

SUPERFACTA: A COLLECTION OF POEMS
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Remington Park, Oklahoma City, OK, a calm fall night, a fast track, and as the horses come-in I sit back with the rest of the crowd and await the results of the photo finish: 7,1,10,3. I've missed another ten-cent superfecta bet by one horse, so I tear my ticket in half, and begin looking at the next race, filled with that strange and sometimes sad hope of another gamble. I've become somewhat of a regular at the track over the last few years, during my stay in Stillwater. It's a place I go to get away from graduate school and whatever else is going on, to bet, and just to admire the horses. There's a theme here, of course, which I'll talk at length about later, but for now I just want to yoke the image of the horse track to the manuscript of poetry this essay introduces, *Superfecta*, which involves its own risks and gambles. Rather than looking at several specific poems from the manuscript for this critical introduction and discussing their individual styles, themes, etc., I'm more interested in talking about this collection as a whole—its history, composition, revisions, achievements, failures, influences, and so on. Writing a poem is one thing, but compiling a collection of poetry is a different, though not unrelated, endeavor. A collection brings with it structural and thematic problems, narrative problems, and decisions about what to leave in or out, what the book should do, length, cadence between poems, and how it all can (hopefully) reach a state of completion (and publication). I hope that by talking about this collection specifically I will be able to address broader issues of my poetry and poetics. Because what is a book, after all, if not an example of both—a manuscript that stands alone and in relation to a larger body of work, that says something about its author, speakers, readers, and reality.

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The collection that follows is the culmination of roughly two years of writing, and four years of learning. *Superfecta* is the eleventh revision and sixth title of a manuscript that I've been working on for the last three years. The poems within, their order, and the titles have changed as my writing and tastes have matured (or perhaps just shifted). One of my goals entering the creative writing program at Oklahoma State University was to put together a body of work I thought was "publishable" as a manuscript. Early on, I think that I was perhaps too concerned with what, exactly, "publishable" meant. The early versions of this manuscript, most often entitled *Labor Lounge*, were influenced by what I recognized as publishing trends in the industry—especially trends in the books that were winning contests. Most of the poems in *Labor Lounge* had been published, but several, I realize now, were not my best work. Perhaps that version of the book was more marketable than *Superfecta*; indeed, it was a finalist in a solid book prize, but I didn't feel proud of it, and I didn't feel like it was a sound book from beginning to end. When thinking of my own work, I'm often reminded of the following statement by Larry Levis in an interview with Michael White:

Be spoiled in the right ways. If your work feels mediocre, if it demeans your spirit, burn it. Burn it even if the workshop you're in likes it. After all, you didn't begin doing this in order to be a competent or even an accomplished poet. That's like being a moderately good neurosurgeon; they don't exist. No one alive is going to be as good as Keats, but that doesn't mean you have to settle for crap. (42-43)

This was a lesson I had to learn for the book. *Labor Lounge* was a competent collection, maybe even better than average, but it wasn't my best work, and I knew it. And so the

drive for the right book, *my* book, led me to other versions, and revisions. And since I've already mentioned Levis, I'll go ahead and make reference to his last book, *Elegy*, which was published posthumously, collected and edited by Philip Levine. From the first time I read *Elegy* I knew that it was much better than many of the other books of poetry I'd read. It had this way of holding itself together, but loosely, with images such as the Sybil of Cumae weaving their way throughout. It wasn't a "theme" book, though; rather, it was a collection of the best poems in their best order, doing their best to tug against their individuality as poems and their place within the book. As I read and re-read *Elegy* it represented for me the potential of what a book could be.

So, I knew what I wanted my book to do, but I didn't know exactly how to make it into what I wanted, and at the time I don't think I had all the poems I needed to make it into what I wanted. *Labor Lounge* was effectively put to rest, and I printed out all my older poems along with newer work and set out to begin a new collection. Like *Labor Lounge*, the next version, first titled *The Deal*, consisted of five sections, with each section loosely carrying out some thematic thread (love, work, loss, etc.). I worked for a few months on *The Deal*, moving poems in and out, moving them around, and eventually re-titled it *Deal Gone Down*. In both of these versions, gambling was the central and unifying motif. And the book was better, I think, but still not where I could walk away from it and have any sense that it was done. I think putting a poetry collection together is a unique experience in this way because there is so much potential for arrangement or swapping poems out, changing sections, and so on. A novelist might move things around and make major revisions, but the frame of time, or the beginning and end, often seems to stay the same. And unlike theories of the novel, most poetic theories and prosodies deal

with the poem specifically, or the line, sentence, or word. In “Greater than the Sum: How do Poems Make a Book,” one of the few articles written on how to put a poetry collection together, Marnie Bullock Dresser discusses the tension between the poems and the collection, and the difficulty of trying to make a book “greater than the sum of its poems.” Dresser notes that one of the greatest difficulties in collecting poems is that individual poems work on several levels, so that if a poet groups them by theme, the structures may not work well together, or if a poet groups them by structure, the content may not work well together. In fact, one of Dresser’s only conclusions in her study is that “there is no magic or secret or obvious right way to organize a collection of poems” (49).

Sometimes, the poetry itself isn’t good enough to make a strong collection. Other times, however, the structure of the book gets in the way, or there is no structure where a formal design might help highlight the ways in which poems work together. Many literary journals have begun ordering their content alphabetically because it’s easier and they don’t have to make qualitative decisions about the work—none of it is better or worse, so just let the alphabet do its thing. And I’ve heard some poets talk about arranging their books alphabetically by title, letting fate take over in how the poems work next to each other. Granted, I think a part of a really good book is based on chance—we’ll never know what *Elegy* would have been like if Levis had published it himself, for instance, but it’s something to think about. However, with my own work I wanted to have some hand in how the book was read—I wanted to at least give the impression I cared about that. I think often about the many revisions of *Leaves of Grass*, and how Whitman projects his self into each version, coming back slightly different each time, or at a different angle. And although I have no hopes (well, a slight few) of becoming Whitman,

I think a large part of his legacy and influence as a poet is due to the sincerity with which he represents himself on the page, and the sincerity with which he revises that self as he ages and his perspectives on the world change. In *The Situation of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky writes:

Language is absolutely abstract, a web of concepts and patterns; and if one believes experience to consist of unique, ungeneralizable moments, then the gap between language and experience is absolute. But the pursuit of the goal, or the effort to make the gap seem less than absolute, has produced some of the most remarkable and moving poetry in the language.

(59)

I think, in the general sense, this quote applies to the composition of a book, too. In the last year, Noah Eli Gordon, a poet near my own age, published a book with BlazeVOX titled *Inbox*, which is a collection of e-mails from his friends taken in reverse chronological order and placed in prose without any delineation or notes as to where one person's text ends and another person's begins. And while I understand the theoretical parameters of this, and its comment on autobiography, it seems symptomatic of many books I see these days insofar as it takes language as "absolutely abstract" and leaves it in that place and condition. For my own collection, though, I wanted to try, whether in vain or not, to bridge the gap Pinsky discusses, to collect a group of poems that can stand alone but which together become something, as Dresser puts it, "more than the sum."

And so I continued to work with *Deal Gone Down*, and eventually decided that I needed to revise it again in order to make it better. I changed the title again, too, shortly after Dylan released his latest album, *Modern Times*, which has a song that features a line

in the chorus that says “I’ll be with you when the deal goes down.” I consider Dylan a heavy influence, so the similarity between his lyrics and my title was too much. In fact, before the song came out, I had used various lines from Dylan (at one time or another) as epigraphs for the book (along with lines from Woody Guthrie, Loverboy, Aristotle, Ginsberg, and Dostoyevsky). The epigraphs often helped me think thematically about the book, and I eventually settled on the lines from Dickinson’s “#254,” maintained in *Superfecta*: “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers— / That perches in the soul— / And sings the tune without the words— / And never stops—at all— .” After incorporating this epigraph I changed the title for about two weeks to *Little Mythological Bird*, but the title change still didn’t feel right for the collection as it then stood. So, again, I started over from scratch and decided I didn’t want five sections anymore. The more poetry books I studied, the more it seemed to me that five was becoming the magic number of sections to have—there wasn’t the symbolic burden of two, three, or four, and it wasn’t six, which could seem like the author was embellishing. I embellished, and ended up with a collection in six sections titled *Self-Help for the Lost and Found*. And the manuscript stayed that way for about a month. It felt close to where I wanted it to be—closer, at least, but not there yet.

Then, after the horse tracks had shut down for the season, I had little to occupy my free time other than thinking about the tracks and thinking about the book. At some point, the two came together, and I decided on the title *Superfecta*, a bet which picks the first four horses of any given race in order. So, I set to work coming up with four sections, with each section to be named after a fictitious horse picked for a fictitious superfecta ticket. The names I ended up with are “The Martian,” “Domingo,” “Mr.

Jones,” and “Countdown.” This revision marked the first time I really felt like I had completed a “book,” and, more important, it was the first time I felt like its composition reflected my sense of reality and personality. I’d always, as a reader, been fond of books in four sections—I admire the symmetry of a collection like Eliot’s *Four Quartet’s*, for instance. But for some reason I think I lacked either the courage or the confidence to divide my own book into four sections—I’d worried so much about “trends” and “theories” that I’d lost some of the creative nerve that can really make a book, and writing in general, successful. This is not to say I’ve made a successful book—only that I’ve tried to, and that I’ve tried to incorporate a sense of “book-ness” to the collection. Wallace Stevens writes in *The Necessary Angel* that “poetry is a process of the personality of the poet. This is the element, the force, that keeps poetry a living thing...” (45). The history through which *Superfecta* came to be was a vital process for me because it forced me to think consciously about what kind of poetry I write, my personality as a poet, what I want my poetry to do, my poetics, etc. It’s been a long and difficult process, but it’s affirmed my belief in the struggle to write work that attempts to transcend the gap between language and experience. That attempt, and that goal, thus resurfaces throughout *Superfecta*, as the gamble as thematic metaphor parallels the risk taken in poetry of trying to achieve what may or may not be possible.

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And so to discuss themes within the collection, I’ll start by addressing the gambling theme at large, and more specifically the horse-betting theme as I see it connecting to poetry and life in general. First of all, as with writing, there’s a certain aesthetic to gambling—different people enjoy different sorts of betting (or none at all),

depending on their personalities, their interests, and their tastes. Some gamblers dislike the sort of manic state of casinos, so they play lottery tickets. Others hate the machine element of the lottery, slots, and video poker, so they play table games. Some people dislike the human pressure of a live card game, so they play slot machines. And I, like many gamblers, favor the human and animal element of a race, and therefore bet horses.

