

CASINO OF THE SUN:  
A COLLECTION OF POEMS  
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

My entire family, on both sides, originated from Harlan, Kentucky, a coal town in the southeastern part of the "Bluegrass State," a place of great importance to labor historians and country singers. My ancestry consists mostly of alcoholics and pill addicts, xenophobes, agoraphobes, preachers, toothless Felliniesque pinheads, veterans of foreign wars with unidentifiable diseases, attempted murderers, moon shiners and bootleggers, racists, golfers, magicians, disability royalty, suicides, and a legion of mourners. Before I arrived on the scene, my mother and father and my two sisters moved north to Dayton, Ohio, birthplace of African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, actor Rob Lowe, and sibling aviators Orville and Wilbur Wright. If my father had stayed in Harlan, there is little doubt he would have been a miner instead of a construction worker, which means I too might have gone underground to make a living (if there were any coal left in those mangled hills). I suppose this constitutes what William Wordsworth, son of a noble lord's personal attorney and lifelong resident of the Lake District in northwest England, referred to in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" as a "low and rustic life" where the "essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language" (303). If so, I got lucky. I am the first person in my family to graduate from high school. Both my sisters took the G.E.D. route to earn their diplomas; my father quit school after the eighth grade, my mother after the second grade. At the risk of sounding dramatic, I feel

thankful that I learned how to read and write, thankful that university life now permits me to immerse myself in language every day, thankful for my belief that words are so exquisite, so elastic, so conductive, and so *weird* that sometimes they make me want to cry—because of their majesty, because of their ability to bring us back and take us beyond, because they love us so much. I worship words instead of G-d, which orthodoxy has led me to an "overwhelming question" similar to the question the speaker asks and never clearly answers in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot (though mine seems decidedly less dire): What in the world *is* poetry and what in the world lies at the core of my own writing (3)? Drawing upon the literary analysis of various authors while acknowledging the work of poets who have directly influenced my aesthetic, I will attempt to conduct this two-part inquisition in my critical introduction through an honest appraisal of my prosodic techniques and fixations. I will also attempt to confirm my connection to the post-confessional movement in poetry and to justify my bleak, satirical sensibility. I hope the collection of poetry that follows supports my assertions and displays an edifying and entertaining consolidation of the major open form craft elements.

As far as the definition of poetry goes, we have all heard the requisite catch phrases and sound bites. I would argue that each and every statement has stood the test of time in spite of its overuse. "Poetry is the best words in their best order," wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (327). "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] recollected in tranquility," Wordsworth proclaimed (312). Samuel Johnson, echoing Horace, considered poetry to be "the art of uniting pleasure with truth" (714). "If I read a book," Emily Dickinson maintained, "and it

makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry" (qtd. in Meyer 44). Edwin Arlington Robinson held that "poetry has two outstanding characteristics. One is that it is indefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable" (qtd. in Meyer 27). Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay "The Poet," went so far as to say that "every word was once a poem" (378). In his book *ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound reported that "[poetry] is news that STAYS news" (29). Surrealist André Breton called poetry "perpetual rambling in the depth of the forbidden zone" (qtd. in Packard 16). Poet, novelist, and ex-college professor Stephen Dobyns paid tribute to the profound necessity of verse in his compilation of essays *Best Words, Best Order*, striking at the heart of the genre's efficacy:

A work of art gives testimony as to what it is to be a human being. It bears witness, it extracts meaning. A work of art is also the clearest non-physical way that emotion is communicated from one human being to another. The emotion isn't referred to; it is re-created. The emotion shows us that our most private feelings are in fact shared feelings. And this offers us some relief from our existential isolation. (10)

And who can forget these two provocative pronouncements relating to the poet's role in society: W. H. Auden's "poetry makes nothing happen" (82) and Perce Bysshe Shelley's "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (356)?

An interpretative breakdown of the foregoing inventory produces a connective assessment of poetry's abiding significance and a tacit illumination of its vital components. Diction and syntax can save or destroy any given poem, and all poetry



should convey its meaning economically and gracefully. Deciding on the perfect word for a specific situation and making every syllable count remains the poet's primary animating force. She must familiarize herself with the birth, life, death, and periodically the rebirth of as many words as possible—be they Latinate or Anglo-Saxon in origin, abstract or concrete, formal or colloquial, technical or proverbial, archaic or cliché, figurative or literal, connotative or denotative, emotive or referential, decadent or pristine. Then she must arrange the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of her chosen native tongue in the most polyphonic though meaningful way possible, as if the language already existed somewhere and she needs to locate the poem on the wind and coax it back into being. She might even come up with a clever name for this ritual, something like semantic transubstantiation, and never get burned at the stake. Nothing is off limits. Nevertheless, the act of creation should express more than the spewing forth of one's feelings. The accomplished poet steps back and artfully takes control of chaos by examining all sides of every human predicament, refusing to commit herself wholeheartedly to a restricted attitude or outlook. She understands that poetry should appear self-aware as well as sincere. She guards against multiple, mutually exclusive interpretations, shooting for conjunctive rather than disjunctive ambiguity. The poetry reader ought to feel more inside himself than ever before, yet so external that he can temporarily forget his own troubles. He acknowledges the difficulty in characterizing good poetry, although he knows it when he sees it: Poetry is love and fear and sympathy and fury and, above all, precision. Poets may never unseat a corrupt regime with one poem, but the accumulation of poetic ecstasies can have considerable, long-standing effects. Verse's ability to stay out of the mainstream, the fact that few people care, few

people listen, endows the form with its essential power, sustaining the word well under late capitalism's radar. When the larger marketplace does not bother to dictate what the poet says, she is truly free, perhaps freer than any other manner of artist. This politically-charged viewpoint arises out of A. R. Ammons' essay "A Poem Is a Walk," in which he declares that

walks are meaningless. So are poems. There is no ideal walk[...] except the useless, meaningless walk. Only uselessness is empty enough for the presence of so many uses, and only through uselessness can the ideal walk come into the sum total of its uses. Only uselessness can allow the walk to be totally itself. (7)

Surely, Ammons does not propose that a poem should make no sense, but that sense should never be imposed upon a poem through nefarious, mercantile means. The late James Dickey, in a *New York Quarterly* interview, brings this line of thinking to its ultimate conclusion, tendering some optimistic praise for the genre:

What you have to realize when you write poetry, or if you love poetry, is that poetry is just naturally the greatest god damn thing that ever was in the whole universe. If you love it, there's just no substitute for it. I mean, you read a great line, or somebody's great poem, well, it's just there! I also believe that after all the ages and all the centuries and all the languages, that we've just arrived at the beginning of what poetry is capable of. All of the great poets: The Greek poets, the Latins, the Chinese, the French, German, Spanish, English—they have only hinted at what could exist as far as poems and poetry are concerned. I don't know how to get this kind

of sound, or this new kind of use in language, but I am convinced that it can be done by somebody. I feel about myself as a writer like John the Baptist did. (qtd. in Packard xvi)

Presenting an even more complete explication of the fundamentals of verse, Robert Bly, in his essay "What the Image Can Do," undertakes "to set down some thoughts" about the image's place among the various "powers" or "energy sources" that make up a successful poem (38). In the process, he provides insightful coverage of all six key elements of poetry: imagery, spoken language, psychic weight, sound, drumbeat, and story (Bly 38). Imagery essentially amounts to language that addresses the five senses in order to create the mood of a poem and help the poet avoid dreaded abstraction. Psychologists have even extended the human arsenal of perception to include the visual (sight, brightness, clarity, color, and motion); the auditory (hearing); the olfactory (smell); the gustatory (taste); the tactile (touch, temperature, and texture); the organic (awareness of heartbeat, pulse, breathing, and digestion); and the kinesthetic (awareness of muscle tension and movement) (Brogan 113). Images instantaneously construct verbal pictures of the poet's encounters with materiality, both real and imagined, and these images, according to Bly, "moisten the poem, and darken it, with certain energies that do not flow from a source in [the poet's] personal life" (38). As indicated by *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, figures of speech—synecdoche, metonymy, simile, metaphor, personification, allegory, and symbol—count as images because "one thing is said (analogue) while something else is meant (subject), and either the analogue, the subject, or both may involve imagery" (Brogan 114). Furthermore, these seven devices operate on a dichotomous level in the mind, and frequently, Westerners look at life

dualistically—matter versus spirit, the concrete versus the abstract, the representational versus the non-representational—and poets seek out the connection between these two worlds through suggestive marks on the page (Brogan 117). "Spoken language" stands for diction and syntax, the word choice and word order that ideally generate a high level of musicality in a poem while contributing to the development of voice, the individual poet's stylistic DNA, the vehicle through which she delivers her personal vision to the reader (Bly 39). Voice exudes an all-encompassing authorial presence, a fixed, ethical animus that the poet selects and renders in a serious pursuit of an identity behind the poem. The phrase "psychic weight," for Bly, applies to "something imponderable" that "comes from opening the body to grief, turning your face to your own life, [and] absorbing the failures your parents and your country have suffered" (39). Without a hint of arrogance or false pride, the poet should possess the ability to stare straight into the sun or hang out over the abyss—lest the ideas stop flowing altogether. "Different sounds," Bly suggests, "affect different parts of the body," and these sounds comprise "a structure of beams, and even if all the words were taken away the beams would still stand" (40). Put another way, sound arises out of the poem's unconscious—in the form of assonance and consonance, euphony and cacophony, exact rhyme and slant rhyme, breath and pause—working in tandem with meaning to embody a particular dramatic situation. When the action moves slowly, the words move slowly; when the action moves rapidly, the words speed up. Sound and sense, then, will always appear interconnected and interdependent. "Drumbeat," on the other hand, refers to the alternate rising and falling of utterances inside a poem (rhythm) as well as the potential recurrence of these stressed and unstressed syllables (meter), both of which, in Bly's estimation, reinforce meaning

(40). The final "power" Robert Bly discusses in "What the Image Can Do" turns out to be, in my opinion, the most important: "The narrative, the story, the fiction, the tale, the imagined entertainment" (41). Free verse poetry flows out of a need for deliverance from the semi-dormant tradition of meter and rhyme, from the breezy predictability of the sonnet, the ballad, the villanelle—not to say that these forms are simple to master. Former President John F. Kennedy's favorite poet, the witty Robert Frost, avowed that he would just "as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down" (qtd. in Packard 102). In actuality, playing tennis with the net down would require an equally robust resourcefulness. Without the syllabic latticework of fixed composition, open form practitioners must imagine new and different margins and distances in order to manipulate the reader's expectations. For this reason, I believe story has replaced sound as poetry's most indispensable mnemonic device. We all remember what happened, though we may not remember who was responsible.

