THE INSTITUTE OF LIVING

By

PHILIP MICHAEL PARADIS II

Bachelor of Arts
Central Connecticut State University
New Britain, Connecticut
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Master of Arts
University of Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah
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PREFACE

I thank all of those who have offered their support and encouragement to me over the last four years here in the English Department at Oklahoma State University. I especially wish to thank Dr. Gordon Weaver for his willingness to share his literary expertise and for his sage advice. I thank Dr. Terry Hummer for his generosity, for his expert criticism, his professional guidance, and for his friendship. I am grateful also to Dr. Edward Walkiewicz, Dr. Leonard Leff, and Dr. John Schweitzer for their constructive criticism and guidance. Similarly, I thank Dr. William Baker for his professionalism. And finally, I thank Marjorie, my wife, for her encouragement, support, and endurance.

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POEMS

INTRODUCTION

Educated readers of poetry these days are particularly sophisticated and hard to please. So much has already been done and done well, and they have been exposed to so much good and great poetry, that the contemporary writer, when asked to address his public, becomes suddenly humbled if he has not already become so in the act of adjusting to "the burden of the past" as it has come to be known by some. Comparing his own efforts with those of past masters, he faces the inadequacies of his own efforts. The awkwardness of his position is further intensified when he is asked to introduce or comment upon his work, for he has been taught to believe that the work should be able to stand on its own merits and that anything he might say about it may be held suspect by a reading public previously alerted to the dangers inherent in the conflict of interest which arises when an author is given the opportunity to discuss art, aesthetics, and his own work.

Having thus warned or reminded my reader to be on his guard, I will proceed to briefly discuss poetics, poetic influences, and techniques used in the poems which follow. But before I begin discussing poetics, I wish to say a few words about the poems collected in this manuscript.

The poems collected here were written over a period of several years. A few of them are early poems; however, most were written within the last four years. All have been reworked, and some, no doubt, will be revised further. The collection is a representative sampling of my poetry, although emphasis has been placed on the more serious work, thereby excluding some lighter pieces.

The title The Institute of Living comes from the poem "Passing Asylum Avenue" and has an obvious metaphorical significance. The image is reminiscent of John Keats' idea that life is like a mansion of many chambers and that as we live life, we move from one room or realm of experience to another, and each is different from the last.[1] It was my intent to guide my reader along through The Institute of Living by an arrangement of poems which would permit the reader to experience as wide a variety of experiences as my poems allow and which would also provide the reader with a progressive reading experience. The poems in part one deal with childhood and with learning about the world. The poems in part two are more complicated and deal with art, imagination, guilt, ritual, and mortality. Those in the last section deal with some of those same themes as well as with love, beauty, and communion.

Whether there is discernible from this collection a recognizable style, voice, or vision, I leave for my reader to decide.

Poetics

"Poetics" in the tradition of aesthetic or Romantic criticism refers to a descriptive and philosophical statement not a prescriptive and regulative one.[2] In this section, it is this definition of the term that I wish to keep in the foreground. My statements are intended to describe and define an ideal that I aim at.

One way to begin discussing poetics is to quote Robert Frost's comments concerning the dramatic element implicit in any piece of good writing. He said, "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing."[3] The word "dramatic," as Frost uses it here, means "characteristic of, or appropriate to, the drama; often connoting animated action or striking presentation."[4] And when he says, "it is drama or nothing," his use of "drama" refers to "a series of actions or course of events having a unity and leading to a final catastrophe or consummation."[5] His comment suggests that he has noted an inherent dynamic quality common to various types of good writing; and in fact, Frost makes it clear in the rest of the preface that "everything written" includes lyric poems and essays, too. He literally meant every kind of written discourse.

Ten years later in 1939, Frost expanded on his earlier comment. Describing poetic structure, he said,

> It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to

> tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same for love. No one can really hold that ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement.[6]

By referring to the "denouement," Frost indicates his perception of the poem as a dramatic structure with action, conflict, and resolution. I assume that when Frost says, "it runs a course of lucky events," he is referring to what happens after exposition: complication results when conflict is encountered and tension is generated until eventually overcome. Frost, of course, was not the only one to link poetic structure with drama. The New Critics, among them John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, also connected poetry with drama.

Ransom, to make a point, went so far as to call poems "little dramas, exhibiting actions in complete settings."[7] He qualified his overstatement by saying,

> Poetry is not literally drama. . . But histori-

> cally and logically it looks like a derivative of drama. It maintains faithfully certain dramatic features. The poet does not speak in his own but in an assumed character, and not in the actual but in an assumed situation, and the first thing we do as readers of poetry is to determine precisely what character and what situation are assumed. In this examination lies the possibility of critical understanding and at the same time of the illusion and the enjoyment.[8]

Ransom further explains that the poet dons mask and costume to fit his role in the dramatic situation of the poem.[9] Robert Penn Warren, speaking theoretically of the poem's structure, says that it is "a dramatic structure, a movement through action toward rest, through complication toward simplicity of effect."[10] The poem, which he says, "involves resistances" and "tension," he defines as "a motion toward a point of rest."[11]

To sum up then, Frost and Warren concern themselves with poetic structure: the poem's action entails conflict, complication, tension, and resolution or denouement; whereas Ransom is concerned with the dramatis persona of the narrator and with the dramatic/rhetorical situation inherent in each poem. Frost and Ransom are describing the structure of an ideal poem. They describe

the type of poem that they are interested in and are drawn to.

