

MODERN HIEROGLYPHICS

POEMS

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"In modern works of art, meaning dissipates into the radiation of being. The act of seeing is transformed into an intellectual operation that is also a magical rite: to see is to understand and to understand is to commune." --Octavio Paz

Connections between literature, painting, music and dance seem to be taken for granted; perhaps they are considered irrelevant to effective criticism, or too unwieldy for effective critical study. Individual comparisons are made between specific practitioners, or between certain works. In most cases these comparisons concern product, some analogy between tangibles like biographical events, membership in some salon or critical canon, or technical features of works. In studying the products of an artist's creativity, this criticism in effect "de-humanizes" the artist and his or her work by denying his or her creative process. This introduction relies on one simple assumption: that comparing the processes of creation that all artists undertake yields information integral to an understanding of the interrelations between all artists. Its structure is equally simple; in exploring the poet's role as musician, visual artist and theatrical performer, discussion of canonized writers will yield in the end of each section to a discussion of representative poems in this collection. It is not my intention to place myself alongside these poets as much as delineate their influence, and that of their poems, on my own writing and on the basic ideas that form the foundation of my poems.

Poetry especially reaps the benefits of proximity to other art forms. By its very nature, poetry lends itself to an exploration of technique; what is language, after all, but an arbitrary material with flexible signification? Contemporary poets, realizing the subjectivity of their materials, rightfully search other art forms for clues into the manipulation of language.

John Ashbery's embrace of John Cage's aesthetic in forming his own, unique poetic, William Carlos Williams' association with cubist painters, and the "New Narrative" Poets' application of theatrical characterization techniques based partially on fiction, partially on Method Acting strategies, are alike in their reluctance to accept conventional forms and subjects at face value in favor of forging their own paths as artists. Aware of the conventions of other arts and able to use those conventions in new, individual ways, these poets offer the beginnings of a poetry that reflects the community of artists as it exists in a world in which art is taken for granted. Dana Gioia puts the "backgrounding" of poetry in perspective:

American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic or intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group...[poets] are almost invisible. (1)

This invisibility affords poets the luxury of incubation and experimentation, two things that helped shape American poetry of this century, and that will sustain it into the next. Incubation allows the poet time and energy to explore language as a means to an end, not necessarily a content-based end in itself; experimentation arises from this incubation as the poet attempts to access the non-linguistic energy of musicians and visual artists, the movement and placement (context) of dance and the theatre.

Poetic tradition is so vast--from the expansiveness of the Homeric epic to the minimalist "anti-language" of concrete and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry--that experimentation is itself a poetic tradition. Since poetry is simultaneously oral, typographical and performative, access to other artists' processes is logical, even necessary to the evolution of the poet's work.

THE POET AS MUSICIAN

To some, poetry is music, and vice versa; the connection between musical and poetic composition extends far beyond a shared oral tradition. In her book on music in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Barbara Holmes explores "the role of the musician in the poet's craft, the poet in the musician's" (xi). According to Holmes, our poetic tradition springs from that of the troubadour, but with the evolution of the separate entities of poetry and music, much of the connection apart from oral tradition became lost. Holmes credits Wallace Stevens with an ability to "embody [thought and feeling in a poem] in the same motion and sense that music 'embodies a certain type of movement' rather than expresses it" (2). The poet seeks not to create music, but to emulate its effect on the ear, if not the soul. Contemporary concepts of music have centered on the craft of an individual's composition (as in studies of Cage, Glass, and other "minimalists") more than on one centralized tradition which flows through all music; this hard focus on craft enables poetry/music comparisons to examine the processes of composition up-close. John Ashbery's appropriation of John Cage's musical aesthetic is but one such point to be made in comparing composing processes.

John Ashbery's connections to the other arts are well documented, from his affiliations with *Art News* and *Newsweek* as art critic to numerous interviews in which he cites music as an important composition tool:

The thing about music is that it's always going on
and reaching a conclusion and it helps me to be
surrounded by this moving climate that it
produces--moving I mean in the sense of going on.
I find too that I suddenly get into, as they say,
a certain composer's work which seems to me to be
a very good background for what I'm thinking about

while I'm writing a particular poem. ("Craft" 114)

However, Ashbery's work exhibits more than a mere acquaintance with other art forms; his poems bear a strong measure of the philosophies that underline the musical compositions of John Cage. Cage is well known as both a composer and a poet, and Ashbery and critics alike have made brief mention of Ashbery's debt to Cage. The resemblance extends far beyond an application of experimental techniques--seemingly random juxtapositions of words, mixing "common" and "poetic" language; rather, it carries over into the most basic attitudes toward art and the artist. Cage's position on the nature of art and its practitioners reappears again and again in Ashbery, suggesting more than a superficial influence. The texts that result from Ashbery's adaptation of Cagean attitudes are less experiments in Zen or Dada or decentering of the self than products of a totally different, decentered aesthetic.

Cage sees art and life as integral parts of one another, inseparable for the artist who is willing to suspend traditional notions of composition and "sense." Cage himself said, "I'm in an accepting frame of mind rather than a controlling frame of mind" (qtd in Aldiss 207). For Ashbery, as for Cage, art and life are inseparable, constantly reflecting and re-reflecting one another in a never-ending field of possibilities that affect both. Cage further addresses his role as "composer" in his book *Silence*:

And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life--not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking

up to the very life we're living, which is so
excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires
out of its way and lets it act of its own accord. (Cage 12)

These artists intersect at the point of reception: Cage expects the listener to adapt his ears to catch the subtleties of life emanating from his juxtapositions of noise and silence, just as Ashbery asks his reader to read between the lines, between the words and all over the text to find something he or she can call "meaning."

Harriet Zinnes claims that in encountering any Cage piece "All one has to be is omniattentive--and art, freedom, natural rest, a sense of participating in universal centers of being will become accessible" (1). Daniel A. Herwitz chimes in on this idea of universality:

he aims to speak in a plethora of voices so as to
produce in us, his audience, an overall response that
fails to cohere in ways that we want, thus throwing
into relief or undercutting some pattern of our
ordinary beliefs and responses to works of art. (785)

The concept of multiple voices seems to be a critical theme, at least among those critics who are willing to accept the experimental, random nature of Cage's work. Cage specifically uses random events and chance elements--"optimistically embraces anarchy" according to Peter Gena (73)--to reflect the chaos of the world around him. He is far more concerned with the process of musical composition, with all its accidents and imperfections, than with some structured notions of tone, harmony and the like.

Ashbery's aesthetic functions along lines similar to Cage's. In fact, In a 1981 interview, Ashbery said his poems are "about the experience of experience," the "movement of experiencing" (Poulin 245). Ashbery's position could certainly be

considered "radical;" the New Critics would undoubtedly consider such language no more than an exercise of the imitative fallacy, a poem taking on an analogous form, denying the superiority of the traditional, externally conceived poetic form. New Critical texts thrive on a distance between the product of a poet's efforts and the poet himself, resulting in a central role for criticism between writer and reader.

For Ashbery, there is no distance between the artist and his audience; like Cage, he rebels against a tradition which sets arbitrary limits for art. These limits, insistent notions of form, content, and "sense," impose an artificial distance between experience and the rendering of it in art that Ashbery rejects. Why not render experience as it happens, with the chaotic nature of thought and the uncertain form of experience itself? Such a question is at the heart of the Ashbery/Cage comparison.

The opening lines of Ashbery's "If The Birds Knew" provide a clear illustration of Cage's aesthetic at work:

It is better this year.
And the clothes they wear
In the gray unweeded sky of our earth
There is no possibility of change
Because all of the true fragments are here.

Each line could be read as an individual thought, and any combination of lines could carry their own meaning, dependent on the interpretation of the individual reader, just as the sounds in John Cage's compositions can be interpreted as the most sublime musical expression or simply noise. In both cases, the craft of creating an artistic piece requires a release of commonly held traditional ideas of form, structure, and the very materials used in composition, materials the New Critics found so unwaveringly important to the art. Yvor Winters' claim that "the greatest fluidity of statement is possible where the greatest clarity of form

prevails" (Lipking 322) reflects the formalist desire for regularized formal structure. But questioning New Critical assumptions provides a key to the next level, not only of criticism, but of poetic composition itself.

Ashbery adopts Cage's aesthetic to further his own work, to find that elusive music that transcends rhyme and meter (although Ashbery has throughout his career explored the possibilities of traditional forms as well). By taking the *spirit* of music instead of its surface features (song, sound, etc.), Ashbery forges a poetry that combines the best of both forms while leaving plenty of promise for whatever comes next.

Much as John Ashbery does, I prefer letting my poems be influenced by the spirit of, and theories behind, music. I employ sound systems and poetic structures that reflect my own musical background, which is heavily weighted toward percussion, the "minimal" compositions of Cage, Philip Glass, Terry Riley and Michael Colgrass to progressive rock and jazz. My concept of "meter" and "cadence" is informed by a strong sense of natural (conversational) rhythm, polyrhythm (two different time signatures being played simultaneously) and odd time (musical phrases in multiples of 5, 7, 9 and other odd numbers). Quite often, I phrase in accordance with these techniques, as in the opening lines from section one of "Hallways":

He had no idea how he'd come
to this house, this room,
this bed with faintly perfumed
light pink sheets...

Line one of the example is in relatively loose trochaic tetrameter, setting up a fairly regular "metrical" structure that inverts in line 4. As early as the second line, though, this structure begins to collapse, providing the equivalent of a beat-

influenced, all-caps expression (THIS HOUSE; THIS ROOM) without resorting to typographical gymnastics. This emphatic rhythm breaks the pattern, resulting in the equivalent of a 4/4 bar of eighth notes followed by a 4/4 bar of forte quarter notes. Line three is in iambic trimeter, throwing the poem into a loose 7/4 pattern, and line four reinforces that idea with three emphatic beats (LIGHT PINK SHEETS). The effect is two bars of 7/4 meter spread out over four lines of language. Poetic devices such as alliteration, and a sound system involving lighter sounds--*hs* and *fs*, *ls* and soft plosives--allow the words even more emphasis, reinforcing the structure of the whole poem.

As with any piece of music, even the most proscriptive, the performer/reader's interpretation determines duration, dynamic level and, in this case, inflection. The contemporary American reader easily loses touch with poems that utilize "High British" inflection and pronunciation, certainly lost on those with Southern accents; in light of this, scansion in American poetry is as relative as any other purely technical term. My interpretation of the "trochaic" meter is closer to Williams' "variable" foot than to the strict, Elizabethan version. I let the line stretch and compress as they would be spoken, and I keep the variations and inconsistencies of American speech in mind as I write. Content-wise, music appears in my poems in fragments, more elements of each piece than the gestalt of the poem itself--

"They're the songs you'd sing to your own children" ("Spinster's Field");

"Their songs are slow and sad,/ Bessie Smith in perfect form" ("Hunger");

"She enters through a country song..." ("Masques");

"I mail you the songs I once sang/ in person, lyrics typed neatly..."; "I sing into space...alone, hitting all the high notes" ("Composing Myself")

References to singing, songs, and drumming serve the same function in my work as a radio playing in the background of a dark room or a street musician on Bourbon Street--the soundtrack of life. As a musician (and a devotee of John Cage), every sound is to me potentially musical.

The poem that best expresses my musical side as a whole piece is "The Man with the Electric Blue Guitar," one of several second person address poems. The speaker of this one is a singer whose collaborator simply doesn't understand music that relies on feel:

Stop soloing, you moron!
Play me some arpeggios,
a few delicately-placed chords,
something I can sing over.

The person being addressed does not listen, lacks a quality of attention and perception missing in many people. The speaker longs for a musician who can be an artist as well as a player, echoing the interarts desires that resonate throughout the book. My goal in this and other music-oriented poems is to funnel music through the lines without weakening the integrity of the language. Rhythm, phrasing, sound and silence all intermingle as much as the page allows as I try to shape ideas into songs, both literally and figuratively.