By way of example, my poem "Casino of the Sun" brings Robert Bly's six "powers" aggressively to the forefront (38). The tale unfolds as follows: A troubled young man takes a plane to Arizona on Christmas Day to visit friends and recover from a particularly painful breakup with a woman. Though the poem appears quite discursive, the speaker genuinely reflects on his many failed relationships and pledges to be less reckless and more committed in the future—even if he can only manage to attract "a beautiful cyborg with reliable taxonomy / and skin the color of grape soda." In this way, the poem reveals its story or situation. The raucous image field integrates the visual ("pictures of lepers," "the ochre of a different time zone," and "electric chairs"); the auditory ("a thousand mallard ducks inside a shark cage" and "a lonely jingle leak[ing]

out of the sound system"); the olfactory (a "molten parking lot" and basketball star Shaquille O'Neal smelling vaginal residue on his fingers while preparing to brick a free-throw); the gustatory (margaritas and blood drunk "from a leopard print purse"); the tactile (desert heat, "giving birth," and "inexplicable cuts and scrapes on [bar patrons'] hands"); the organic ("check[ing] the pulses of dead husbands / and disagree[ing] with the diagnosis" and "say[ing] *I love you* under [one's] breath"); and, lastly, the kinesthetic ("a boy of ten or eleven / jump[ing] into his father's arms"). The "spoken language" Bly promotes in "What the Image Can Do" surfaces all through "Casino of the Sun," one of the most musical poems I have ever written. The unruly and unpredictable diction and syntax of signature lines like

I've drunk blood from a leopard print purse,  
said *I love you* under my breath,  
shared an apartment with a terrified and weeping,  
uprooted fleshpot  
who caught me looking at pictures of lepers

establish the scratchy voice that many of my poems depend on (Bly 39). The "psychic weight" of "Casino of the Sun" emerges at the very end of the poem's fifty-nine-line stanza when the speaker finally accepts his alien, even alcoholic, lot in life and opens his "body to grief," reaching out to those around him in order to mitigate his feelings of disconnectedness (Bly 39). He strikes a proletarian bargain for the proper coins:

But for now, the Chin toasts the end of an era  
in a bar on the edge of effectiveness.  
A lonely jingle leaks out of the sound system,

and the patrons sing along like there's no tomorrow.  
Every Sunday morning they wake up  
with inexplicable cuts and scrapes on their hands.  
These are your people.  
They would offer you the world  
if they had any right to it.

Poets choose and arrange words according to their sound as well as their meaning, and sound, linguistically speaking, originates from the lips, the teeth, and the tongue. "Casino of the Sun" thrives on plosives, sibilants, fricatives, and the long-O reverberations that emanate from the speaker's sorrowful, cynical resignation. Vowels and consonants slam up against each other in relentless, aural inevitability. If "different sounds affect different parts of the body," as Bly contends, this poem attacks the gut (40). Because I am addicted to the English language and because my heart will not stop pounding and my nerves will not stop hopping, the majority of my poems extract the iambs, the anapests, and occasionally the trochees from my throat. This is my "drumbeat" (Bly 40). This is my way of saying, craft being nothing more than a habit. Witness the opening lines of "Casino of the Sun." Take out your pencils. Utilize your diacritics, and see for yourself:

It's Christmas day in Arizona:  
one-hundred and sixty degrees above zero and rising.  
When you get off the plane,  
which you secretly hoped would crash,  
and pass through that gray chute,  
your old roommate, the Chin, greets you,

lathered in the ocher of a different time zone.

Along with the ghostly rising and falling meter of the poem, the insistent rhetorical anaphora and the parallelistic configurations that saturate my ranting create a rhythm that drives the story down the page. By and large, I believe this poem adheres, fairly strictly, to the poetic prescription Robert Bly lays down in "What the Image Can Do," and, again, I must reiterate that of the six "powers" Bly classifies, I deem story to be the most fundamental and necessary (38).

Stanley Plumly takes a similar position in his essay "Chapter and Verse," pointing out that free verse "emphasize[s] the vertical movement of the poem, a going down the page," whereas formal, lyric poetry "emphasize[s] the linear, a going across the page" (23). Progression down the page, he contends, stresses "the body of the action" throughout a poem (Plumly 23). In other words, narrative draws the reader in and keeps him interested and entertained. The admixture of versification and storytelling has fashioned, according to the former Poet Laureate of the United States, "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," though even the line itself appears to be a vestigial stain left over from restricted, metrical poetry's supremacy (Plumly 28). In fact, Plumly predicts that the more contemporary poets deal with the "personal and the particular," the more the genre will incorporate the "strategies of fiction" (28). Tess Gallagher builds upon this theory in her essay "Again: Some Thoughts on the Narrative Impulse in Contemporary Poetry," insisting that "the narrative and lyric impulses in contemporary poetry have grown more and more indistinguishable" (69). Personal history, the illusion of intimacy and secrecy, and figurative language combine to create



what Gallagher calls the "lyric-narrative," a hybrid composition that has achieved popular appeal "because of our attraction to realism and simple human interest" (80). Sound and sense work hand in hand, then, to shock the reader's nervous system into awareness. Furthermore, the oxymoronically labeled prose poem—with its lineage that leads back to Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Walt Whitman, the French Surrealists, and all the way up to James Wright, W.S. Merwin, and Russell Edson—continues to renovate the art of writing poetry. Charles Simic cleverly describes the form in his essay "A Long Course":

[It's] an impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose. Prose poems are the culinary equivalent of peasant dishes, like paella and gumbo, which bring together a great variety of ingredients and flavors, and which in the end, thanks to the art of the cook, somehow blend. Except, the parallel is not exact. Prose poetry does not follow a recipe. The dishes it concocts are unpredictable and often vary from poem to poem. (qtd. in Johnson 13)

Without the line breaks afforded free verse, the prose poem must still achieve the heightened language, the forcefulness, and the overall compression of the lyric poem, certainly a challenging task for the poet.

Having recorded this utterly biased, idiosyncratic, semi-historical definition of poetry, I may have found the perfect jumping off point for exploring the source of the work that follows this critical introduction. The poets I admire rant and rage. They can barely manage to contain their exuberance, their disenfranchisement, their association

with various –isms, their love, their moral outrage, their addiction to language, their need to shriek, their solipsism, their humor(s), their pleasure, and their pain. But they do manage, and what ends up on the page vibrates across time and space. These poets have something they *need* to say, and they say it in an innovative yet lucid manner because they desperately want to communicate (no one who uses words writes simply for herself). Their poems can best be described as breathless, scornful, socially-conscious, bold, self-limiting, self-aggrandizing, apocalyptic, funny, hyperbolic, risky, antagonistic, complaining, aggressive, ironic, anaphoristic, apostrophic, vivid, despairing, triumphant, testimonial, collectively-voiced, individualistically-voiced, transforming, morally just, morally questionable, courageous, blasphemous, investigative, and generally hard-hitting. Their poems "[make] the stomach believe," to quote Tim O'Brien's beautifully written novel *The Things They Carried* (84). As far as direct influences go, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"—an incredibly doleful, nautical, pacifist, nihilistic love poem—first alerted me, in high school, to the persuasive power of language. Twenty years later, Anthony Hecht would nearly wipe away my veneration via his parody "Dover Bitch," in which he criticizes Arnold's narrator for addressing his lover "as a sort of mournful cosmic last resort," but if any poem expands my sometimes limited vision, then the poet has definitely done an admirable job (qtd. in Meyer 497). Like Arnold's "Dover Beach," many of my own poems exhibit a kind of failed romanticism, a give-and-take between exhaustion and affirmation, idealism in a constant state of disappointment. For instance, the poem "Portland Is No Place for the Soulless" concludes with the male narrator, in a keening moment of desperation, performing a physiologically paradoxical, if not impossible, sexual act, all for the sake of transitory oblivion:

Shuffling into the woods, I unzip my trousers  
and pull it out, urinate, and then jack off, crying,  
my shoulder against a tree. Anything to forget  
who I am for five minutes.