I, too, like poems with dramatic structure. Who does not? Dramatic structure can be simultaneously effective and affective. It is so close to the natural rhythms of daily life that we may almost instinctively react favorably to it. Conflict, tension, complication, climax, resolution, relaxation: we know it well. We can relate to that rhythm and easily identify ourselves with protagonists the least bit like ourselves if they are involved in such action. We sympathize with them, for their condition is the same as ours. We, too, find ourselves at times frustrated or stymied, and at other times, overcoming obstacles and progressing onward. The rhythm is true to life and the action of our minds. If we are not cynical or convinced that we know it all, if we are open to the possibilities of life, we are often surprised to find that we are always learning something new about ourselves, others, or our work and that our enlightenment always entails a psychic movement from point A to point C by means of point B. In terms nineteenth century writers would have approved of, we move from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. A line from William Blake, himself a nineteenth-century poet, neatly sums up this dialectic: "Without Contraries is no progression."[12]

Many good poems have a dramatic structure with a clearly perceivable conflict. The persona of William Stafford's "Traveling Through The Dark" is torn between pragmatism and his wish to be able to save the unborn fawn within the body of its dead mother:

> Beside that mountain road I hesitated.
>
> The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
> under the hood purred the steady engine.
> I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning
> red;
> around our group I could hear the wilderness
> listen.
>
> I thought hard for us all--my only swerving--,
> then pushed her over the edge into the river.[13]

Stafford heightens the drama of the situation by devoting a stanza to describing the setting and the heightened perception that accompanies the crisis. The last line contains the resolution; he acts pragmatically.

However, some poems that do not have an overtly dramatic structure as Stafford's poem does do have a depth or complexity to them that results in another kind of dramatic effect. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Eagle" is a short descriptive poem that is dramatic despite its brevity:

> He clasps the crag with crooked hands;

Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.[14]

The first five lines describe the eagle's surroundings and the eagle as he sits motionless. The description is relatively static until the final image which forcefully describes how he dives from his perch. We have a description of motionlessness in stanza one and a description of swift and sudden motion in stanza two. The two stanzas are antithetical; however, together they present a dynamic and detailed portrait of the eagle: we know how it perches, where it perches, what it does there, and how it dives after prey. Though both stanzas present descriptive details, each stanza is different, and together one after the other, they have a cumulative effect. Just as two photographs of the same scene produce a three-dimensional scene when viewed in a stereoscope, the two stanzas together give us slightly different views of the eagle. The poem itself is a miniature drama in which the static description of the first four lines suddenly comes to life with the simile "like a thunderbolt he falls."

Tennyson's poem has a depth or a three-dimensional quality to it because his techniques achieve effects de-

pendent upon striking and forceful presentation. The juxtapositioning or contrasting of balanced and opposite stanzas achieves this artistic effect.

Just as Stafford's narrator moves from pragmatic impulse (thesis) to impractical desire to help the fawn (antithesis) to pushing the dead doe into the river (synthesis), Tennyson's poem contains description of motionlessness (thesis) and description of sudden motion (antithesis). The reader must provide the resolution (synthesis) for Tennyson's poem, but that is because in his poem the dramatic effect is a result of striking presentation of detail rather than of human action involving conflict and resolution as is the case in Stafford's poem. Both of these poems embody dramatic elements; they are types of poems that I like because they impress me and because they are inherently dynamic forms expressive of human intelligence and emotion. They are two types of poems that I try to emulate in my own writing.

Influences

Some scholars spend much time trying to determine who influenced whom and when. Influence tracing can meet with limited success at best. Everyone is influenced in one way or another by everything that impresses him. I know that I have been influenced by poems and books that I have read and that for every poem or poet that I can name as having an influence upon me, there may be others who have been

equally influential, whose influence upon my writing I am not yet aware of. However, the first poems I read with pleasure were Edgar Allan Poe's haunting lyrics, Walt Whitman's longer poems, and E. E. Cummings' witty poems. Later, I discovered the nature poems of William Everson and Gary Snyder, the magical poems of James Dickey, the dramatic narratives of Robert Frost, the imagistic poems of William Carlos Williams, and the music and emotional power of some of Dylan Thomas's lyrics. Still later, when I embarked upon a more systematic study of literature, I gained an appreciation for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's golden handful of poems, his conversation poems, for some of William Wordsworth's poetry, for the odes, sonnets, and letters of John Keats, for the dramatic lyrics of John Donne, the dramatic monologues of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, William Butler Yeats' poetry, Theodore Roethke's, Robert Lowell's, James Wright's, Richard Hugo's, William Stafford's, and Louis Simpson's. All of these poets have written poems I admire.

Others with a more objective point of view than mine would be better able to tell how my writing has been influenced by these poets and others. Nevertheless, generally speaking, I can say that many of my poems are written in the plain style and in a manner not unlike much of the poetry of James Wright and Louis Simpson. The emphasis is upon the simple declarative statement. And most of my poems, like most of those written today by most modern

American poets, are written in non-traditional verse forms.

Within the collection, there are poems of various kinds. There are dramatic monologues: "Fast Eddy Wakes Up To A Warbler," "Clown To His Audience," "Apprentice Gazing Upon Cellini's Saltcellar," and "Altar Boy's Confession." There are elegies similar to Robert Lowell's in Life Studies: "Smoke Rings," "To C.P. From Ferrante's Bar & Grill," "The Last Time," and "Why Thirteen Xerox Copies Of 'October Ghosts' Lie On The Floor Of Bill's Copy Shop." "Night Wish To Elizabeth" is a conversation poem. "Sequoia Grove," "Above Timberline," and "Reclaiming Wetland: Near The Mouth Of The Connecticut" are similar to Gary Snyder's and Brendan Galvin's descriptive yet dramatic sketches of flora and fauna of specific places. In the following section, I will discuss some of the techniques used in the poems.