For me, betting on horses is its own sort of poetry. Each horse has a name (often fantastic) that usually carries a reference to both the sire and dam. So from the beginning of its life, a horse carries a burden in its name and a history and expectations. One of my favorite aspects of putting *Superfecta* together was naming my fictional horses. Whitman discusses in *An American Primer*, among other things, the importance of naming—specifically the importance of American names. He demands an American language that is representative of its people, its cityscapes, and its natural elements, and that the names be American in composition rather than English (thus he prefers Mannahatta to New York). He writes “One single name belongs to one single place only—as a key-word of a book may be best used only once in the book” (27), and that “I say nothing is more important than names” (31). Partially inspired by *An American Primer*, I only actually use the word “superfecta” once within the book—in the poem “Elegy for a Bet that Couldn’t Lose.” I chose “Superfecta” as my title after many previous titles, but it was the first title that actually stuck, that was the right name, I think. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of the word “superfecta” dates back only to 1972. It’s a young term, contemporary, but it carries within it old roots. American horse racing, like American English, is always partially based on the traditions of another country—indeed, all thoroughbreds date back to three Arabian stallions imported to England for breeding

at the end of the 17th century. However, horse racing as it developed in America becomes something distinctly different from the European version (a dirt track instead of turf, for instance), just as the language in America developed its own identity.

Horse racing is often referred to as the “sport of kings,” and still today the top thoroughbreds are nearly always owned by the extremely wealthy. However, if you go to any horse track in America, you’ll find a structural commentary on America itself and its hierarchies. On the bottom level of Remington Park (like most parks), for instance, you’ll find a diverse and wild group of people from upper-class owners to lower-class every-day gamblers. Structurally, many people come down to the lower level in order to mix with the smells, see the horses close up, stand next to the winners circle, etc., but generally the lower classes fill the bottom level at horse tracks, while the grandstands are more likely inhabited by middle and upper classes. Even in the grandstands there are still further divisions—there are open seats, reserved seats, boxes (which cost money), and the jockey’s club for the well-to-do regulars. Part of what I love about the tracks is that, within a minute or so, I can pass up or down between these various levels and representations of America—and that’s something I hope my poetry does.

I worked several manual labor jobs as a kid, with all sorts of people, but most often my dad owned whatever business I was working in. So I always had the strange sensation of being both one of the workers and an outsider. I’ve always tried to carry that feeling into my work. I have a strong instinct to write with some degree of clarity in the Wordsworthian sense, but I don’t expect, necessarily, many of the people who’ve inspired me to write in that language ever to read my poetry. And because I’ve known and worked with and respected many different sorts of people, I also refuse to simplify

my themes and/or writing overtly, to “dumb things down,” because I give them more credit than that, even perhaps if some of them don’t deserve it. But that’s an optimism I’m willing to keep.

Language is, itself, a gamble. Structurally, a gamble is two or more parties agreeing to place worth on some arbitrary arrangement and to pay the debt decided on afterwards. Gambling fails to work when one party doesn’t pay or fixes the situation, etc., but I’m amazed how often it goes as planned. Language, too, involves two or more parties agreeing to place worth on the language itself, and it fails, as well, if either of the parties doesn’t hold up their end of the conversation. It is quite easy to give up on language because we lose at it often and by its very nature we’re never able to achieve any “perfection” of communication. The house always wins. And yet, as Pinsky noted earlier, there’s something worthwhile about the pursuit, and the attempt to say something to someone else. Considering language as a gamble is at once metaphorical and absurd, since so much (if not all) of our society is based in language of some sort or another. Part of what I want poetry to do is deal with the absurdity of this situation, and for that reason I often try to incorporate humor into my work.

For some reason, it seems to me there is less humor in poetry these days. It is likely that since the market for poetry is so intensely driven by contests now, humor has fallen to the wayside (how many comedians win Oscars, for example). And yet humor is, I believe, one of our best mechanisms for persisting. When a long shot (a horse that’s never done much of anything in its career) wins at the tracks, people are nearly always less angry and more amused, shaking their heads and laughing. Long shots are physical examples of both possibility and absurdity; they affirm hope in the American dream

while simultaneously serving as examples of the hoax of that dream. Gambling does that, too. It offers the simulation of an easy and quick route to the top, even as it possibly undermines a week's wages and hard work if the gambler loses.

Shelley writes in "A Defence of Poetry" that under its yoke poetry unifies all "irreconcilable things." We find a similar theme with Keats' negative capability. A horse bet is at once a union between fantasy, reality, and history. One of my favorite parts of horse racing is not the betting, but studying the daily racing papers. The papers have a history of the horses' races, and information about their jockeys, trainers, etc. A horse begins to offer up a narrative of itself through the racing paper, becoming a sort of story. And it is easy to become enamored with a horse for one good race, or workout—it is easy to see the favorable qualities in context to the poor ones, and vice versa. Each horse is, in a sense, its own poem—with a *volta* somewhere that either turns me in favor for or against it. Seeing the horses before the race adds to the narrative—if their ears are up, if they look light on their feet, skittish, confident, like a winner. And so I continue, sometimes against my better judgment, to hope, and to bet, and to write. Writing poetry is often a solitary act and also an act that confronts the technological and industry-based ideals of America. In one of my poems about horse racing, "The Finish Line," I end with the line: "What is beautiful is that they will do this again tomorrow." By "beautiful" I don't mean the situation but rather the persistence in spite of the situation. Language is often nowadays referred to as a "game." And, as we know, games almost always have winners and losers. My hope, though, is that my poetry doesn't lose sight of the fact that the "game" itself is a metaphor for language and for more serious undertakings of communication. I want at once a poetics of the jockey club, the grandstand, and the bits

of tobacco and popcorn left in a dirty bathroom stall. I have no idea whether I get to that or not, but I hope it is apparent that the work at least appears to try to, or takes some sort of risk—in a word, that it gambles.

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Formally, there is not a great deal of range in *Superfecta*. The majority of the poems are written in a slightly longer line without stanza breaks, and if stanzas are used they are most often either couplets or tercets. Most of the poems also begin their lines at the left margin, although there are a few exceptions to these tendencies throughout. My hope is that the form of these poems never impedes or diverts from the content. To this extent the work follows one of the Black Mountain mantras worded in various ways by Olson, Creeley, and Levertov, that form is never more than an extension of content. Just as I hope there is a degree of lucidity in many of my poems, I also want the form to adhere to that openness—I want my poems to be formally inviting, unpretentious, and somewhat consistent throughout the book. While composing *Superfecta*, one of my main concerns was the way poems might look next to each other, how a poem written in couplets or tercets might break up a monotonous flow, or how a poem with a slightly unpredictable form, like “Whole Fryer Baby in Parts,” might break up a group of poems written in stanzas. In earlier versions of the manuscript there was a greater range of form (even some sonnets); however, as I continued to write, I found myself more and more fascinated with the visual simplicity of a poem without stanza breaks and lines of a more or less equal length, and also the possibility of complexity within that form.

Both formally and stylistically, one of my greatest concerns as a writer in *Superfecta* is with the line. In their introduction to *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*,

Robert Frank and Henry Sayre discuss two approaches to a theoretical framework of the line. The first, as discussed by poets such as Ron Silliman, sees the line as a specifically social formation. Indeed, what line breaks do and how they work at any given time is often influenced by how other poets of the same and previous periods are using lines, as James Scully states in the same book: “How a line breaks depends on how line breaks *have been* working—historically, in general, in the present...and in the specific, historically developing practice of the immediate producer of the lines, the writer” (102). Scully’s final nod toward the writer brings up a second approach to line breaks, what could be called the organic model (after Levertov), about which Frank and Sayre note that the line “possesses a more personally expressive, even *autographic* potentiality” (xv). As mentioned earlier, there’s nothing especially original about my line in the formal sense—it’s an adaptation of theme used by several writers in poems I’ve admired over a long period of time as they’ve been internalized along with what I hear as my own “voice” in my head. However, I also hope that through the ways in which I break a line, or turn one line over to the next, I’m able to put a personal stamp on my writing. Historically, many lines visually and formally look and work the same, but through the writing within, and the tension between the line and the content, we’re able to note the distinct “autographic” quality of two different writers of long lines, such as Whitman and Ginsberg. Or, when a poet like Frank Stanford places a constant pause at the end of his line, we can recognize a distinct voice in the work.

As a means to discuss my own poetics, it’s important to point out other writers whose critical work has influenced the ways I think about my work. Over the past three years, my thinking about poetry has been influenced often by Stanley Plumly’s

description of the “prose lyric” in his essay “Chapter and Verse.” Plumly defines the prose lyric as follows:

the intersection of the flexibility of the free verse rhythm with the strategy of storytelling has produced a kind of prose lyric: a form corrupt enough to speak flat out in sentences yet pure enough to sustain the intensity, if not the integrity, of the line; a form wide enough to include a range of reference yet narrow enough to select; a form coherent with and accountable to its sources yet sensitive enough to register variation in the terrain; a form expressive enough to elaborate the most inward experience yet aware enough to attract our public attention. (188)

I remember the first time I read this passage I was drawn to the romantic possibility of such a form. Although Plumly goes on in “Chapter and Verse” to describe other forms of narrative poetry, prose poems, and so forth, my thinking consistently returns to this notion of the prose lyric because of its potential to do several things simultaneously. And later, while reading Robert Pinsky’s *The Situation of Poetry*, I was also drawn to his definition of “discursive” poetry, in which “The idea is to have all of the virtues of prose, in addition to those qualities and degrees of precision which can be called poetic.”

Part of what I connected to in both of these forms is their attention to the possibilities and qualities of a poetics that accounts for the potential of a more prosaic style, or a looser line than that of a writer like Creeley or Olson, for instance. When I first started writing poetry, I didn’t want to write prose, not even prose poems, but I did want my line to have the ease of good prose at times—the readability, the movement of narrative time from one word to the next, the pull. Early on I read widely, and the poetry

I had the most difficulty with and/or disliked the most was poetry that put up walls for me to constantly jump over as I read. I enjoy much of this poetry more now, but I am still drawn to work that has a sense of flow throughout—that moves (not even logically, necessarily) from one place to another, even if it's just between two sentences (as is often the case with Ashbery). While discussing Plumly's concept of the prose lyric, Jonathan Holden notes that it is "a poetry founded on the rhetoric of 'voice'," as opposed to "a poetic based on... 'the rhetoric of silence'—a poetic in which the image rather than the voice conveys the content of a poem" (11). Holden notes that much of Plumly's essay demonstrates that "the capabilities of the two rhetorics are mutually exclusive" (11), but part of what I'm fascinated with about the prose lyric is that it seems to allow for both (or at least tries to).