Nevertheless, the behavior itself, though self-negating, contextually symbolizes, I would hope, artistic and emotional release. My first poetry professor, Herbert Woodward Martin, at the University of Dayton, where I went to school for a few years, was a Paul Laurence Dunbar scholar, and Dr. Martin seemed to have Dunbar's entire body of work memorized, and he performed amazing recitations of the poems on Dunbar's birthday every year. Listening to Dr. Martin practically sing those poems seriously affected my ideas about the dignity of oratory. Perhaps this is why I begin my list-poem "The Quick" with the expletive "it's," and then let every ensuing image—from "a wristwatch with a crucifixion on its face" to "frost on the ribs of a radiator"—operate as a vehicle for an unspecified but terrifying tenor, to borrow I. A. Richards' brilliant definition of metaphor (Brogan 184). The poem rushes down the page like a man in cement shoes dropped from the Queensboro Bridge into the East River. The French Surrealists, mainly Jean Arp and Guillaume Apollinaire, helped activate my imagination and train all my senses to stand at attention. The strange rooms in my poem "Matisse Room" overflow with dreamlike sequences and bizarre juxtapositions: "tomatoes and watermelons near the closet," "a ship full of Jews," a "French professor hid[ing] behind / a torn-out car seat and [throwing] mudballs / at moving targets." I find Charles Baudelaire's poems to be sad and exhilarating at the same time, a "power" that has profoundly affected my own writing, keeping my work from sounding too overtly whiney and complaining, though I must

point out that Andrew Marvell used the word "complain" to mean "write love songs" in his poem "To His Coy Mistress" (qtd. in Meyer 81). My poem "New Suit, Just Like Mayakovsky" ends disastrously, but with an understated awareness that suicide, too, can rise to the level of art:

The police found his body in the park  
across from the station.

He'd been a gymnast in high school,  
so he stood between the parallel bars  
and shot himself not once but twice  
in the temple with a .32-caliber pistol.

That's determination.

To be wearing a new suit  
in your final moments,  
just like Mayakovsky,  
without ever having heard of Mayakovsky,  
even though you're a laid-off auto worker,  
woman gone, no victories left in you at 26,  
only half in this world now,  
birds scattering,  
the blue sky in knots above you.

As indicated by the above excerpt, I tend to model Elizabeth Bishop's accentual verse and her simple, grammatically based lineation—especially after Richard Shelton, one of my professors at the University of Arizona, told me that if I ever write a line that does not

contain at least two or three hard stresses, then the line should be cut or *thoroughly* revised. The line breaks in "New Suit, Just Like Mayakovsky" generally occur before a preposition or coordinating conjunction, before an appositional phrase, or right after a punctuation mark. In addition, every line contains from two to five hard stresses that punch through a wall of otherwise congenial sound. I think I have inherited James Wright's straightforwardness, his appreciation of his roots, and the commitment to story and monologue (as so many of my poems about family, alcoholism, alienation, political and economic quandary, and death would suggest). I prefer Allen Ginsberg's humor to Ogden Nash's; situational irony rather than verbal irony; and I respect any poet who refuses to compromise, primarily Walt Whitman, Sharon Olds, Charles Bukowski, Amiri Baraka, the poet Ai, Bob Hicok, and Pablo Neruda.

As a result of my ongoing apprenticeship, I have tried to consolidate the major free verse prosodic techniques and fixations in order to craft a darkly humorous, high-stakes, sardonic, narrative-lyric hybrid grounded in a desire to attain accessibility or just really depress the hell out of people with a melancholy that starts off being autobiographical yet resists the temptation to stop at the check-point of mere self-reflexivity—which brings me to the confessional poets (specifically Sylvia Plath and John Berryman) who have influenced my work more than any other group of writers. All those burlap sacks, all that blood, that chicken paprika, all those anti-hopes—they set my eyes on fire. In *The Confessional Poets*, Robert Philips stipulates the salient characteristics of confessional poetry:

It is highly subjective. It is an expression of a personality, not an escape from it. It is therapeutic and/or purgative. Its emotional content is

personal rather than impersonal. It is most often narrative. It portrays unbalanced, afflicted, or alienated protagonists. It employs irony and understatement for detachment. It uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology. There are no barriers of subject matter. There are no barriers between the reader and the poet. The poetry is written in the open language of ordinary speech. It is written in open forms. It displays moral courage. It is antiestablishment in content, with alienation a common theme. Personal failure is also a favorite theme, as is mental illness. The poet strives for personalization rather than for universalization. (qtd. in Bradford 5)

This passage describes my own work better than I could have described it myself. I feel no shame in announcing that my poetry is post-confessional in nature, though I do sometimes worry that I might take too seriously a rather satirical statement John Berryman made in a *Paris Review* interview shortly before his tragic suicide:

I do strongly feel that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal. Certain great artists can make out without it, Titian and others, but mostly you need ordeal. My idea is this: The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business. Beethoven's deafness, Goya's deafness, Milton's blindness, that kind of thing. And I think that what happens in my poetic work in the future will probably largely depend not on my sitting calmly on my ass as I think, 'Hmm, hmm, a long poem again? Hmm,' but on being knocked in the face, and thrown

flat, and given cancer, and all kinds of other things short of senile dementia. At that point, I'm out, but short of that, I don't know. I hope to be nearly crucified. (322)

I, on the other hand, hope my collection of poems moves beyond this sort of morbid self-attention and reaches some level of originality while employing the American casino's risk, tawdriness, and mystery as a controlling metaphor. In many ways, the casino represents the only place in America where individuals get treated equally. If you have a few chips, you can join the game. And if you master the rules, calculate all the odds, stay relatively sober, work hard, and pay close attention, you can break even. The same goes for poetry. I have no idea where my work is headed in the future, but something is changing. Personally, I feel as though I would like to break free, but not too free, not so free that I would not recognize myself anymore or my friends and family would not recognize me, my friends and family who sometimes drive me nuts, or else reflect back upon me that I am driving myself nuts. I want only to stay in the game.

## CASINO OF THE SUN



## A Fine Powder

He had a little box that looked like a dark brown treasure chest  
with an iron gargoyle for a lock.

He had a grainy whetstone that he kept  
in an aqua blue pouch with Chinese lettering.

I have no idea who he was; he died and I'm getting paid  
to tear the dry wall out of his house with a claw hammer.

That box has a red velvet lining; it's got keys in it, matches,  
the tassel from a graduation cap.

There's no money, not that I would take it,  
but there's a spent shotgun shell  
and a pink guitar pick with teeth marks all over it.

I can't promise that I won't demolish this house.  
Delicateness makes me lonely and loneliness makes me vicious.  
I keep a sledgehammer in the truck.

But undoubtedly a pattern exists here.  
A dead man lies in state, his face clean-shaven, expressionless.  
The telephone rings and a familiar voice says,  
*Do you still have my knife?*

Undoubtedly, a pattern.  
Maybe it's better to disavow the small things.

(no break)

The opposite of a miracle hovers above this spare estate,  
looking for a tongue, a teller.

## Casino of the Sun

It's Christmas day in Arizona:  
one-hundred and sixty degrees above zero and rising.  
When you get off the plane,  
which you secretly hoped would crash,  
and pass through that gray chute,  
your old roommate, the Chin, greets you,  
lathered in the ocher of a different time zone.  
Nakedly joyful, a boy of ten or eleven  
jumps into his father's arms.  
A camera flashes and the Chin snorts,  
*Another chat room dream come true.*  
Close your eyes, imagine giving birth  
to a thousand mallard ducks inside a shark cage  
while some non-union uniform runs a metal detector  
up and down your leg, up and down your other leg.  
Welcome to hell. Try not to spill your margarita.  
Try not to let the molten parking lot solidify  
in your lungs when you hear about your ex-girlfriends  
riding the cranks of hard-minded day traders  
in Mustique or Minorca  
or wherever people go who have parents.  
There's a bed waiting for you in the desert,  
though the sheets were not prepared for your arrival.  
The cordless phone is dead,  
but the cable television works fine.  
Shaquille O'Neal just missed another free throw,  
and we all know why. He brings the ball

(no break)

too close to his face; he smells his fingers.  
He's distracted by his own good fortune.  
Those guys have it made: ballplayers.  
The Chin says they live like dolphins.  
Shaq, Sprewell, Allen Iverson. Sweet.  
What am I doing here anyway? This is not my affair.  
I've drunk blood from a leopard print purse,  
said *I love you* under my breath,  
shared an apartment with a terrified and weeping,  
uprooted fleshpot  
who caught me looking at pictures of lepers.  
I have checked the pulses of dead husbands  
and disagreed with the diagnosis,  
listened through walls for signs of forgiveness,  
been counted on and let down and squeezed out.  
I bet I would sell my organs in China,  
I would build electric chairs for a dollar an hour  
if I could only put together enough scratch  
to go back in time and burn the right bridges.  
By next Christmas, I vow to pledge my life and mind,  
my entire troubled essence,  
to a beautiful cyborg with reliable taxonomy  
and skin the color of grape soda.  
But for now, the Chin toasts the end of an era  
in a bar on the edge of effectiveness.  
A lonely jingle leaks out of the sound system,  
and the patrons sing along like there's no tomorrow.  
Every Sunday morning they wake up  
with inexplicable cuts and scrapes on their hands.

(no break)

These are your people.  
They would offer you the world  
if they had any right to it.

## Gaps, Guns, Targets

There are gaps in my memory,  
and guns. A rack of three  
on the wall in my parents' bedroom,  
and one next to the Vaseline  
and the heating pad in their nightstand.