Technique

One of the ways poets can reconcile themselves to the burden of the past, of course, is to accept tradition and build upon it. The poet builds new art from what he selects among the ruins. He finds "what will suffice" and transforms it into a new creation.[15] One way to do this is to make use of allusions to poems, stories, legends. In "Dust Storm," I allude to the story of Genesis in the Bible with an echo of biblical language: "sons of Adam,/we are clay." The memory of Sunday School days leads to the

remembering of biblical language and the elemental metaphor which serves as a reminder of our mortality. The dust storm itself literally serves as a reminder to us that we are at the mercy of large forces beyond our control. The literal and figurative reminders work together to give the poem a kind of depth and authority which it would not otherwise have without the biblical allusion. Similarly, "Sequoia Grove" contains allusions to the biblical story of Samson and to Paul Bunyan, a hero of folk legends:

> Rising from legend
> greater than any folk-hero
> lumberjack we grew up with,
> they are pillars
> no legendary strong-arm
> could budge.

The allusions are used to help describe the giant sequoias. Paul Bunyan, the giant of tall tales, suffers from the comparison. The trees are compared to pillars that cannot be moved--even by a legendary strong man like Samson of the Old Testament story who destroyed the temple of the Philistines. Both of the comparisons express the narrator's sense of awe when confronted with the size of the trees. The poem is a kind of tall tale itself strengthened by the allusions to the other mythic tales of larger-than-life-size characters.

Echoes or allusions to other poems also may help to lend authority to the voice in a poem or to place it in a historical context. The phrase "the other world" in "Offering" is the same phrase James Wright used to refer to the spiritual world in his elegy "Willy Lyons." And in "Why Thirteen Xerox Copies of 'October Ghosts' Lie On The Floor Of Bill's Copy Shop," the style of the poem is imitative of the plain style of many of Wright's later poems. The long title and the imitative style are appropriate expressions of homage to the poet whose life work is being celebrated in the elegy. Likewise, the opening words of "Against the Drought," "Farm boys lost to this world," echo the opening lines of James Dickey's "The Sheep Child": "Farm boys wild to couple/With anything. . . ."[16] Both poems deal with men and animals, their similarities and differences. "Against The Drought," which takes place in the Southwest, deals with animal sacrifice; consequently, it seemed appropriate to pay tribute to the Southern writer whose poetry often deals with violence and the darker side of human existence.

Mythic overlay is another technique that has been used in some of the poems. In "Wild Flower," the motif of the romantic guest is inherent in the speaker's search for the flower/woman life-sustainer. In "The Black and White Dog," the dog is a mythic beast, and confrontation with it means the same thing as having to face Scylla on one side and Charybdis on the other. "The Man Who Knew Things" is

about learning from a mentor, a Promethean fire-bringer, a teacher-guide. The mythic dimension is apparent also in "How It Happened." The life-saving father is compared to Adam, the mythic first man of action. The mythic dimension which is overlaid upon the main action of "Wild Flower," "The Man Who Knew Things," and "How It Happened" is used to achieve a serious tone; however, in "The Black and White Dog" the mythic dimension contrasts with the mundane action of the poem and achieves a humorous tone tinged with underlying seriousness.

Another technique used is that of repetition. Robert Frost uses repetition of key words in "Directive" to obtain a somewhat monotonous tone and hypnotic effect: "Back out of all this now too much for us,/Back in a time made simple by the loss. . . There is a house that is more a house/Upon a farm that is no more a farm. . . ."[17] In the second stanza of "Dust Storm," the first repetition imitates the repetitive motion of breathing: "every breath brings us/ back, further back." However, the second repetition does not have a hypnotic effect because the second "steps" has a different meaning than the first one: "until at last/we retrace our steps/to the steps we sat on." An associational leap is made from the figurative retracing of steps to the arrival upon the concrete image of the steps "in front of the Sunday school." The shift in meaning accompanies the narrator as he shifts his focus from the present to the past.

Another technique used is that of using an image to

close a poem. An image can serve to dramatically close the poem down or open it up. In "Passing Aslyum Avenue," the final image opens the poem up because it is open to literal and metaphorical interpretation:

> we hold all
> the keys that unlock ourselves
> from our cells,
> keys that open doors
> to all the rooms
> of The Institute of Living.

In "Instructions for Living a Paper-Boy's Life," the final simile likens a basketball to a globe: "watch the ball spin/on the rim like a world,/until you know that it's good." This simile opens the poem up but not as much as the final metaphor opened the last poem up. The basketball/world summarizes the paper-boy's life and symbolizes the world of innocence and childhood.

An image is used to close down "Offering." The image of the blue saucer filled with milk left out for the neighbor's cat summarizes the poem and reveals its form. The persona recalls an incident from childhood involving a doomed sparrow, and that memory leads to others of how dead animals were left on the doorstep by the cat next door. Did the cat leave them there in exchange for the milk left out for it? The persona senses the possibility that it may have been attempting to appease its gods. If so, then the

dead mole on the doorstep was a token, an offering. With the image of the saucer the poem ends, without much of a story being told, yet the fragment itself is a story of sorts, an offering to the reader.