THE POET AS PAINTER

The analogy between poetry and painting is almost a cliché, as critics have compared both artists' attempts at mimesis, at representing the reality around them with their respective materials of color, shape, and language. With the loss of critical and theoretical ground suffered by the concept of mimesis, as Wendy

Steiner asserts, it becomes clear that "painting is not like poetry in that it does not represent the same reality...painting is to bodies as poetry is to action" (13). In her book, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, Steiner explains the twentieth-century replacement of *energia*--essentially "lifelikeness" based on a mimetic framework--with Jean Hagstrum's definition of *energia*, "the actualization of potency...the achievement in art and rhetoric of the dynamic and purposive life of nature" (Qtd in Steiner 10). *Energia*'s assumption of artistic self-determination can not be achieved through simple imitation of, or analogy with, another art form. Rather, *energia* remains, and may in fact be strengthened, when we compare the processes involved in creating art. In the discussion that follows, William Carlos Williams' adaptation of visual arts ideas in his poems augments the theoretical basis of poetry itself. By successfully rendering the poem as much a visual object as an aural one, Williams releases the moorings of the oral traditions, Williams renewing the form by injecting it with an *energia* that uses only those parts of the painter's aesthetic that are most adaptable to language.

A. Kingsley Weatherhead describes William Carlos Williams' poetic process as "supplying new context for parts of the world" (128); similarly, the poet provides a new way of seeing this context by manipulating lines and stanzas on the page, in effect questioning his predecessors' predilection for traditional visual structures, lines as tried and true as those in a Renaissance painting. Williams' visual experiments were undeniably influenced by the painters who worked around him, particularly members of the Arensberg Circle such as Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray (Tashjian 14); Abraham A. Davidson calls him "an associate of painters all his life" (21), and biographer Paul Mariani credits "[the] fine tension between the 'meaning' of a line and the presence of the line as a formal entity with as much solidity as pigment squeezed out onto a canvas" as "a lesson [learned] repeatedly from the painters--Cezanne, Juan Gris, Jackson

Pollock, Robert Motherwell—all of whom directed the observer to see the very planes and blobs on their canvases apart from any 'meaning' those forms or colors might have" (726). Bram Dijkstra credits the visual presence of Williams' poems to his understanding that "the artist distills [reality's] essence and intensifies it by stripping from it all details which might obstruct the purity of the experience, concentrating entirely on the elements which enhance its meaning" (53). Dijkstra claims Williams believed the poem has "the same power as photographs or paintings to suspend a moment of intense action forever," rendering a fragment of life in sharp contrast to its context.

The most striking application of Williams' understanding of his "lesson" must be "The Red Wheelbarrow." Roger Mitchell claims the poem was written "between 1913 and 1921" (Myers 31), placing it around or after the 1913 Armory Show, only three years after what Davidson refers to as "The beginnings of early American modernist painting" (1). Exposure to the work of Stieglitz, Duchamp, and Picasso had to reinforce the visual experimentation Williams was already applying to his early Keatsian mode, stripping the language down to its most basic level of diction. In this and other poems, "meaning" has as much to do with design as with connotation. Williams' words are simple, carefully placed for maximum impact on the reader, a move that echoes Picasso's removal of the bordello guests in the foreground of an original sketch for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The women's ugliness and impassivity, like Williams' "ugly," unornamented language, forces the reader to make his or her own judgements regarding the "meaning" in each piece. As Picasso manipulates traditional ideas of perspective by cramming objects into a flat space, Williams injects meaning into a simple statement through its placement on the page.

Williams' visual experimentation culminates in his "variable foot" and "triadic line," a "formless form" that is at once recognizable and elusive in terms of meter.

A section roughly midway through the long poem *Paterson* illustrates the "triadic foot" and expresses the difficulty in an art in which "the dream/is in pursuit" (222):

Durer
with his *Melancholy*
was aware of it--
the shattered masonry. Leonardo
saw it,
the obsession,
and ridiculed it
in *La Gioconda*.
Bosch's
congeries of tortured souls and devils
who prey on them
fish

swallowing
their own entrails

Freud
Picasso
Juan Gris. (222)

Bernard Duffey offers insight into Williams' choice of references:

Durer's *Melancholy* had amassed its identity out of a tumult of unrelated detail. Leonardo had seen the dream of art to inform its object and simultaneously satirized that dream in *La Gioconda*. Hieronymus Bosch had pursued what Williams saw as unified vision through all the phantasmagoria of his painting. Freud is included among the artists along with Picasso, Juan Gris, and Beethoven, all these, like the last, stamping their 'heavy feet' (P, 223) but making dance of their stomp. (94)

In Paterson, the early "blobs of paint" set down in "The Red Wheelbarrow" have graduated to a canvas on the level of *Guernica*, with multiple perspectives sharing space in the field of the work of art, interweaving with the people of Paterson, New Jersey, the poet who relates the long work, and the world surrounding the environs of the poem, restructuring reality into art.

William Carlos Williams searched for "an answer in the visual arts to the questions of poetic agency he faced as a now avant-garde poet" (Duffey 121); the answer he found was an incorporation of visual elements beyond the enargia of comparisons. Williams changed the visual face of poetry, inspiring poets like Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg to engage in their own searches for form that allows poetry the visual power found in a painting. As a result, the rules governing visual presentation of a poem are hardly rules at all, more directions for those poets who are willing to question traditional notions of form. In explaining his desires for a change in American poetry, Williams says "we as loose, disassociated (linguistically), yawping speakers of a new language, are privileged (I guess) to sense and so to seek to discover that possible thing which is disturbing the metrical table of values" ("Field" 286). His "I guess" reveals the responsibility involved in the "privilege" of creating a new, American form, one that acknowledges the participation of all American art forms.

The poems in this collection interact with the visual arts in a more subtle fashion. Typographically, I seldom stray from the left-justified, centered-on-the-page format that predominates in contemporary American poetry; however, I do experiment with altering line lengths for visual effect, as in "Perilous Stuff"--

He still sings you into those decisions
your parents said not to make
without a husband--

college courses,
what to do with the insurance money,
whether to care again
when caring failed once.

I intended the effect to be subtle, the hyphen on line three shortening the line, emphasizing the widow's loss through a pre-empted statement allowed to extend beyond the line. Lines four and five set off the "decisions," followed by the manipulation of lines six and seven to indicate the speaker's true concern. The relatively "safe," left-margin-flush spacing in my poems reflects the solidity I expect from my subject matter and language. At this stage in my development, a consistent visual format is important to the overall quality of the poems, which depend on language more than form to generate meaning.

There are exceptions, like my attempt at a more free-floating visual form in "Energy." I tried to keep my diction simple so the placement of the lines carried more of the weight of the "meaning":

No work of art
can capture
the clean lines
the imperfect symmetry
of a kiss
at an angle
that unfocuses you
floats you in
with memories
of the last time
we kissed like this
when you said
it meant something

Throughout the poem, the evolving form choreographs the language, moving the reader in concert with the form:

lines intersecting lines
shapes crawling
across a canvas

The placement of clauses serves as punctuation (double spacing for periods and commas, the "triadic" movement indicating phrases), and groups lines for emphasis (the blocked sections "center" important ideas within the poem). This poem was far from "organic" in development; that is, its line spacing and development did not emerge through one "automatic" writing; in fact, it went through multiple revisions before the form was "opened," and several more to achieve the present form. My process does not involve organic composition, but many of the concepts of fragmentation, balance and flow can be directly attributed to an understanding of Picasso, Pollock, Frank Stella and Marcel Duchamp. As my poetry evolves, more visual experimentation ("Energy" is the only one that made it into this collection) will undoubtedly come to the fore.

THE POET AS ACTOR/DIRECTOR

In his "Postmodern Poetic Form: A Theory," Jonathan Holden characterizes poetic forms based on "nonliterary" analogues, including poems employing narrative structures in which "the poet has removed himself fully as a character, and we are conscious of him only as a peripheral presence, as 'The Author'" (31). It is Holden's contention that "the lyric category dictates a generic persona, a subverbal subject matter, and an organic rhetoric deploying a high degree of imagery" (23-4); in moving away from traditional forms and prosody, "the more [the poem] will be compelled to seek, as a basis for its form, some non-literary analogue" like the letter, the conversation, or the confession. Holden continues by establishing a continuum of "personalization" ranging from the relatively impersonal speaker of the lyric to the participant in a more narrative mode of

expression (26-7), a speaker "no longer...singing to himself but complaining aloud to a listener" (27).

How do we account for the speakers or the characters that inhabit such narrative poems? The narrative poem, borne out of the epic tradition, is hardly a "new" form; Tess Gallagher provides a possible explanation for the "revival" of narrative poetry:

Perhaps in the case of storytelling, the poet must supplement Pound's dictum to "make it new" with an acknowledgment that the reader and listener may also need to "hear it old." This certainly goes back to storytelling's oral roots, in which mythmaking provided a tradition for scooping up history and fitting it to already existing mythical patterns...it is now the intimacy of voice, used as a poetic strategy, which establishes the hear-it-old requirement of the ancient narrative impulse...the convention of intimacy....serves as a kind of telescopic lens through which the poet's experience is actually magnified and brought emotionally close to the reader. (69-71)

It is the "emotional closeness" to which Gallagher refers that bears most directly on the responsibilities of a theatrical director and the actors he or she directs. With the poet removed from the equation, the poem becomes a performance; behind the scenes of the action, the poet asserts control over that performance by creating characters and manipulating their movement on the "stage" of the page. Or, as Robert McDowell asserts, "The poet's personal psychological drama must be presented in the context of a community that exists outside the poet and also includes him" (104). McDowell claims that narrative poetry's

inclusive nature expands the poem into a performance space in which "the lyric, the meditation, and the story are seamless partners," much as the playwright, actors and the director function as a unit in the production of a play (109). Of course, as Holden asserts, the same process occurs in writing fiction; however, the nature of the poetic form as an active genre lends itself more effectively to theatrical structure. For instance, William Hathaway's "Wan Hope" begins in the voice of a soldier in the Trojan War:

After we got suckered and lost the war
there weren't any jobs or any place to roost,
so we just humped along close to the coast
scrabbling one day at a time. Now, on this
one evening, see? (135)

Hathaway's poetic process approximates the process a Method actor goes through in preparing for a role, one which involves more thought to motivation and other internal factors than straight "research." As with the other arts, a direct analogy is impossible; *Energia* is enabled by the center of the comparison--discovering or creating a voice appropriate to the character/speaker. A typical Method acting text describes the process--determining the character's typical actions, language, reputation, mannerisms, and necessary stage directions--that results in a character that is consistent and believable. Further, McGaw and Clark cite Stanislavski's concept of "units of action," also known as *beats*, quoting Charles Marowitz's definition: "[a beat is] a section of time confined to a specific set of continuous actions, or perhaps the duration of a mood or an internal state" (142). As it relates to action, a character's *objective* is his or her goal in a specific beat.

Hathaway's speaker reaches his objective in the first stanza--he witnesses Aeneas' breakdown over the pictures in his home then walks on to find "dinner, a

bath, maybe a girl" along with his fellow soldiers. The second stanza requires a change of set, of lighting and costume:

But that's crap; I wasn't there. This
part's been just a poem, a parable
meant so cold souls can't understand
and be forgiven. But now I'll tell
the story behind the story.

The poem makes an abrupt turnaround here as Hathaway's speaker reveals his true nature. The *Aeneid* story was just a metaphor, and the actor steps to the skirt of the stage, breaking the "fourth wall" between himself and the audience/reader and telling the real story--an account of helplessness in watching a girl get raped by a group of larger, stronger football players:

...They took the cutest girl
upstairs, clamped her neck in a windowsash
and ganged her from behind. We sat
out on the curb away from the lights
under a sickly moon with the other girl
who just whimpered when we spoke
and wouldn't let us touch her.

The *Aeneid* narrative is relevant, and the soldier deals with his situation far better than the poem's true speaker. Hathaway strips away level after level of artifice to achieve the kind of intimacy Tess Gallagher claims this kind of poem can achieve, while relating a story-within-a-story narrated by its main character. The result is a performance of which the reader gradually becomes an integral part.

In discussing Shakespearean acting, John Barton claims that the language is all-important, that language is characterization (58-9). Nowhere is this more true than on the printed page. The poem often acts as a set of stage directions for

characters that emerge from the poet's mind and evolve throughout the course of the poem. The medium of poetry allows for changes, even abrupt ones, in the size or nature of the "stage," effects like lighting and sound, and internal and external movement; here the poet takes advantage of these possibilities in presenting a story that flows smoothly from scene to scene and makes its point in one level after another.