The rifles I never touched,  
but sometimes I would take  
the revolver out of the drawer  
and hold it in my hand.  
It was surprisingly heavy  
and the grip was covered  
with sharp little bumps.  
I never aimed at anything  
(there were bullets in an ashtray).  
I just held it and gazed at it,  
my heart pounding in my head.

If my father had discovered me,  
he would have shot me  
to teach me not to play with guns,  
like when he killed my bicycle  
with a sledgehammer after I crashed  
going down the hill by our house.  
That's how he was.  
His answer to everything  
was a dollar bill;

(no break)

or the sight of him  
charging you like a bull  
with drool backed up in its eyes,  
yanking his belt through  
the loops of his pants with a flourish  
and the snap of leather;  
or else it was wrapped  
in a red oilcloth next to  
the Vaseline and the heating pad.

There must have been times  
when he imagined  
wiping us all out—  
my mother, my sisters, and me.  
Times when he'd get one  
of those dizzy spells  
and hate would not suffice,  
and we started looking  
more and more like targets.

## A Pleading

Why can't I be cleansed?

By cleansed I mean something more important  
happening to me.

John the Baptist could cleanse me  
but they cut his head off just for fun.

And going to Jesus is exhausting.

Must I be touched  
by the hands of an innocent,  
whose life is indescribable,  
before I can no longer feel  
the hole in my vessel?

I don't see the difference  
between restitution and renewal.  
Bright orange gulags  
inherit the swag.

Can love cleanse?  
The right kind.  
Can other people be your salvation?  
Maybe.

I see these old couples on TV  
(my only contact with the aged).  
The woman is in a hospital bed,  
eyes closed, the picture of serenity,  
hooked up to the dying machine.

(no break)



The doctor pronounces the words:

"There's nothing we can do."

The man begins to cry.

It's been forty years since he last cried.

He confesses he's not ready

for her to go yet.

The cockatoo will keep saying her name.

The doctor's eyes move.

"There *is* one other option.

A new procedure, very experimental.

We could attach you both

to the dying machine."

The old man keeps saying her name

but he isn't looking at her

or listening to the doctor.

What was her name?

Something that sounds like *rise* or *lies*.

They'd been taking long walks

when the sun was about to come up.

They hardly slept.

## Trash

I am dealing with my grandmother's  
dead mattress in the garage  
and I can't remember her maiden name.  
A week ago, under this bare bulb,  
she swept cigarette butts, insect carcasses, and soot  
into a rounded pile, rehearsing.  
I don't think it could be said  
that she was ever a beauty,  
but at the end the woman looked exactly  
like hell. She pickled herself  
on TV juice and little purple guys:  
some doctor's idea of the twilight years.  
Waking up delirious in the hospital,  
she gulped down a handful of imaginary pills.  
No reason to go on after that.  
She willed her own death,  
as though she'd propped the broom against the wall  
and stepped back inside the house.

Today the sky is so white it's invisible.  
I grip the mattress by the edges,  
drag it out to the curb.  
My grandmother was always sick or nervous  
from what I remember.  
Aunt Jean got her stoned once;  
I don't think she liked it.  
She had a relationship with god

(no break)

that nobody cared to fathom.

She was 62 when she died. I stared  
at the hymnal and followed the words  
to the same songs as the last funeral,  
her son's.

I never knew her and I have lost her,  
and I am trash.

I let the mattress drop to the ground  
with a thud and a billow of dust.

Real and imagined,  
there was a lot of pain in this bed.

## Good Vibrations

There was the propeller  
and there was the bowl of acid.  
They both had black hair  
and I tried to ravish them,  
they looked so graceful and inviting.

There was the Amazon breast nailed to the front door,  
blood dripping onto the welcome mat.  
She must have hit star-69.

If I was ever going to rise up, something yellow had to happen.  
Is it possible to ridicule beauty?

A dead crow lay in the parking lot,  
flat as a no from god,  
one suspicious wing aflutter in the breeze.

An old friend stopped by for coffee.  
*Coming up for air*, he said,  
and there were tears in his eyes from the smell.

This was by no means a normal Saturday afternoon.

My lungs weren't dipped in boiling copper.  
I didn't sit on the couch in my underwear  
cleaning the shotgun and watching cartoons.  
I sipped my harmless coffee, made goo-goo eyes at eternity,  
waited for night to pull up to the gate  
and honk its horn.

## Harlan County Copula

My mother walked me by the wrist,  
limping, back to the farmhouse,  
her thickly freckled hand cold  
as though she'd leaned against a headstone  
in the cemetery where the dead  
of this hollow lie buried.

We were either on the moon or in Kentucky,  
visiting second cousins.  
The drive south seemed all downhill  
until we reached Pine Mountain.  
That was the summer the coal miners  
at Brookside and Highsplint struck.  
The UMWA marched through the streets  
of Harlan with pickaxes reflected in their eyes.

I'd spent the day with Robby at the creek,  
catching crawdads in butter bowls  
and blasting them with rocks at close range.  
The water being warm, we went shoeless,  
and I sliced the milky arch of my foot  
on a broken Pepsi bottle.  
Until I came out of the water  
and saw my footprint  
on the bank filled with blood,  
there was no pain.

(break)

Across town a miner lay on a blanket of blood  
and stared into the sun with his eyes stuck,  
no longer complaining,  
no longer on the clock,  
quite unaware of the movie camera  
that snored in the sickbed of history,  
unaware of my mother putting her hands  
around my waist and lifting me up  
to the kitchen table  
which I must have mistaken for sky.

## Breeding and Feeding

I would just as soon not eat. It's a pain in the ass. I wish I could take a jar of paste three times a day like a good astronaut and get all the nutrition I need. Maybe that's where we'll end up, but for now I eat the regular stuff. Peanut butter, broccoli, milk, tongue, crackers, black beans. I feel like I'm feeding. It's disgusting, I eat so fast. My ex-girlfriend used to say—we'd be sitting at the table—"Did you even taste it?" She'd give me the you've-got-to-change-this-behavior look. Right through my eyes to the back of my skull. I had to get out of that relationship. Sometimes I dine with people, they look up, I've cleaned my plate, I'm sipping my water (I love water). They say, "What the hell?" I know, I eat fast, it's disgusting. They've barely had time to spread their butter and bug the waitress for more syrup. I can't help it. I want to get it over with and go on with my life. Am I afraid the food will abandon me? When I was a kid my father would take the whole family out to Ponderosa Steak House. I was named after the owner, who was a man my father admired. We'd go through the line, order number four or number six, sit down to eat. He'd always start in on everyone else's dinner when he finished his own. That hairy forearm coming across the table like a missile. We had to sit there and take it. My mother said, "Dave, why don't you leave them kids' food alone?" "We'll get 'em another one," he grunted. Which never happened. The trick was to shove the steak and french fries down your neck before he could get his mitts on them. That's why I eat faster than a slot machine. But I'm clean. Don't let anyone tell you different. If you sat me down to lunch with my namesake and the ex-girlfriend, I wouldn't spill a thing. She could tell him how long I've been waiting to meet him. How proud I am to be named after a steak house baron. He'll pick up the check. Pay off all my student loans. On the way home the ex-girlfriend whispers in my ear. Soft. Inhuman. She'll try to end the famine in my blood. Somebody bless her. Before she opens her eyes.

## Elegy for Samuel Beckett

Artichokes make me feel predatory.  
Tendons erupt, retinas scramble—  
I twist myself into a Bengal tiger  
swiping at a dead horse carcass  
with my claws of yellow bone.  
The meat gets softer near the heart.  
Blood turns Jamaican rum vermilion.  
Shit! Across the vain savanna  
a raunchy telephone rings once, twice.  
I growl high in my throat, rise from the table,  
and answer it. The voice at the other end  
unleashes the terrible news:  
He died a week ago in Paris.  
I try to grieve, to simply tip over onto the floor,  
but the closest I ever came to him  
was three one-acts at the Harold Clurman Theatre  
in New York, 1985, and the pages of his book.

I keep a picture of Beckett above the oven  
where the ceramic rooster used to be.  
In the picture, he's sitting on a footstool  
in the corner of an empty room  
with a cigarette between his fingers.  
He's wearing worn-out hush puppies  
and a frayed v-neck sweater.  
He looks predatory.  
And here I am, some stiff, gazing into the eyes

(no break)



of a man who lived in a renovated prison,  
a man who insisted on wearing Joyce's shoe size  
even though it was two sizes too small.  
Practically everyone I know wanted to *be* him  
whose final sigh must have been deafening.  
Samuel Beckett knew what no one else knew—  
and now he knows this.

## Style

Winter approaches like a retaliation  
and I wonder will it be as bad  
as the last one. Lodged in a stupid room  
with a borrowed bed and dresser,  
ensanguined clock radio numbers,  
imaginary rope and wobbly chair.  
Repeating the alphabet to pull my heart rate  
down and the sun back up in the sky  
so I can at least go to my job  
and pretend I'm not splattered.

My sister said, *I don't even feel like  
I have a brother. Where's he been?*  
And it's cold and gray where I am,  
and there's a buzzing sound.  
I'm learning how to stop trying  
to get my old life back  
when I haven't yet found a new one.

It's funny to think  
of what keeps us going.  
Is it the hope of something better  
or just the hope that someday  
we'll be able to handle what there is?