Poetry often gets divided into binary camps. The phrase "rhetoric of silence" is quite similar to what Ron Silliman describes as the "School of Quietude," although less pejorative. Frequently on his blog Silliman describes the School of Quietude, in various ways, as a conservative poetry which he places in opposition to the poetry of what he describes as the Post-Avant (where he locates himself as a poet, as well). My problem with Silliman's delineation between School of Quietude and Post-Avant poetics is that it makes a dismissive move similar to political talk radio, and ironically places a very limiting definition on the Post-Avant. After postmodernism, I would argue that in the current social climate "post" anything refers (or should) to simultaneity and heterogeneity. Labels like School of Quietude and Post-Avant, while contemporary in name, are quite old and rooted and outdated concepts. Dividing poetry and poetics into binaries never really works—there are always exceptions to the rule, and work in the

middle. And most often it's the work somewhere in the middle that I identify with, especially work that attempts to take all the liberties of either side—work that reads as smoothly as prose but that still relies on imagery, work that has a distinct voice but still uses that voice to convey moments of silence (as Creeley does at times, for instance).

Therefore, for my own work I consider the prose lyric to be a sort of model for potential. I don't consciously think about these questions of poetics when I'm writing, but when I think about my own aesthetic, the prose lyric and discursive poetry are what I most often identify with. And even though I just stated that I'm drawn to the prose lyric because of its ability to encompass both voice and image, I'll admit that I'm probably more affected by a strong voice than a strong image. Voice, for me, is intricately connected to the question of "sincerity" in poetry. Sincerity, like voice, is a somewhat hazy category in writing that is almost always based upon a subjective reaction by the reader. Holden notes, however (after Plumly), poems that "depend on image rather than on narrative 'voice'" take a greater "risk that the poem will seem contrived and therefore 'insincere'" (14). Yet although a poem which relies on narrative voice may appear to more easily achieve a sense of sincerity, I think it's always a difficult endeavor, and, for me, the most important. Auden writes in *The Dyers' Hand* that "Sincerity in the proper sense of the word, meaning authenticity, is, however, or ought to be, a writer's chief preoccupation" (18) and that "Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about" (19). Since Pound issued the imperative to "make it new," that phrase has become a mantra for many writers as they interpret the wording (in some fashion or another) as a call for a constant push to write in a fashion that is fresh and surprising. The problem is, though, as much of

postmodern theory has pointed out, that we are what Bloom calls “late-comers,” and therefore it becomes increasingly more difficult, and perhaps even problematic, to “make it new.” I’ve occasionally been burdened by this concept of “originality” in poetry, but I’m more often motivated to make it mine, or to make it good, than I am to make it new.

And yet, from a certain perspective, postmodernity can also undermine any notion of sincerity, as sincerity is often tied to the individual and intention, which are impossible to know since they rely on the subjective connection of a reader to a text. Sincerity, postmodernism might say, is nothing more than a pose. Often, I make use of the direct address to the reader, just as Whitman and many, many other writers do. In certain poems you will find both serious and ironic addresses to the reader, such as “Friends,” “Dear Reader,” or other ways in which the “I” finds himself self-consciously referring to his readers. It’s quite easy to say this is insincere inasmuch as I am aware of what I’m doing, but I’m reminded often of one of my favorite quotes from Donald Justice in *Oblivion*:

Sincerity may be a pose, then; a pose which amounts to the poet’s *saying what other people believe*. Of course the writer may happen to believe it too. He probably must, if he is going to cash in.

But to say that sincerity is a pose provides only the first of two propositions, of which the second is: *A pose may be sincere*.

It is by means of this second proposition that we approach a revised definition of the sincerity which matters, not in life but in art. Sincerity is *saying what the form obliges you to say regardless of whether or not you believe in it*. A more humane version of this, one which has been proposed by several modern critics in other contexts, is *discovering*

what you mean by or in the act of saying it. The poet—the sincere poet—becomes a performer, a charlatan, a great pretender; art is artifice. What he has to be sincere about is his art. (3)

I enjoy this selection from Justice because it provides, I believe, a context and place for sincerity in postmodernism. To say that an actor is acting is to point out the obvious. The question of whether or not the actor accurately conveys any emotion, or a message, is always a more difficult question to answer and relies as much on the individual aesthetic of the viewer (and/or reader) as it does on that of the actor.

Both stylistically and thematically, I think my work is influenced by a broad mix of what I find “sincere” in poetry—the humor of the New York School, the honesty and voice of the Confessionalists, the romanticism of the Romantics (and many others), and so on. In many of the poems the speaker is often aware of the concerns of a postmodern world (and postmodern theories), but works through the language nonetheless to establish the perception (or pose) of a self, and hopefully some degree of sincerity. As noted in a poem like “Elegy for the Waffle Iron,” the language is at once that which undermines itself but also that which holds out, which goes on in spite, attempting to mean something. I think that the prose lyric, and the tension between the end of one line and the start of another, what Plumly calls “the integrity of the line,” is at once a point of meaning and contention—a move to go onward and pause simultaneously, which is perhaps why James Scully describes line breaks as “the most volatile, productive punctuation in free verse” (109). Since much of this introduction deals with horse racing, and since I’ve already mentioned the last line, I’d like to look momentarily at the first lines of “The Finish Line”:

Because I believe in the standard of word
of mouth, because I listen, because I feel
that the old man in thick glasses knows
something about the odds strung across
today's racing paper I've got my heart
wound up in a ticket I've got my gut
holding out for the gray horse all day.

While trying to avoid any discussion about the merit of this poem one way or the other, I think the first few lines are good examples of what I want my lines to do stylistically. The enjambment in the first two lines with the words “word” and “feel” offers an example of a tension between the prose and the line that I work toward. The first line opens with a sense of faith in language, but that language is carried on through the sentence so that “word” becomes contextualized within “word of mouth.” There’s a similar move with “I feel.” What I find fascinating about the prose lyric, line breaks, and poetry in general is this tension and potential of the line, that the first line simultaneously reads “in the standard of word” from the perspective of the line and also “in the standard of word of mouth” from the perspective of the sentence. It’s nothing exemplary, and it’s probably not the best writing in the world, but I think it’s a useful example of what I enjoy and work for in my own poetry. For me, poetry at its best works toward Keats’ negative capability. It should be able to push toward meaning(s) while simultaneously undermining any one or “correct” reading. In this manner, I think that the poetry of today is not much different than the poetry produced throughout history. Pinsky aptly states that “The quotation marks bracketing ‘Romantic,’ ‘Modern,’ and ‘Contemporary’ indicate (in

part) this same idea: that the problematic relation between words and things does not change, from one time to another, however much stylistic responses to the dilemma may vary” (87). So my style is only one of the many responses to the same problem, but it is influenced by both poetic history and my own specific formal concerns, and the constant attempt to be sincere, even if I am only posing as such.

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In conclusion, I’m happy to report that since I began this introduction, *Superfecta* has been accepted for publication by Ghost Road Press. This news marks the end of the narrative of this book in some ways and in other ways the beginning of a new life for it—in print rather than in the hypothetical. Creating, revising, and worrying over this manuscript has helped me to realize many things about myself as a poet, my conceptions about what I want poetry to do, and how I visualize my poetics and aesthetic. At the heart of each revision, and each draft, and each mounting poem was the hope that my work would change and grow for the better. In this regard, I think that I’ve become both a better student of my own work and a better student of poetry at large. Poetry, as a generally unmarketable form of writing, almost always involves an egotistical hope on behalf of the poet. But what is life if not a gamble? And what is a gamble if not something to believe in, despite the arbitrary nature of its system? I like to think of this book as a large superfecta ticket itself—a long-shot in the vast array of books published every year, but one that I nonetheless place some stock in, and one that I also view as a beginning of more to come.

SUPERFECTA

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

-Emily Dickinson, “#254”

“A horse! A horse! my kingdom for a horse!”

-Shakespeare, *Richard II*

i. THE MARTIAN

Poem with a Forecast on Either End

Ice, wind, the eternal rock star's inscription glowing on a tree
in the middle of Kansas somewhere, *Carpe noctem*, man,
don't let the bastards steal your thunder. In another room,
a woman. In another room a television and a weatherman
spouting off history in the form of record snow accumulations.
Twas' just a breeze when I awoke and by supertime the world
had put on its game face. I'm tempted to tell myself this has
never happened before. One event in the chain of events, one
person in all the people, one city in one state in one country
America you are cold, cold today. I was stranded once on the side
of the road—the middle of winter in flip-flops and a T-shirt,
I'd only gone out to drive, really, and I finally hitched a ride
with some old man who was kind enough to stop for me.
You never really care about that road to Damascus until
you find yourself outside Damascus and looking in. The man
drove along, no radio, only me and him in an old, boxy sedan
full of used auto parts, and he constantly coughing and spitting
out the window, saying This weather is nothing compared
to what it was like in the trenches back in the war. So I felt
guilty for being cold, though that was not his intention. I felt
guilty for having not fought for my country, though as of yet
I haven't seen a war in my lifetime worth fighting for. I felt
guilty for sharing his heater, guilty for being young and maybe
too wild, the guilt of a lifetime of before and after and ever.
I had him drop me off at the first church I saw because I wanted
to walk home. And now I wish I could see him again sometime,
though I doubt I'd even remember his face. I want to say Old man,
I'm sorry. Thank you. You were a real fucking lifesaver back there.
But why do we speak to someone as if our life were a road.
How do we not. And so winter comes again. Come winter, come.
The pasture that has slowly gone brown will soon go white.
And I will take the dog outside, and walk, and run, and make
loud noises against the cold and the stillness, leaving a mark
in the snow everywhere I can because for me beauty is seeing
the world as I am contained in it, scathed and unscathed, guilty
and innocent, putting one warm breath in front of the other.