Of course these techniques are only a few of those used in the composition of the poems which follow. Nevertheless, together with the section on poetics and the section on poetic influences, this final chapter provides, I hope, some insight into my theory of poetry and my philosphy of composition. The section on poetics is meant to be a descriptive statement concerning dramatic structure and dramatic presentation, two elements inherent in two kinds of poems that I am drawn to. The two poems used as examples to illustrate my points, William Stafford's "Traveling Through The Dark" and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Eagle," are touchstones for me and poems that I try to emulate in my own writing.

Notes

[1] John Keats, "To J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818," Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 95.

[2] G. N. G. Orsini, "Conceptions of Poetics," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 637.

[3] Robert Frost, Preface to A Way Out, Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, 1966), p. 13.

[4] James A. H. Murray, The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 797.

[5] Murray, p. 797.

[6] Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, 1966), p. 18.

[7] John Crowe Ransom, "The Tense of Poetry," The World's Body (New York: Scribner's, 1938), p. 249.

[8] Ransom, p. 254.

[9] Ransom, pp. 257-259.

[10] Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York:

Harcourt, 1971), p. 991.

[11] Warren, p. 991.

[12] William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Selected Poetry and Prose of Blake, ed. Northrup Frye (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 123.

[13] William Stafford, "Traveling Through The Dark," Stories That Could Be True (New York: Harper, 1977), p. 61.

[14] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Eagle," The Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. 2, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 852.

[15] Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 175.

[16] James Dickey, "The Sheep Child," Poems 1957-1967 (New York: Collier, 1968), p. 252.

[17] Robert Frost, "Directive," Robert Frost Poetry and Prose, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, 1972), p. 156.

PART I

SEQUOIA GROVE

Rising from legend
greater than any folk-hero
lumberjack we grew up with,
they are pillars
no legendary strong-arm
could budge.

Among them silence grows
until a small boy says, "Why
is everyone so quiet?"
and his mother quiets him,
surrounded by smiles.

Grey haired men and women
step forward to touch.
Each is a child again
touching its first tree.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIVING A PAPER BOY'S LIFE

Rise before the sun
and bring The Daily News.

Rub shoulders with shadows
and love the dark and the beauty
of cutting across lawns.

Stash three good size rocks
in your canvas bag
for the black and white dog
on the hill.

Run through the route
then sleep an hour
before school.
With a National Geographic's
cover folded back,
drift through Math and History
somewhere off the coast
of Madagascar or south of
Saturn's rings.

Hold out until the final bell
rings you out of school onto

(same stanza)

the blacktop where real life
begins again with a fast break
and sneakers on.

If someone hits you
with a full court pass,
go for the lay-up.

Watch the ball spin
on the rim like a world,
until you know that it's good.

ABOVE TIMBERLINE

Branches of black spruce lean
like flags on poles,
pointing which way storm clouds
fly from here.

Capped with reindeer moss,
boulders lie hunched with lichen
beards, as rains drummed
into crevices freeze,
chiseling granite shoulders
into talus slopes.

From lazy parabolas and spirals
on the upward drafts, with eyes
that glean the tundra of movement,
the hawk like feathered lightning
strikes the stone that moves.

A shadow wipes the ground like a dark palm--
snow-shoe and ptarmigan freeze.
After it passes, they are carved stone
come to life.

ANGELS

Black and white togas streaming
from handlebars like kidnapped tuxedoes,
around the bases at the park
disappearing and reappearing in
the April early morning mist. . . .
Time was to waste, like pocket money
on bubble gum, getting swallowed up fast
as a friend riding his bike
into low clouds.

Tangled arm in front wheel spokes,
late again, breathless and axle grease
like mortal sin on a snowy surplice. . . .
Hovering half-awake with Father McGuire
over knee-cracking marble, rattling on
like wind-up toys: "I'm a cowboy, You're
a cowboy, We are Mexican cowboys"
skipping forgotten "Worlds
without end."

After Mass, when a laugh turned into prayer
after slamming a door in his face, McGuire knew
too long behind closed doors meant
warm bellies, horns sprouting,
guzzling altar wine.

FAMILY PORTRAIT

1.

Baby has one shoe and sock off.
Daddy's face is red.
He says those things whenever
the vein in his forehead
sticks out. He's mad.
We're still dressed up for Church
even though we already went,
because there's film in the camera.
We have to take pictures
instead of changing into dungarees
and going out to play.

2.

I poke my brother in front of me.
He turns around and
punches me in the stomach.
My father slaps us both.
The baby starts to cry, too.
Daddy takes his tie off and Mommy
puts the baby's shoe and sock
back on, and tells my brother

to keep his eyes open this time.
The baby drools on Mommy's dress.
She wipes the tears away and
when my father says, "Smile," we do.

FIRST TROUT

My brothers and I flattened our noses
pressing out the screens
on the porch of the summer cottage
my uncles built. Our faces left
mask-like impressions: Hear-No-Evil,
See-No-Evil, Speak-No-Evil.

Outside, Doc Carothers stood in
August rain, a khaki poncho draped
over him, holding up for us to see a
sleek-bellied trout hooked with
the Royal Coachman as he drifted
Roger's Lake in his varnished boat.
He grinned--his bedside best,
<u>Isn't she a beauty</u>? And she was.
She was. Raindrops falling on moist skin,
tiny rainbows glistening inside rainbows.
And the one in his hands, gasping,
alive, still trying to give him
the slip.