## Portland Is No Place for the Soulless

Across from the YMCA I have found  
somewhere to park until morning.  
Behind glass, healthy human bodies run in circles  
and hoist weighted bars above their heads.  
It all looks magnificent.  
As individuals, I presume, they are decent people  
with homes and jobs, maybe husbands and wives.  
I do not resent them.  
I think of you, Rosamond,  
and 839 Formosa Avenue.

I got drunk on wine tonight  
at the Salmon Street Bar & Grill  
with the day bartender. You get drunker  
than usual in those kinds of places.  
You're watching a game on television,  
your blood starts pumping a little harder,  
and all you can do is drink.

Compelled somehow like a piece of meat  
being forked into an open mouth,  
I came up here to get away,  
as they say, find an apartment and a job.  
I considered Boise, but I'd heard Portland  
has a river running through the center of town.  
Now I'm drunk and alone  
in a strange green world—

(no break)

so far from Los Angeles, so far from Ohio.

If I crawl in the back seat and fall asleep  
I might never wake up,  
so I open the door and work my way out of the car.  
It's darker than the inside of a fist.  
Shuffling into the woods, I unzip my trousers  
and pull it out, urinate, and then jack off, crying,  
my shoulder against a tree. Anything to forget  
who I am for five minutes.

## Large Father Syndrome

A battalion of blondes and their hairless  
captain of desperation take the wrong trail

in a sold-out nightmare,  
gasping for light,

sharpening gray bayonets and eating  
breakfast out of half-pint-sized cans.

In the sand near the water,  
amid the melange of lorry tracks,

cracked spectacles, roots and thorns,  
a tender worm migrates

through this movie of absolution.  
Focus on the detour past a pair

of shabby, tightly-laced jungle boots.  
No wings anywhere.

Something must be waiting  
under the rocks at the gate,

scratching words in the universe:  
never never never never

arrive.

## Matisse Room

### Color

In a smack red room  
with garish curtains  
mantling the window,  
a Matisse painting slides  
off its canvas into place.

### Conjuring Jealousy

When we aren't there it doesn't exist.  
No one can sleep on the bedding;  
no one can scatter clothes on the floor.  
I believe we are jealous of the room.

### Nomads

You said, Which room is it?  
This one, I said, and I followed you in.  
At that moment I knew I loved you.  
I did not know a thing about love  
until we walked into the room.

(break)

## Harvest

If we stay in the room and plant  
tomatoes and watermelon near the closet  
and lilies near the window,  
we must wait patiently for the harvest.

## Divertimento

I have poured too much in your glass;  
nevertheless, you will probably drink it.  
When we make love in Matisse room  
some of it spills over the side.  
We empty it and fill it up.

## The Revolution Was Romantic

The Russian room to the north changed its name.  
Then ranking members entered to discuss  
whether the urinals would be communal or enclosed.  
Trotsky lobbied for enclosure.  
Lenin wanted them to be made of gold.

(break)

## Chance

Some mechanic took apart an airplane  
and left the pieces in the room.  
When we saw them we thought  
we were in the wrong fur shop.

## Not Enough Room

Joseph tried to get Mary in.  
A camel tried to get in.  
Derain and Marquette tried to get in.  
A ship full of Jews tried.  
But only you and I could get in.

## Morning, Noon, and Night

Children leap out of corners  
and wrestle each other to the ground.  
Children alone in the room  
are never frightened,  
are never alone very long.

(break)



## The Collarbone Defense

You had been living in a room  
down the hall to the right  
in which the floor and furniture  
were covered with adhesive plaster.  
I was born in the room directly  
below it several years later.  
Fearing the stone-blind financial  
beast screaming and chomping  
on its own flesh, you could  
never take me near your room.

## Another Chance

Anyone who had ever been in love  
wandered into the room by mistake  
and ended up talking about Cocteau,  
Matisse, salad dressing, and other lovers.

## Denial

I cannot be sure but I think Philip Glass  
was on the stereo when your glass  
was upset, spilling its contents.  
After we left the room the music stopped;  
certainly, you recall, Matisse room

(no break)

does not exist then.

### Oracle

When I inquired about the sudden disharmony  
she replied, I am not an oracle.

### Dead Reckoning

Windows are open for the night.  
The hallway is quiet  
but for the red-handed voices.  
We are in a room together,  
a room far away from the others.

### Coming and Going

No one could leave the room.  
Vlaminck couldn't get out.  
A ship full of Jews couldn't get out.  
The trapper couldn't get out.  
Only you and I could get out.

(break)

## Dream

The room had a dream. Or I had a dream.

An accurate woman combed her hair  
in front of a mirror that was exactly  
the same size as her body. Balconies  
collapsed and fell around her.

The French professor hid behind  
a torn-out car seat and threw mudballs  
at moving targets. The room felt  
like a department store during a clearance sale.

## Tire

Cut in two.

Twisted and entwined on the floor.

We look like a tire in the room.

## Roomer

A drifter with something bad  
in his past moved into the next room.

We often hear him talking unabashedly  
on the telephone at inappropriate hours.

We suppose, by the inflection in his voice,  
that he's talking to people who know us.

(break)

## The Voices

I don't know if I am allowed to love you.  
I wish things were different.  
Turn on the light. Brighter.  
Yes, as a matter of fact, that is  
precisely what I was thinking.  
How did you know? Forget it, I know.  
There are no clouds in the sky of the room.

## Melancholia

It's round and large  
and it's on wheels  
and it's wooden and dark inside.

## Reformation

So, I'm not quite 21  
and I'm overcome by you.  
The beer and vodka  
should help us decide  
what to do with our lives.  
Let's save ourselves  
future dismal Thursdays;  
let's stop all this desperate  
running from room to room

(no break)

and go back to where we have  
previously shown each other  
much kindness.

## Afternoon at the Ex's

She cleaned her apartment  
and did laundry  
while he played records.  
Some old stuff—  
Schumann, Roy Orbison.  
They'd been apart  
three months.  
A rope burn of regret  
seared his duodenum.  
Some call it starting over;  
some call it losing everything.  
He was recovering from the flu,  
she came near him  
to pick up a dirty bath towel,  
and he kissed her.  
You probably shouldn't do that,  
she said, And besides, you're sick.

Afternoon turned thoughtlessly  
into evening.  
The two of them lay  
on her bed,  
which was more comfortable  
than his own,  
and made beautiful deceit  
to the steady canticle of apologies.  
It was the saddest

(no break)

erection he ever had,  
inside the latex prison  
of infrequent lovers.

They slept afterwards,  
and he had a dream.  
They were walking across  
a bridge above a river  
and came upon a truck wreck.  
Gasoline was everywhere,  
but the driver had it  
under control with a squeegee.  
There was music coming  
from the cab of the truck  
and she started dancing  
along the edge of the bridge,  
motioning for him.  
As he approached,  
her right foot slipped  
and she fell off.  
He watched her unbrazed descent.  
At first she was terrified,  
then something else  
came into her eyes.  
He didn't know whether to jump  
over the side or make his way  
down to the riverbank.  
He woke up before he could  
do anything.

(break)

In the hard darkness  
he listened to the familiar  
curve of her breathing.  
He didn't want to,  
but he kept running  
that look on her face  
through his mind.  
The look that said  
*I know you didn't mean  
to hurt me.*  
The look that said  
*I understand  
but I'm going, I'm going.*



## Touch

I wish I hadn't called.  
The second you heard my voice  
you went off like a car alarm  
through the agonized beeps and bells  
of your anchorite melody  
that everyone hates but lives with.  
I should have known you'd keep me  
on the phone trying  
to avenge four years of no contact.  
You haven't changed.  
Listening to you tell me you're a better writer,  
louder talker, more dispirited and friendless,  
isn't my idea of forgiveness.  
You win.  
I admit I envy the rock fight going on in you,  
the categories and sub-categories  
of irritation and rage,  
your heart wet-slapping against your skull.  
I dream I'm you sometimes,  
sitting at an old typewriter  
composing the airline jingle that'll make me  
so rich I'll buy you a new spleen.  
Will you go away now?  
Honestly, I'm afraid of you.  
I'm afraid you'll move in with me  
and pick up where we left off.  
I can hear blowing out and tamping in.

(no break)

The phone line starts to burn  
and I lose my place.  
I loved you so much,  
but something happened.

## Giving In

The expression on my face  
doesn't know who I am.  
My need, a brooding locomotive,  
vibrates in the heat.  
All the ceiling fans in this bitter  
lounge run on dread.

The waiter brings another miracle.

Back in my apartment  
the telephone is cranking up  
the end of the world.  
Electricity stupefies the spider plant.

I might be expected to shave my head  
now that the only radio station in town  
plays nothing but train songs  
with terrible precision.  
My other life turns on a spit  
in the courtyard of loneliness.  
*The Book of Threats* says not to hesitate.

I should wipe the flames out of my eyes  
and go home.

## Self-Portrait in a Knife Blade

I wish I had no mother, no father, no sisters,  
no uncles and aunts, no cousins, no grandparents,  
living or dead.

I wish I had no friends in L.A., none in San Francisco,  
no friends back in Ohio,  
no friends' friends, nobody.

I wish I had no woman.

I wish I had no bosses, no liquor store clerks,  
no landlady in a housedress and hospital slippers  
trudging up to my door.

I wish no one lived down the hall from me.

I wish I didn't owe anyone anything but money.