Self-Help for the Lost and Found

Working out the riddle of the speaking crow
in my head and on the television some man
is reaching out to the world, saying Listen,
I have lived a terrible life and if you don't
shape up you will die miserably. The end is not
the end is what the bird said, in a cage
beside a popcorn machine in this fantastic
flea market on the other side of the river.
I was looking at all the knives and living
my terrible life, because I like to look
at the sprawling array of replica swords
and switchblades and close my eyes where
in one instant I become Conan the Barbarian
or some fearless gang leader on the south side
of Chicago. But the crow brings me out
of this and the dullness of the blade's edge
becomes apparent, but there is still this
sharp-as-hell ideal of a something in my mind
for the rest of the day. And so what does
that mean, anyway, the end is not the end,
and why do I put so much stock in what
a bird is probably just parroting, and a crow,
especially, because if this were a Macaw
it would all be much more humorous, or less
dark, I don't know, I don't even know anymore
which blade-touting heroes are historical
and which are something else. But on television
this poor bastard has gone through hell according
to his self as source and a cameo by his ex-wife,
whom he loved dearly until sticking a fork
in her leg one night while high on meth
for the twentieth day straight. I knew a guy once
to stay on the shit for almost thirty days,
and at first he was like this magic go-go machine,
and then he slowed down some, and then it was
like he was looking at this entirely different world
behind everything else, and then one day he
opened a door and left forever. Maybe that's
what the bird meant—that on the other side
the world keeps going, too. Or maybe the crow
was speaking at the linguistic level, and in saying
that the end was not the end simply meant
to point out the arbitrariness of language as some

ironic meta-commentary on its situation
as the speaker who speaks from another source.
I have no idea, honestly, though that's not
exactly correct either because about many things
I have a thousand ideas. When you walk out of a lot
of these flea markets, it's kind of similar to walking
out of those enormous gothic churches, of walking
out of the darkness and into the light. The best
thing every time is how surprised you are
at what time of day it really is, and how alive
in a completely different way the rest of the world
becomes, and always was so far as you can tell.
There's something about both sides that sadly
reaches out for the other. Like the way
the crow, in its dark little corner beside
the impostor knives and impostor colognes,
continues forever to say the same thing
and everything over and over. On the television
this guy says that we can never go back.
That he's looked and there are no time machines.
But if we're lucky, he says, we can find
something in life to cling to, to hold
and never let go. As if the clinging itself
will get you to tomorrow. Or if not tomorrow
than at least to the other side of today.

Beginning with the Area Code

When I answer the telephone it is Cleo Lane again,
or someone pretending to be Cleo Lane, or someone
calling from the number of Cleo Lane and Cleo Lane

and I have become close friends if for no other reason
than his number is constantly calling mine. But I am not
nor never will be who the number of Cleo Lane is looking

for, I am someone else completely but they gave me this
number which apparently is also or was also the number
of an entirely different person for which the folks at the residence

of Cleo Lane have a great and unending affection.
And they're always asking for some girl who is not here
and they never believe me when I say She is not here

it is only I here, the big ole me, yea, and not and never
the person for which they are asking. If organized religion
really wanted to get organized they would hire a thousand

telemarketers not to market in the traditional sense, but in the new
sense which says Buy me or else. All this would entail
is calling everyone in the middle of the night and saying something

like You will go to hell for that or God sees everything
and then hanging up to leave the person on the other end wondering
Is this a joke or something more. Because every joke is really

something more, really some way to get at the deeper stuff
which was what Corso said about humor, but there is nothing
humorous anymore about the hundred calls I keep getting

from the residence of Cleo Lane, which makes me wonder
who the fuck does Cleo Lane think he is, and who exactly am I
if I can be so easily confused with a number issued at random

by the invisible people in the telephone receiver. And if Frank O'Hara
called me from the dead I would write every word down
but when the good people of Cleo Lane call I don't write anything down,

except that I am writing this down so maybe we're all really just one
big AT&T commune set to motion by the almost endless formations
of ten numbers arranging themselves into these beautiful codes

that mean nothing on the surface but when taken as a distinction
between one person and the next mean everything and mean even
we are exactly who the book says we are even if we were once someone else.

Poem Calling Out from a Little Black Box

This one goes out as some sort of transmission to the Martians, I don't know, bleep...bleep...bleep, even though they're telling me there are no Martians anymore because Mars isn't exactly what they thought it was, or rather it is exactly what they thought it was but not what they hoped it might be. What do they know anyway...bleep...bleep, because I can continue to rely on sweeping and ambiguous pronouns to describe the other I can have my fucking Martians and I can drink Martinis as the ultimate toast to the Martians, and life, Earthlings, is nothing more than believing in Martians even if by another name. Because Mars is so many things I do not know exactly how to feel about him, he is a planet he is the god of war he is also a candy bar that's not bad and as you can see he is gendered by me and also impossible to gender it is everything it is a light in the sky some nights and some nights not. And there is Marvin the Martian and my father-in-law Marvin (not a Martian so far as I can tell) and what does all this mean tell me does it mean that there's no one out there or does it simply mean not where we thought to which I say bleep all you people, bleep your bleeping science bleep the whole bleeping system and to you my Martian friends I say bleep...bleep...bleep.

The Late-Late Show with Galileo

Long and tired and my face drew itself
into a sort of pout in the bathroom mirror
that made me sorry I can never really
slap myself as hard as I want because I'm one
of those persons who always holds back.
I bought one of those clapping contraptions
because I like to imitate god as most of us do
and I like to say And then there was light
and clap my hands, and boom, light, except
these devices are finicky and it doesn't always
work, and sometimes even just goes off
randomly so that my free will and control
of the universe are undermined by who knows
what, maybe the wind, maybe two crickets
making the music of two crickets. It's like Galileo
said, or maybe said, about all objects falling
at the same rate, dropping melons and olives
off the leaning tower of Pisa while making
a mess of the ground below and Aristotle
all at once. Except that's not right either
because somebody else told me this requires
a vacuum—not like a Hoover, you know,
but like no pressure, which is something
I know nothing about even though it was
a definition I used to state over and over
without even knowing the word: No pressure,
man, no pressure, but of course I was
saying this to myself because I felt pressure
all over. Where did Galileo go? I was just
talking about him but now he has fallen
at not exactly the same rate as the skin
off my face. If I stand here forever I will
eventually fill up the sink with a revision
of my atomic structure. And come to think
of it Galileo is probably the wrong metaphor,
albeit a handsome one. What I want to know
is when I clap two hands together how do I
understand sound if I also understand
that my hands are never really touching but only
perpetually getting half the distance closer
to each other. And even if they never touch,
why half, why not a third, or three-eighths,
which was always my favorite fraction

for strictly aesthetic reasons. You see I'm not very good at science but go barging in on all the good people in lab coats nonetheless. All I know is that in the end sometimes the light turns on by accident and sometimes because I tell it to with my bare hands, but what's important to this conversation is that there is undeniably an off and an on, and once I get there no matter how I get there I am able to see.

When Sauntering Doesn't Seem So Easy

Morning and I had started walking,
which is the act of going in acute unawareness
and obtuse melancholy where the angle
opens up wide and says Ahhh, you are not
seeing this clearly. I walked past a liquor store
and I walked into a liquor store and I walked out
with a bottle and brown bag for walking
in my hand. The sword is to the knight
as X is to the man walking. If you've ever been
that good at algebra then I have some use
for you yet. I walked and I walked past a tire shop
and in the background the tires were screaming
at being stretched and burned and glued
around the edges of these beautiful rims for which
they would die a slow and toilsome death
as protection. Behind every queen there is
a new set of discount tires, with their names hidden
and a warranty for seventy-thousand miles.
But as walking is an act of moving I kept moving
and I walked away from the tire shop
with less of a perspective on life and more
of a perspective on the whole story about King Arthur
as a modern-day gangster. I walked past Maple Street
and I walked past Oak Street and I walked past
Pine Street and wondered why in the world I've never
seen a Weeping Willow Street. I'm sure it's out there,
and maybe you live on it, but I was walking and in
my time of walking it was not a street I encountered.
I walked past the downtown and I walked past
the uptown and for a long moment I dreamed
of the uptown girl who died, god rest her soul,
at the hands of late-capitalism and Billy Joel.
I was walking with nowhere to go necessarily.
I was not even necessarily destined for anything.
But I was walking and as I said earlier in walking
I was going. I saw many small worlds in a larger context
and some things didn't make any sense. But there
were people and there was hot food and coffee
and thousands and thousands of streets and sidewalks—
some going one way, and many going another.

Feeling Lucky

This morning my mother told me she dreamed
she gave birth to a casino. A big one? I asked.
She said No, but it had revolving doors and lots
of bells—standard size. Did you gamble? I asked.
She said No, but if it weren't her baby she might have
put a quarter or two in the slot machine giving away
a shiny red car. Ah, to be pregnant with all that.
The only thing I ever birthed in a dream
was a riding lawnmower with a four-foot cutting deck.
It felt something like the opposite of swallowing
a tortilla chip sideways, odd and rough and a little scary,
too. But to keep the grass down I'd say it's worth it.
You're lucky, my mother said, that was an easy delivery.
And I said maybe, but that luck was a lady, I saw her.
When she lifted her sequin dress she had long white legs,
and oh how they stretched across the floor's green carpet,
oh how they glimmered when the buzzers rang.

Broadcast of Another Speech About Forever

Weeks before the beginning of the next football season,
and I am sitting on the couch waiting, because sometimes
the waiting is all there is. On the television they're broadcasting

the NFL Hall of Fame speeches, and I drift in and out
of listening, while Al Davis, rebel owner of the now-again
Oakland Raiders, comes out to announce John Madden.

