it too.

DIRECTIONS:

One whiff guaranteed to cure:
snoring, nosebleed, sour breath,
constipation, gout, hives,
boils and chest pains. Several whiffs
will: grow luxuriant hair.

Skin application will prevent:
lightning strikes and cosmetic surgery.
You will love your job, your spouse.
You'll have all the cash you need.
Warning: may cause impotence.
Do not discontinue use.

Drinking will allow you to:
make instant friends with all children.
Widows will bring you pies.
All dogs will heel.
And fish? Fish will beg for your bait.
Take them home; they'll clean themselves.
And your spouse will love you. Every night.
Do not attempt to drive or operate heavy
machinery. If dizziness occurs
consult a physician.

Keep out of the reach of children.
Repeat as necessary.

DESPERATE MEASURES:
SUNDAY MORNING CROSSWORD

It's going to take something more
than words or phrases
folded into the sheets
over us to make it okay while we listen
to the gully-washers run down the gutters,
and wash away the flowers
just put in,
exposing the roots of our boredom.

What is there, after all,
to do on a day like this?
I'm sick of cleaning.
I'm sick of planning vacations.

It'll take at least a shaking out
until the grey sun
breaks through and the earth comes back
covering the bulbs like a comforter.

Until then we can comfort
ourselves at the roots of trees,
dug in as if this rain will never end.
Besides, everytime we've tried to stop it

it's like trying to catch the movement of dawn,
seeing it as action rather than tableau.
Impossible.

So I guess we just take it: unstoppable,
like wire hangers in the closet,
not to be fought but wondered at,
like wire hangers under the pillow,
not to be shifted but hugged
deep into the night, as we
snuggle under the covers,
pale new bulbs.

DAUGHTER

I see her,
white T-shirted and bare legged,
come out of the twilight.

Melody,
her father's only daughter,
snaps her fingers,
and sends all the pale
animals running.

I see this song
dance above the grass
following the lilting sun.
I listen, though
I've heard it all.

I have heard her father
who could never carry a tune
curse her to her singing face.

Even so, a song: my song,
my belief in everything.

Legs and songs, long and smooth,
allow the twilight and the coming night

to be explored, dark as a cave,
songs and curses echoing.

Legs and long cottonwoods silhouette,
spread like quiet plains toward morning.

ANTICIPATIONS

For forty years, Smitty and I
have kept the world safe and certain.
We always know which card to play.
In double dominoes, we're undefeated.

More than that, we tell the town
when picnics will be pleasurable,
when to plant their radishes,
when to stock extra groceries.
We are never wrong; they believe in us.

When Smitty's left hip hurts,
he lies waiting for sleep, certain that
tomorrow will be cloudless
with a breeze carrying the scents of leaves easily.

A flat ache wrinkling from right shoulder
to neck base tells me he's accurate again.
I have my aches too;
we are consistent.

Try as I might, one night not long ago
I felt nothing, saw only easy images,
the designs of sleep's edge,
and this told me nothing.

But Smitty was sure--
his cramped, extended toes pointed toward
a sky hiding the sun
with snow melting from pavement only.

This morning I was, admittedly, afraid.
Smitty's voice was uncertain, no pain, no forecast,
while I, having suffered asthma all night,
was unmistakable.

And now, tonight, after reading for hours,
this shallow throb in my right wrist.
This is all new to me.
I can't possibly sleep.

SOLUTIONS

The laying on of aspirin would do
he believed, and the slow dissolving
was not all that bitter. Failing,
he tried scotch and hot salts.
Still the tooth did not go numb.

The x-rays were proof enough:
nothing wrong, all in your head.
The worm bore deeper and he caked
it with cloves and garlic.

The periodontist: just as well remove
the jaw, just as good.
And you're still smiling. It was, in truth,
a grimace, and he left, tonguing
the tooth, holding his face.
He trimmed his nails only on Friday.
Always put his right sock on first.
It would not go away.

Cold weather made it worse and
on February 9 he dreamed of St. Apollonia
holding fast to her god as
her teeth were pulled, one by one.

He lost sleep.

He quit his job to study teeth,
conduct interviews. He meditated,
He kissed the lips of unbaptized infants,
fasted on Maundy Thursday.

And always something against his head:
a slice of warm onion to his ear,
cow dung, live frogs, a piece of moss
from a long dead skull.

He travelled widely, chasing
the pain he ran from.
Surgeons in Sweden laughed.
Witches in Zambia danced.
As in the cartoons, it was always
the doorknob which gave way.

In Peking, now, the certain cure:
A tab of arsenic close to the tooth.
He lays it on.
It takes him with it.

FOOL

You want to see it up close.
You want to know how you can really tell
the difference by the shape of the nose.
You want to know the smell of its breath.
You want to find the ears.
You want to see if it's as hard as it looks.
You want to see if a stick
will prop its jaws open.
You want to know if it really sleeps
when its belly is stroked.

Wild animals do not know how to kiss.
And don't offer your kerchief to them,
those tears are not real.
I know what you're thinking:
crocodiles are rare in Oklahoma.

You want to help it any way you can.
You want to know how it mates.
You want to feel the texture of its eggs.
You want to know how it loves its young.

You want to get close enough
to learn how it feeds.

EASY KILLS

Tomorrow's bait shines thick
as fingers in the thin
grass near flower beds, under the mulch
pile, against the cool edge of concrete.
We cover the flashlight with red cellophane,
move softly, stand still, are patient,
hunting for fat night crawlers.
When they feel us coming, they snap
back like tortoise heads.

When they mate,
when the thick bands
near their heads melt
together, vulnerable, easy,
we grab them at the bands,
like two flies with one swat,
hold tight, pull.
They are strongly anchored,
stretching thin the length of an arm.
They snap loose
like rubber.
We keep them in loam.
We need two dozen.
By midnight we climb the steps.
Knowing the beast with two backs

can't see what's sneaking up,
we hide our shining bodies
under the sheets. We stay
covered, safe,
warm as underground.