"Wan Hope" provides excellent examples of the poet's alternatives regarding staging. The following passage illustrates Hathaway's manipulation of time (from past to present) and space (from the claustrophobic scene of a gang-rape occurring near a pair of helpless bystanders to the cold atmosphere of a classroom). It is easy to imagine the way the stage--lighting, audio levels, and performance space--transforms to fit the new scene:

...Then I said this, "Listen,
those girls should have known; we did
all we could." Which is crap, of course,

and I suppose on the blackboard of an ethics
course before a warm crescent of faces
some yellow chalk could screech this
so a rubber-eyed pointer could jab it:
accidie. Cowardice in greek, as doctors
always scribble names of sickness. The point,
again, is that I was there--again
and again and again in places so stupid
they're hidden not merely from cunning
but from wisdom itself. And I never saved
anyone for Love and Freedom and Art...

The speaker moves from past-tense memory through a heavily-detailed theoretical present to an up-close personal narrator a la *Our Town*, one to which only we the readers are privy. This poem makes its own progression from a more traditional "lyric" speaker through varying levels of personalization. At the end of the poem we share the speaker's world, just as a theatrical audience shares the intimate thoughts of narrators who step outside the events of the play to comment on the action.

My own experience with writing narrative poems relies on similar issues of theatrical staging, behind-the-scenes manipulation, and distance. My history with theatrical productions has led me to see each character as a living, breathing entity. A poem like "Security Electric" is as much a dramatic text to me as a poem, at least in its execution:

"I'm really very happy,"
she says, reaching for her spoon
and stirring sweetness
into her coffee.
She wraps both hands
around the mug,
inhaling warmth enough to peel
strawberry-dotted paper down the walls.

I chose to open with dialogue to set the scene, similar to lights coming up as an actor speaks. The dialogue is mingled with action, the female character stirring her coffee, which she repeats throughout the poem. Stanza two occurs in flashback, the two characters fully engaged in their former relationship; the speaker's reverie is abruptly broken off in stanza three by the "female lead"

reasserting her current situation--"She says the wedding was lovely,/ sorry I missed it/ or she forgot to invite me."

These characters no longer know each other, and the speaker begins to question whether he ever really knew her. The curiosity that prompted his visit is answered in his own realization at the end:

Her coffee must be cold,
since all she does is sit and stir
spoon after spoon of sugar,
turning the coffee light
and thick, hardening in the mug.
Now the baby's yelling,
demanding food, or a change.

When the audience applauds and the lights go up, this speaker is satisfied that the part of his life that included this woman is over; her satisfaction no longer matters in light of his own discovery. In revising this poem, I tended to treat it as an isolated scene, and I tried to manipulate the language to affect staging choices. The final stanza provides the best example, as I chose to repeat the stirring image then focus on the coffee, the cup, the sensory stimuli in the room. I move from Tess Gallagher's intimacy to the distance Jonathan Holden claims comes with narrative poetry. The baby makes the final statement in the poem, speaking for a speaker who is no longer involved and a mother who can't speak for herself.

The narrative impulse repeats itself in this collection; I appreciate poetry's ability to blend the narrative structure of a play with the language of the poetic tradition, and some ideas really function more effectively as stories. Particularly, the "make it old" impulse of storytelling in tandem with the "new" concepts from contemporary developments in painting and music inform my poems, enabling me

to make sense while treating language as a substance I can manipulate to my will, offering me the best of both artistic worlds.

Note On The Poems

The poems in this collection seemed to fall fairly easily into three categories, proving that the poet's state of mind during a particular period contributes to multiple pieces. I gravitate toward themes of loss and uncertainty, and speakers who continue on despite negative circumstances. In my poems, as in life, sometimes these speakers succeed, sometimes they succumb to the forces poised to drive them over the edge of despair. The ability to survive is a strength of human will I find fascinating.

The poems in *Perilous Stuff* deal with relationships--between man and woman, man and society, man and the self. Many of the speakers in these poems feel trapped inside lives over which they have no control, codified by some unseen force. These poems are frustrated, dealing with issues of external control, external pressures, habits that can't be broken and insurmountable difficulties that could have been inspired by "dirty realism" a la Raymond Carver. The speakers believe they have no recourse, no redemption from lives in which they feel trapped. Reality is so unreal for them, the line between the two blurs. They would just as soon turn on the TV and stare at it, hoping to gain some ground from it, hoping that it will save them. The poem "Perilous Stuff" deals with two common characters in this collection--a young widow and the man who is involved with her, trying to understand her pain and put his life with her in perspective. The speaker comes to terms with his strength in this poem, and with the fact that he will stay in the relationship for the moment. The widow and her lover appear in several poems, each framing a moment in the relationship until its end in "Black Widow." In this poem, the speaker has reached a point at which he

knows the relationship must end, as someone who fits into his new, self-aware perspective has appeared to take the widow's place.

Modern Hieroglyphics explores the enigmatic codes we apply to our interpersonal relationships, subjecting lovers, friends, relatives, even strangers to a mysterious path leading to our true thoughts and feelings. The "Stephanie" referred to in the poem "Modern Hieroglyphics" is my first therapist, and the poem concerns the labyrinth of the individual attempting to find his own path through his head, with the help of a conscientious professional. After all, no journey can be undertaken by a reader until the poet determines the direction of travel.

It is this self-aware perspective that resonates through the final section, *Rise*. These poems deal with the end of the journey to self-understanding, the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel." The speakers in these poems are beginning to understand where they fit within the world, and to come to grips with events in their lives that were too painful to deal with before. "Rise" itself deals with another theme in my poems, that of overcoming a southern upbringing. Unlike those "Southern writers" who celebrate living and growing up in the South, I treat my Mississippi upbringing with skepticism. The characters in all my "southern" poems feel as if they don't fit into the traditions set around them like stately old oaks, but the "southern" speakers in this section realize they must leave the homestead to find themselves and live their lives free of traditional expectations. My long poem "Digging Deeper" particularly casts its speaker in a life that is crumbling as he returns to the Mississippi Gulf Coast family home he hasn't seen in years. His realization at the end of the poem underscores the fact that the South isn't always romantic, that sometimes home can be the most frightening place to be.

The poems come full circle from the spark of a need for understanding to the beginnings of that understanding fully realized. The progression is a difficult one

for the speakers of these poems, and at times they dip into self-pity and despair. In the end, though, as in life itself, the strong survive; they do so only with the individuality and perception that allows them to put their lives in perspective, like the artist cropping the world down to a size he or she can then portray.

Jacques Maritain claims, "Art and poetry cannot do without one another," although he makes a distinction between the two:

By Art I mean the creative or producing, work-making activity of the human mind. By Poetry I mean, not the particular art which consists in writing verses, but a process both more general and more primary: that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self... (3)

Maritain's "inner being of things" is analogous to the materials of any art--color, motion, language--and with the process the individual undergoes in expressing this Self. Maritain continues his theory of poetry by explaining the poetic act as an expression not bound by its physical product. The page is only one state of poetic utterance, one of the many states--oral, visual, structural--that comprise poetic knowledge.

I attempt to keep multiple states of expression in mind in my composing process to take advantage of the strengths each offers to the final piece we call a "poem." The poem's status as Art object depends on this commingling of elements into Octavio Paz's ideal of a work that is simultaneously intellectual operation and magical rite, clear enough for interpretation but always resistant to any one form of critical analysis. Like the other arts, Poetry arises from the heart of the creator, only to be understood in the mind of the recipient.

My creative experience, which has ranged from musical expression to painting to drama and writing in all genres, has taught me that no art exists in a vacuum.

Vocal exercises and singing performance effects spoken performance of poetry; years of percussion training and performance influence my written concept of rhythm and cadence; developing an appreciation for the visual arts and theatre through "dabbling" has made me aware of issues of structure, visual form and characterization that I have translated into writing. I can't imagine writing without incorporating ideas from other arts into my expression; language is infinitely flexible, enabling it to function as color, sound and movement according to the poet's design.

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I. PERILOUS STUFF

Shell Casings

Bullets, bullets, bullets,
a rain of artificial
constructions, weapons
lost to their projections,
uncertain of destination
or purpose, pursuing
the goal of the man
or woman pulling the trigger.
There's no hierarchy in death.

The half-literate scrawl
of personal philosophies
in war diaries lasts as long
as the paper it's printed on,
as life in proportion to flesh,
the weakest possible substance
for holding a soul.

How much has to die
for the lonely woman to call
the man she sees, speaks to,
just for a moment, every day
on the way to work,
as if he'd like to share
a pot of coffee,
tell each other life stories?
How long before those stories
no longer have to be lies?

There are deaths of the body
and deaths of the spirit;
one offers release and relief,
some say a new beginning.
The other, offering nothing
but a constant, stabbing reminder
of being unique to a fault,
often happens in a crowded room
and in the knowledge that somewhere
on the other side of the world,
in some unattainable grotto
on the outskirts of a small town,
happiness hides in the weeds
repeating its singular mantra,
reflecting all of human hope.

Fragments

Nothing matches up; maybe that's why
I'm sitting at home,
watching CNN,
trying not to react.
The news is all I want now,
reality in digestible slivers
I can have with juice
in the morning,
before stumbling into a day
where I have to think.

But I'm always doomed to watch,
as if I'm always seven,
watching Dwight Stevens
chop a turtle to bits with an ax.
I thought about the blood
for weeks, flowing slowly,
freshness steaming out
through immediate air contact.

The shell fragments
rocked back and forth,
no sides seeming to match
any other pieces,
to their own cadences,
impromptu cradles
for a rage that's grown,
or worse, been suppressed,
since that day.
I wonder what he's doing now.

No, I wonder what you're doing now,
as I talk to the machine
your new husband bought
to take my drunken midnight calls.
I wonder if feelings can sink
into the dirt like turtle blood,
if love goes stale so easily,
if the puzzle pieces you left
might make a picture.
At this point in the poem
Wolf Blitzer would come on
saying no, ladies and gentlemen,
this is no dramatization,
it's real. It's really happening,
and the world is still here.
There's been no reprieve.
You can't return to a channel
that's been blocked out of memory.
The news is all there is.

No,
I won't leave another fragment
of an actual conversation
on your endless loop cassette;
your message is loud and clear.
You can't take my call right now,
but as soon as you can
you'll get back to me.

The Inevitable Result of Civilization

"And the Lord answered me, and said, 'Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it.'"

--Habakkuk 2:2 (KJV)

How does one question words
that send him running
to the empty vaults of dictionaries
dusting off vocabulary there
only to find nothing
but a pile of empty boxes?

What kind of man can deny sounds
he knows he's never heard before,
too familiar to be new,
too consistent for coincidental origin,
too beautiful to dismiss as noise?

The same man who, walking through woods,
misses two symmetrically
perfect leaves, but knows
the trunk of each tree must be real
since they're rooted in visible Earth;

Who connects the good in everyone with himself
and the bad in himself with them;
Who sings old friendly songs
as long as he knows all the words, and sings
the way he's sung for years;

the same man who believes
the words he writes and speaks
are his alone, used correctly
only when he struck his type-keys.
When it's held up to light,
his paper is blank, his ideas
so fiercely grained inside himself
there's no way he can share them.

Homeless

Someone is walking perhaps
between parked cars
in the doorways of office buildings
long-dead storefronts
and he wonders if you see him
if his destination
means anything to you at all

He won't tell you this
of course
but in his musings
he wonders where you're going
or if you really know

For an instant you pass
he looks like you
moves his left hand
as you move your right
and he looks bewildered
like you
until you feel yourself
being forced to grin
like an idiot

When he moves away
you don't follow
He grows smaller
in fading daylight
you smile
secure in the knowledge
you know as much
about his destination
as he does

Meditation in a One-Way Mirror

I'm standing around
nursing a drink, groping
for something sleek and shiny—
less a woman than an emblem
of what I'm told is proper feeling.

The wall benefits
from my support, but my support
comes from the big nowhere
hidden in overnight purses
and personalized plates,
the myth of belonging
to a column of 7-digit
numbers in a sealed black book.

Privileging the visual sense is easiest,
substituting the enigma of a look
for its underlying emotion,
a vague honesty lost in the fog
of successive nights in bars,
practiced lines in a play
that closes after opening night.

Who says the eye
is any closer to reality
than ear, or nose, or fingertip?
The sound of distant crying,
smell of apple shampoo,
or the brush of a hand--
electric, when it's meant?

If seeing is believing,
then better men rely
on catching searchlight eyes
in rooms thick with smoke,
boozy breath
and idle chit-chat
where conversation should be.