Or rather introduce, because now that I've said announce
all I can think about are those terrible camps I went to as a kid,
where in the cafeteria if anyone had anything to say, everyone

else would sing this song about announcements, a terrible
death to die, a terrible death to talk to death. I always hated bullshit
songs like that, and coming back to John Madden, sportscaster

extraordinaire, maybe talking our way out of this life
and into the other is the best option possible. And Madden
is a huge man, and a man I trust if for no other reason than he seems

honest, he wears that garment of sincerity like a loose skin,
which is sometimes all I think we really have to shoot for in life.
But watching him on the television now, on his day of immortality,

I can't help noticing how old he's become, squinting into the sky,
and by extension how his years reflect something of my own.
I've got a few white hairs on my chest now, and I don't mind, really,

because as a kid I was one of those who did everything they said
would put the hair there, and now that I've earned it I'd just as soon
it grow old and die in the same place it began. I'm tender

about the beginnings and the ends. And Al Davis is old, too, coming
out with a walker, still dressed in black, though, and silver, go Raiders
you bad-boy sackers of the world. Then Al speaks and Madden listens

and I listen and in Canton, Ohio the sun is shining and in my backyard
I can hear the beginnings of a quick rain. Al says Time doesn't really stop
for the great ones. And I get a chill for a minute, and get up to write it

down, and in writing it I realize that it's nothing that spectacular, probably
ten-thousand humans have said this about another, but then I realize
the greatness of the repetition of some things, and the constant promise

we offer to others to carry on some memory of the body and soul
and sound of a voice crackling on the old speakers of a t.v. set.
Like my friend, who is gone now (I know not where), would repeat:

Love, love, love, love, you sons-of-bitches. And it was more the kindness
in his voice than either end of the words, because words have a beginning
and an end, and also a spirit which carries on forever. And it carries on

beyond the page, and beyond the screen, and beyond the silence of Madden
standing up out of his chair to a stadium-full of applause, a hulking figure
growing slighter every day, in stature, that is, because the legend will live on

in bronze. And what do I have to say for myself now. I don't know.
In four more weeks my weekly ritual will begin again. I'll be watching
a game and Madden will say something terribly stupid, as is his habit,

as is his trick. And all the rest of the world will feel smarter for at least
one minute, while Madden laughs and begins another non sequitur.
As if any one moment could logically follow another.

The Finish Line

Because I believe in the standard of word
of mouth, because I listen, because I feel
that the old man in thick glasses knows
something about the odds strung across
today's racing paper I've got my heart
wound up in a ticket I've got my gut
holding out for the gray horse all day.
When a ghost is running among the living,
when it's horse out-panting horse
my money is on the vapor of the mare
who has worn her way into an almost white.
Born January 24, 1979, a gambler
known for knowing these odds have to be
wrong. I was young and I believed the world
was something for the taking. I was young
and I was young and I was young.
Horse track, Oklahoma City, OK, USA,
and I've got dreams here, yes dreams,
though I realize that these days a dream
is nothing more than a smaller subjective version
of the great big losing machine in the sky.
And somewhere a radio is playing our song,
"Oklahoma," OK, L-A-H-O-M-A, and I hear
home somewhere inside and I hear the odds
of the race already run rewritten into a better version,
and I think of Richard Dreyfus dancing around
the racetrack like a lunatic in *Let It Ride*, Richard Dreyfus
running like he's got a bridle on, a whip at his side,
but he is running because for one brief moment
he feels like there's nothing on his back at all.
This is the movies, I know. He's maybe not even
a real man any more he's played so many parts.
But let it ride. Maybe nothing in the world more fitting
or comforting or terrifying to say. Let it ride
on number 11, let it ride on the gray. I've got the world
outside of these windows, I was young once, I was
young. There is money but this is not about the money.
There is winning, but this is not about that either.
There is the illusion of freedom written on the reflection
of every face in the glass through which we look out.
What is strange is that we have come here at all.
What is beautiful is that they will do this again tomorrow.

ii. DOMINGO

Poem Ending with the Beginnings of a Horror Film

It's the every car that goes tearing through the night.
Where the dream starts to walk in the image of man.
Put your life up on a set of blocks in the front yard
and you can get underneath and see what the motor means
in relation to a cool breeze. Crawl ahead. Cough ahead.
Go ahead and wish for something terribly shiny.
In the beginning I was something else but I was a child
nonetheless who ate his way into a solid structure.
No loss at the initial losing so far as I can remember
but there have been losses, heavy ones, dear reader, along
the way. The ways to California are several and distant
and winding past the gas stations, the people calling
themselves towns, the mattresses and refrigerators strung
across a landscape that I read once looked much more
like your basic everyday heaven. Heathens in the front
yard. Second helpings on our way to the ocean. Heaven again
in the distance of the water or in that pull of the body
as our two-thirds lurches toward its salty home. And salt
for the heart and all over the French fries. I am a long
sight from the dying as I know it but I take
a little in with each passing. It's the automobile
as once scratched out on a pad of paper. It's the America
as once I pledged to. And the ocean as it keeps resisting
the structure of a cymbal. And the hope each morning
I fill myself with, for another long day of driving
to that dark blue motel that continues to wait at the end.

I Pluck You Out

Jimmy my friend who tells me to stop
looking for the map to Atlantis on the backs
of cereal boxes is my friend you understand
because he once picked up my tooth
and placed it in my back pocket beside a flower
I kept for Tennyson who once wrote root
and all, and all in all and thus garnered
my affection in a momentary state of dementia
I'm going to call self-helpless sophomoria.
You see I haven't forgotten. I was led by the hand
once I was led not by Jimmy but I was led
past a field past a dead barn past a dead car
past trees past a trunk and to a river my ancestors
once looked out upon and said I think
we have reached the place we must stop.
And then it was the other side and I
was there and Jimmy my friend was there
and you were there at six in the morning
when the sun comes up and offers the water
the only thing it has to smile about in the morning
in the evening in the cloudless in between. And you
have gone and Jimmy is gone forever
and my ancestors are buried under a swampland
now dried by the shadow of levees except
sometimes when the river opens up and sings
and houses drown and animals drown and children
drown and fish learn for a short while how
to breathe and then not to breathe which after all
is what we all learn which is what Jimmy learned
which is what the ancestors started a fire
to learn which is what Tennyson learned
when the flower went out root and all, all in all
like the birds who take in too much rice or not enough
and one way or another fly into a sort of explosion.

Poem on the Impression of a Welp

Reach into August and pull out its insect heart,
the entrails of misery and mosquitoes hanging
about your arm like when once you reached
into the bathtub drain, dark and slow, and pulled
out everything that occupied your mind,
as the tender strands of a head once held had grown
taut at time's chorus. Composition
and decomposition. The barbeque grills have witnessed
first hand the slow wear of wood from charcoal
to dust to the lips of someone biting into a rib.
You bring the molars. I'll bring the incisors.
Then we'll climb through the mosquitoes
to a quiet spot in the sky, and watch
as the green glow of lightning bugs illuminates
the scene below, of humans standing
in small groups and around fires, hoping heat
and a gathering of bodies might be enough
to repel what is felt only in the minute.

This is the Steeple

Summer and southbound and the sound
of the Allman Brothers on the radio
carrying out some anthem about revival
until a guitar solo and the road and your thumbs
on the steering wheel meet at some point
high in the distance atop which two bars
of steel meet and go their separate ways, leaving
at their intersection a cross sans crucifixion,
so that time and tempered metal become crucifixion
at the hands of we the poor spellers and story
tellers. There was a church. This is the steeple.
Look down there inside at what we call
the people. And all history save that which is
not history takes place in the shadows
of one of these or one of those, but shadows
in general, as the battle between right word
and wrong word took place and takes place
again as you give this Chevy some gas. I say you
because I mean not only you but also me because
sometimes I need a little open space to get outside
myself and say Son, look at what you've become.
You have no faith in the church, no faith
in the people, but faith nonetheless in the sharp
points of the steeple—in the time it marks
across the hillside, the roadside, as the sun moves
from east to west, then east to west, then east
to west again. And I have a faith in this, too, though
part of me truly expects to wake one day and find
things moving the other way. I say truly
and I mean it. I say I mean it and I mean I mean
nothing, and cannot say anything truly. I have
no preoccupations at this moment other than this
and the smell of gasoline on my fingers.
A community is that which builds itself
under the humility of some larger structure.
And whether we sing from the rooftops
or jump from them, there is a high point
we leave behind when we go on our going away.

Long Laundry List Ending in Twilight

Inventory of absence scrawled on the cutting
board, I'm listing the lusts unappeased:
forever, forever alternate, the never in the back
of my hands. Six million ways to die,
every one. Read catalog of the unquenched thirst:
water from the spring, ice from the glacier, bourbon
from the bottom of the open barrel. America,
you are my laundry list of the unseen: Tupelo,
St. Augustine, the California sun. From ocean
to ocean it's each I have not touched.
Geyser and forest fire and the sad shadow
of Nebraska corn. Never in the back of my hands,
never forever, never ever forever again.
I'm making a list of the virtues on the highway
unknown: haul ass, right turn, keep
your left foot in line for the clutch.
I making a list of the places I've never been:
like twilight, west Texas, the always back of the throat.

Poem for the Twenty-First Century Gate Keeper

Thirty days in the hole and when my body proceeded
into the light I looked behind at what was left

and there were words on the wall and teeth
on the ground and the bones of an animal

that once dipped its head into the edge of the ocean,
and in rising determined or was determined

to be no more. Oh, Moses, what is this
pang that tears down my back? Thirty days

in the hole thirty days later outside
of some bar on the edge of some interstate

where the world is coming and going and so in stopping
I have no burden to lay down. Lay down, Moses,

the people are not speaking today. A bucket full
of mouths I feed to the swine who bask

in the mid-day sun and in my shadow for a moment,
as if the darkness I produce at certain hours

of the day can carry over into a momentary salvation.
I believe in none of this and in all. I am not

this image, this body, this anthropomorphic pasture
I look out upon where a break in the tree line

opens like a throat or a pair of arms, where I walk
through into a welcome or digestion

of some organic creature that gurgles in the mire.
Bring us water, bring us loaves, bring us

higher wages and cleaner cells. There are words
written everywhere. There are messages on these walls.

Scratched and bled and bartered in a system
of lines and dots that come together at the echo of doors closing.

Eternia

Jimmy, I'm lonesome sometimes again. In the mirror I thought I saw a bicycle rolling down the street with no one attached. I know we should stop looking at things through mirrors. I heard this rap song on the radio the other day, and it was degrading to many things including me but I loved it for a little while and now no longer remember why I'm telling you this. I went from Natchez to Hushpuckena, and there was a man with a fire on the side of the road. I just signed a contract for a rental plan on this beautiful old voice they had hidden in the back closet. Jimmy, I'm lonesome sometimes again. I've been coughing up the evils of the universe in the sink and watched once more the other night that movie about He-Man. Look at that name. What a strange film there is covering the window. It looks like everything outside is blanketed with the saddest glass in the world.