In the pond outside my house lives
a catfish who feeds on offerings
of sheep. Some say it walks at night,
glistening in the moon, to hunt.
Mostly, it get couples who
come too close, lying on a blanket
by the water, after dark. Its mouth
is lined with grappling hooks; still it
could swallow Elizabeth Bishop whole.
From my window: yet another red bike
on its side, its front wheel still spinning
in the air. It's now I vow
to get that fish. I send the biggest female
catfish I can find into the pond.

Preoccupied, his mind a great lake away,
the bodies melt together, churn.
One huge back rolls out of the water
and then the other. My timing is perfect,

the harpoon straight, and this old oak
and cable hold.

Too slow, no claws, no sharp teeth,
our only defense is standing up,
looking around, seeing what's coming.
She's always looking over my shoulder.
Later, I'll pull the covers up over our
bodies, our heads.

Finally, I'll insist that we
stay silent, and still, knowing that
under the rippling sheets' surface
the strike comes quickly.

HIDE AND SEEK

At three, I wake and put on the coffee.
Down the steps, out back, I take the
binoculars and hold them cold to my eyes
like I have, every night, three weeks straight.
It's supposed to be low on the horizon
just east of Sagittarius, and if I can
find one I can find the other. Wind comes
across the lenses like the tops of
empty bottles, and in the hollow sound I
hear my toes and fingers go numb,
lose their color and gain a new one,
the same almost blue of this sky,
crowded but without what I need most,
the warm glimmer of a shooting star.
Is there anything here besides the comfort
of constellations, pictures imagined?

I'm still awake at seven, thinking, and inside
my lids I see images of loveless mating.
My wife wakes, closes the door
behind her so I can't hear the shower,
the news, the dog circling wanting so
badly out, the cat so badly in.
I know without seeing how everything
changes places and she shoots through

the house like a star. I will not go
to work today. I have things to look for.

KURT AT THE SLEEKBEAVER SHOWBAR

Kurt finds a seat up front,
smiles at the big bouncer
who doesn't smile back,
buys a beer.

And there she is, not a foot away.
She struts her fake fuck right
in his face, throws it out,
dances that she wants him,
really wants him,

as he thinks her out of her top,
and thinks he wants her too,
and wants someone to tell about it.

She hangs his eyes on her untouched
tits, just as she hung the tinsel,
for flash, from each pasty,
till she pops them off
and drops one in his glass,

staring him down with wet wet lips
till he looks away from her eyes
to her sleek strong thighs.
Just a foot away.

Untouchable, they are both outside
of themselves for just a second.

And Kurt wasn't ready, no,
not ready for this.

In his pocket only fifties,
but he tells himself it's worth it,
it's all worth it
if she'll just go away.

LOST

No matter now, he thinks, how badly
he really wants to go home.
Even surrounded by ice,
eating non-native food,
in a land inhabited by reindeer
and wind and little else,
a land seemingly plagued by drought
for want of vegetation,
so that the dark sky comes
all the way, absolutely,
to the ground, held up by
nothing except occasional antlers
in the distance,
sometimes so lost and angry
he would toss a stone
if there were one.

And getting away? How about getting away
like young women escaping from prison
to return to the trailer camps,
pink laundry on the line
and dirty tiles in the kitchen,
where, for the first time
since the incarceration they dine
on embrochette shrimp and beef,

burr artichokes and cantaloupe sherbert, alone.
Silly? You bet, but just as likely.

So what does matter? He is simply surprised
that he's here and pointing to a place
he cannot see, to a dark slow moving animal
carrying away the horizon.

OKLAHOMA SPRING

It has been a winter without storms,
every day the same, warm and without promise.
We never wear our coats.

We come in, already tanned,
and sit in Jakie's all day:
cards and dominoes, beer, popcorn
scratchy as the land.

There are always the fluorocarbon
and ozone stories, the green house effect
and derainforestation.

The bomb.

Stories about what any of us
might do, gone broke and mad, blowing
away the banker, the governor.

At this moment, Johnson's wife wades
wearily through the fields, blindfolded,
holding the forked rod lightly,
her mouth just right.

I wonder what there is to do, really,
besides drill a deeper well,
buy a bigger pump?

And maybe, I say, though I know it's only March,
turn on the air-conditioner in here.

And buy another round; we've all gone dry.

PART II
PRODICAL

THE TORTURER TALKS TO HIS DATE

Are you sure you're comfortable?

Can you hear all right?

We've got just this one more to do.

Come, lie a while and relax.

No need to watch; you can hear
everything, everything he says.

This should be fun.

Prop yourself up on an elbow.

Smile if you like, parting
your lips a little.

This is what we do best,
this binding of hands and feet,
stretched out between the sun
and the moon and everything
he holds dear.

Are you hungry?

We can order out.

This is always fun,
quartering from the fields to the sea
under the white sun and whiter moon,
blue sky and orange sky.

And, because you're beautiful,
you can look over your shoulder,
a peek, just once, if you like.

Would you like that?

But really, he's just like all the rest.

If you bring some ropes,
because you're beautiful,
you can try one yourself.

Pick one you know well,
one who loves you and will go all the way,
because it's a long ways between
the sun and the moon.

How about a drink?

If you like we'll do another.

FRIDAY NIGHT PERSPECTIVES

HIM

The best night ever.

And she was beautiful.

Tracy, I mean. And hot too,

just like everyone said,

and we were out by the old dragstrip,

and she kissed better

than anyone ever kissed,

and she let me put my hands everywhere.

Everywhere. And her body felt

hard and soft at the same time,

and I unbuttoned her,

real slow, because it was nice,

and I could only use one hand,

and the buttons were backwards.

And I sucked her neck

but she didn't want any marks

and pretty soon, one-handed, I un-did her bra,

and I thought I was going to blow right there,

just feeling

and sucking a little.

She loved it.

She kissed me hard while I felt

all around and I took off my shirt too,

and it was all skin on skin,

and she fit me perfectly
and so I just hugged her and kissed her,
and ran my hand over her soft, soft back.
And then I unbuttoned her jeans
and I know she wanted it,
but I could barely squeeze my hand
in there and finally she let me slip them down,
slow and shifting from hip to hip, over her bottom,
and then I could feel it,
softer than anything, and moist and warm
and she held my face and kissed
me hard while I felt down there,
and I pulled my pants down too,
a little, and finally she touched it,
and when she did
the whole world was light.
I mean the whole car just filled up
with light like another huge car
was coming down on us,
or like the cops were looking
in the window, but I couldn't
hardly care, or see really,
because right then I burst,
copped a wad,
and my toes even cramped,
and then it was so dark

I could barely even see her face,
and she was looking down anyway.