I defy someone to tell me
why sight, so dependent
on the WHO and the WHAT,
is anything but elusive,
while the WHEN and WHY
and HOW of this social equation,
abstractions fleshed out
only when you take the time
to know someone,
vanish in the passion
of the well-played game.

I defy you to tell me
where my sensibilities slipped,
when I became less of a player
and more a willing pawn
pushed around the board
by a lone, lacquered nail.
I can't see beyond what's there,
a failure of vision that changes
with the brightness of room lights
or a lonely mirror's whim.

Hallways

I.

He had no idea how he'd come
to this house, this room,
this bed with faintly perfumed
light pink sheets,
sorority letters on everything.
All he knew was his waking
as a true-to-life,
one-night-stand clichés
and the distinct sensation
he was still wearing a condom.
At least it was safe.

He got dressed, circled the room
taking in party photos,
multi-colored teddy bears,
wine bottles recycled
for candles dripping frozen wax,
ironic next to his dark suit
and proper tie
draped over the brass footboard.

Something that might've been wine
sloshed from one side
of his head to the other.
No note, no roommates;
He found his shoes
on the porch, side by side.

II.

From cliché to statistic,
the careful life
he thought he lived--
plugging figures into columns,
food, rent, expenses,
daily seriousness funding
nights spent in clubs, restaurants,
a new city every week.
All numbers.
He was Successful--
He deserved it, didn't he?

To him, these hospitals
always smelled the same;
he smelled a monopoly
on cleaning products.
He'd buy stock
if he weren't beyond chemicals--
AZT and the other acronyms
shortcuts to a slower death--
focusing on memory
to make lists of lovers,
men and women,
supply them to another stranger
in a long line of strangers.

III.

The janitor standing in shadow
watched them pass, just a few
business associates, people
who read about AIDS in the papers;
They filed in quickly, quietly.
The janitor thought it was sad
that so few came to this funeral,
compared to the girl
last month, same disease,
sorority letters everywhere.
He thought the world erupted
that day, sliding past the casket
to the photo mounted above it.
They carried teddy bears
and T-shirts,
remembrances of a life
so fast, so full of friends
and laughter,
in the end so short.

No one said a word
at either service,
and the furtive silence
was more accusation
than celebration.

The janitor stood
leaning on his mop,
felt the dead cold
creep into his chest.
Everything we once held sacred,
passion, love and trust,
reduced to doubt and suspicion--
always strangers,
always alone.

Curb Feelers

She stands on the corner,
attitude intact,
earrings dangling to her shoulders,
cigarette hanging from unkissed lips,
dreams pushed all the way
to the back of a heart
that stopped feeling
long before the right boys
bothered to notice her.

At first I want to introduce her
to my neighbor's son, the one
who wants to work on foreign cars,
buy her a pink dress and wave her off
my front porch like a father.

But do I really want to open
my passenger door, invite her home
for a shower and a bowl of Campbell's soup?
Could I trust myself to passion
I developed before she was born?
I pass this corner every Friday,
wishing I'd dated in high school,
and here's my past, the girls
I watched but couldn't feel,
the release that lay restrained
while I was sexually peaking.

But now the peaks of
thirty-three year old breasts
pushing out of a blonde's tube top
steal my attention, and the girl
drifts into guilty memory.
All I want to do
is fuck away the frustration,
lose myself in the same
absence of passion
that creates need,
obscuring the fact
that the way things are
is nothing we did,
and nothing we can do.

Charity

I started working the phones in June,
marked off a name for every call,
selling tickets to the wheelchair
basketball game for children
whose handicaps kept them at home.
The "athletes" spent the ticket money
on beer and women for the post-game show,
but that wasn't my business.

My business was commission;
Morning Man Mark showed me how
to coax housewives from their Hoovering
long enough to listen to his voice
melt like margarine in their ears.
Mark started in radio, discovered
the money was better
in synchronized, all-day flirting.

His walrus mustache twitched as he yawned,
said "Yes, Madam," brought a mug
of coffee and Southern Comfort to sleep-starved lips.
He told me I learned fast,
said we could start our own
phone bank, make a mint
off lonely women and shut-ins.

One day, as I rubbed blood
back into earlobes
and turned up the noisy fan,
Mark worked his verbal magic
on a Mrs. Gardner.
"Yes, MA'AM, the kids'll be there;
We just want to give 'em
somethin' to cheer at, a little smile."
He smiled himself, tooth gaps
offsetting yellow cigarette stains;

"Having trouble hearing you, ma'am,...
you like my voice, do ya? Well,
thank you, ma'am."

Covered the receiver, whispered:
"That ain't no Maytag--
this one's got a vibrator!"

He stared at the phone
like the monkey in *2001*,
amazed at the power of a bone
that evolves into a spaceship,
his future and past
all lumped into one.

And I was struck by this man,
scamming entire populations,
living more life in a year
than all nineteen of mine,
staring open-mouthed
at the vessel for a loneliness
equal to his own,
the sheer electricity
of the right voice
at the right moment
in the right corner
of lives that never quite turn out right.

Drive through

Like the gaping emptiness
of a bed a lover has just left
to go to the bathroom after sex,
his world simply shut down
the day she left,
after work.

The bank was busy,
cars lined up at the drive-through lanes,
plastic whoosh of pneumatic tubes,
the smell of new cash slipping
into someone else's envelopes.

Rates were up,
but his interest was down,
or sleeping, or even gone
for all he knew; the house
too quiet--the silence

muffled the TV, his thoughts,
the microwave making that night's
identical frozen dinner
which he ate in his recliner,
thinking about reading the paper,

wondering if later, crawling
between cold sheets, he'd remember
something of her, her perfume,
the way her body felt against his,
her voice whispering goodnight
as she rolled over to go to sleep.

But nothing came, and all he'd invested
in her--trust, opening
a space for her inside his life,
Sundays in bed
telling secrets, listening
attentively to hers--
would have no return.

Tomorrow he'll awaken,
tie the same tie he tied today,
stuff the world's legal tender
into tight white envelopes,
eat his lunch alone,
count the days until
he meets someone else
as others might count their pennies
to roll, exchange
for something real.

Lycanthropy

Internal clock working
far better than usual,
he steps out onto the balcony
knowing it's ten to six,
far too early to be awake.

At first he's struck
by the sun, a reminder
that today is another day
he'll remember--
strolling down pristine beaches,
staring at bikinis
attracted to Florida's light
like the first bugs of spring.

But then hunger attacks
and he thinks of the steak
he'll wolf down with eggs
when room service begins,
the five-course dinner
complete with champagne;
the sheer chill of night.

He decides that bed
is where he belongs.
He closes the curtains,
smooths long hair
down the back of his neck,
removes the blood-stained pillowcase
just to make sure
he won't dream this time.

Black Widow

Foolish or not, I believed
in this woman who, bringing me
homemade soup one moment
and hours of angry silence the next,
called herself the best thing
that ever happened to me--
as if she'd painted
the pictures on my walls
and delivered the morning paper
then slipped back in bed beside me.

The news comes slowly; no mail
carrier is responsible for more
than his own bag, but the whole
gets delivered eventually.
I figured it out the day I drove,
alone, to the hospital with chest pains.
I'd just left her house; her phone rang
infinitely as I clutched myself,
searched for my car keys.
The doctor said "Acute Indigestion"
in a voice reminiscent of hers
when she'd inform me she needed time
"to be herself." True enough--
"Herself" differed sharply from the woman
she let me know--
it wore tight T-shirt dresses
while mine wore jeans
and was rarely in the mood.
She didn't drink coffee, for godssakes!

As I sit and divine my future
from a handful of job offers
in faraway, mystical states,
I know she's in a bar somewhere,
drunken wink dripping down one eye
searching for that good man
who'll force her into place,
replace her military husband's memories
with another set of rules
I could never make, myself.

And the best part? Her opposite
is on her way to visit.
The coffee's made, the bed
unmade because she doesn't care,
and these words come as easily
as they refused to before,
rendering my newest new life
in stark, unmistakable black and white.

Shades

She always fell asleep saying
how wonderful her marriage was--
hunting for the perfect chair in junk shops,
chopping vegetables together
for soup to begin a long, cold night,
picking out names for children
they weren't ready to have yet--

Then she woke him up crying,
rocking like an autistic child;
I don't know if I can.
He held her, let her go,
held her, dropped back
to lean against the wall.
Fear shocked him
colder than plaster.

He knew about the fights
and the cheating,
different sides of bars,
eye-flirting with strangers
to retain the thrill of being single;
He imagined their shapes
silhouetted on a drawn shade,
throwing arms in the air
and objects at each other.

He wished it were easier
making love to her in the dark
while she kissed pictures of her past,
naming each one with a glance
to the side, a shallow breath.
Creatures seemed to form
and dissipate in the ceiling
laughing at his inability to say "I love you"
knowing she couldn't respond in kind
since her memories were the only love
she thought she'd ever know.

He wished he were too deep asleep to feel.
She stirred; he slipped out of bed,
put on his shirt, began reconstructing
his way to the bathroom.
She pulled the pillow to her like a lover;
he blazed a trail down the hallway,
pulling the walls to him for support.

Worship

Like a racquetball court at midnight,
nobody playing but him,
the words rebound
 off the inside
 of his skull:

Your car's not ready.

You're fired.

I've met someone.

Each word a fissure
along the same stitched line
he's sewn up so many times;
a pinhole in a condom,
the slit of a papercut,
diagonal slash of a knife wound.

Now he sits in the second-hand chair
impressed with his butt-print
worshipping the only god
he can hear, the TV
in its shallow cave,
taunting him with lives
that work in twenty-three minutes,
hour-long testimonials
to weight loss
and hair replacement.

He'd like to have some metaphor
to hang the emotions on,
but there's nothing
but glass to sweep up,
and the bottle of vodka
he bought on the way home today
won't help; he needs
a Roseanne to yell at him,
a Claire Huxtable to holler
at the kids,
some aerobic exercise model
to love him into a stupor.

But that's not the way
this show works;
he channel-surfs
another couple of hours,
never settling on
any one experience
so he won't get attached
to life between commercial breaks,
gone with the closing theme.

His sitcom long over
for the night,
he turns a deeper groove
into the center
of the bed,
canned laughter echoing
through the room.

By-Products

The woman with the hospital bed
in her living room
closed her eyes as she pulled
on an unfiltered Camel, focusing on us
through the resulting, painful cloud.
She smiled because it hurt,
reminded her of the dried figs
in her X-rays,
and of how little time she had
for storytelling.

Five minutes of coughing,
and she reminded us she stood line
at the Oscar Mayer plant,
"Back when you knew
what was in the weiners.
Nasty, but you knew."
And about the boy who fell in the vat
back in '39, how they got him out
without a hand
then fired up the machines again.

"You kids're in love," she said,
"Makes you smile real open like that."
Then she tipped Jim Beam in a coffee cup,
a tumbler for me, gestured me to the kitchen
for Pepsi and a beer for her granddaughter.
I measured each story by the kitchen clock,
by the way I sweated off the fiction
that Rhonda and I were still married.

She sent us to the Piggly Wiggly
across town--"best prices," she'd say--
with the same weekly list:
Beef bologna, hoop cheese, cartons
of Camels--"filtered for fancy company"--
Coke and beer and a gallon of milk,
a couple of loaves of Wonder bread.
"Only the real stuff--no by-products."

The doctor gave her full reign
for her last days, all she had;
the worst things for her body
and the best for her imagination,
seeing in Rhonda and me something
we couldn't sustain ourselves,
the beginning of a life together
that ended before it could start.

The bourbon burned past my heart
to settle in my stomach,
and I looked at eighty-plus years
of anecdotes and empty,
fanciful hopes for her progeny
and I realized all her life
was composed of by-products--
of a husband, work, a family
who loved her enough to leave her alone--
and I began to plan my own escape.

Roadwork

Driving from Vicksburg to Jackson,
slowed by constant, state-funded
roadwork at Bovina,
I see Chris Farrell's face--
lined, scraggly beard--
behind a circling orange flag.

He doesn't recognize me,
only pushes me through
with a flick of the wrist,
eyes already on the car behind
with the practice of a career flagman.
It's been 10 years, but I remember
being a junior on the bus
and talking to Dana, Chris's girlfriend,
reflected in his shades
as he watched her board at school.

She cried that day, distressed
that her parents had caught them
in the shower together.
Glazed, she said she couldn't
see him again, her daddy said
he'd blow the boy's head off.
I told her it would blow over,
but she stayed glued to the window
watching her happiness blue into the trees.