The Prayer Mechanism

Two days to get home and then one
day to get home and then none and then
home was nothing more than the shadow
of some Bermudan doll made in Singapore,
shaking her hips on the dashboard.
I went out all night and all the moon
had to say was Young friend, this is going
to hurt in the morning. And where was
October then, and where was Minnesota,
and where was Jimmy and the sound
of crickets and then nothing and then
the single crack of a rifle in the distance.
Where were you where was I where was
that long drawl of a voice that could never
distinguish between the pronoun with agency
and the pronoun without. I am not home
but not without home. I am not home but not
without hope. I say these things as simple
affirmations. If I believed in them whole-
heartedly, I would not be speaking out loud.
You see a prayer is nothing more than a contract
with the darkness. A voice is nothing more
than a warm little praying machine. When you
feed the car its gasoline, when you feed the throat
its drink, when you feed the dog on the side
of the road you are always feeding the small
green monster that hides somewhere in the chest,
and asks only that you keep feeding
and that you go. The destination is up to you.
The destination has nothing to do with you.
There is a home and there is a heart,
and there is this thing that crawls within.
From one street corner to another you will find
a long and surviving space. Of gravel
and ground and darkness and halves
becoming halves ad infinitum or forever,
depending on what language you pray with
when you pray for the other side, amen.

Regarding My Sentimentality and Love of Hole-in-the-Walls

In some barbeque joint off a state highway,
you understand I will smell of communion
when I go home, and at this moment the thought
of moist towelettes is too pornographic
to understand. I have been to the edge of reason
and you may be surprised that there were
no guardsmen there. Only a small river
and barbed wire strung across a long line
of two fence posts leaning against each other,
which is what you and I are doing at this moment
in some ways, which is a form of touch if we continue
to call it one. At the outpost of progress
they are pickling more things than you would
ever imagine—knuckles and hooves and okra
and the livers of large animals and in some cases
their own livers, and so I have learned
that when you look into a pickle jar you see
every greed you have ever possessed
or been possessed by, and every patient thud
of your footsteps across the floor as you
waited for nature to take its course. Vinegar
you salty cur I love you. I am pruning
for lack of a better word. And small hands
on ribs and small teeth on flesh and the smallness
of the moment is enough to propel
my weak mental faculties into nostalgia.
I'm waiting for everything to return again. I have
been made plump on ten-thousand stories
about the circle of life. If I am sentimental I am
only because you have made me this way.
I have been forged in the belly
of a weeping old man, posted beside a fire
that continues at a temperature slow and low.

Another Lesson Learned, Again

Tell the countertop I'm alone today, drinking coffee
and wondering how long it's been since I last ate
rhubarb pie. The waitress stares at the big clock

on the wall, and I think she's expecting patriarchy
to end at the top of the hour. I'm tempted to say
Give it up. But my face is not that kind of face

and I've seen the way she moves around a grease fire.
I'm reading the back of a stranger's newspaper
and have therefore also been marginalized. How sad

to be a third-page story. How sad to be pasted
on the fridge. The soup comes and already I have
envisioned burning my mouth. This time tomorrow

you might find me eating slower. Cursing the future
I saw but went on with—skin hanging from the mouth's roof
like a white apron on a hook by the door.

Mercy Mild

At the supercenter we were waiting
for the big televisions to go on sale,
which is to say we were waiting
for a larger version of *The Price is Right*,
in full color and spread across the screen
the way Antarctica stretches across
the bottom of the globe like a pair
of tight, white underwear, the kind
my father used to wear in the bathroom
when he shaved his face each morning
and banged the razor rhythmically
on the side of the porcelain bowl.

In the supercenter there are three versions
of reality. One, that of the law, of those
who move through the aisles in an orderly
fashion, on the right side (which is the right
side). Two, that of the island, which is
the lady in a blue pair of shorts over black
tights, picking up each bottle of shampoo
and reading the label before settling on the first
and moving on to conditioner. Three, that
of the man out front with a long, dirty yellow
beard and a tattoo of Dennis Hopper in that movie
Easy Rider on his forearm, steadily ringing
a bell while some passersby drop nickels
and quarters into a pail for the Humane Society,
and others dig into their pockets, look down and walk on.
And so I lied. Supercenters are no version
of reality, only an image of reality, like the pine-
scented mop bucket that reminds me of a time
in my life when I was outdoors, or maybe
even the moment my old man handed me
the hatchet to cut down the Christmas tree.
The lights are so funny in places like these,
that sometimes it seems when I look down
I see pine needles covering the tile bought
in bulk, but this turns out to be only the sad
attempt at a marble effect. And so the other
version of the image is us staring at thirty
televisions, some small, some large, but all
playing the same thing, a sappy holiday movie
where a boy gets a puppy in a red bow
and the whole family gathers round and drools

while carolers sing Hark, the Herald in the background.
In thirty minutes the young girl with a squeaky voice
will announce over the intercom that all bets are off,
and televisions are being sold near the back
of the store at fifty-percent discount. We envision
a year of seeing the world in a bigger way,
of Robert De Niro's head large enough on the screen
it will remind me of my grandfather when he
screamed at me for leaving the toilet seat up.
Some fellow dressed as Santa walks by
and two kids in the toy section are picking
him off with plastic versions of Uzis.
Bing Crosby is in the background, a voice
soft enough I splurge on the fuzzy slippers,
and all this madness seems to trail to the ceiling,
bounce off the black bubbles that hide
the video cameras, and settle in front
of the speakers that crackle, buzz, and remind me
of a record played over and over when I was young,
while on a screen in the background
a snowman was packing up and leaving town again.

Exit 240B

The chicken-fried steak served with gravy in an iron skillet, the three-thousand pocket knives, the American flag everywhere, even where you'd least expect it, like on the hand dryer in the bathroom or the panty line of some old gal in leather chaps bending over to pick up her cigarette. Dirty mirrors and one clean one. The red vinyl booths, the waitress's name tag, the gold teeth, the missing teeth, the impostor rattlesnake boots. Doo rags and don't rags. Fading blue hearts on every other forearm. One-hundred and one mesh caps with one-hundred and one clever lines about wives or trucks or getting drunk and not knowing the difference. The smell of bleach, the smell of eggs. Low ceilings and fluorescent lights. The musky odor at the counter, the peppermint patties and broken toothpick dispenser. The end of the world. The start of a new life. The lady with her boy under her arm on the pay phone and crying while something in the window makes her flinch. Motor oil. Various chrome gadgets for semis. Bumper stickers. Leather vests. A black, plastic ashtray for some trucker in red suspenders, a hot meal and cup of coffee for every last thing crawling home.

Spanish for Beginners

The sadness of the flowers pushing up
in the backyard too early to listen
to what the groundhog's shadow had
to say break my heart every time because
the cruelest month is not April it is
all those other months that because of one
nice day perceive themselves to be April.
I say this to you, as someone once said
to me, Look, the trees die standing up.
And I have no idea how to feel about this—
is it noble or terrible or natural or just
something contained in the sound
of a morpheme that calls out el from the get go
like an instructional Spanish tape in the car
pointing to everything outside and repeating:
el árbol, the tree, el árbol, the tree, el árbol,
the tree. Tiny flowers, go home to your
mothers, the winter is not through with all
of us yet. And so what if I push my
obsessions on to everything that grows
in the backyard, along the sidewalks, everywhere,
because I can't stop this because I never asked
to stop this because I don't know yet for sure
if I'd even stop this if I could. I could write
the history of the world on one petal even
knowing that somewhere along the way
that petal would become furious at being history
and disappear forever. I'm thinking if you
gave me the right pen and microscopic vision
I would try to spell out the guttural sound
I've held within me for an eternity nonetheless.
And I don't even know what it sounds like,
really, but it's there somewhere beneath
my diaphragm and cries out at the worst times
of day. And so the trees die standing up
and I hope to but don't know why, exactly,
because so many of us die on our backs,
and I knew a man once to die just like that,
on his back, and he was whispering something
I don't know what but for the sake of all
things green and for the sake of my own
backyard I'm going to say I know exactly
what he said it is what I have said it is

what I'm saying inside as my life moves
from one translation to another imperfection:
el árbol, the tree, el árbol, the tree, el árbol.

iii. MR. JONES

Self-Portrait as an Aging Human Type

Seventeen and cocky but we had to be back then.
I was so sure of the being sure. Nowadays
I'm the one telling the kids (kids!) to take it easy,
slow down, because I've seen too many friends
get into trouble or worse or death just to spite
some cosmic "NO" on the wind. It has hurt. Much more
than I ever expected, when I was just a self-described
soul smoking dope and believing love could conquer
everything. I still hold a version of that person inside—
I hold a host of my past tenses locked away in the rib cage,
you know the bars, the eyes, the voices. Nearing thirty,
which isn't really much, but I've this fear
that the wild side I've pretty much buried, the one
who said Life's not much worth living after twenty-nine,
isn't quite through with me yet. I was twenty
and on acid at a winery in Hermann, MO. It was
the first time I ever really thought about hell. Standing
beside a set of train tracks next to the river, I thought about
love, I thought about commitment, I thought about
life, deeply and without any reservations. Soon I would be
married, soon responsible, soon awake to a world
I couldn't quite catch. Soon sadder than I could ever
have expressed, soon happy again, soon placing bets
at a track in the Sooner state. Wide open pastures, flat
rice fields, cotton, motors, mufflers—the personification
of my youth. I try not to be nostalgic but sometimes
I can't help asking for things back, an act which the code
of my boyhood would never have allowed. All you women,
all you men, all you people I have known, who have known
me, where are we now, what have we been doing. Sometimes
I look up high school classmates on the internet, to see
what has become of the class of '97, to see if others are, like me,
still wondering about the whole idea of purpose. I propose
a toast to the giddy, the broken-hearted, the bi-polar love and hate
of the left-brain, right-brain mechanism. A bad shoulder, a bad
back, a bad wrinkle formation under the right eye, and the body
is plunging through space. We've branched out in a hundred
directions. We've done everything (and lesser things, too)
that the graduation speech compelled us to. I've lost so many of you
to the highway, the airport, the pipe, the bottle, the American dream,
the lack of dreams altogether. These are only some of the many
memories in a long chain of good and bad memories. These days
I can only wish for them to never end. Years gone by and (god willing)

years to come. Hope and hope. For another day of life, another day of living, another day of absolutely nothing better to do.

Lukewarm at the Best Western

We checked into the hotel fifteen blocks
from our house because every so often

even a slight change is enough to keep
our hearts beating. The headboard screwed

into the wall. The water-repellant comforter.
And for three minutes I have a deep regret

about spending forty dollars, as if somewhere
in my mind I'd catalogued the money

for a much nobler use. Who am I kidding?
Myself, for starters. I've been kidding

you for years now, and no one's seemed
to notice. And so we spend the evening

drinking cheap beer out of a cheap box
and lounging around the indoor pool area

they locked up hours ago. Yes, we jumped
the fence. Yes, we're breaking the law.