HER

I still can't believe I did it,
but he is cute,
and he is nice, you know,
and he kissed nice too,
and I guess I was a little excited
at first, but it's just so gross,
and I couldn't get him to stop,
you know how they are,
and he was all over me,
I mean all over,
and it was okay for a while, you know,
just kissing and stuff,
and it felt okay too,
him rubbing me,
and so I let him work under my shirt
a bit but he wouldn't stop there.
You know how they are,
pawing and panting,
and he was so awkward
it was almost cute,
like he didn't really have any idea
and was just busy, you know,
until I was all sticky with his spit,
and I'd push him away,
and try to cool him down,

and hold my mouth shut,
and he'd just come back,
you know, like a game,
and he got my pants down some even,
and that hurt when he got down there,
he wasn't good at all, you know,
and didn't know what he was doing at all,
you know, and he just went after it
like it was play dough,
and even tried to stick a finger in me,
and when he pulled his own little thing out,
I thought I was going to die,
and I really didn't know what to do,
you know, but like Kay always says,
just use your hand,
and that'll make them quit,
so I did, just to get rid of him,
you know, and we sure weren't
going to do anything else,
and it was weird,
like it wasn't even my own hand,
and then it happened, so quick
it surprised me, and when I
looked over his shoulder
it was like heaven just opened up
and said Tracy! What are you doing!

and his whole stinky little car
just filled up with light,
like Jesus and everybody was looking in,
and they all saw us,
and I could see his curled up little face,
and my naked little body,
clear as day, and I was sick to my stomach
right there and then, and I could have thrown up,
but he didn't notice a thing,
so I thought it must all be in my head,
like I was crazy,
and the light, and the voices from the light
saying Stop It! stop it right now,
just like a mother you know,
but by then it was too late,
and really, when I think back,
it only took a few seconds anyway,
and it was all just too gross, you know,
and the car went dark,
and I wanted to cry, but I didn't want him to see me,
and I made him take me straight home,
but he didn't care,

and if you tell anyone about this I'll die.
I could just die.

A POEM WITHOUT UNDERWEAR

The daffodils are singing
and the birds are blooming.

What?

Marsha Brady's in love.

Oh.

In the evening . . .

It's been said.

Everyone has said it.

That's what I said.

Why can't I?

O.K. Say. Just
like everyone else.

One morning, Marsha woke
with love in her heart
and eyes.

eyes?

and put on her little blue
miniskirt and swished off,
steamy-like and twelve years-old

12? only 12?
and love like that love
that's stranger than words
or ape alphabets even
pretty strange

strange indeed at that age
to wake up wet and weeping
wanting only one thing

What? what?

and a big thing at that
yeah, sure

the biggest, like love.
I'll stay tuned.

ANNIVERSARY POEM

(STILL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE BILLS)

Because there are no other words,
I say I love you. Because your name
is bed spelled backwards, where it's
always warm. Because your name sounds like
those voices I hear on the edge of sleep:
the fan hums, and I am titillated.

And my heart? More than
if trapped in a house, no, a mansion,
surrounded by skeletons.

Because the sight of it is more titillating
than if I found giant geometric
objects from the air, carved into
the hillside, white chalk and erosion,
a clearer and more clear scar of a
heart with initials and an arrow,
a pattern playing off the green grass,
too green, too white, but playing off, on.

But ultimately, you know, sweetheart,
your name means currency, cold and hard,
to pay the insurance and the rent.
Partners. A fixed floating rate of exchange.

DISAGREEMENT OVER SOME BASS, TRUMAN LAKE

A dark night in December in Missouri.

We have been drinking for hours.

He is asleep on the couch.

I have kissed his wife.

I have touched her leg too,

and I have thought about all this before.

I cannot see her eyes.

Is the music too loud?

When he stirs he reaches for her

in a daze, unzippers her, and underneath

she is dressed like a starlet.

And then she is naked and I am

silent as I can be. As he slips

into her from behind, she looks at me

on the floor, reaches over the armrest,

holds my hand.

In the morning I will be afraid.

In the morning, we are going fishing.

AN AFFAIR WITH MR. ROGERS

Up a perfectly straight sidewalk,
through a crisp painted gate,
a beautiful woman walks briskly.
She wipes her shoes,
and takes them off,
then enters the perfect door
to the square room.
She changes into fuzzy
slippers and from the closet, exchanges
her topcoat (she is naked underneath)
and puts on a long deep fur. She leaves
her hat on. She floats and fluffs to
the fresh couch where she reclines and
waits a long time.

At sunrise she is furious and flies through
the neighborhood, crying, one arm bouncing
limply, the other holding the fur closed.
Mr. Rogers never came home; she has to
fix breakfast for her husband. She
wonders about taking a bus dressed
like this.

At sunrise, Mr. Rogers is bothered, the
skin of his throat tight;

he is in danger of sweating.

Last night, he exchanged his slippers
for shoes, sweater for coat and went out
to buy construction paper and a fine
champagne. Once out of the neighborhood,
he stopped for directions at a bar and
found himself with a woman who clung to him
like clean air, who dressed well,
who enunciated like crisp fall air.

He found himself

laying her coat over her shoulders.

Later, he took off her shoes while looking
into her eyes. The rest has melted together like last
year's vacation

and he sits on the edge of the not so
white sheets and is afraid to look at her.

Mr. Rogers notices nothing missing when
he changes his coat for his sweater, his
wing-tips for loafers. He slams the closet,
plops on the couch.

Is that a slouch we detect?

He thinks of her.

Can you say, big mistake?

Can you say it's a wonderful day?

WHY I'M MOVING OUT

All this time in the kitchen
under the bare bulb with cold coffee,
our speech has floated to the floor
like lost ghosts,
speech that could reach right through
itself and touch the wall behind.
We weren't getting through.