The newspaper said she got home,
loaded her father's boyfriend gun
and placed it in her mouth.
The police chalked her outline,
interviewed her friends,
consoled her parents like innocents,
then came looking for Chris.
We all signed affidavits--he was
negotiating line markers with us
at band practice--but accusation
is conviction in a small town.

Now, as he directs me
safely around a half-mile hole
in the right-hand lane,
I think about how gentle
he was with Dana,
how death is the only journey
that's certain, guaranteed.

Roustabout

A three-hundred-and-seventy-nine-foot Ferris Wheel!
At least that's how it seemed to me, standing small
among midway smells--hot dogs and beer--
and the shuffling of livestock.

My parents had to drag me all the way to the car,
where an attendant strapped me in and winked.
Then the slow sweep up, taste of bile building
in my throat, some small revelation
that this was my life,
that nothing I did could change that.

Now the woman I secretly love giggles
on the phone with the man she's convinced
is the latest eruption of love in her life,
and I feel the same trepidation,
walking on ice in oversized shoes.
But since I'm her "friend" I get to chop
and slice potatoes and onions for supper,
pretending I'm oblivious to her joy.

I don't want to be alone on her sofa,
climbing ever higher out of stiff, clipped carpet
taking me higher than I can comfortably go,
so I wipe away absent tears, walk into the kitchen
to see if I can help.

Key Lights

What happens when I find myself
in the same chair night after night,
old girlfriends' photos boxed
under the bed with the extra blankets
my family doesn't need in Mississippi,
thumbing the remote from world
to videotaped world,
searching for one that fits?

There she is, the woman in Potemkin
reaching for her child as he bounces
slow motion down the soldiers' steps;
I know the careening carriage
is the last thing she sees,
but I wonder if I've seen my own future
bounce away through too many scenes
that turned out unfocused,
leading ladies slipping out
from under the credits
as I stand, blinking from the lights,
and drop my popcorn?
white fluffy possibilities
shower to the floor,
each one a sibling
to the one next to it.

Engaged three times, each show
cancelled for lack of interest,
I simply got old, dated
before a second run,
released to video only
to languish, dusty, on the shelves.
Maybe that woman never had another child,
grieving too hard to allow
a new life into her own;
Maybe a star wouldn't spill
his popcorn when the pressure's on,
but I'm no star. I'm just a viewer,
my love lost to gravity.

I reach down to pick it all up,
salvage some semblance of life
to stuff into my empty bag,
and I hit my head on the seat
in front of me, standing into
a Three Stooges film festival.
A punch, a kick, and a "Woo-woo-woo,"
and I'm back on the floor, lying
in a pool of butter, cola and candy goo,
back wrenched with pain.
As always, I'm stuck
in a script I didn't write,
can't direct, will never see--
my life all trailers
with no big feature premiere.

John Wayne rides into the horizon
again, and I'm still lying here
bathed in the browns and oranges
of a sunset I'll never witness
directly, my own key lights
having burned out so long ago.

Perilous Stuff

Your memories are your anchor,
pictures he left behind holding places
of emphasis on coffee table and desk
in the rooms you see most often.
He still sinks you into those decisions
your parents said not to make
without a husband--
college courses,
what to do with the insurance money,
whether to care again
when caring failed once.

But no amount of memory
can disturb needs that move in waves,
washing over you
whether you recognize them or not;
someone to make you laugh,
someone to make love to you when you can,
someone to hold you when you cry.

I'm in a rowboat on those waves,
hanging on as you hold that anchor chain,
pushing at the oars with extended arms,
feeling both ends of my spine
strain to keep me afloat
against a tide of comparisons.

I can see you on the deck
of the ship you built together,
hair shining thick and dark
against an even darker sky,
staring into that sky
through brown eyes,
watching for a lift in the clouds,
relief from your constant rain.

II. MODERN HIEROGLYPHICS

Spinster's Field

You were six the first time
you saw Grampa's farm;
having wet the bed,
you crawled under this sky,
pulled it up to your chin and dreamed
of clouds that sang your name,
deeper sleeps you haven't had since,
except long-distance whispers of hours
lost in your inner mind's playground.

They're the songs you'd sing to your own children
had the Earth turned swiftly enough
for fertility and desire to share the same bed;
six was a beginning, of language and of friends.
The second time, half your learning behind you,
you took off your shoes to commune with grass
and the night flickered with possibilities.

Twelve burned into the soles of your feet
as twelve does when you run it away,
and you hummed the song the wind whispered
through the trees, between a kite's bones.
This time the song remained in the reflection
of sunlight in your new watch crystal,
rhythms tapped absently by thoughtless feet,
shutters creaking on rainy, no-play days.

Years have passed,
the land unchanged, but you,
oh, you've grown too old
for Grampa and his stories
of animals and secret places.
Reality's too close to you
for belief to cloud the lens.

You realize you're kneeling now,
moisture seeping into the knees
of well-hemmed mourning slacks,
and that tears come without prompting;
Twenty years since you last saw this sky,
and it remembers you.

Sleep

The boy gets up, four a.m.,
stands in front of the window unit
seven feet from his bed.
The cold blast draws out
bed sweat, blows off whatever
thought repeated in his head
so many times since bedtime.

At five, you're not supposed
to think at all, much less
worry about Mom and Dad,
a million homeless puppies,
the grades you'll make
when you get into school;
he might fail "naps" in kindergarten,
since he can't sleep there, either.

Has he been bad?
Does his Sunday School God
ignore his floodlight nights,
or is it the dark,
smell of fingerpaint and Play-doh,
posters coming alive, tapping him
on the shoulder just for mischief,
but there is no explanation.

Five years, two months,
head full of spiders
creeping up sink drains,
desire for a kitten,
how many days it will be
until he can drive a car.

Yesterday the teachers sat him
on the highest stool he ever saw,
asked him to read--out loud!--
a book about horses to the class.
As he read, he swore he saw
jealous faces grow longer,
expressions grow harder,
constructing walls around his mind,
echoing one consistent thought:
I don't want to be different.

Now he worries about that,
the stool teetering on uncertain legs,
floor tiles half a mile down,
those faces singling him out
for the simple act
of recognizing words in Mama's lap
as she read him to...

Sleep. School tomorrow.
Mama will fuss if she catches him up.
He slips back under the covers,
closes his eyes tight,
struggles to think himself down
to a darkness with no books,
no animals in trouble,
no distance but the walk
from bed to air conditioner,
no longer necessary
with the room so comfortable.

Security Electric

"I'm really very happy,"
she says, clutching her spoon
and stirring sweetness
into her coffee.
She wraps both hands
around the mug,
inhaling warmth enough to peel
strawberry-speckled paper
down the walls.

I remember when she drank it black,
spiked with Southern Comfort
on nightly drives through the middle
of soybean fields,
where she hung her bra
on the rear-view mirror,
stuck her head out the sunroof
to yell at nobody in particular.

She says the wedding was lovely,
sorry I missed it
or she forgot to invite me,
and that these past five years
of breakfast and dinner,
and cleaning up between
have been nice, a safety
she never knew before,
then scoops more sugar
into one of the Security Electric cups
her husband brought home
for their anniversary.

I tell her all our college friends
have moved on--graduate school,
entry-level corporate jobs,
new beginning in teaching and sales--
and she could do the same.
But that life became fuzzy for her
when she met a man
ten years older than her,
started making her own
little people, two with one
on the way.

She didn't recognize my voice
on the phone when I called;
maybe sorting laundry and trying to watch
kids and *As The World Turns*
simultaneously precludes memory.
Now, today, she studies my face
as she speaks, trying to place
the events I recall so easily.

Her coffee must be cold,
since all she does is sit and stir
spoon after spoon of sugar,
turning the coffee light
and thick, hardening in the mug.
Now the baby's yelling,
demanding food, or a change.

Straddling the Mason-Dixon Line

In my dream, I lift you weightless,
carry you up the stairs
like Rhett Butler, our Tara gleaming
with artifacts of you--
curtains so gauzy they're barely curtains,
brass birds on tiny, intermittent shelves,
hand-stitched bears on refinished school desks--
and our sunset's at least as bright
as the fresh orange juice we brought up
from leisurely trips to Florida.

Our south was the old South in a new,
bigger way, ivory columns restored,
ground fertile as the days
cotton grew high and gentility reigned.
We played our roles perfectly--you
the hostess, decorator, mother,
me doing a real day's work
driving a barge downriver,
letting my silly childhood dreams
of writing sink into the mud
under the shallow Mississippi.

We were the fulfillment
of generations of poverty,
wrapped in dirty linen
tilling uncooperative soil
for little return, surviving
and preserving the ideal
of a South that stands alone,
confederates in the arms
of tradition, lovers
in a bed of Magnolia blossoms.

When I wake up, though,
the bad back that kept us
in separate beds reminds me
there's no way I could lift you,
and your momentos fill a corner
where I put them, gently,
for when you retrieve them;
it's raining outside, another day
in Vicksburg, funnel clouds
forming and releasing
over the river. It occurs to me
maybe I should write this down,
try something creative for a change.
The South may rise again,
but today I'm not certain
I want to be there when it does.

Pappaw

I wanted to rip off that dead man's suit,
leave him in T-shirt and nitro patch,
one hand thumbing the remote, the other
demanding something from someone.

Here was a man who'd always been loud,
bellowing over taxes or blacks
taking over the world, demanding whiskey
in Christmas fruitcake, calling for
more coke, another pillow, the remote control.
He stopped just long enough to breathe.

And sure, he looked natural lying there alone,
as natural as anyone forcibly silenced
by kleenex and sixteen layers of makeup,
a stiff illusion--
like he'd been to church this decade,
like he'd smiled all the time,
like he'd understood grandsons
who didn't want to get married yet.

I make my own demands
with the same energy;
I want to be the only one who knows,
exasperating, sweating, eating
whatever I damned well please,
handing down a legacy of brute strength
to my own kids as they resist
the tendency to stand in the corner
at Christmas, or just empty that bottle
of fruitcake whiskey, untouched each year,
or watch the presents being opened
and wonder who their real family is.

Pocket History of the World

First there was a loud noise;
then the monkeys left their caves,
shaved their fur and began
to build houses to hold
their posterity. On the Nile
they all wanted to control
they had some wars,
and some of them died.
Survival of the Fittest magnified
the existence of the individual--
if my club's bigger than yours,
I'll kick your ass.

Lots of wars--
we like 'em loud and bloody
so we can build monuments,
take pictures of our children
sitting on them.
Wars lead to governments;
now our governments declare war
on someone else's ideology
(The other's always wrong).
Histories are gauged by wars
leading to domestic strife,
begetting petty squabbles
that turn into everyday arguments.
It's all out of time, out of
anything but the hurricane Idea
and Experience, living in whatever
boundaries define our world.

Still monkeys, we hobble to corners
we chalked out earlier, defend them
with violence, a gritty white line
more important than a fellow's life.
Tomorrow, whoever's left will scratch
his initials on the last tree
surrounded by yellow tape--
"Police Line: Do Not Cross"--
try to chronicle events
locked inside its rings,
but he'll be a monkey, too.

He'll crawl back into his cave
pulling the world in behind him
and make red-hot monkey-love
to his mate, and they'll scream
loud enough to shake down
the remains of the houses
someone tried so hard to build.

The Death of Pinocchio

His joints have begun to slow
and crack louder, his color faded
to a dusty tan, white paint splintering
chip by chip over the million days
he's been a man, not just a real boy;
his nose is the only part of him
that hasn't grown
since his adventures ended,
replaced by long days of wood-carving
and children, and their children,
circled around to hear the old stories.

At night the crickets chirp their own stories
and he sits back and forth in a rocker
contributing his voice to their song,
reliving the days when a cricket's voice
was all he could trust, chirping hope
and faith in the power of love;
flowers on the matchbox grave
show his thanks in yellows and greens.

In the life of a simple woodworker,
Gepetto's son fulfills his father's
fondest wish, as his eyes close,
transmogrify to their original wood:
He lived a man, and died
surrounded by signs of life.

The Three Bears

It must've been a sizeable shock
to find the food eaten, beds unmade,
makeup on the pillows,
baby blue chair fragments strewn
across the floor--you'd think
the three of them would be more careful.

A lock on the door, or windows
that shut all the way and stay there
or at least--to discourage
hibernation looters--
some fairyland security system
of acorns and pieces of string!