But if trying to salvage an existence is a crime,
well, then, sue me. We are what we make

of ourselves in idle time. Cheers to whoever
said that. Though I think that maybe

I'm missing the point, as I run back and forth
from the pool to the hot tub, finding it hard

to believe how quickly a body loses
its temperature, how slowly it finds it again.

Self-Portrait in a Chewing Gum Wrapper

Northbound to nowhere in November
or was it later and I was chewing
a piece of gum with such precision I thought
Goddamn I would make a beautiful
chewing machine. Every time I watch a movie
about human robots I constantly have to say to myself
You are *not* a cyborg, and sometimes simply
saying this is enough to get me through
the day. Everywhere I go everyone is telling me
in one language or another that the world
is going to end or that it ended back in 1984.
That book, they say, it already happened.
And grant you I understand what they mean, but I am
not a cyborg, You are *not* a cyborg. And if for no other reason
than my mother once told me when we were alone
that I was special, she knew, I continue to believe
in the essence of my subjective self. This is what
driving alone does to me. This is what
mothers do to children in general. And maybe
the world is over and maybe we're all
just computer functions, but even if that's the case
I'm still going for the high score in the video
arcade. Sometimes I think that's all that will be left
of us in the future. Two-hundred Pac-Man machines
with hundreds of three-letter initials, and all the numbers
corresponding. If nothing else it will look like the boxes
were consistently trying to say something to each other.
I am trying to say something to you, but I'm not sure
if it's coming out right. And I am driving north, but as of now
I don't know why. I keep aspirin in the glove box
because the world on days like this sometimes needs
a little incentive to lay off its inhabitants. I am not a cyborg.
You are *not* a cyborg. And you are not a cyborg either.

Whole Fryer Baby in Parts

It was a few months after a good friend
had her first child, a little boy. We'd escaped
on a Friday night to some bar, and over a beer
and cigarettes she told me the baby had come down
with the colic. He just cries, she said. And cries.
And while she drives him across county roads
at dusk, to put him to sleep, she thinks about
stopping and leaving him on the asphalt shoulder.
Isn't that terrible? she asks. Isn't that the worst
thing you've ever heard a mother say?
I dreamed that night of hundreds of babies shot out
of a diesel's muffler. Their screams followed them
into the low clouds. I heard them crying in that distance
and not one of them came back down.

~

I loved a girl once, or what I knew then to be love,
and she forever called me baby. Baby in my ear after dinner, baby
before we went to bed, baby can you grab me a towel,
baby I don't feel good, baby my tummy hurts.
She liked it when I laid my head on her chest. She liked it
when I said I don't know what I'd do without you.
Baby I'll never leave you she said back.
When I drank too much she said Baby let's go home.
And when I told her I don't see no babies around here
she left me for a man with a nice haircut and inner resources.
He's good to me, she said. He sings to me, buys roses,
and holds me on the couch and into the night.

~

I've a list of songs now I listen to when I want
to get good and depressed. I drink bad gin, because
it heats my stomach up. I drink too much and sing
at the top of my lungs:

1. Baby, I Need Your Loving
2. Baby Don't Go
3. Baby Don't You Do It
4. Baby Hold On
5. Baby I Love You
6. Baby It's Cold Outside

7. Baby I'm Yours
8. Merry Christmas, Baby
9. Baby, Scratch My Back

~

Before I was born, in the hospital, my old man
passed out and banged his head on the floor.
While I was on my way out, Pop was in another room
being treated for a concussion.
Six kids and three times he passed out. Every time
Mom would ask Baby what happened, he'd rub the back
of his head, shake it, and say I don't remember.

~

Baby, I'm yours, and I'll be yours
until the sun no longer shines she sang
to me once. Yours until the rivers
all run dry. In other words.
I was looking out the window and a rabbit
ran across the yard and stopped by the hammock.
Sometimes I think everything ended right there,
as I lit a cigarette and she started vacuuming the rug.
She stopped suddenly. You know I want kids
she said, you know I want forever and a dog
and a little bitty carriage. I turned again
to the window. What I wanted to say
was Baby I'm all you'll ever need.
What it sounded like was until the end of time.

Self-Portrait in a Hollywood Car

Beginning with the end of righteousness
and I put my money in another slot
machine and give the go a whirl while
in a far corner someone is winning
their religion back. Tunica, Mississippi,
Sam's Town Casino, and oxygen for all
of us thirsty little people. If you take away
the desert from Vegas this is what you are
left with: better payoffs and the vagueness
of a much wetter metaphor. And across
the street or down the road the Everly Brothers
as always and everly keep on singing
those top twenty hits of the gone year,
while I mumble along and blow three times
on my chips for good luck. It's morning
or evening or the in between but it doesn't matter
because upstairs there's a big, beautiful buffet
serving prime rib and eggs all day.
And I'm walking around wondering if it is
wrong to pray for good fortune because
I've never really understood god's stance
on this and if I tell myself I don't really believe
in prayer does it make any difference anyway.
I'll tell you what I do believe in, though:
free cocktails, losing money, and fine
automobiles. In the lobby they've got
the actual Batmobile and one of those Deloreans
from *Back to the Future*. And so I'm left
broke for the moment with the question
that has faced us since the beginning, I suppose:
should we try to save the world or just try
to save ourselves. Sometimes just nodding
and saying yes will get you through your entire
life. But what is a good life, lived goodly.
The questions come more often when I'm tired.
Sometimes by saving the world you can also
save yourself. But then you have to look
in the mirrors that line the lobby walls,
and watch the people behind you going in
and heading out, and ask yourself if you are
cut out for this sort of thing, or if the world
is even worth the saving, or do you feel
lucky, punk, well, do you? I walk into the bathroom

and splash a little water on my face, and wet
my hair down because in most cases I like
to make a good impression in public.
And yes the front door beckons as does
my own un-magical, un-technical friend
of a car. But the open floor calls me back
as does the feel of the water behind my ears,
and free coffee, better than you'd think,
and the bells and lights and tables one after another,
covered in their softest and finest green.

Scissors

The radio cracked and buzzed,
the Rolling Stones singing Let's
spend the night together while I

pulled leaves from your hair
and burned them with matches
one by one until my fingers

were black and the air smelled
like a Saturday with football on
in the background. You looked

at the eave of the roof and the Chrysler's
flat tire and not me and for that
I felt like a photograph in the background

of some black and white film, the end
of the mis-en-scene if you will,
or won't, it doesn't much matter

either way. Jimmy said something
once about how we were like two peas
in a pod, and I agreed, except for

there being more than two peas
in a pod. Once you smelt like the river
and for that I loved you. Once you

tasted like canned soup and for that
I wanted a bigger spoon. The radio
buzzed again and I played with the hanger

that masqueraded as an antenna.
I have masqueraded as a cold pillow
and slippers by the bedroom door.

I have worn white sheets and acted
as a ghost when you walked into the house.
Every time I watch a good movie now I look

in the mirror and think about changing my hair.
I'd let you cut it, if you asked. I'd let you turn me
into something handsome, dark and tall.

Handle

I never meant to start counting and never stop,
but if I never started I'd never have known
you to be that never girl who never wore lipstick
never even once. Happy birthday, blow out the light
again. Fold the covers again, go to the sink again,
write your name in bubble letters and ask the world
for another pair of sturdy brown shoes. Let's get this straight:
I never meant everything, but here I've said it
nevertheless. The whistle is blowing. The train is leaving.
I want to sit here by the window with you and think
about the hinges on that lonesome suitcase climbing aboard.

Reception

Sitting in the parking lot of some club house
at some golf course in the middle of nowhere

and everyone is doing lines off the console
of a minivan because it's a wedding

and weddings are supposed to be symbols
that life is moving on—getting better

and also a little bit worse. There's another DJ
inside who like most DJs has surrendered

all his good tastes at the hands of bridesmaids
who want to hear that song they heard

in high school again, that old-fashioned rock
and roll that comes off as one big fucking giant

euphemism for sex and nostalgia, for self-love
and self-destruction rewritten into the lines

of night and loss and thighs and the lines
of the cocaine we're putting up our noses

because the nose is close enough to the brain
and even the brain needs a little vacation

sometimes, and even the heart needs to go
to work again, to the beating of a bass line

rattling the windows, so that the windows
become those instruments that can't hold

everything but try to, bless their hearts,
bless all our hearts because we're going to need

some sort of blessing for this stupidity
when we get home. And champagne

if for no other reason than the bubbles
and that they told us all along this was

supposed to be a celebration. And then later
in the evening, sitting in the bathroom

which is also the club house locker room
smoking cigarettes and talking with all the old

friends about only those things the old friends
are best for talking about. And upstairs the DJ

has had one too many bourbons as most of us have
and it fills our heads and we're high

and then some Motown anthem comes on
and there's dancing to do though dancing stopped

meaning anything a long time ago other than
a remembrance of one single dance in our past

somewhere we'll never let go of, which has
nothing to do with our lives anymore except

that it was learning to put one foot down
and pick the other up, and to hold someone

like you meant it, and then to stop breathing
and start breathing again, which is what life

really was then, and still is sometimes now
even if only as a tired and sad and beautiful recollection.

Portrait of the Author in Rain

It is coming and you know it
and the cows know it, huddled around
each other under the only thing
trying to define itself as a tree
in the middle of the sloping pasture.
September, November, the error
of October. Radios carried on the wind.
The rain, the rain, the godalmighty
rain. The windshield wipers tear
themselves patiently against the debris
of another day. I am coming home, dear,
please have the drinks ready.
I want to sit and say nothing about
the nothing of which has begun.
Standing here outside, wet, waiting to melt,
to die, to live, to breathe, or waiting
for I know not what, just because
it feels good and right. Saturday night.
Forget the moon for now. I tell you
I am softer than you've ever given me
credit for. And through the screen door
I hear the stereo playing, something
with horns, Chicago, does anybody really care
about time. It is raining, you see, and I've got
lyrics for you. And movie lines, and fantastical
hopes and impressions, and a bad rhyme
sketched out against the prime-time sizzle
of a rib-eye keeping dry under the grill.
I want the world to end, I want it to
never end, I want none of this so much
as I want it all. Thunder and the boom-boom
sticks thrown down from the sky.
If there is a god then I guess it's just as well.

Ode on a Lower-Midwestern Storm System

Third and final notice of the grievance filed
down to nearly nothing but a sharp point

some tattoo artist in Wichita uses
to spell out those last lines by Keats

on the lower back of a girl in lavender and leather
who wants to believe in something

she'll never have to see again,
except backwards in the bathroom mirror.