THE MAN WHO KNEW THINGS

Sleepless since old Tom Downer swore
mounds in his hayfield were Indian
braves, we rummaged encyclopedias
for news of Indians. We needed him:
white-haired, stoop shouldered, with
bolo string tie and khaki uniform,
he walked with us
game trails thick with laurel,
waving away the cobwebs in our path.
Wabaquassett, Nipmuck--he knew all
the lost tribes. If we dug
deep enough, we'd find charcoal
instead of arrowheads. Out of a wild
tangle of vines and scrub, he'd find
gnarled green apples, an orchard
gone wild, a root cellar, cornerstone
in place. His mocassin left
no prints. We followed single file.
He taught us to read like them.
Stopping suddenly, he'd wait
until we'd see and point out the sign--
scat on oak leaves, prints in black mud,
white-tail, skunk, three toes, pad.
Nudging hemlock boughs aside,
he'd find the path he wanted

(same stanza)

and go on about King Philip's War.
We were sure he'd been there. Was he
a survivor? A smile first, then
the history lesson. He'd tell
how it was for them: Mohegans, Pequots,
Narragansetts, following the salmon,
trout, blueberries, watercress, beachplums,
mussels, quahogs, hickory nuts, hazels, cottontail,
partridge, squirrel, canvasback. What a life,
someone would say. He'd smile. His blue eyes
brightened when he knew you knew.
He'd let you tell the other side.

HOW IT HAPPENED

--for Barbara

You slept, but too quietly.
Your brothers kicked and wrestled
on the double bed by your crib
until your silence made itself
heard. The youngest ran to tell.

During an intermission
that seemed to go on forever
between our acts of play,
our father, standing over us,
lifted you up and onto the big bed
cleared a moment before
with a sweep from his strong right arm.

His face covered yours like a lover's,
our mother crying his name
over and over, asking Is she?
God, please don't let her--
and he, acting like the first man

ever to reach out for one
of his own moving away
from him, almost out of reach

(same stanza)
between worlds, gave you

a kiss to bring you back
to us. Your shuddering cry
brought us back to life
without words--your world
and ours turned around.

The second time he gave you breath,
all of us stood around the child
you were, not unlike those
who have witnessed
a miraculous rebirth,
not unlike a family
of true believers.

JEFFREY'S DREAM; OR WAKING

The stones were singing
beautiful lyrics
like the songs of trees.
Snared by the sound,
I stared through the melody,
lulled by wind and light
dancing through the leaves
of a poplar.

The second movement
released me long enough--
I found a quill
and began transcribing
notes and words
that sailors and such
have traditionally sealed
their ears against.

I woke to white paper,
my notes vanishing
like the first snowflakes
touching the surface
and surrendering
into a deep dark mountain lake.

THE BLACK & WHITE DOG

It is hard to say
if it is a white dog
with black patches
or black dog with white--
what is important is the fact
that it is black & white
and old
and bites anyone
whenever it can.
Whatever you do
watch out for this black & white dog
like my brother didn't
when he was delivering newspapers.
He believed that the dog
would not bite him
because he believed a barking dog
won't bite. You can bet
he doesn't believe that
anymore and won't give
that dog a second chance.
He relies less on the testimony
of authorities like my father,
who told him when the old dog barked
and growled and showed its teeth, Don't worry

(same stanza)

he won't hurt you ... his bark is worse than his bite.
Still my brother worried,
his faith not strong enough.
His method now
is more empirical.

And though now it's older than old
and should be dead, dead, dead,
that black & white dog still lives,
still barks. Look out
so it doesn't get you
like it did my poor brother.

FAST EDDY WAKES UP TO A WARBLER

Will you for a minute stop
and listen
to that bird sing?

Sure it's that time
again and he has
his reasons, the season
being young and all
that sap.

If I could sing
like that, don't think I'd stay
in a popsicle stand
like this. Not me, babe.
Not this bird.
I'd fly.

PART II

APPRENTICE GAZING UPON CELLINI'S SALTCELLAR

The goldsmith's touch
quietly astonishes. A moment
lives in the face of the goddess.
Has the power of the sea
awakened her? Lowered, her
eyelashes conquer Poseidon,
the self-possessed.

Gazing upon the master's work,
the King and Queen of France
will see themselves--
god and goddess beholding
the king and queen in
each other--their mortal hearts
captured by the immortal pair.

The master's touch awakens
my love and me. He calls us forth.
I will die in her arms
and live.

TRINITY

The neighbor girl
was too friendly
with a boy I didn't like.
They giggled
and threw bread
at two silly pigeons
in her backyard.
He was older.
But I had a good arm,
and from my side of the fence,
I threw a stone over.

One flew up.
The other waddled
with a white wing feather
out of place.
They were angry. She was hurt
and hurled hurt looks.
Stupid bird, I ran after you
and gathered you in my arms
and tossed you skyward.
You flopped hopelessly
to earth. We chased after,
but you hid

(same stanza)
in a crawl space underneath
our neighbor's stoop.
A cat found you
and we found your feathers
scattered everywhere next day.
Still, I knew you hovered over me
when she looked my way.

FISHERMAN'S VISION

Bathers and swimmers stay
away, but he is drawn
to rotten stumps, quicksand,
and the weedy shoreline
of this flooded sand pit
where he stands, knowing
ringlets widen, the pond's
mirrored sky breaks
into spashes of sunlight,
herons stalk reedy
shallows, become one
of the swaying rushes.

Standing on a bad bank,
he reads every ripple
and wave. A steam shovel's
skyward-raised arm breaks
the water line defiant
as a fist: below orange fins
of carp and schooled yellow perch
are fanning the rusted controls.