And why chase the thief out
once you've caught her in the act?
These are bears we're talking about;
imagine Baby learning early
about tender young blondes,
Mother with an abundance
of foil-wrapped freezer packages--
Father bear couldn't be prouder.

Storytellers dress it up
in sweet vocabulary and description;
Those of us who know the truth
know bears eat meat and sleep a lot
and that tender blondes often go
where they're not supposed to.

It takes less than a robbery
to make us check our housekeeping
before the porridge goes cold
and beer gets warm;
bears are no fools--
even an animal knows better
than to leave the cave unattended
in case some blonde comes along
and takes what's yours.

Apples

I'm drunk on the fumes of my friend's love
as he smiles and postures
the premeditated moves and comments
of a man for whom "love" is more
than just an overused word,
for whom the idea of relationships
carries weight the way I do--
low, obvious, in front.

His is a belief in priests
and pets and children,
a kamikaze happiness
only reliable on the surface--
plenty of time to play,
regularity of food,
happy circumstances chalked up
to miracles. I'm too old,
my soul too battle-scarred,
to clutch belief so close.

He walks right up to women,
tells them who he is,
tells them they should love him.
I nurse a drink, mutter
a few ill-placed words,
make sure our table
doesn't blow away while he searches
for the perfect woman,
the ideal situation.

I'm less like him
than Johnny Appleseed,
wandering from place to place
not waiting for seeds
to take root, handing out
the fruits of myself
careful not to open
my pack too wide,
sitting under a tree
drinking cider I saved
for those days
I was my only company.

Now I sit taking swallows
from a double bourbon and coke.
My friend returns unsuccessful,
slams a beer, "Who's next?"
I know who's next; it's him,
bottled into himself.

I keep my bottle hidden
in my backpack in the car
with all my crumbling love letters,
a clean shirt in case of rain,
and a notebook full of scrawls
documenting love I've watched bloom,
so I'll know if it happens to me.

Floating
(for Diana)

We both know the broken line
between friendship and eternal devotion
has plenty of spaces to peek through,
the way you look at other men
when you think I'm not looking;
then again, you never know I look,

swimsuit curving high on a thigh
as you climb a rock to sit,
watch the river flowing past,
me balanced on the surface
watching you backlit by the sun.

Floating like this, hearing you laugh
takes me back to parties,
together in your kitchen, both of us
a little drunk on vodka
and blood-red cranapple,
holding each other, your hand
under my shirt, rubbing my chest,
covert smile brief
as the rumor of a kiss.

I don't know how many years
I've watched, but the peach
of your skin is so familiar,
a color that never changes
no matter how long you stay
in the sun, while I burn.

You smile down at me,
and I realize I stopped
interpreting that smile so long ago,
judging word and touch,
fearful of drowning in love
I've always only watched,
it's better just to float.

Hunger

Maybe I should've married
the Fat Girl; she would
warn me beforehand,
and we could order
a pizza or some Chinese
and wait for apocalypse.

But no, I had to marry
the Beauty Queen, the star
of the senior play,
the most-likely-to
of all time, including
most-likely-to-divorce-me.

Glossy yearbook pages
seal in a me
whose smile is forced,
whose clothes don't fit,
who needs a hairstyle,
a good dose of the reality
that forges personality,
that single-minded confidence
we give one word: ADULT.

Now I can eat alone,
not because I have to
but because I know
how to cook for myself
and clean up the mess.

As I write this
I'm wiping the table
with my free hand,
making the smooth surface shine.

Why make promises
with all their uncertainties
when so many Fat Ladies
loungue on local barstools,
fill their plates at salad bars,
bump your cart at the A&P?

Their songs are slow and sad,
Bessie Smith in perfect form,
and their words are my pain
played full volume on the radio
in rush hour traffic.

When the Fat Lady sings,
what I thought was my life
becomes someone else's
night time entertainment,
a weekly docu-drama

developed for consumption
by eighth-grade educated
nine-to-fivers scraping
the remains of TV dinners
from aluminum trays
because they're easier to clear away.

Modern Hieroglyphics
(for Stephanie)

Your hand, the smallest I ever held,
was strong. You led me around landmarks
like I'd just been struck blind,
describing the black wrought-iron gate,
patches of newly set sod
and recently disturbed dirt,
each color of flowers
in private pots.

Air that had long forgotten odor,
I searched the long-empty vaults
as if for something I'd dropped,
perhaps a cufflink from a tux
worn in some friend's wedding
or distant prom,
any connection to lives
I wish were mine:

conversations over the Sunday paper,
coffee in twin ceramic mugs.
Mornings are still the hardest,
so I stretch them out
till well after noon.

We transcend this cryptlike room,
tape recorder slowly turning,
into the depths of emotion's tomb,
unearthing brittle memories
with your hand on mine
to steady the rapidly growing shovel.

You pull me by the length of both arms
like a kite midwifing a hurricane
and remind me of my own gravity,
of the day I touched
the first marker you led me to,
palms flat on its cool, pebbly surface,
tracing iron letters with my finger.

We mouthed the names together slowly,
offering each letter its own identity,
annointing each name in a small notebook.
The impressions you left read like braille,
and I make a habit of reading them
the way an old man pulls his neck-skin taut
and follows the contours of his face
for a clean, nick-free shave.

Rebuilding the Wreck

"Only Women Bleed..."

--Alice Cooper

It's not Becki I miss,
only the regular pulse of eating
dinners cooked for two,
watching rented videos
I didn't have to choose,
not sleeping alone,
the radio's distant hum
and the lonely squeak of bedsprings
no substitute for her breathing.

She has her own life now; I have
a car to drive around in,
a box of momentos--
the scarf she left,
pictures of us at the lake
smiling, eating chicken,
my last unused condom--
and a bookcase full of movies
I pirated from cable,
other people's visions
of lives that turn out right.

I stand here, hands outstretched
to grab the glowing power-ring
I'm genetically heir to,
but Becki got it with the Bronco
and the kids. I reach out,
pull back a fistful of bills:
child support and alimony,
the note on the Dodge Dart we drove
only with the Bronco in the shop;

I'm not a rapist, a wife-beater,
a callous child abuser;
I'm a nice guy who's out of milk,
a pushover, all the things
my therapist says
I can admit to being.
But still, when I go to the A&P
with the sixty dollars remaining
after bills and payments
and having the boys for a weekend,
I wander the aisles searching
for something canned on sale,
keeping my head down
to avoid meeting a woman's eyes.

Channels
(for jennie)

1.

This bacon-cheeseburger,
so big it takes both hands,
doesn't disappear when i chew
and swallow; it becomes fuel
for the mechanisms
of moving and thinking,
eventually becoming
a mechanism of its own
reminding me to walk more,
exorcise the effects of living
where overeating is easy.

In the same way, she died
but remains part of the inner systems
which, kept in balance,
let me tie my shoes
and eat big hamburgers
and tell people please
don't call me Jeffrey,
only my Mom
calls me Jeffrey anymore.

2.

i magnetize my fingertips
and scale the walls
of the house she lived in,
search cobwebs for traces
of what she called essentials:
pencil stubs
bits of colored paper
notes i wrote her
cut into their component words,
taped together in new order
to reconstruct their meanings
from the inside.

Demagnetized, my fingers fail
and i fall onto carpet thick
with undisturbed dust.
i cough, catching the irony
of such a life sign
in a room so very dead.

The walls hold only the hooks
of pictures she once painted,
and the floor whose furniture
long since deserted it
in a roar of truck-thrown gravel
lies in its ashes
like an Old Testament prophet
who knows his very existence
thumps its nose at death.

3.

The Confederate cemetery
behind the house
is quieter than it should be,
vacuumed free even of the sounds
of wind and snakes,
and I wonder who's really buried here,
or if she could tell me now.

The last time a Ouija board
passed my fingers
she told me everything was OK,
she still loved me, maybe more so;
that night, after the rush
of communication, chills
and tears, i swore
not to play with spirits
until i am one myself,
laughing because we can't make mistakes
and stealing away behind a piece of cloud
to whisper and marvel at
how good we look without bodies,
no need to eat,
no need to sleep,
no worries but who we'll welcome next.

Digging Deeper

I. The Coast

Waves crawl in like chastised pups
over sand darkened by oil-stained feet.
Two sickly crabs--the only ones
strong enough to hang on
to chicken legs in the nets--
fight to the death
in an old pickle bucket.

The pilings of this community pier
hold their own with barnacles
and the few strands of seaweed slime
that make it beyond Ship,
Deer, Horn Islands,
barriers between my world
and the one where everything happens,
with its white beaches,
crisp, clear waves,
water deeper than a few feet.

A couple of boards are all that's left
of the pier. I sit on one.
It bends to fit me, bounces a little
as I look out at the shrimpboats
dragging the ten-foot water for life
as the dredge digs the channel deeper.
All I can see is water and masts
as shrimpboat nets trail behind them,
losing more than they catch.

The dredge plods along
chugging up silt,
oblivious to all but its job.
So much like me, losing the will
to do anything but stare at the horizon,
having lost everything else.
I've always recognized loss--
the fact that nothing grows
in sand or in salt,
half-healed gashes on the legs
of water skiers who'll fall again,
deserted crab nets hanging
over the sides of abandoned piers.

I see more of this as I get older,
chained to a tiny desk
copying tapes in a publishing house,
making coffee instead of music.
As I try to salvage something
of my childhood to explain this life
I wonder if the pier-walkers
need the crabs that ignore
their bait-laden nets,
or if they just boil the green,
deformed shrimp after they lose
faith in it as bait.

II. Shards

Once, when I was seven,
a ski boat hopped out of the channel
to smash its hull on wet sand.
The pilot jumped out, fists ready
to fight the first Coast Guardsman
off the cruiser, punching air,
tossing angry words,
gesturing toward the remains
of his escape from work,
home, maybe family;

I envied that escape, saw the world on TV
so different from my own
and wanted it inside me
like the melodies I hummed
while putting out the trash
or cleaning my room.
I knew there was more to me,
deeper than anyone could dig,
but the fear of using it
and failing was stronger
than the music, and it still is.

Shards of fiberglass
and the halves of a broken seat
still serve as depth markers
for the careless moments
that shape a man's future,
moments I tick off
in my own life today--
early marriage, divorce,
my parents distancing then dying
at a moment in which
I was three hundred miles away,
trying to sell my songs in Nashville.

I saw my brother Scott at the funeral
for the first time in six years;
watching family friends carry the coffins
was like watching the Coast Guard
tow pieces of wrecked speedboat
off the sand bar, wanting to help
as they salvaged the motor,
a lone ice chest,
a pair of shiny water skis
I dreamed of strapping on
and gliding somewhere else.

I wondered if that guy
ever bought another boat
or went skiing again;
I don't know if I could,
knowing the uncertainty
of second attempts.

My marriage went through
attempt after attempt at happiness;
she couldn't love a singer
the way she'd been taught
to love a man who holds down
a nine-to-five and mows the lawn.

III. Fishing

Daddy fished the same way
he worked--up at four a.m.
and don't forget your hat.

Did the fish know it was dark?
Did they sleep?
He didn't know the answers,
or he wouldn't tell me.
We always bought groceries
the day before, filling the cooler
with canned drinks,
meat for sandwiches,
six-packs of Snickers
and little candy surprises
Scott and I didn't see
until we were well underway.

Everything came out of the styrofoam wet,
and we made believe
it all tasted the same.
Some of it did--root beer
watered into cola into lemon-lime.

We were there for the activity,
peeing over the side
only when we couldn't wait,
scaring the fish by yelling,
sliding across the plastic boat-bottom
like clowns in a bass rodeo.

The trip to the marina
always blended into the excitement
of seeing Pappaw's boat,
the "Miss Honey," again.
She was red and white,
with just enough cabin
to get wet around the edges
when it rained, which it did
every day around seven,
right after sunrise.
We saluted the sun with soda cans,
lifting them and shouting
loud enough to ensure
we'd see no fish
for at least a half hour.

Daddy baited our lines,
and we held them in the water
until we got distracted
by a jumping catfish,
some glint in the water.
Scott kept his line in longer;
he believed Mammaw's stories
about fish's connection to the world,
how by catching them
we were letting their babies
grow up to repopulate the ocean,
how we'd bring our kids here someday
to catch their kids, renew the cycle.
I ignored the stories;
I liked to see how close I could get
to the side before Mama yelled
or Daddy got up to get me.