I wish I had no telephone,  
no U.S. Mail.

I wish my impossible car would die  
in the middle of an intersection  
before a hundred honking horns and twisted faces  
and I'd just walk away from it.

I wish the devil or god  
would come up here or down here  
right now  
and try to fuck with me.

There's no transition.

When my eyelids commence  
their involuntary semaphoria,

I hope the plastic horizon shudders.

If I had a black magic marker,  
this would all be over in about ten seconds.

## Boneyard in Absentia

I can't talk or write or fuck or fight  
or love or shoot my way out of this one.

I hide like a bug in the wall;  
I stink like a prehistoric dog.

Chased away from the pack of liars,  
not speaking unless spoken to,

because I ride my skull around and never sleep  
and my eye's hanging down.

*I want the scene to leave to leave the scene*

Is a man's shadow being made  
or is the shadow making the man?

Would you blame the bees if they stung  
us all till we died and would you blame

the rats and birds if they naturally  
came along and picked the dirty bones clean

and would you blame the hounds  
if they buried the proof in mounds?

## Emerald Lake

At ten thousand feet  
the water was clear enough for us to see  
where the trout's wings used to be.  
The air was uninfected, so we took off our masks.  
My ridges smoothed over  
as the street headache waned.  
When I opened my eyes all the way  
the trout was swimming down a small waterfall.  
I knew it was a felony to think of eating meat  
but I couldn't help it, I couldn't help it.  
I'd sweated and groaned inside my godless manhole;  
I'd saved my Valium Dollars for eight years to see this.  
Soon the sun would be a brown dwarf,  
this lake would start to coagulate,  
and the trout would need to be vacuumed up  
and discharged in a jewelry store at street level  
with the rest of the precious gems.  
Ludicrous would have his way with the world.  
To my guide I said, "Trout used to be silver, right?  
What color are they now?"  
"I don't know," he said.

Dispatches from the Shelter

Everything began to tremble—  
like the face of an insect.

•

Whenever you want something  
you will never possess it,  
even if you stop wanting it.  
The object of your desire  
eats you, drinks you, expels you.

•

Knowing I have this reckless need for her lips,  
the scar, the scent of her hair.  
Knowing she has an answering service  
and sometimes I call just to hear  
the patience in her voice.  
Am I trying to befriend the warden?

•

I want to be buried in a Cadillac.

•

Since she was bleeding, we did it anyway.  
When we finished I ran my finger  
through the blood that coated my penis  
and applied it to my face like war paint.  
I did my best Indian squall,  
dancing around her on the bed.  
That I was serious goes without saying.  
She thought I was crazy,  
but she laughed and laughed.

•

Don't you want to move to New Zealand,  
the island, with me?

•

A carnivore masquerading as a herbivore,  
a social climber in hermit rags.

•

We were playing a game  
in which we tried to embarrass  
and humiliate each other  
by bringing up things from the past.  
She wanted to convince me  
that this is the one exception  
to an otherwise virtuous life.  
She's one hot pilgrim.

•

If our language were foreign,  
we couldn't hurt each other.  
I'll make edgy love to you  
and breathe with you.  
I no longer need to speak to you.

•

A strand of hair floats to the ground.  
In agony.

•

Maybe you could have loved me.

•

I don't want your voice in my head any more than I wanted  
Mrs. Webster's voice in my head in the third grade.  
This is a veiled attack on my beliefs.  
Such as they are.

•



She called me from a payphone.

(Pouring down rain,  
her dress soaked through.)

She wasn't wearing her shoes,  
which she'd left in a repair shop across the street.

What a terrible symbol is the payphone.

•

You can tell a man's fortune from the bumps on his head.

•

I want to be buried in a Cadillac.

Maybe you could have loved me.

## Valediction

I guess you could say we grew up together.

The party in high school where we met.

First time we ever got drunk.

A girl punched me in the stomach that night  
and threw the little ring

I gave her into the bushes.

I never did find it.

And I never found out  
who told her I'd been messing around  
with the coach's daughter.

All those prank phone calls to Joe Staub.

Who could have answered so many questions  
about his sister's anatomy?

A week later he died in a car accident  
and we were left with his shrinking voice on tape.

Cruelty was our forte.

Aborted attempts at B & E (we weren't good with locks),  
wine stolen from the pizzeria,

Sherman's march through adjoining neighborhoods.

It's amazing what I had the guts to do  
and now I can hardly get up the nerve  
to ask a stranger what time it is.

Vandalism and larceny weren't going to make us famous,  
so we went to college, started the band  
we always talked about, honed our drinking skills.

Once, we made an agreement

(no break)

to stay drunk forty days and forty nights  
and not to wash our hair, like two kids  
dressed up as bums on Halloween.  
You finished school; I didn't.  
The music got us out of Ohio  
and into a one-room apartment in Hollywood.  
One dark room, everything in it shades of green.  
We stuck together as long as we could  
but there were no adventures,  
unless you count passing out  
with turkey pot pies in the oven  
and setting the kitchen on fire.

After three years I'm something close to sane again.  
I'm more on the wagon than off,  
and there's an electricity in me.  
I've come to a moment  
that feels curiously like the moment  
just before Thanksgiving dinner  
when you're supposed to pray  
but this ritual is gone from your life,  
and it's dead silent  
until someone's fork finally hits a plate.  
I don't know what I'm trying to say.  
Goodbye, I guess.

## Whiskey for Charlie

I've had my share of last drinks.  
This is it, I say to myself,  
and order one final scotch to savor  
like the last at-bat of an illustrious career.  
Only the blood in my veins is ovational.

My grandfather Charlie must have known  
the same self-dividedness after the benders  
that landed him in Harlan County Hospital.  
When I was a boy my father dragged me  
down there while he was drying out.  
He looked gray and oilless,  
his sleeping mouth trying to suckle,  
a shell of the man who'd survived being shot  
three times at a poker game in Pineville.

Charlie had his last drink this past February.  
He fell down, drunk,  
in the hunting cabin he lived in  
and died of thirst.  
He lay there for days.  
At 73, he still had a full head of white hair.

Charlie, I never really talked to you.  
I wanted you to tell me about the mines.  
Was it cold where they sent you  
to pick up rocks to heat the world?

(no break)

Did the black breath of necessity lie to your lungs?

At the funeral his drinking friends  
sat on one side of the aisle  
and his non-drinking friends sat on the other.  
The body in the casket had three bullets in it:  
two in the leg and one in the hip.  
I wish they had cut one of those slugs out,  
so I could hold it in my hand,  
something that lives forever,  
without eyes, and speaks to me in the Kentucky accent I love  
though I'm afraid to admit it.

Any night now, Charlie, I'll walk into a bar,  
order a whiskey for you and not drink it.  
Because I'd rather pull all my teeth  
in front of the bathroom mirror  
than keep getting the sawdust kicked out of me.

## Jimmy Huber's Lament

I'd been working with Dad for about a month, and Mom asked me to go pick him up one night he was working late. We were doing the Wilson kid, the one killed in that car wreck on 206? I remember when they brought his body in. There was a piece of metal about the size of a chicken wing stuck in his chest. The car had caught on fire, and he was alive trying to get out—he had on a pair of Herman Survivors, and the lacings and upper part fused right to the flesh of his legs. We pulled the chunk of metal out and scraped the boots off his feet. A wreck like that, you always imagine it happens at night, but this was in broad daylight, so the kid's sunglasses were practically melted onto his face. The family was pretty upset. Thought they were going to have to close the casket. But Dad concocted some kind of chemical peel to get the plastic off. When I got to the shop the body was already in the show room. I stopped to look at him for a minute. What an incredible job. It's been three years and I bet you could dig him up right now, scrape off the mold, and he'd be ready for viewing. I heard Dad in the storage room and went in there to see if he was ready to go, and he was painting a casket. I asked him what he was doing, but I realized. He was putting a coat of copper sealer on a Batesville. With copper sealer on it a Batesville looks just like a Hanson. Four-thousand dollars as opposed to a thousand. I guess that's how he put me through undertaking school.

## Connection

Jim Simpson challenged Russell Aber  
to a fly-eating contest  
in the locker room before football practice  
and won 26 to 25.

Russell Aber was a risk-taker.  
We had him diving in icy lakes,  
drinking vinegar and eating all manner  
of insects, dirt, shoe polish—  
even ate half a shoe once—  
and all he demanded was reverence.

Jim Simpson was an upstart.  
After seeing what eating things  
had done for Russell's reputation  
he, too, craved the uncommon validity  
reserved for the charmingly disgusting.  
The two of them sat like kings  
at opposite sides of the room,  
swallowing fly after proffered fly  
as everyone gagged and grimaced.  
Jim Simpson defeated the great Russell Aber.

That was fifteen years ago,  
and I just read a letter from my sister  
asking if I remember a kid named Jim Simpson.  
She said he'd been down in Georgia  
working construction with our father  
who, one Sunday, came home

(no break)

to find his trailer broken into.  
Gone were his television, his tools, his sunglasses;  
and Simpson didn't show up for work on Monday.  
I sat against the wall, wondering  
if he thought of me  
as he carried my father's valuables away.  
Wondering what eating flies  
does to a boy's heart.