All that time in bed, close
but not touching, like the wings
of those slender cemetery angels,
we stared straight up to the ceiling,
watched our words flutter, dive and dodge,
believing in things we couldn't see.

Where have you been? And me?
Let's have the old cliché
about a lack of substance:
let's ask ourselves some questions.
Are we in love?
Let me admit I have no idea who you are.

In this way you are dead.
In words you couldn't
understand, even if alive,

I need to tell you.

Words made from the tips of fingers
and stiff dry tongues,
words you could never feel through
your thickening skin.

In this way

I am dead too and there you have it:
two deaths, sudden as last frost.

And there we have it.

THE NEW GARDEN

She has left, and he's breaking new ground,
slicing into sod so thick it squeaks.
He turns it over, pulls chunks of grass
out by the hair and shakes what soil
he can from the roots.
This year no one sees him sweat.

He thinks of last fall and she looks over his shoulder,
the weather cooling, melons dead on the vine.
Across the long yard the white house is appearing,
its cover of leaves falling away.
He's ready for the cold job of cleaning the garden.
Pulling up pea wire, stripping dried vines,
old poles break off at the ground.

He yanks beans and peppers by the roots,
tomatoes like dead snakes in cages.

A pile grows--vegetation, wires, strings, stakes.
He follows vines to missed squash,
cucumbers gone soft inside,
growing tough new skin.
He does not till.
This garden is finished.

He mulches lightly so the ground can rest,
tears down posts and fence.

The sweat in his eyes brings him back.
It's hot and he's doing things the hard way.

Still, he thinks of the bags
that wait--top soil, manure, peat, sand.
The deeper he digs, the rockier it gets
and the more he thinks this may not work.
The dirt itself, though, almost black,
pulses with worms.

ROBINS

Is that one? Dark, small,
tracking in the muddy garden?

Another? Under the pine. And
in the forsythia, six!
And here they come.
They spill from the park, across the
street, soak the lawn.
They reach the door and
pile up. They look in
the windows.
The cat paces.
The sills, the eaves
creak under their weight.
The door handle rattles.

All winter, waiting,
it was different, looking through
the frosted window.
And you only wanted a
sign, you think, as they drive
away, soaring in the Toyota.
They are in your recliner
and your refrigerator,
eating--chicken salad?

They aren't at all like
you remember, imagined.
And you stand in what space
they'll give you, holding
the cat, who claws your shoulder.
Propped on feather elbows,
they read *The Journal* on your floor,
control the remote, the radio.
They drink from the stool.
Careless, they break
the spines of new books,
spit on the floor.
Why do they want to turn on the stove?

Make your way to the window.
There's not a wooly-worm in sight.

A NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF BERT CLARK

Like a mother who searches all night
for the dog who bit her child,
a sweet child, one undeserving to die,
to get some hair to bind the wound
before it goes sour, Bert Clark
looks all morning, moving across
the empty sidewalks like wind blown
wrappers, peering into the windows
of bars and grills for his best girl,
who stormed from the party only
to get lost among the tall buildings
of a strange city. She ruined
him again and he knows it, giving it
to him there like that, in front
of all his best new friends,
and now he is lost too, unfamiliar
with the streets, unfamiliar with her,
unable to figure where she might go,
a slight waking hangover spreading
across his brow. Soon, he thinks,
people will come to work, soon,
when the street lights go out,
she'll be able to make her way
to the airport incognito, too soon,

he thinks, because he has to find her
even though he hates her now.

A MAN EXPLAINS HIS POSTURE

At first the voices were sudden,
like a distant marching band,
baseball crowd noises, an untuned radio.
Soon, as they cleared, I began to talk back.

I must have learned from them, but
can't remember. We had brief, but
valuable, conversations about far
away marshes, thick skies, light clouds.
And sometimes they teased:

*so this duck walks into a bar
with a woman on a leash.*

I would hold my fist to the sky, wish them
bad weather, hope to see them on
the ground.

They laughed *no way, no way, no way*
at me, a victim of gravity, a man
with leaves to rake. That was no way
to treat a friend. That hurt.

I flashed my B-B gun.
Let the cat go outside.

And discourse, of course, has gone to hell.
Now they give me only

a dee, a chupity, nothing, fading.

But I'll give them no tears.

I give them only a man

who won't look up.

TAXPAYER LOOKS AT THE NIGHT SKY

Honey, you've got to see this.

Can't be heat lightening.

Not at this time of year.

Must be weather balloons.

Lots of them.

What a mess.

This you've got to see.

Someone's in big trouble.

How did they all get away,

I wonder. From Dallas, I bet.

Somebody's gone and burned their

own butt good. And ours.

They'll hear about this.

I wonder if they'll get them all back.

If they care.

I wonder how much all this is

is going to cost us.

JESS

Well, Lillie, she's just a snoring
and a snoring, when the whole room
fills up with lights, all colors,
purple even, and so I jumps up
and I runs to the window, and there
it is, all lights, and I says Lillie
look, they's the goddamn bastards
been taking my cows, they's the goddamn
thang a making circles in the field.
They's here, right now, right now,
gets yous sorry ass out the bed and
see here and best calls the sheriff
quick, cause I knows they a taking
something again, with all them lights,
they must be a looking hard, goddamn
cattle rustling bastards, and her sorry
fat ass just a rolls over and she grunts
and they's right here, right out the window,
and I got them this time, right out there,
and I says Lillie, where's the shells
for the .410, where's the goddamn shells,
cause I always knows where the gun is
but she's always moving the goddamn shells,
so I says real loud where is they,
where is they and I runs back over to

the bed and grabs her fat ass and shakes
her fat ass and says where is they, again,
the bastards is right out side, tearing
up the fields again and taking lord
knows what and she sits up and slaps me
for no good reason, just sits right up
and a slaps me and by then they's gone,
plain vanished, got aways with lord knows
what, and I says goddamn Lillie, couldn't
you a helped, and she rolls over on her side,
just rolls over, and won't look at me
or say nothing, and all the lights is gone,
so I guess to go see what they done,
and I could a had them this time, goddamn it.
I could a had them this time.