IV. Civilization

After our fishing trips, we went
to the Piggly Wiggly and bought
a canned ham or a whole deli chicken,
which Mammaw and Mama would slice
and serve with garden tomatoes
and lettuce, mayonnaise
and a fresh loaf of bread.
Even then, I wondered:
Did everybody sublimate the desire
to conquer nature
into a grocery store trip,
wandering the aisles
looking for brands
we didn't have back home?
We sure did, just like we watched TV
on stations we couldn't pick up
in Vicksburg, wondering if their news
made any difference in our lives,
then cleaned up to go into town,
wander a mall or see a movie.

Mammaw and Pappaw were still
moving around then.

They went with us
even though they complained
about long walks on hard mall floors,
stores that all looked alike,
the cussing and violence in the movies.
Now I know they really wanted to go,
holding on to us to brave the speed
of civilization growing more
and more prevalent.

Now their "civilization" is here,
and it's taken my childhood world
with it--the pier, the fish,
even the water, so polluted it's opaque.
The mall's still there, of course,
but the Piggly Wiggly succumbed
to a larger chain.

The beach, once so clean
it smelled like it had been
salt-scrubbed, has shifted
into dark, uncertain soil
as much pollution as nature.
Even so, I still like to feel it
between my toes,
a carpet of thickness
that holds me to the world
while I dream out
a still-uncertain future
up above me somewhere,
like the sea birds
that once flew overhead.

V. Progeny

The fish's kids never happened,
I guess, but neither have mine.
The water's too dirty
to support life, and that myth
about "someone for everyone"
is just another fish story.
The water only flirts with the beach,
and the birds we yelled at
from the "Miss Honey" are gone.
Back then we thought they were angels
like we saw in Sunday School,
except these angels dared us to ignore them.
I wondered if they wanted to catch us
like we wanted the fish;
we ignored them as best we could
throwing bread only when the fish
refused to bite.

The birds screamed
when Daddy started the engine,
and a couple swooping down
to investigate;
we were friends,
and their friends always left them.

I feel like those birds today,
nothing but hot wind
to keep me company,
hardly enough waves for a pulse,
weak but kicking, like crabs
fighting for dominance,
unaware it's the last battle
they'll ever fight.

Bridges

This sidewalk is cold.
Trees circle my head
like protective older brothers
picking me up after a fall
in a game of yard football.
I need rest; feel like
I've lost a leg, but I walk
as well as I ever did,
circling around with nothing
but a center of balance.

Of all the hundreds of times
I've traveled this path,
with its leaves that change
and cracks that never do,
this is the first time I've noticed
the deep gray of the concrete
and the earth beneath;
I always assumed it was there,
eternally strong.

The trees that soil supports
don't think or feel,
but shouldn't they be happy
when their branches are straight
and strong, their trunks disease-free?
Some leaves hang on
longer than others
to the trees that bore them.

This is my new tradition: opening
everything to its possibilities,
trying a life alone until trying
is nothing but another cliché,
becoming one only because it's true;

Now I'm breaking anything
that even looks like a rule,
even from a distance,
because distance equals independence
and strength is no more
than an attitude.

I want to chop my own wood,
even if it's from metaphorical trees,
build a fire that won't burn down
and reduce to ashes--a punishment
for Prometheus's discovery,
merely a symbol of my own.

III. RISE

Ape
(After James Tate)

They strapped me into my chair,
tied a pencil to my hand,
forced me to scribble
on nailed-down paper.
What could I do?
I wrote something.
It meant nothing to me,
but the lab techs exclaimed,
Dr. Bluespire collapsed
and stopped breathing,
and I just sat there,
unable to move,
unable to do anything
but sit and wish
for a banana, even a green one.

Now I have my own room
papered in pure, tearable white
and all the bananas I can eat
as long as I keep scribbling.
I don't know what "tenure" means,
but if this is tenure,
I want more of it, every day.
I miss Dr. Bluespire
jumping around gesturing
for me to scratch the paper,
but I've gotten used
to sitting, and scribbling,
and knowing for a moment
what it must be like
to be a hairy little god.

The Man With The Electric Blue Guitar

Stop soloing, you moron!
Play me some arpeggios,
a few delicately-placed chords,
something I can sing over.
How many miles of musical meandering
can you stand before you notice
there's no longer a root,
that your tonal center's
completely de-centralized?

Zappa said "Shut up and play,"
and he meant playing is no more
than listening and making
the next note fit.
They never taught you that
at the conservatory, did they,
cloistered with the attitudes
of a thousand future bandleaders,
no musicians left for members?

Now you noodle up a scale
and down twice as fast,
no feeling but the friction
of finger raking string,
a painter with only one color,
an actor who makes up his lines
as he goes along, nothing
but flashy, empty sound.

Overheard in a Bar

What do you mean, I'm not your type?
Is there a chart, some color-coded graph
on which my shade doesn't fit?
Am I too blue for you?
Maybe it's my redness,
the bold individuality that glares
like a serious rash and says "Stop"
to someone like you, squeaky-pure,
bereft of even an ounce of vice;
Come on, you're in a bar, that ain't
no Shirley Temple in your glass!
Give me the green light,
I'll show you what I'm like
under low light with a CD on.

Maybe I'm in-between your gentle hue
and the deep, rich colors of men
of integrity, of true emotional fortitude,
men who don't exist
anywhere but in the minds
of women who know their colors
or whatever style is in this year,
the ones who dye and re-dye hair
that's forgotten its original shade.

I'm from the wrong part of town;
I earned my blue streaks
from one bad mixture after another,
a muddy, overdone brown
like steak and potatoes, simple
as the bourbon in my glass,
simple as your perfectly smooth face.

Well, if you insist on sitting alone
I'll carry my dull brown ass
to a table the same color as me,
filter in some brown bourbon
straight to my brown liver
while you glow like a rainbow
and glance all around you
in search of colors you'll never find.

Handing Down

Dwight Stevens, you vicious bastard,
I watched you chop a box turtle
into small, bloody pieces.
I was seven; I never knew
a turtle could scream
until you cracked the shell,
blood spurting high as your arm
and the scream, higher pitched
than anything I've ever heard,
steamed into November air.

You said you did it because
it was there, but now I know
it was for the thrill, control
you'd never find again,
career Sargeant Stevens,
after your face glowed
like a skull, grinning red
from the effort involved
in breaking the carapace.

That image haunts me,
the spurt of a scream
every time I hear about
a puppy tossed out of a car,
a baby left in a dumpster,
a gay man beaten by soldiers.
Did you give that order?

The details of you have drifted
into locked memory files
except your name and rank;
but sitting at my computer
entering data in tiny bytes
while you inspect the barracks,
or sitting up beside my wife
in the middle of a deep sleep
as you slumber into oblivion
I see that turtle, bright
red and green like Christmas
splattered across your lawn,
and I check in on my son
sleeping away our generation,
dreaming of the next.

Artifacts

The discarded remains of someone's lunch--
heel of a french bread loaf, scraps
of meat, mayonnaised lump of cheese--
lay unwrapped on the museum steps
as if their consumer had offered them up
to the silent, stone lions.

Those lions, symbols of the bravery
of years spent combing ruins
and digging tons of sand
to unearth treasures for the mind,
insights into the history of a species
more interested in commerce than love.

The woman I love rolls over,
Jeff, turn on your side, you're snoring,
and I turn to her, kiss her,
listen to her breathe instantly
back to sleep.
Such easy relaxation is not for me.
The business we built together
fulfilled my dreams of love,
and of commerce, but the sleep
doesn't come any easier
than it did when I was struggling.
Why?

The antique store pays the bills
and more, my fixture in the community
preserved on plaques--
Business of the Year
Entrepreneur of the Month;
my American dream a roomful of history,
preserving past ages in their trinkets,
furniture, manner of dress.

But I need more here and now,
to take a bite of that sandwich
so the lion will have to bring down
a gazelle with claws and teeth,
take blood and taste the thrill
of a wildness that can't be captured,
dragged into a civilized display,
domesticated of all its passion,
left on museum steps to rot.

I crave the creation of the souvenir,
consumption for its own sake,
love that happens just because it does,
free of the captivity of fidelity
and in-laws and annual reports
and the certainty of weekly sex
and a monthly payroll.

Looks

Just sharing space quenches,
more than sex ever can,
the need for something different,
a whispered half-promise of lunch
or a quick game of something
that makes them both sweat.

They have no excuse at first--
him married, her pledged exclusively
to earning a month's pay--
and just a smile is OK,
surrounded by strangers at work,
visitors searching for the right office;
anything else disturbs daily business,
bridges the careful distance
between coworkers.

After awhile everything's OK,
and they commit to being around
at the same time, conjuring
a mutual image
after a flash of the right smile
generates the warmth to re-heat coffee
and enough light to photosynthesize
wilting office plants.

Do they worry about competition,
the big deal that puts them
on different sides of the boardroom,
arguing with all the fervor
of yuppies scenting money?
Nah...they use that energy
when the subordinates have left,
pulling candles out of drawers,
ordering out, working late.

But that's the best way to cultivate
an affair of more than the heart--
cheating in the mind is more fun
since that's where secret sex,
the kind vows don't cover,
is not just OK, but outstanding;
everything counts,
everything hurts,
everything's devoted
to being free
from real life.

Survival

Whitman said we're alike
despite our differences;
Marianne Moore said we're alike
because we're different,
but isn't the difference
all that connects us?

Isn't that why we love,
to add to the characters
missing from the collection
we claimed at birth?
Animals mate
to make stronger,
fitter offspring
so they'll live longer.

They only have
their bodies to merge;
they have it easy--
we have to judge
gift with curse,
figure out what,
added to this equation,
will turn the one
made from two
into a one that stands
straighter and taller.

But judgement is imperfect,
and no two perceptions
are alike, which is what
keeps us adding up
and crossing out
until we find a formula
we can live with.

Most of the time
We work that formula
in our heads;
Memory lapses regularly
when we don't have
a pencil handy to sharpen
and work it all out
or jab into a palm
to wake us up.

Cherry Street, June

Seems most of my generation welcomes the chance to root to old wooden rocker with a frayed-edge old plaid cushion on old front porch and watch life instead of join it. Shit, I'm old, not dead, besides, there's still old women runnin' around in short pants and their arms don't sag too bad above the elbow and they still got life in 'em. Hey, you're a young fella, lots of energy, most of your hair's still dark, what you doin' talkin' to me when you could be out sampling some of the fruit of your youth? That tenderloin strainin' against them cutoffs and mini-skirts? Seems like I oughta be the one askin' the questions here, seein' as I'm the one with experience and a collection of garters stuck away in the back of a sock drawer that Grandma never knew about, or admitted anyway, but she's gone and I'm still eatin' that no brand peanut butter she hated and vienny sausages and that stuff they call potted meat that oughta be meat, anyway, though it smells like dog food--I draw the same check I always done, eat OK, eat what I want, don't need rubbers or good shoes or any a them CD things you boys always talkin' about. I got the sidewalk and that lamppost your brother knocked out back when we had Nixon and them old joggin' women that sometimes come in to say hello, sometimes bring a cake or somethin' they think an old man with almost all his teeth and a little bittah hair might eat and I get a little feel and they get a little kiss and a you shore do look pretty, maybe next time we'll see if I can still get it up, and they smile and pat my face and say quit living in the past, old codge, you ain't needed it since Bess passed and I laugh and say yeah, she was a good old gal, kind of a bitch at times, but she smiled long and forgave me for most things and we did have them kids, all three of 'em grown and off doin' whatever that school I paid for taught 'em, sendin' grandkid pictures less now that Bess is gone, sendin' twenties in Christmas cards that end up in the grandkids' birthday cards next year--hell, boy, I got too much to do to sit still. Someday we oughta get out to the garage, fix that door so I can get the ol' Chrysler out, drive around a little, maybe whistle at some girlies if my lips'll still pucker. Don't matter a damn, though--old car wouldn't make the trip.

Radio Nights

We all travel life's
communication superhighway
peering through the glass
between adjacent escalators,
taking alternate routes
to adjoining mall levels,
missing each other in the process of travel.

Sarah sits on a single bench
sketching horse heads in her diary--
she's not ready for bodies yet--
alongside hearts, empty save her name
and shadows crosshatched between letters.
She wishes for a man who'll learn
her favorite foods, where she likes to go
for dinner before investigating curves
and the denim folds of jeans
she got from Mama last year
along with a lecture and condoms.