STALKING BUFFALO

Downwind from a shaggy headed bull
the air is alive
with a damp odor of hides.
Lightning and thunder
or prairie fire spirits him,
or a mild wind
like this over the rise,
with cows grazing
the valley below.

The bull on a bluff,
tail slapping flies
and nose to the wind,
I stalk him low
through the long grass,
frame him on the horizon
with equal parts of earth and sky,
and focus on infinity--
his great horned head turns
the other way.

OFFERING

I remember a sparrow
huddling in roadside dust,
its useless wings
sprayed with coal tar,
on one of the streets
of my childhood,
and how my father
washed its wings with spirits,
how it cowered in a shoe box corner
until morning sun
found it still,
and how it was given
a small thing's burial,
the shoe box filled with newspaper
and buried beneath the ash
so that it could fly
through the earth
to the other world
beside the pigeon,
the starling, and the mole
that the neighbor's cat left for us
on the doorstep
where my brothers and I
left a blue saucer filled
halfway with milk.

RECLAIMING WETLAND: NEAR THE MOUTH OF THE CONNECTICUT

The city stops short of hawthorn
and sedge, and the black green river mud.
Off the point buffleheads alternate dives.
Plankton drifts across the tide-pool's small sky.

Sand slides through a tailgate,
leveling cattails. The tailgate slams.
Two mallards rise and circle off,
certain that though this was the place,
it can't possibly be.

The pilot-boat heads for mid channel
where a tanker rides low.
Beneath the surface all remain true
to the old patterns, fixed like tides,
and weather: fingerlings, slow-movers,
low-lifes, striped bass from the Gulf Stream
and mackerel that will under a new moon
scatter from bluefish off Montauk.

THE LAST TIME

The last time, you were thin: a stick
man with a wooden smile, quiet
as always, but more pronounced, whose
two tone wardrobe grounded always
in black loafers changed overnight
to white bucks and loud ties.

Was there anyone listening?
Anyone watching? Did you know something
in your woman's way? Uncle, that's how
I see you still: decked out
for Saturday night, an extra left foot
ready to dance in Monday morning,
a retiring hand refusing to fade out
of the picture, stiffly formal,
on hand to say good-by, your hand-
shake solid. Even then, you knew.

As you did when you ruined my run
with nothing to bid on
except your knowing
the two jacks you held
might, with any luck,
give you the game.

BLACKBIRD ON A WINDY DAY

Like a salmon fighting falls,
once I shouldered wind,
wrapped in an overcoat
in my private war,
when a blackbird threw itself
up from dried grass, hit
the stiff head wind
and hung there, beating wings--
my spirit cheered.
After a long moment of fists
pounding a door, its spirit
buckled, and I thought all was lost--
but with set wings,
it sailed the wind away.

DUST STORM

Our horizon closes
in. Against our wills
we are made
to taste the earth.

We learn our lesson
again: find shelter--
every breath brings us
back, further back, until at last
we retrace our steps
to the steps we sat on
in front of the Sunday school
where once we learned
our catechism: <u>sons of Adam</u>,
<u>we are clay</u>.

Nothing we drink
washes away the dust.
And how long we wonder
must we live with
this fine falling rain
dusting the half-buried faces
of our sleeping children?

NIGHT WISH TO ELIZABETH

I wished to tell you once,
Sleep now, hold this quiet
close to you. Sleep will
bring you closer to yourself
and teach you the possibilities.

Tonight, alone, and childless
under this wide moon, I share
a father's concern. My thoughts
drift toward you now, as your
father's did then, on a night
when we talked and you
slept little between dreams,
his words straying from the paths
of conversation as your cries
reached him from a room teeming
with stuffed animals, all
called by their first names.

Tonight, walking an unlit
country road, I remembered you
when the night had grown too big
for you, or your bed too small.
Once again, the night has brought us

(same stanza)

closer together. But tonight,
under this sky, I know that any man
can bless. So Elizabeth, whenever
you wake fearful, may you wake
to a voice close grained as oak,
strong enough to hold the darkness
at bay, strong enough to hold you.
And someday, may you remember
how, from lilac branches
outside your window, song sparrows
woke you to another life.

AGAINST THE DROUGHT

Farm boys lost to this world
immortalize themselves,
their dates, their broken
engagements. In finely tuned
machines, they try to make
the crooked ways straight
by speeding head-on
into lovers' headlights and out
of this life where cotton
withers on the branch
and no rain falls. A world
all wrong for them, they leave it
for a good girl or a dream
gone bad.

Cracks in the earth grow
wide enough for livestock
to fall into.
The nearest beer is miles
across the county line.

Across the way, some others,
tanked up and riding high,
talk loud, laugh. Shouts.

(same stanza)

They have been to the other side
of the county line, their faces
dimly lit by flames.
A rough circle of torches
and men. In dirt at their feet,
an armadillo is trying
to crawl back
into its uncharted ramble,
its night-walking life
where moonstruck eyes can hide
from torch light.
One of them has it by the tail.

He is one of us
who live and work under
a burning star,
crawling out of our everday lives
to answer the unspoken summons
of the night and take this
beast of the dark, the shadow-ridden,
and coolest hours, for
its life is one of ease.

This is something he must do,
even if it does not bring rain,
even if the wild animal inside

(same stanza)

does not die out.
The trapped beast, doused
with whiskey and gasoline, crawls
farther and farther
into itself, until
lit by a single matchstick,
the dying animal blossoms
into flames, lighting the darkness,
lighting their faces.