THE DOG TOUCHES A SORE SPOT

--for Bert

You, yellow dog, cannot,
and never will, drive.
You will never fly a kite.
You, I'm afraid, will never know the orange grass
of the wide-open where wind always blows
and birds never land.

You are a dog of the city,
at home with cars but not boats,
concrete, not creeks,
yet you will never parallel park,
never have your own apartment.

Why do you smile so?
Remember you came from the alley
on a dark fall night, alone,
a pup, starving and beaten, cold.

Remember? And remember us?
How we drank wine on the table you cowered under,
whining like the pup you were,
while we sparked above,
new friends, new lovers, looking at the lights

of the tall city across the way
as they reflected in the river.

A city dog who will never bury a bone.

A dog of the streets.

A dog who knew what he wanted
as you followed us to the car.

And you came on home, ate everything,
floors, doors, books and albums.

You were at home. Still are.

And you were right all along:
She's gone.

Why do you always have to bring that up?
What are you driving at?

Oh, keep far hence, you little shit.
Sniff me out some wine.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF BERT CLARK

Bert Clark rides tall
in the saddle, tall, all right,
on his brand new mower
looking for ways to control
it all, even the grass and
the mating of crickets. Good
luck, Bert, good luck.

Bert shampoos and shaves,
looks at the flecks in his eyes
in the mirror and asks
How many times have I done this?

Bert puts on his tuxedo
slowly and smokes
a cigarette after each
successful accessory. He looks
nice, this Bert Clark, sure
looks nice.

I am not so short, Bert Clark
says, looking at himself in
the meat shop's window, when
the superimposed knife slashes down
from the other side of the glass,

showing the light just as it
passes through his imaged head.

Bert slips and slaps his best
girl's face so hard she
reels. Don't you feel bad,
Bert? Don't you? And she's
all dressed up, too.

Bert goes home
to put his feet up,
indeed he sits all
night in his undewear,
listens to piano music
and drinks some very
cold drinks of beer.
That's nicer, Bert Clark,
much nicer.

BERT CLARK BOUNCES BACK

Well, you've done it now, Bert.

Just a slip, you say,

in a city far away, and all in front

of people who don't understand you anyway.

Just a slip, but now what do you do?

No job, so you play.

What ARE you doing?

Going to see the second best,

driving forty through thick fog, hungover?

And aren't you just like this drizzle?

Too much without the wipers, too little with.

Admit it. Your head, like your headlights, burns.

And what else? In two-hundred miles,

you will meet your second best in a motel.

But you think only of sleep, maybe a shower to relax,
arriving long after dark.

Rub your temples. Go ahead, Bert, wonder what
will be on T.V.

And doesn't it all seem just a little too familiar?

Don't you remember, Bert, don't you?

Once you drove eighty miles through snow

swirling on the road, to a motel

to meet your teacher,

to lose your virginity in a town where

no one would know you.

Don't you remember how, with reservations made,

you lied to your parents and crept

at forty miles-per-hour to what you

could only imagine, balls burning?

Remember how the room was too crowded,

and you got there too early, and how alone

you paced as best you could around the furniture,

watched T.V. and drank yourself impotent?

Even the hottest of showers couldn't bring you back.

Come on, Bert, think about it.

Nothing can bring you back.

It's early. Why not just stop here,

take a nap? Maybe get some tomato juice?

Go on, Bert, and forget about that vodka.

Go on, Bert, it's all over now.

Come on. Don't cry all over her.

Stop here. Get some champagne.

WORKING IT OUT

As I soak my feet,
four ducks sleep
on the opposite edge
of the pond, heads drawn
down like turtles.
Behind, stone protects
them from the wind and
the autumn sky. Above,
shedding trees,
grey cracked with white.
An iridescent hen rises,
stirs and looks,
floats into the water
like a leaf, like
white wisps of cloud reflected.
She is swept toward
the island beyond the fountain,
and how could anyone
help but follow?
She comes by close,
swims right up to me,
then tips, head under,
white duck butt pointing
to the sky with dancing
duck feet, saying once,

*half drunk, you swam across
this pond at midnight,
the long way. I saw you.*
Her feet fold in and
she bobs back, shining.
She looks at me and
suddenly I feel the cold water
dangle up my ankles, saying
it's time to go.
*You have been too clumsy for her
up to now. We've all seen you.*
I believe they're right.
I wonder if I've every really
known who she is.
I'll take the long way home,
dawdling through the grey fields.

WADING

Man, you should be here
in this bay we've found,
sheltered from the wind,
we stand, the four of us,
waist deep, wiggling our toes
in the mud, swaying with tiny waves,
laughing and burning,
tripping to the cooler.

Here, we piss when we want,
casually, unnoticed,
except for Dick,
who always holds his arms up
and out, like a tight-rope walker
or a martyr.
We don't let on we know what he does.

Yes, you should be here, now,
instead of closed-in, curtains
drawn, sitting on the high bed
in your motel room of an apartment,
thinking always about
wading in that ultimate deep green lake
where your toes tell you
you're feeling nothing.

Face it. She's not coming back.

12 - 2
Come on. You ought to be
out of that water and into ours--
shallow but still green--
light green that makes us
lighter just by standing here.

Okay, so we're hot and little drunk,
and you're probably tired
of tired metaphors.

It's probably time to go back
to shore for a while. It's time.

But get this:

Dick wants to stay on
a while longer, deeper now,
chest deep, so he can float his arms
straight out always, smiling,
and turning in circles.

PART III
THE NEW GARDEN

THINGS TO DO ON SPRING BREAK

You are five young people
camping on the Cimarron River,
looking up at long cottonwoods and
listening to frogs.

You find your self, while cooking beans
over a driftwood fire in a sand pit,
in the midst of animal-like pioneers.
You are a genetic experiment gone out of control.
You do not bathe.
You eat raw meat.

You are a group of young vigilantes,
searching the dry plains
for the notorious outlaw
who has fallen in love
with the sole survivor
of the train his gang robbed.

Yes, you killed them all except her,
then scooped her up and
slung her over the horse like
a cadaver, and carried her away.

You live in gullies now.

