

**MODERN HIEROGLYPHICS**

**POEMS**

**By**

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MODERN HIEROGLYPHICS

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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.

VITA<sup>2</sup>

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