PASSING ASYLUM AVENUE

Nights like tonight, I half
believe if I go back,
I'll find Luiz, the Puerto Rican
moonlighter, still trying
to pay off three wives
with kids
and floating below
the student nurses' open
windows, his Fu Manchu mooning
among the cherry blossoms.
I have the chance but drive on

believing Wesley, the ex-cop
with no larynx, who can't
sleep after 35 years
on the force, will still be manning
the gate, giving his life
story in wheezy installments
to a kid wide-eyed
on coffee and No-Doz,
who can't help
but listen, his first
graveyard watch.

(stanza break)

Lost souls. They rise
and stalk the starlit shadows
for me now.
Jailer, prisoner, once again
I am among them--
between us, we hold all
the keys that unlock ourselves
from our cells,
keys that open doors
to all the rooms
of The Institute of Living.

THE UNFINISHED PIECE

The brightness that blinded
might have been the sun
in his eyes and the angel
who struggled so much.
Hit or miss, for some
there is no in between.

A half-smile
to the apprentice who knew
putting down the mallet
was a sign, the angel
had won. . . .

Holding his book,
St. Matthew stands
poised about to step free,
the stone gripping
an arm, a leg, a shoulder,
midway between man and stone,
the formless and the formed.

BACKPACKER PEERING INTO A STREAM-SIDE PUDDLE

Pine chip, seed husk,
twig, and pebble ....
In a house of sticks,
in a house of stones,
caddis and stonefly
cross paths.

I, too, bring
home with me.
Wherever I go.

PART III

CLOWN TO HIS AUDIENCE

In my street clothes
with my face straight,
you would never know me.
Still, I can tell you
that everyday is not breakfast
with trapeeze girls falling
into my arms. A printer's devil,
I ran away, wanting to be
a lion-tamer, hopping the circus train,
aiming for that spot on the horizon
where two rails converge.
That place has gone by
many names. I'm thankful for a hook
to hang my hat on -- what would I do
with a home that didn't move with me?

I flounder, you might think,
but it is my act-- my floppy shoes
nailed to sawdust and boards.
You laugh when I fall on my face
and match my frown with your smile--
I am your dimwitted brother
and this is the circus.
Call this one of your good days--

(same stanza)

remember a man shot live
from a cannon, glittering girls
on a high wire, a lion's roar,
and the pistol crack of a whip.
Patch the holes in my pantomime
with laughter, and deafen me with applause,
the sound like summer rain
pounding canvas under a Dakota sky.

WILD FLOWER

--Medeloa Virginiana

Perenially shy,
no gaudy blossomer--
no one is going to pick you
for the school dance.
Hanging back from the others
in full sun-- the black-eyed
Susans and tiger lilies,
you thrive in the veiled light
beneath a broad-leaf canopy: red oak,
silver maple; shoulder to shoulder
with white pines and blue spruce.
I find you only
when I leave the smooth path
near the foot of the mountain
at the edge of the marsh.
Worth my troubles, you are
not a spindly wallflower
to my eye. Your constancy
is legendary. Others before me knew
whoever wins you away from your mountain
home will have the fruit
of your favor. The root that keeps you
down-to-earth will also hold him

(same stanza)

through the long snows,

the deep nights.

TO C.P. FROM FERRANTE'S BAR & GRILL

With spillage enough
for floating a good man
on a dry day, your shocked
friends drink as if drinking
will call the river back
from Long Island Sound to
this side of Founders Bridge.

A half-juiced electrician,
still sailing a schooner
of draft from a pizza palace,
you grabbed a hot 220
you swore was cold.

The same live wire
shocked everyone you touched.
In hock to your friends ....
They owned you or owed you
and still do. Only now
you don't owe us
any favors.

We drink as if anything
can be cured by filling an empty glass,

(same stanza)
to become innocent, speechless,
and once again mercifully blind
to the fact you weren't putting on
bad manners for a laugh: stone-
faced, a cold shoulder
for your friends--you,
the absent, honored guest.

Some of us remember
the Atlantic City "exotic dancer"
singling you out in the Blue Danube's
Moonlight Lounge. The spotlight
couldn't hold both of you--
staring at your Xtra-large T-shirt,
she teased, and when you shook,
laughing, we all cracked up.

Show stopper, you would have loved
the finale. True to your old form,
the Cadillac that carried you
stalled the City Council's meeting
with Young Republicans, held up
traffic, backing it
across the tracks, horns honking,
radiators overheating,

(same stanza)

all the way from Renee's Pool Hall

to the Polish cemetery.

LESSON FOR THE DAY

You could say what you don't mean
then see if anyone puts hand over heart,
hand over ears, hand over mouth.

But you've measured the distance
between ganglia and know
that if words are wasted breath
and breath is life, then life is wasted.

Once you know saying what you don't mean
means life imprisonment: the mind and heart
a broken up bad marriage, each telling
their sides with no one wanting to hear
such one-sided stories; then you can begin

sounding the heart and if she is so inclined
you might try the mind, and if he too
is agreeable, introduce them. Together
they might surprise you with their voices
blending in song.

WHY THIRTEEN XEROX COPIES OF "OCTOBER GHOSTS" LIE ON THE FLOOR OF BILL'S COPY SHOP

--in memoriam, J. Wright

One of your books, now
out of print, I didn't buy.
I might have borrowed it
in good conscience, smuggled
it into Indian Summer light
and found some quiet place
beneath a sycamore, far from
the dust of book shelves.
But a friend told me here,
take mine, copy it.

The proprietor told me he would not
break the law, but I could
and could use his machine,
saving 2¢ a page.
I didn't want to steal bread
from your widow's mouth,
but my friend lent me his copy--
your book handed from friend
to friend. You would have approved
if I read you right.