You are the cowboy who,
finding a ranger dying of wounds
sustained in an ambush,
assumes his identity to save
your daughter from kidnapping.

You are the daughter.
How do you like that?

By now, of course, you've
given it all up, except the identity,
and do what you can to keep
your mind clear.

And as a ranger in the territories
you do what you can
to help us all:
You team up with preachers and gamblers.
You hunt down deserters.
You solve the mystery behind
lynched card players.

You even come to the aid of
that notorious madam of the Bar XXX.
You deal in sexual insecurities and deviations.
What have you done?
You are in trouble;

the profiteers are slaughtering your horses.
Criminals are instigating a range war
between you and the wheat farmers
to cover their tracks.

You are the one with a conscience,
you stall the Indians from
going on the warpath because
of the rustlers.
Then you lead troops into
their quiet camp,
into an ignoble battle with the tribe.
You slaughter them all.
They are helpless.
You are helpless.
We are all helpless.

But you can't call a stop to it all.
Even when you retreat, call time out
for R and R and arrive back
at the Bar XXX
and eye the greasy bottoms,
you guessed it:
there she is, your long-lost daughter.
Don't you wish you would have
rolled her over
and looked at her face first?

Don't you know you are her?

Don't you think it's time you went home?

SLEEPING ON MY SIDE

I lie still listening to my wife
snore, the soft crescendos building
then ebbing away. I smile because
she hasn't slept well lately,
hasn't slept much at all because she
doesn't when I'm out, and I've been
out a lot, too much.

At least I'm not my father, I say,
at least I don't just disappear.

I hear myself snore sometimes and wonder
at it, my dreams dancing.

Other times, I wake myself up
with a sudden ripping snort. What was that,
I ask, because it always wakes her too.
Sometimes she's already awake.
You weren't breathing, she says,
Sometimes I feel better when you snore.

If I drink a lot, I snore a lot
and sometimes I drive her from the room
with noise. Lately, she's kept
a sleeping bag rolled out in the study,
always ready. So lately, I've taken
to not coming to bed at all,

hoping she can get some rest.

I can't sleep when you do that either,
she says, and besides I hear you
watching T.V. I hear you laughing to yourself.

Richard, the shy stutterer who worked for my dad,
sat with me at the table, after the funeral,
picking at a ham, and explained to me how it happened.
He d-didn't feel w-well,
he said, so he t-took an alka-s-seltzer
and he lay d-down. He was s-snoring l-loud
and w-we l-let him sleep. An hour later, o-only
an hour, he was d-dead,
and there was n-nothing, n-nothing I could d-do.
I know, I said, and wept with him,
watching his lips and throat.

When it's late, and I'm watching T.V.,
the dog forgets the rules,
climbs up on the couch,
fifteen, and weak.

Once there, though, he snores
dog snores, as loud as a human,
as loud as my wife at least,
and I'm happy I can hear him.

At least I know he's still alive, I say
to myself, and this is the perfect way to tell.

In the dark like this, it's hard for me
to see if he's still breathing,
a habit I've gotten into lately,
checking him always,
a habit that scares and disgusts me.

Deb is sleeping well, I think,
and I'm still smiling after all this.
I have to get up now, though. I'm awake,
and I want coffee. If I stay here longer,
I'll bother her.

As I slip out of bed as easily as I can,
she shifts just a bit, and the snoring stops.
I wait for a second at the door,
looking back through the early light
to check on I don't know what.
It looks to me, from where I'm standing
and in this light, that she's smiling too.

AFTER EARTH, AIR, AND WATER

I dress sitting down, sprawling,
the sun searing through the orange walls
of the tent, the mummy bag so hot,
the ceiling so close time itself is on fire.

She is outside already,
stirring last night's ashes, exposing
the coals and a stack of new wood while
the sun brushes her not quite yellow,
not quite red hair smooth and everything
shines like the shining coffee pot.

Deb loves to tend the fire.

At night it's tall and she is at her tallest.
Rising, the cinders reverse our stares
from earth to air. We watch
the insects fly in, feel them burn,
while the silence around us pops and crackles,
spits sparks and resin.
We are silhouette, but from the shadows
her eyes sparkle. Her eyes:
fire, the flames, and the flames' fire.
The glow of my cigarette and emotion
are nothing here.

CHRISTMAS POEM

FOR NEIL

The tree, white lights and more--
red, green, blue, steady, unblinking--
casts a shadow of unusual shades
and shapes on the ceiling,
though nothing is recognizable:
no faces of dogs or crocodiles,
funny men or birds in flight.

I'm up early, three o'clock,
thinking of you. Where is Springfield,
anyway? You are not yourself, old love,
and that makes me not me.

I cannot picture you in your strange new
life, no matter how hard I look.

I think of staying up all night
drinking tomato juice and beer.
When the fire is gone, we can see
the sky more than ever before,
clear through the purple to the stars.
We lie flat on our backs in the damp
grass with cans on our bellies and talk
about being here, hurling through time
and lost loves like planets as fast

as the stars that spin around that
slice of moon. No clouds get in our way.

Tell me about it: dippers and Pleiades,
the ones I loved and the ones I snubbed
and all the times I promised myself
I'd never forget.

What about the one-armed prostitute in Wichita
at the Evergreen, leaning against the shuffleboard?
What about sitting in the old red car for hours,
running in for beer and the bathroom while
giant moths hung on the streetlights
and the purple mirror of bar window,
banging their brains out trying to get in?

When I laugh at the colliding stars
of ceiling shapes tonight I recognize
that same old shuffling laugh.

I know the cityscape is beautiful there,
but I will phone, thinking you must come visit.
Bring that special electricity that makes
lights blink, shifts shadows,
that puts our shapes into patterns
I can find and feel good about.

More than ever I need a face I can touch.

How about yours, laughing?