If you reverse the order you'll still come
to the same conclusion: a small pain (is truth

is beauty) is something to be worn
in a gothic font where the body hinges

to turn on itself. If you're ever on I-35
you can see for yourself that pasture

is a green stretch of hip in the first person.
And when the cattle bawl they bawl

for the low thunder that all of us have felt
pass through our chest on its way

to rip apart a double-wide in upper Arkansas,
and break the hearts of everyone

who ever sat on the porch and dreamed
of never leaving. You see a blue line

makes every claim of ownership here.
As if to say you know these words

are not your own. Neither them nor the breeze
that lifts the back of the shirt and promises rain.

iv. COUNTDOWN

Elegy for a Bet that Couldn't Lose

You have desire written everywhere
 on small scraps of paper, clutched in a hand,
tucked away in a shirt pocket, as if not looking

were the same as knowing, the same as manifest
 destiny resting against a chest beating under pressed
cotton. We have all come here for something.

To bet on the three horse every race when they pull the horses
 out. To bet on what we believe won't happen, but hope for
nonetheless. And then language takes over

as a sort of resonate emotion, and we stumble
 into the sound as much as we stumble into the need
to move forward—superfecta, trifacta, quinella, exacta,

exactly what we didn't realize we asked for when we gave
 prayer another try in the bathroom this morning. And the trumpet,
the trumpet more than anything that moves something within,

the same way music played in the distance under a lonesome tree
 becomes enough to make a small space quiver inside, even though,
even though we have been here before and tell ourselves

this is just another structure tugging away at our sad existence.
 To love this. How not to love this. Asking the American
middle class not to gamble is like asking us

not to breathe, to place our small, tired hands
 over our hearts as some young girl in white sequins
over-sings the national anthem to which at least one

old man in the crowd will weep. But listen. And they're off.
 Into a space brown and wide open. The thunder of feet we sense
but can't hear from this distance. For a collective moment

the world stops breathing. And then. And then. And then the sound
 of paper torn in half, the sound of trash cans and feet shuffling,
one last hope left unopened, still clinging to a crumpled hand.

Elegy for the Elbow Scab

I come to understand the consistency of asphalt
the same way the middle of the chest comes
to understand a scalpel, which is to say not at all
or with humble and eternal thanks. And since
it was Da Vinci who invented the bicycle, or since
I'm going to say it was, on some mornings
we are geniuses each time we learn to pedal and remain
upright. You have two wheels and two bars and two
legs which is really what this is about: I am moving
and I am falling. A man down the street crashes
into a mailbox and this is beautiful you understand
only because the motors have slept in. When they awake
we shall have things to wail and moan about.
I can't tell you what asphalt is but I can tell you it is
dark and consistent, and sometimes blurry in the distance.

Elegy for What It was You Thought You Saw

We were at the brink of a kind of starvation,
in a burned-up black Buick running

on fumes, praying for an exit
with a decent cheeseburger joint.

Inside, we entered a sort of un-swept version
of heaven, and as the waiter took our order,

the fountain soda hissing in the background,
our hands shook as we placed the napkins

in our laps, still hoping that manners
might salvage some sort of resistance

to an un-collared status quo. Who needs
collars anyway. All we were asking for

was a plate full of fries and charred meat,
a simple sort of solution

to the endless highway, and miles of gas stations
and porn shops that ticked by like some shadow

that approaches in the periphery,
then fades and fades when viewed head on.

Elegy for the Waffle Iron

Inside a kitchen drawer inside an owner's manual
inside the third section inside a word you find
the meaning of power, as common sense surrenders
to the agency of technical jargon: press on
to bring life to this otherwise lifeless machine.
I have no use, really, for anything other than
a sharp blade and deep pot, but I have mixers
for the mixing, blenders for the blending, fryers
for what I wish to submerge in hot oil. Language
befriends the person who knows what he wishes
to do. If I possess cabbage and no notion of recipe,
the stock pot stops meaning a goddamn thing.
I've got zesters for the cocktails and Zest soap
for the shower and I use both of these for the waking
of my otherwise sleepy soul. To be without
zest is to be without gusto, without enjoyment,
without vigor, without what on the better days
my mother called life. Oh, the madness of a kitchen
counter. That which holds each appliance on its cold surface
like a digit. We have one, and we have two, and we
have three beyond which the numbers begin
to lose their meaning, as they stretch themselves
into a fabulous array of vowels and consonants,
holding ground against the next new gadget,
which as they say on television will revolutionize
the industry, as well as change our lives forever.

Elegy for the Organ Slowly Dying Inside

This heart houses a tombstone in an upper chamber
with your name written all over it.

I can claim solitude only on Wednesdays.
The methodology is not mine.

When dissecting a rat the hardest thing
is finding a place to forget about the tail.

French class and formaldehyde were friends of mine.
And G. who dipped his joint in the preservative,

smoked it at lunch and was gone three days
before the cops found him under a tree,

carving his initials over and over in a band
around the trunk. I swear to you

I have known someone who said they couldn't
leave the house for one year

because they thought they were an order
of French fries, destined to be eaten if they left.

In some fashion or another this is the destiny
that awaits all of us. Through language

I could say formaldehyde equals strawberry jam,
but the toast has a different narrative

of harmony with sub-plots of love, drugs,
and violence. We are most cruel

to what we burn. Or most holy.
I haven't decided yet, but will write you when I do.

I can call my body a temple, but this is only a speech
act, because if I were to use a metaphor

it would not be a temple but perhaps something
more like a shot-gun apartment falling

off the back of a house or some beat-down
blue Chevy with its tailgate missing,

a set of spark plugs gone the way of so many of us
when we find ourselves old or dirty enough.

I'm telling you I have a fear that what is going to kill me
is already housed somewhere within.

Ready your scalpels. We're going after it.
The cartography of a rat is the same for all species

in that it is always a map of the unknown.
If you've ever really opened anything you will know

what I'm talking about. There is an unnamable odor.
Something old, yellow, long-legged and foul.

Late Eighties Elegy

The Bruce Springsteen in my forearms
stopped wearing denim long ago.
I am more plaid and less neon.
More white collar and less white smoke.
The Camaro in my heart hissed
one last time in '93, before the radiator
spoke up and said This decade
shall be no more. I see this everywhere.
Excessive zippers are not coming back.
The Michael Jackson in my soul squeals
at the image of the Michael Jackson
in my present tense. Time has dismantled
history or vice versa. Come back tomorrow
and try to put yourself together again.
Note to self: stop saying heart and soul
in public. It's bad form to let your person
hang all over your belt line.
There's a piece of the Berlin wall
on the mantelpiece of my collective conscious.
There's a mythological bird on the hood
of my neighbor's car that keeps flying away.

Elegy for a Boy in a Tree in Flames

The fireplace crackled and spoke up
when no one else would and said Light

is my ultimate obsession. But there
was warmth, too, and beauty and for these

things I said to myself This fireplace
is one selfish sonofabitch. What do I know

about fire, except as a metaphor we worked out
tirelessly in Intro to Lit. once upon a when.

My mother is a literal pyromaniac
and because of this and because of literature

I can no longer look at her without
seeing some larger symbol, like a giant marquee

lit behind her with an arrow pointing down
saying Look! Mother! Fire! Desire!

And so the fireplace and I will disagree
on some things, but on other things

like our aesthetic for certain types of masonry
we will find ourselves comrades forever.

And I am burning with love inside
the house because of books and the fireplace

and good wine, or wine good enough for me.
And my mother is outside burning

everything, first old boxes and then branches
and then an entire tree that I once

climbed on as a kid and looked out across
the neighborhood where in the distance

I saw smoke and other children playing and felt
a tree was the only thing I'd ever need to know.

Elegy for a Light Going Out

And just like that a big star fell out of the sky

and went streaking down the outer globe

of the visible world. A giant ball of gas

can only be understood as a giant ball of gas.

I put the nozzle into my car and stand

with my hands in my pockets and wait

for all the other people to notice me

because I am, because people I need love

and I need you all to recognize that I am

standing here pumping fuel just like you

and that last night the sky changed forever

and didn't even make a sound.

But there is the sound not heard

because there is speed and light and echo

and distance to travel and miles to go

before I sleep and miles to go and it has

to make you feel amazing and ancient

to see a star die, because stars live

forever in human years, and in dogs years

even longer than that. Witness

and wonder. Wonder and wander. I move across

the earth by foot and with various sorts of wheels

and have lived to see the death of something

older than the seed that spawned my family

tree. Come hither and for this we will drink together.

Even this land is older than any accurate conception
of it. Because a million years is a million years

it makes absolutely no sense. Take that to mean
what you will. Take that and run with it.

And run high and run far and run hard but friend
there is no out-running the run. We're here

to be beautiful and then to die. And to die
beautifully is the best thing of all.

Like we would put on a show for all the little creatures
that crawl across the world, for one member

of a generation of spiders or ants or flies
that we hadn't wiped off the face of the earth

with the stroke of a hand. We are dew and we
are new. We are bold and old and told

of one-thousand things in the world we should not
touch. But we represent the we in our reaching,

in our touch. We represent the current moment of being
in a long, long history of beings.

And so a light goes out and another story begins.

And I take my hands out of my pockets as if

pulling something fresh from the ground.

And shake the dirt off, and clap them together,

and begin a song about everything I love to sing.

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VITA

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Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: *Superfecta* consists of poems written over a three-year period (2004-2007). Many of the poems were written for poetry workshops with Lisa Lewis and Ai. The manuscript is divided into four sections, with each section thematically represented by section titles, which are each the name of a fictional race horse (The Martian, Domingo, Mr. Jones, and Countdown). The critical introduction investigates the history, revision process, and aesthetic influences of the manuscript, drawing especially on the critical work of authors such as Stanley Plumly, Robert Pinsky, Donald Justice, Wallace Stevens, and W.H. Auden.

Findings and Conclusions: Thematically, the manuscript is bound together by the running theme of the gamble. In *Superfecta*, gambling is dealt with directly most often through horse betting, and indirectly and metaphorically through language as it represents its own form of gambling. Through a blending of free-verse narrative and lyric elements, and through the influence of Stanley Plumly's "prose lyric," Robert Pinsky's "discursive poetry," and other authors' writings on sincerity in poetry, the poems deal with an array of themes including death, hope, romanticism, the road, loss, weather, and gambling.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Lisa Lewis