(stanza break)

I had to give up my place
at the machine for another.
When she left, the machine fired
one, two, three, fourteen copies
of "October Ghosts" before anyone
reset the counter. For my copy
$1.61 plus tax. He didn't charge
for the thirteen.

And though I know this lament
will do you little good, I am ready
to pay and will be ready for the authorities
when they come to collect what I owe you
as they figure it. But the way I see it,
my friend and I, and the rest
of us-- all honest citizens--
owe you thanks for your plain talk
and your breaking into song
like a man in church, who is aware always
he is a man in church singing,
so he sings, sometimes a half-step behind,
sometimes a little too gravelly voiced,
yet he sings like the man he knows
himself to be. And though it may be vain
to hope even one copy falls
into right hands, I know at least one

(same stanza)

has when I return my friend's
book-- yours. Which belongs now
to those of us you've left behind.

SMOKE RINGS

--For Vincent Nowak, for not
saving his breath

That was a clear day
when you sat in the parlor,
the day your granddaughter
and I came to call: there
was no baby crying in the other room,
no rain coming through
a hole in the roof, no smoke
from burning oak leaves
filling up the front room;
the sun was bright on the mountains
of slack outside Morris Run.

I didn't know then about those dark days
when air hangs heavy
with coal dust and the mind
loses its way. The women
gone, you conned me into rifling
drawers for the cigars
you planted earlier. We smoked
up until blue-grey clouds
hung from the ceiling.

(stanza break)

You told me more than the story
of the big buck stepping from pines
each morning at sunrise
to nibble sweet flesh
off your apple trees, something
more than the claim
that the rainbows of the Susquehanna
light the eyes like white-water
falling far and fast: sometimes

for those who share the light
and the air awhile with us,
we must give our breath
to fan the flame, for it too quickly
becomes a smoldering ember
in a darkened cave.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Roosevelt Dime

Viens ici, boys, viens ici.
Parlez vous francais?
Oui, monsieur.
Comment ca va?
Tres bien, merci, mon onc.
Pas mal, merci, mon onc, et toi?
Tres bien.

Look what Uncle Lucien has
for you.
A dime! a shiny new dime!
and a nickel, too!

I knew it.
E Pluribus Unum:
In God We Trust.
But he didn't ask it.
A nickel and a dime!
For my brother
and for me.
In Uncle Lucien We Trust.

(stanza break)

Here, boys,
which one you want? The big one
or the little one?

Uncle held out his hands.

Make cents now,
it makes sense.
Who first?
Youngest first this time.

Little brother grabbed
for the greasy nickel
and held it tightly
in his fist.
Everyone laughed.
I got the dime
and the joke, too.

You make any cents? Uncle said.

I held up the dime.
Right, mon onc, makes sense.

United States of America
E Pluribus Unum

(same stanza)

In God We Trust.

One thin dime,

ten cents.

ALTAR BOY'S CONFESSION

One parish priest
hooked on wine
turned me around,
so the aunt who turned
my head and pointed
down the Sunday school path
that led to the steps
of the seminary
would have no relief.

I served under him,
three marble steps below
where he stood sweating
in gold vestments
on one of the coldest
days of the year.

With his arms outstretched
and the back of his neck
glistening, he was
crucified himself,
his spiked conscience
driving the nails.

(stanza break)

He mumbled the words
"This is my blood"
everytime.
For him I kept
three cruets full
until he went on retreat.

He knew about suffering
and when he doled it out,
if you had the choice,
you'd want him
to be your confessor.
When the team got caught
celebrating a victory
on the road,
all the first string
juicers suspended,
the bench took over
and cost us the title,
but he was easy on us.

At confession, a statue
of a child with the world
in its palm, looking out
over all of us -- Ratzik, the almost
seven foot center -- in his hands

(same stanza)
the ball was a palmed grapefruit --
and Kelly and Mooch
the six foot forwards,
and Flash, the smallest man
on the team and highest scorer --
all the senior class
waited in the same long line for him.

An Our Father and Hail Mary
and I was half way home
in sunshine,
the wind in my hair,
while eggheads
like the Kaminski twins
bowed their heads
in an unlit church
with somebody else's penance
hanging over them,
rosaries chaining
their wrists and two nuns
no longer guarding
against premature exits,
but praying for their
own release, to go home,
to steaming carrots

(same stanza)

and potatoes,

boiled onions and beef.

LATE BLOOMER

Watch the young flower
alone in the shade
by the lone spruce;
watch her go spindly
reaching for sun
until her leaves green out
taking full shape.
Then, breathless,
behold her blossoming
her face open,
searching the sky's.

MOUNTAIN STREAM

Wanderer, wherever you go,
whenever you drink again
from these melting snow fields,
the fog will slowly rise
off this lake of clouds,
you will walk softly
and not disturb
the wood-drake's dance,
the partidge's drumming,
for the white-tail's hoof prints
in the cool black earth
beside the flat stone
upon which you kneel to drink
have impressed this upon you.

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VITA 2

Philip Michael Paradis

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: INSTITUTE OF LIVING

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in New Britain, Connecticut, February 11, 1951, the son of Norman A. and Claire Paradis. Married to Marjorie A. Hull on May 27, 1978.

Education: Graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas High School, in May 1969; received Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from Central Connecticut State University in December 1976; received Master of Arts degree from University of Utah, August, 1981; completed requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University in May, 1984.

Professional Experience: Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Oklahoma State University, August, 1980, to May, 1984.