## The Quick

It's waking up in the morning and brushing your teeth  
so vigorously the toothbrush snaps in half.  
It's thinking you're really on top of things  
when in fact the bottom fell out.  
It's saying hello to the same people day after day  
without ever knowing their names.  
It's wishing that windows were made of sugar,  
like in the movies.  
It's a wristwatch with a crucifixion on its face.  
The upright beam is the hour hand;  
the transverse beam is the minute hand.  
Christ gets all tangled up.  
It's apologizing for hitting a bad note in a bad song.  
It's slogging around the library until your legs ache.  
It's headphones—morning, noon, and night.  
It's a praying mantis on a loaf of bread.  
It's being addicted to the world.  
It's a woman in a two-piece bathing suit on a beach  
in Thessaloniki. She sends you stuffed animals in the mail  
and you have no idea what to *do* with them.  
It's falling in love with the rowing machine.  
It's sitting on the end of your bed in a televisionless void, transfixed.  
It's being so sad that breasts don't make sense anymore.  
It's elevator buttons and boiled potatoes and elbows.  
It's waiting all night for the telephone to ring  
and then not answering it when it does.  
It's feeling like a human cannonball without a cannon.

(no break)

It's not the town; it's not the people;

it's horrible is what it is.

It's sticking it out until you're good and stuck.

It's trying to speak without moving your lips.

It's attempting to remove the object of temptation.

It's a damn shame.

It's wasting time grooving to the devouring whims of belly dancers.

It's frost on the ribs of a radiator.

It's the accumulation of unsatisfactory moments.

It's knowing how easy it would be to take your head

in your hands and break your neck.

## P.O. Box in Jersey

My p.o. box is  
on the bottom row.  
To check it  
I crouch down  
in the catcher's position,  
tilt my head  
to the side and peer in.  
Same as looking  
under a car.  
I check it twice a week  
which is probably too often  
but I don't care.  
My p.o. box is  
the most stable address  
I will ever have.  
I'm paying \$22 a year.  
That works out to \$1.83  
a month: pretty cheap rent.  
If only I were smaller  
I could live in it.  
It's unfurnished,  
but doll house furniture  
would do nicely—  
a tiny couch and bed,  
a little kitchen table.  
That huge hand coming in  
the back door every day

(no break)

would be inconvenient,  
but life wouldn't be  
such a grumble in my p.o. box.  
Safe from all my enemies  
like a gangster  
in a haberdashery.  
Did I mention that  
it's a perfect rectangle?

## The Visit

When green cicadas arc and wail  
in the morning sun  
like armless monks resigned to guard  
the handprints on a banister

and church bells pour their various syrups  
into the ears of the disconnected,

you will be standing in the road,  
weak from tearful rapture,  
trying to say goodbye,  
trying to come back in and say goodbye,

but a thousand vipers will evangelize  
through transparent wings,  
so pulsant and alive, not even their blunt corpses  
at dusk regret the morning sun.

## New Suit, Just Like Mayakovsky

It was two in the afternoon  
and I was playing chess  
with my sister's live-in boyfriend.  
We were both out of work.  
He'd been laid off by General Motors  
and had three weeks' unemployment left.  
I had forty dollars to get me  
through the rest of the summer.

"Is it my move?" I said.  
"Yeah," he said, draining his beer.  
He was a male stripper  
before moving in with my sister.  
I felt ill at ease around him.  
He was always getting rough with me:  
wrestling holds and quasi-martial arts stuff.  
I'm not sure what he did at GM;  
probably he worked on the line.

"We gotta finish this game," he said,  
"before your sister gets home."  
He was winning again.  
I had a rook and a few pawns left.  
He had his queen, a knight,  
both rooks, a bishop—it was a slaughter.  
I borrowed a beer from the fridge  
and braced myself for the end.

(no break)

He wouldn't checkmate my king  
until he captured every piece I had.  
It was the only decent thing in his life.

A week later my sister broke it off with him,  
and he moved back in with his folks.  
She didn't like the way  
he treated her daughter  
and didn't much like him anymore either.  
After a few days he returned  
wearing a brand new suit  
and asked if they could start over;  
she stood her ground and told him no.  
"Then I'm going to kill myself," he said  
and instructed her as to where  
and didn't stop her from picking up  
the telephone as he marched out.

The police found his body in the park  
across from the station.

He'd been a gymnast in high school,  
so he stood between the parallel bars  
and shot himself not once but *twice*  
in the temple with a .32-caliber pistol.  
That's determination.

To be wearing a new suit  
in your final moments,  
just like Mayakovsky,  
without ever having heard of Mayakovsky,

(no break)

even though you're a laid-off auto worker,  
woman gone, no victories left in you at 26,  
only half in this world now,  
birds scattering,  
the blue sky in knots above you.



## Behold the Father

When I was eleven years old  
my father tried to convince me  
that the word *nigger* is in the dictionary.  
He claimed the epithet does not derive  
from any linguistic ill-will  
on the part of white people:  
they simply applied an existing term  
to a developing anthropology.  
"It means bad person," he insisted,  
his right hand slicing the air.  
And we could have looked it up, too,  
if we'd had a dictionary in the house,  
but we didn't live in that kind of a house.  
Either you took the boss's word for it  
or you kept your doubts to yourself.

Last December my father got the hook.  
He died in his sleep of something akin to loneliness.  
I hadn't spoken to him in seventeen years,  
and I almost forget why.  
I didn't make it to the funeral,  
I didn't scrutinize the photographs  
of him in his temporary casket,  
I didn't even meet my sisters and my mother  
in Kentucky when they scattered  
his ashes on Pine Mountain,  
ashes they'd had to purchase from his widow.

(no break)

I suppose I wanted to hold on  
to my resentment for a few more years.  
Or else I was too embarrassed to let it go  
after having nourished it for so long  
with gimlets and address changes  
and not enough shoreline or keystrokes or dawns.  
At times, I think it would have been better  
for all of us if he'd never lived,  
and then some totally unexpected hearsay  
will bubble up from the depths,  
undeniably molten and true,  
as when a fellow by the name of Fletcher  
tracked one of my sisters down  
to pay his respects and testify to what  
a decent and generous man my father was.  
Back in the seventies, Fletcher had  
worked his way up from hod-carrier  
to bricklayer to foreman  
in my father's construction company.  
Fletcher had a good life, a nice home.  
Four of his five children went to college.  
"I owe it all to Dave," he said.  
"In those days nobody would give  
a black man that much responsibility."

Here's where I say: *It doesn't make sense.*  
Here's where I say: *What happened*  
*to the gun-toting, adulterous welsher*  
*who only ever did anything for anyone*

(no break)

*so he could feel like a big shot?*

Here's where I say: *Behold!*

*the insipid villainy of the father.*

But I can't seem to whip myself  
into the appropriate frenzy.

What would be the point?

Dying is like paying off your debts  
with money you found in the trash.

No expectations, no grudges, no noise—  
just the low-toned gurgle of the living  
as they conduct their underwater interrogations  
in a language all covered with scars.

I Think I Know Her Name

When I don't drink  
my subconscious, my so-called past,  
the lie experience told my dreams,  
attacks me in my sleep.  
I cry in my sleep,  
and when I wake up  
with my face all distorted,  
some love not quite turning out  
the way I thought it would,  
I put on my robe,  
pump the coffeemaker for information,  
and check my messages.  
Enough said.  
That *was* going to be  
the first—what?—line,  
and now you're thinking it,  
dear rubbernecker,  
so it might as well be groaned.  
This is what happens  
when you realize your world  
isn't just climbing on top  
of some public utility  
and grabbing the nearest wire,  
the nearest cable,  
the copper passage,  
the twisted cord,  
the soldered connection,

(no break)

electrified and so much better than you are  
and not very nice  
or otherwise testimonial.  
You should quit while you're ahead,  
and you know it.  
So now for the grit:  
The bartender's hips in gray slacks—  
her face is too heartbreaking to mention—  
remind me that I am human  
and seriously ready  
to stop eavesdropping  
on other people's conversations  
to accumulate  
my quota of civilization points.  
I am still a man,  
despite what necessity demands,  
despite what Exley called  
*the journey on a davenport.*  
Above the stench of this beer hall  
and the worthlessness  
of my American concerns,  
something smells    very, very good.

Jimmy Huber's Jeremiad

When the change machine at the laundromat runs out of quarters—  
that's terrorism.

If an S.U.V. won't let you merge into traffic on Interstate 95, the driver must be late  
for a car-bomb attack on a market or shopping district.

Canker sores on the tongue, gin blossoms, persistent hematospermia:  
these are all cowardly acts of genetic terrorism.

Iraqi and Afghani civilians splashing brain matter on a Navy SEAL's new uniform.  
You better believe that's terrorism.

All next-door neighbors are state-sponsored terrorists.

My balls itch! Terrorism!

That random fettuccini alfredo smell in the locker room at the gym. Now that's domestic  
terrorism.

Dentists are terrorists. *Highlights Magazine* was a front.

Crushed ice, v-neck tee-shirts, and parking garages were invented by terrorists.

The ocean is no different from a Ryder truck stuffed with C-4  
and set for remote detonation.

The fact that they won't give you nitrous oxide when you get a haircut. Terrorism.

(break)

Bing Crosby was a terrorist and so was Burl Ives, and Rudolph smuggled depleted uranium in his nose.

Stand-up comedians and male cheerleaders are limited political terrorists.  
May they be stricken with Guantanamo Insomnia.

Anyone who owns a ukulele or a magnet is automatically a terrorist.

The sound of chalk on the sidewalk is a terrorist.

Snow is a terrorist.