THE BAIT-SELLER GIVES ADVICE

Never seen you here before.
No sir, and you won't catch
no fish here, no, not with
those puny worms. Sunfish.
You need them about this long,
yes sir, get them with jigs
by the rocks where the creek
empties. Hook them through
the back. Yes. Yes sir, and
use a thick line. Chain the
poles to the ground, or better
yet, tie the line off to the
trailer hitch. You got a trailer
hitch, don't you. Yes sir.
When the big one hits, you pull
it close in with the truck, then,
and set your brake, block the
wheels with stones. And ride it,
ride that fish, yes sir, all four
of you. Ride it until it tires.
Net it with a blanket. But if
it's too big, you cut it loose
and try again. And be careful,
you can't be too careful. Didn't
you see this leg? Yes sir. You just

cut it loose and good luck.

And you'll want this, you, blondie,
this, so your nose won't burn.

THELMA SEES THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Oh, Earl should a been there.
He never would a believed it.
No sir. Never. He never did believe
like I did. Him and that damn dog
of his never had no idea. No sir.
Smoked too much, you know, and I
told him, but he wouldn't listen,
no sir, not to old Thelma.
Never had no idea. Not that dog neither.
Not one. But if he'd a been there
he would a believed, yes sir.
He would a had to.
Right there in the sky out back,
big as Dallas.
Yes sir. Been to Dallas with Earl,
you know. Twice. And it was big and beautiful
at night, and it was just like that,
only hanging in the sky. And I knew
right away it was them. Yes sir.
It was them and they was inside,
big and beautiful I bet too.
And big-eyed and friendly. Like a puppy.
And if he could a seen it he would a believed
they was in there too. He would a had to,
cause there ain't no denyng when it's right there

in front of you. Shining and hanging.
Like going to town. So you could almost
touch it, yes sir, just reach out
into that sky and touch it. Then you
would a had to believed, and Earl
would a had to too. He would a had to listen then.
Cause seein is believin.
If he was only here,
yes sir, he would a had to listen
and he would a had
to make that dog sit right down
and listen for once too.

OCCASIONAL

FOR DEB

I remember that first place, rented
only for its arching window, wooden,
and the price--"half off:

you fix"--deep in the student
ghetto, the fringe of a real ghetto.
That heavy window

seems tiny now. And how we cleaned!
Bones from the bathroom, mold
in the tub, sinks, tiles, with thick

brown tap water. A month out of
our longest summer spent spackling
cracks, peeling paper, sponging drywall

designs over it all, to hide the scars.
I still feel sweat and music
in the ceiling's holes, in August

when building a home from scratch and the
blisters from the long-handled rollers
meant getting drunk everyday, and sloppy

and running to the hardware for supplies.
Stripping the trim, revealing the wood,
sanding, staining, polishing it all

and especially that window. I dreamed
it every night full of plants, the greenest,
fullest we could find. Finally the floors,

the gouged hardwood, the big rented machine.
The cellar took a day, and after
we emptied it into the yard--

the canvas, string, paint and jars--
after we imagined our predecessors,
hippies eating chicken from the bucket,

remember how we lay down on
the cool concrete and laughed
at ourselves and the heat, untied

my hair and held hands, too tired for much,
and stared straight up, talking to the
musty air.

It's more than ten years now. Believe it.
Ten! and I, my hair cut short, surrounded
by boxes and alone, think of you 400

miles away, gone ahead to paint the new
place, our twelfth. I think of you,
your hair long now, tied back, making

cosmetic changes only, a color
you prefer with the carpet and appliances,
painting happily, carefully. I wait

on help to load the truck, friends from a town
we left years ago, and think of how easy
it's become, our fixing of things,

our moving along. I look out the simple window
into the thick of July. I'm drinking; there's
no sweat now and nothing sticks to us.

WAITING ON THE CALL

Today, I wear my father's jeans,
and as the sun slips down,
I try his oversized flannel.
They are not quite right,
a little too big around the middle,
a little too short, too flaired,
though close enough to camp in,
and comfortable.

She has finally begun giving it to me
a piece at a time, some socks,
some shirts, a jacket, her way of cleaning house
without losing it for good,
without seeing where it goes.

For five years, for luck,
she never went through the closets.
She left it all, the shoes and suits,
so all his best would stay that way,
in case one day he strolled back in, smiling.
Oh, Bill, she would say, surprised by
the disapproval in her voice
over so long an absence;
a five-year binge perhaps,
as if all she really had to do was call the bar

and tell him to get home.

At any rate, she wouldn't want him
to have to go naked.

And this wearing the clothes of the dead
didn't bring the bad luck she expected:
I've caught fish enough for dinner,
found wood enough for a fine fire,
all before sunset, and all without pain.

At night though, this is a different place.
I stand at the end of the dock and look out.
The pale lantern hisses to the shadows
and they hiss back. Coves have no endings.
Timber bones up.

The lantern reflects a false surface,
a mirage high above the water.
Bubbles rise slowly into it, into mid-air.
My bobber hangs between the two,
and even the dock floats hazily.

I stare into the illusion and call the couple
who are in every lake,
who, drowned on the honeymoon,
call to each other forever,
wailing when the wind slaps whitecaps

against the rocks, flinging spray.
But there's no response, no wind tonight
in these deep firefly filled woods.
But the bobber, jabbed in the ribs,
dances and slips beneath, between false and real.

And for some reason,
I wish I could call her right now.

I would slip into his voice and say I'm glad
it's getting better, glad these things are good
and are put to use.

I'd tell her how I miss her,
and how I'll see her again soon,
that nothing, really, holds us apart.
Save a few things, I'd say,
save the ones you know I'll need.

Then I'd hang up without saying good-bye.

THE SOON TO BE IMMORTAL TALKS TO HIMSELF

I have given it all away except hope:
the house, the clothes, the furniture,
the mementos, the incense. It's a long
journey. I'm pointing toward heaven
and they're waiting.

I'm ready.

I'm as light as pine needles:
After three years of only the needles--
no rice, no wheat, no quail, no fish--I
am very light. As light as
I can be.

And here I stand, the rocks
of this spur pricking my feet for
the last time. Below me all the faces
who come to see, laughing, believing.
Above, swirling blue like the robes I'll wear
when I arrive like a swan.

Below me, only the faces.

SONG OF YOURSELF

FOR OKLAHOMA

When the lonely man called Okie
stepped from the shower that day,
dripping and weeping into his towel,
thinking of government auctions
and how he could make it big
despite the slow and uneven
economic recovery, an assassination
took place in Iran.
But this is not about that.
Has nothing to do with.