Chris could live six doors down
from her, say 18C;
maybe tonight he'll rewire speakers
with the contents of his Radio Shack sack
before Night Court, a beer, and bed.
He wonders where the women hide
when he comes to the mall,
a single rose on the dash of his pickup.

Tomorrow he'll get up to the radio
that played through the night
in lieu of companionship,
breakfast on another beer and popcorn.
Then he'll go to work writing chords
and basslines into tunes he hopes
will make the cut at the publisher's,
increase his royalties from jingle-writing,
paying the rent and car note,
leaving enough for food and bills.

Sarah will sing with morning songs,
collecting love notes from the radio,
applying them with her makeup
so she'll smile when teachers call on her,
answer like she's paying attention
instead of drawing better hearts
with bigger letters, supplying
other sets of initials to see
how they'd fit, what they'd spell.

Chris writes in major chords
so pork rinds will mean as much
to the public as they do to his bank account,
scribbles a reminder
that crying guitar might help.
He misses the band sometimes,
but it didn't pay the bills.
Now the energy he applies
to insurance and Cocoa Puffs
gives him everything he needs
except the priceless harmony
of sharing it with someone.

Sarah fixes her face
for the fourteenth time--
blush applied sculpture-perfect,
blues for eyes with more red
than eyes her age should show--
ready for a Glamour-Shot,
hoping for a response
from boys who call themselves men,
even professors who content themselves
with looking, winks, offhand comments,
warming the surface while she shivers
beneath her makeup mask.

The mirror knows, and as she goes up
to Chris's down Sarah feels
a rush of familiarity, perhaps
the warmth of faulty thermostats
as a song from this morning's radio
pops into her head, resonating
with the hum of her upward journey.

Masques

She enters through a country song--
something about angels in black denim
and ponytails flying in the wind--
and he falls back into the chair
he was preparing to vacate,
almost filling his lap with vodka.

He never thought about cowboys
in his torn jeans and flannel,
the uniform of the latest rebel
throwing a shaggy mane into space
and singing life is hell,

but she makes him think roundups
and tying off young, jumping calves,
all that fluorescent rodeo shit
they must do in her world,
where his kind of man's at best a hippy,
at worst a threat to careful society.
Not bad for an accountant.

So he watches, and she's alone,
and he slips up to the bar
where she's sipping a beer,
asks if he might know her name.
"Glory," she says, and he thinks
"Hallelujah!" and says it
in his best redneck accent.

She laughs, "you're cute,"
asks if he's hot in all that flannel.
Of course he is, hot from the heat,
hot from bar smoke,
hot in the glow of her face
and the steam of her breath
actually speaking to him.

And damn, suddenly he's a nerd
pushing up taped glasses,
rolling up slack legs
above glaring white socks
Surely she's only being nice,
he thinks, pitying
the poor alternative fool
slinking up to her stool,
stammering a come-on.

He's cute, she thinks, trendy
in a dangerous sort of way
and he's got to know
I've never line-danced in my life.
She imagines him moshing
in a steaming crowd of animals,
diving off an incandescent stage,
hair flying in concentric circles.

He must have shattered the bars
of some traditional cage,
blended into an underground
of constant riot, men
who wouldn't be chained
even by the right woman.
The prospect of trying
to forge those links
make her bootheels itch
with the desire to leave.

Now his flannel begins to itch,
and he pretends to fumble
for the pen in his T-shirt pocket
to scratch her phone number
on a piece of paper fresh
from her shiny snakeskin boot.

They decide to leave together,
and the costumes come off,
skin touching unornamented skin,
and they begin to know
those little pieces of each other
that bind like atomic particles
into molecules of love
or its closest counterpart
in these days of uncertain futures.
They'll wake up different people
than the ones in the bar,
put on accountant blues
and schoolteacher shoes
with the confidence
of a couple whose masks
no longer have any meaning.

The Difference

She asks if I have juice,
fingering her hair
into some semblance of a shape
as I stir eggs into a scramble.

I say Orange. In the freezer
and the moon clangs against
the horizon trying to disappear
as sunwaves puff kitchen curtains
and the world gets suddenly quiet
except for her breathing
and the circular clack
of wooden spoon against pitcher.

Last night she sat across from me
dissecting a steak into edible portions,
unraveling me with smiles
unfocused through wine glasses.
I invited her home for a drink
that lasted the night,
a buzz of recognition turned physical,
less a morning after than a moment before.

I fantasized the standard
lovemaking clichés--sweat and moans
and promises played out
before my bed gets cold again.
Was it the first time, or the only time?
I watched her breasts, her face,
the intensity that stressed her body
into knots slimly bunched around ribs.

She brings me back to reality
draping a bacon strip across my neck,
hands me a bowl of cheese
I shredded at four, waking
in an unfamiliar intimacy,
the shock of sleeping warm for a change.

Cheese and eggs melt together
as she finds my other skillet,
slipping beside me in last night's shirt,
embracing me as the bacon fries,
hissing it notices the difference, too.

That
(for Mitzi)

I dropped that on the ground
outside; it grew
into a knee-high tree,
and a newer, greener that
followed me
to the grocery store,
shadowing me down rows
full of dented, day-glo cans,
pointing out sales,
knocking cart wheels sideways
toward this or that woman
dressed too well for shopping.

I still don't know what that is
or why it picked on me,
but it's unavoidable--
everyone has a that
hiding, waiting for release.
Imagine a store full of thats
motioning from shelves,
whispering, no, screaming,
"Buy me! Buy me!"
then following you home,
bugging you to death
until you, too,
throw it in the dirt
and it blossoms
into a that
too big to toss aside.

Energy

No work of art
 can capture
 the clean lines
the imperfect symmetry
 of a kiss
 at an angle
that unfocuses you
 floats you in
 with memories
of the last time
 we kissed like this
 when you said
 it meant something

I want to paint
hold the you
that ran fingers
through my beard

but all I see
 is the blur
 of a kiss

a slapdash of color

the way Pollock
 might have done it

lines intersecting lines
 shapes crawling
 across a canvas
toward some new
 off-work horizon

The more I dance
 paint slipping
 from brush to floor

in thin
momentary strings of color

the more I understand
that the dance
is the thing

uniquely you

as the portrait changes
new hairstyles
and clothes

a pound or two
here and there

each day's waking decision
to be someone new
and whole

I was an artist
I captured moments
thoughts frozen
never thought again
the same way

now I know
art can move
flow like water
under that ice

and that change only happens

when moments learn

to let go

Rise

"You need every laugh you get
when your home town's stocked
with broken souls."

--Richard Hugo

You return to the places
you frequented as a child--
antebellum basements full of rain,
muddy hills still striped from sliding,
the dump where hidden treasures
leaped out of every corner--
and they're smaller, filled in
with dirt, or maybe years
lost in wave after wave
of progress and growing up.

You know it's here somewhere,
the moment you buried so carefully
to forestall forgetting,
preserve something of the years
you'd all but remembered,
wishing yourself into dreams
you constructed half-awake
waiting for the sun to rise.

Now that they're your life
those dreams are distant,
as shocking as reaching
for a light switch
in your parents' house,
discovering it's lower
than you remembered.
You dig; there's nothing there.

You're searching for a pleasure,
laughter that still echoes
in the haze of a past
you educated away
far from the protected hands
of a not-so-New South.

Then, rounding the corner
of the house, behind
the jungle of a childhood shrub
you glimpse it, the concrete patch
you thought was a philosopher's stone,
initials as legible
as the day they were made
with a stick in fresh cement.

Remember how beautiful she was?
Light-skinned black, as frozen
in your mind as the paintings
in art class, classic,
full-scale reality in boots and jeans,
brown hair flowing past earrings
meant to be seen.

And the laughter bursts free
from your gut as you drop
to the ground
to touch those letters,
try to feel love free
of the cynicism and brutality
of adulthood, of the stares
you never expected at fifteen,
disapproval for nothing
but emotion in its purist, most direct form.

But like everything else,
the reality of her today
is cold, hard, concrete,
long vacant from this stony crypt.
She could still be in town,
frying burgers with a college degree
or raising a new husband and kids;
or did she escape, too,
dredging up the painful memory
of getting too close
across the tracks
only on visits home?

Then as now, She was not exotic,
just real, and memories
make the poorest molds
for any representation
of what she really was.
All that's left are the letters,
saying nothing, feeling
like nothing, reflecting
the sad southern truth
that it was nothing,
never had been, never would be
or could.

DNA

My first great-great-grandchild
will be a boy, I think, and he
will have no remnant of me
except a harmonica
with a G note that sticks
and a couple of poem books
if his past finds me lucky.

Maybe he'll decide to sing
or play an instrument, like me,
or maybe he'll write for pleasure
until someone calls it good--
maybe he'll have trouble figuring
what times what yields a result
or how he built that college debt
out of hours spent imagining.

Maybe he'll fall hopelessly in love
with every girl he knows,
pour his broken heart onto the page.
He'll love to eat, struggle with
the weight of his body and soul;
bit by bit, trial and error,
he'll learn the mysteries of self-control.

And I'll bet one day, sitting
in a dull biology lab
he'll hear a lecture on cells,
how they reappear in future people
dangling by protein threads,
and he'll envision an older man,
beard tinged with traces of grey
and write about his music,
the women that he loved,
the poems he had to write
that grandpa said were silly.
He won't need a lot of details,
just ideas, impressions of a life
he's never known, but somehow feels.

Composing Myself
(for kw)

Words working too hard to replace touches,
phone bills higher than a month's salary,
I continue to believe in the salvation
of substitutions.

I mail you the songs I once sang
in person, lyrics typed neatly
on the backs of window envelopes
I've recycled from unpaid bills.

There is no continuation
that works this far away,
constantly reinforcing a love
that expresses itself up close;

So I sing into space, accompanying myself
with water heater groans, the pops and gricks
of a house acting its age.
The microphone picks up every nuance,
condensing the thoughts I'm thinking aloud--
pillows twisted, tossed off the bed,
sex and Halston mingling
into my favorite, familiar perfume--
into an Ornette Coleman soup
of random, half-dissonant notes.

In class, your favorite word
was "didacticism";
Now I'm learning, and you're calling
well past midnight for reinforcement
that's safest over miles of wire.

I sing alone, hitting all the high notes,
practicing for the day all is harmony
and unison, long drives into the country
so we can make love in the car,
the house has gotten so old,
so comfortable.

Katherine

For two years, nothing
but Canadian Mist, whiskey blended
with more whiskey
because it was on sale
the night I mourned you
around the hotel pool with friends
and cola cans we spiked
into a thin, tan liquid.

I like that, *blended*,
the way I thought we did
before we separated
and I lost our harmony
to a tone-deaf guitarist.

I missed your letters
on Snoopy stationary--
pages inscribed with dating lore,
how much you missed me--
phoning after midnight
when your sketches
refused to become paintings.

The guitarist brought a date
to your funeral, later his wife,
but I still drank Canadian Mist.
Now he's divorced, and I've switched
to Jim Beam with water,
relaxing with it after a day
of fusing students into their writing.

My new combination
is smoother, and stronger,
so much like I am now,
your best qualities blended
so hard into me
there's no reason to think
they're anything but mine.

Leggos
(for Andrea)

I'm building my own world
of nipped, multi-colored plastic,
each brick matching tightly
with the one beneath,
a solid wall, impenetrable
to all but loved ones
and strangers I can trust.

You sit across from me
assembling a black knight
on an angled white horse,
a literal knight in armor shining
from his new plastic sheen
to come when you call
and wait there on your dresser,
never leaving, steadfast.

Layer after layer stacked,
reinforcing, I build my walls
to last, a place I can escape
to dream my plastic dreams,
learn to really relax
from a world that demands
rigidity beyond these polymers,
a world of rules and deadlines
and people who can't be trusted.

That's why you build more people,
friends who find their vistas
by the direction that you face them,
taking in their surroundings
as part of their very lives.

The longer we build, the longer
we create the who and where and why,
the more you place your fingers
in my city, decorating the walls
with postage stamps and flowers
you grew in your herb garden.

I welcome your intrusion, so gently
and unassuming, your blocks
so much like mine;
It's only natural for you
to place your figures
within my walls
for safety, and for company.

I sculpt turrets and towers
for them to climb to get a view
of what lies outside;
Inside we're together,
merging our worlds into one
that's anything but plastic,
it's so alive
and all the parts fit so well.

VITA²

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