What really happened really.
Listen up. Tell you.
It has nothing to do with jeeps.
This is not your average sacrifice fly.
This is the story of my life.

The sane man would ask
why hasn't anything happened yet?

So, if you're saying, what is this,
if you're saying this is a story without images,
if you're saying this is a story without
a single reference to nature,

if you're saying that
while I sit here making this
a mother dies in childbirth,
a child dies in a drought
and ear of corn pulls back
from the husk.

These are not my problems.

Get this:

good.

Once, on vacation,
on a road that wasn't a road,
on a road that was a mountain,
the tighter I gripped the wheel,
the worse my wife gritted her teeth,
the more, all the more,
things happened.

It's not as if we weren't really there;
it's not as if we didn't care.

Are you sensing the density and gravity
of this yet?

Is this the shadow of the world?

No way. This is the shadow's shadow.

Why do you keep asking all these questions?

In the time when I was born

lived a man

who sailed the sea.

Wait. That's not my song.

This is my song.

I've never rolled naked in the sun

by a brook.

It doesn't appeal to me.

Here's how it really happened:

Just outside the shower,

the world is without a sense of closure.

Okay, okay. You're just beginning

to dry off now.

And each drop, each drip, says this:

I'm very independent. I'm an individual.

This is what I reflect of an always ongoing world.

A woman steps out of the tall grass

and cactus, sending all the pale animals running.

You are meeting her behind the barn.

She wears only a tee-shirt.

She snaps her fingers to a beat you can't

find, not in the sun, not in poems.

Her name is Melody.

You've seen her before,

long and tan, long and bare,
down by the bridge,
behind the mill,
behind this barn.

You have known her father for years,
a man who could never carry a tune.
You have known her, too, and
her toes to point toward stars without names.

Is this what you like to think about?
Is this the way you like it to go?

Hey, you, settle down.
Have a damp towel, why don't you.
Wipe your brow.
This is what you asked for.
Who is you?
You is me.
You is the main character here.
Have at it.

So this woman, my wife, is disengaged
from everything because, as you see,
I'm driving, and I've been drinking,
and vehicles like this, on roads like this,
have a propensity to roll over.
What does you think about that?

You is just as disengaged as she is,
as I am. We are all very scared.

When I was in high school, some guys
in sweat suits killed some Jews in Germany.

When I was in high-school
I loved a woman with long black hair
and long dark legs.

When I was in high-school, I drove fast
and drank too much.

We were all very scared.

Things were happening.

In those days, we really didn't reflect.

In those days, it seems we were all
always waiting for the towel.

What? This is my life, remember.

This is your life.

This is.

Okay, so I'm a little disengaged.

So, is this a viable alternate reality?

Does this work for you?

How about:

I am the single bead who has

seen the men from the moon.

This is what I saw when I saw you.

This is what I saw when I was you.

BRIGHT LIGHTS!

Isn't that what you saw?

Isn't that what it was like?

Remember that first moonlit night

when you first saw the light

and were too afraid to run

or even scream? Remember?

Isn't that just what it was like

when you were them?

I am the shining bead on your butt.

I'm just reflecting.

It's not me.

Get the towel and prove it.

But that, Oklahoma, was now

and this is then.

You are your wife.

You are your childhood friend.

You are an architect.

You analyse computers.

You are me.

Happy Birthday, Oklahoma.

Happy Birthday to me.

I guessed the rest:

an oil rush and ensuing riot.

Happy days!

And after all that I have the nerve

to wonder why once,

at the Turner Tollgate in Tulsa

when my waterpump fell off,

green antifreeze glowing,

no one would stop.

You probably noticed no one noticed.

Well, it seems a fired worker

shot ten postal employees;

living together may cause divorce;

vandalism is rising;

help and food are needed;

a serial rapist is loose;

your senator is dead;

your senator is in jail;

there's a new strain of TB;

everyone has AIDS;

people want a new economy;

people want a new government;

the new government wants

a new government
stance on the economy;
the hostages are free;
the hostages are dead;
the market is slipping;
nerve gas is leaking;
and we all, we all, we all
are licking ourselves.

Selfish me.

It seems I've slept with my sister.
It seems I have to sue my doctor
because I can't pay his bill;
the dead sea scrolls have told all this;
my space station is for sale;
I've broken my leg 34 times in 15 years;
I can do anything a normal person can do--
and some things even better;
I've battled Satan 7000 times;
I swallowed a shot glass and survived;
I believe in public execution;
I ask for favors well.

Selfish you.

You want to be buried in my coffin.

You want to change your sex in peace;
you want to live forever;
you want to save the chickens;
you want an African bride;
you want to suck your sister's tongue;
you want to give your dying daughter
your liver;

or was that me?

I'm probably wondering what all this has to do...
I'm probably wondering why all this
is lacking a little loveliness.

You fix my own damn waterpump.
You are the drop of water on my butt.

It seems you are my wife
and finish all my sentences for me!
It seems like it's the end of our era.
It seems when we cut our gasoline station
in two and hauled it a half mile by mule
to where it is now we really had no idea.
The price of wood has gone up.
Hides are harder and harder to sell.

We should have signed that oil company

contract, you know.

We should have got us a right-hand arm.

We should have let them call us at home.

We should have delivered our gas and wood to those stranded.

We should have had full-service,
washing it inside and out.

We should have driven the bean hands to the field.

We should have realized early
that all we had to sell
was right here.

It seems we didn't.

And you're probably wondering what all this has to do...

You're here to tell me that

I am you and he is she,
and they are we, and we're
all here together.

In the shower. Or just getting out.

Don't tell me you're lonely.

Don't tell me that's not your name.

Don't tell me you're not on vacation.

Don't tell me you're not my wife and
that you don't hate my driving.

Fess up, pardner.

Don't tell me this all isn't serious.

Don't tell me it's not funny anymore.

Remember who I am. Who you is.

Catching a glint? Thinking about it?

Reflecting some, yourself, are you?

And of course, of course, you're right.

We're making this all up, right now, right here,

your poem.

VITA^r

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