Overconfident bureaucrats with watermelon-sized heads who never let people finish their sentences trend toward skyjacking and hostage-taking.

Unborn fetuses fund terrorism.

Every Bob Seger song you hear on the radio puts another fragmentary grenade into the sweaty hands of an international terrorist. Ditto the Beatles and Queen.

Recycling is obviously terrorism.

Those fake trolley cars with real tires and low self-esteem might as well be transporting a bunch of nature poets (i.e. terrorists) to a homicide-bombing at a disco.

The moon is a revolutionary terrorist.

The stars are zits on a suicide-bomber's back.

(break)

Darwinism is cause-based terrorism.

When a bomb goes off in a café or restaurant, blame the onions.

Everything anyone says and everything anyone does is made of weapons-grade material.

Both the noumenal and the phenomenal are terrorists:

the leaves on the trees are code green, the sky is code blue,

the dandelions are code yellow, the cat is code orange, and the barn is code red.

We're all dead.



## Love and Oncology

When my mother got cancer  
I thought of an old Polaroid I'd found  
in her dresser drawer when I was twelve.  
She was standing in front of a white wall  
in her bra and panties (like a hostage).  
When my mother got cancer  
I hoped she might lose some weight  
but she's the Belle of Appalachia.  
When my mother got cancer  
I sat on my bathroom floor  
in bitchy Rhode Island and diffracted.  
I guilted a neighbor into feeding my fish  
and caught a flight to Tennessee.  
When my mother got cancer  
I put my hand on her back  
and whispered something tribal in her ear.  
When my mother got cancer  
I blamed coal, I blamed straight pipes  
pumping human waste into rivers—  
because if I didn't I would always hear that ticking.  
When my mother got cancer  
the nomenclature was excruciating:  
incision, J-pouch, temporary colostomy,  
napalm, Agent Orange.  
When my mother got cancer  
there was no more mention of treadmills  
or trips out west or too many pain pills.

(no break)

When my mother got cancer  
I let a doctor stick his finger up my ass  
and gamely set a date for the fiber-optic snake.  
When my mother got cancer  
I tried to put it out of my mind.  
I went to bars and got drunk and started  
arguments with the unemployed about unions.  
When my mother got cancer  
I swear it was true love.  
The world fit perfectly into a powdered latex glove.

## Imprint

Whenever anyone asked the father what was playing at the movies or what was on television or who was making all that noise in the attic, his answer would always be the same: *Deaf and dumb woman showing a blind man her ass*. Then he'd lean back in his chair, ransack his two-day growth of red beard with the palm of his hand, and snort contentedly. If you wanted to know the answer to your question, you had to investigate on your own. But first you had to gain control of the necessary mode of inquiry—*Dayton Daily News*, *T.V. Guide*, Black & Decker flashlight. This was by no means an easy task. The father was cagey and quick. Snatching the item from his grasp often required ten or fifteen tries.

*Deaf and dumb woman showing a blind man her ass*. He spoke with an exaggerated southern drawl, pronouncing *deaf* as if it were spelled *D-E-E-F*, clearly blaming the cracker within himself. And, of course, they all laughed, the whole family, this being the longest running joke of the decade.

Years later, the son would wonder how much that portrait of unattainability had influenced his outlook on the world. He wondered if being party to the father's constant sarcasm had turned him into a half-empty rather than a half-full type of individual or if he'd simply been infused with a heightened sense of dramatic irony.

The answer may lie in the image itself. A voluptuous, rather shy woman with long black hair presents her perfect round ass to a man who has no eyes to see it with and seems to have no hands to touch it with, no idea he's in the presence of such natural beauty. There's only a small distance between them, but she's deaf. She could not hear the man if he cried out, "I am blind! What is happening to me?" and she couldn't reply even if she did hear him, for she has no voice. The son can envision their disconcerted faces, their straining gestures. They are lewd yet toilsome. They are the saddest people on earth.

## Unadorned

I let a dog in the park lick my face for you.  
I pretended not to know the murder rate in Denmark for you.  
I've tried to stay ugly for you.  
I turned myself into an oil field, switched on the klieg lights for you,  
and let Texaco start drilling.  
I never thought about the future for you or else I thought about it in terms  
that only you could understand, though we had never actually met.  
I worked in a cardboard box factory for you.  
I gave up skin for you.  
Whenever love metastasized, I ran over it with my lawnmower for you.  
I wrote "Stairway to Heaven" for you.  
I did the whole Reverend Dimmesdale thing for you.  
For you, I tramped around town smelling old books and thinking of better days.  
If it weren't for you, I might have thrown open the door to any number of empty  
apartments and gone straight for the knife drawer.  
I quit the team for you, I quit the band for you.  
I survived—for you—a *major* stork attack at the free clinic.  
I romanticized the Russian Revolution for you.  
All that weight and all those miles for you.  
For ages, I drove really shitty cars for you, cars with bald tires, cars that burned  
a quart of Quaker State a day, cars with no reverse.  
I passed the Clean Hair Act of 1985 for you.  
I took the pill for you.  
I took my pulse pass/fail for you.  
I took all the wheelchairs out of this poem for you.  
I scrutinized the maps of various principalities and prowled around the depths  
of their free print media, scavenging underground for you.

(no break)

I've pounded the podium and knelt at the peephole for you.

One night I camped out on the sidewalk to protest against something for you—

I can't remember what it was—but I'm sure nothing was ever done.

I had my juvenile criminal record expunged for you.

I secretly hoarded food for you.

For you, I've spent fifteen of the last twenty-two Christmases alone on the couch  
with *The Catcher in the Rye*.

For you, I've suffered bouts of Pernicious Cubical Zombification that no amount  
of Prison Movie Therapy could cure.

I fell this far without you for you.

Anyone good-hearted or wounded enough to fill in for you got bombarded  
with encrypted code leftover from the War of Adolescence which,  
by the way—totally based on false intelligence.

For you to believe a word I'm saying, you have to admit that when my hand floated  
palely away, I forgot every single breast I've ever touched.

This is me trying to calm down for you.

This is me putting my bullhorn and my guillotine in the attic for you.

I'm turning gray for you.

So, please, tell me

when will you be born?

## Flying United

Whenever I'm feeling low I like to hop a flight to Vegas  
on the airline whose aptly gray planes are the easiest  
to hijack and dive-bomb into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.  
I'm not talking about the T-word; I'm talking about taking  
advantage of a situation; I'm talking about economy.  
And I don't care whether or not James Dickey actually came up  
with "fly the friendly skies" when he worked as an ad man in Chicago.  
This silly factoid has been stuck to my recollection for so long  
the halituous ramblings of a thousand false martyrs couldn't *burn* it off.  
Poor James Dickey, so unfortunately named and a posthumous liar to boot.  
The skies are anything but friendly.  
For instance:  
my sister's a mechanic for the aforementioned bombardier  
and now will never see the retroactive cost of living raise  
the company promised her union ten years ago.  
"Labor *Jihad!*" I advised her in an e-mail transmission—  
just before AOL Time Warner Nabisco Pfizer cut off my internet access.  
So I'm sitting on this 757, knocking back a Xanax,  
and an Arab couple slips down the aisle with their teenage son.  
All three are wearing New York Yankees caps  
and they have this look in their eyes like every single  
white person on the plane has explosives strapped to their chest.  
I want to help these people  
stow their suitcases in the overhead compartment.  
I want to gather their dark portrayals unto my bosom.  
But I feel an amateur historian's fugue coming on:  
*Osama bin Carter, Osama bin Reagan, Osama bin Bush,*

(no break)

*Osama bin Clinton, Osama bin Junior, Osama bin Spielberg,  
Osama bin Cruise, Osama bin Albright, Osama bin Zeta-Jones,  
Osama Cat Stevens, Osama bin Ashcroft, Osama bin Kissinger.*

By the time the plane reaches altitude, I've implicated everyone  
from Euclid to the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders.

It's too simple to simply blame the enemy.

Culpability is an airborne bio-toxin that nation-states inhale through the eyes;  
it smells like fuel oil and forward motion.

Consider the case of young Bob McIlvaine, twenty-six years old, perished, extinguished,  
murdered, unplugged, wasted, abolished, man-slaughtered, collaterally damaged.

And for what? Nine-hundred years of history? Nobody deserves that.

He stumbled out of the South Tower and crossed Liberty Street,  
only to be put out of his happiness by falling debris,

his penultimate thought *I made it* and not *Fuck, that's hot*

or

*I wonder if I'll black out before I hit the ground.*

At least his loving parents can keep that in mind when they're  
funding scholarships and weeping phosphorescently in front of Congress.

Not so suddenly, the seat belt light goes pong  
and the aircraft banks into a turn, begins its descent.

Every head in the cabin chants, *What-if-what-if-what-if?*

I slide my plastic window shade up and a spritz  
of desert light lands on the empty seat beside me.

This might be completely irrelevant, but I was in love once.

She was fifteen and I was sixteen.

For elocutionary purposes, I'll call her the Scar. *E pluribus unum.*

I think she peed her pants the first time we made out  
in the back of the bus coming home from the Roth game.

A wet spot appeared.

(no break)

Her Italian-American father, literally, worked in a chocolate factory.  
He gargled eight ounces of salt water every morning  
and brutalized his children with belts, deprivation, and the palm of his hand.  
I wanted to be *the man*, to figure out a way to protect my little ruination,  
so I reported the coward to Social Services.  
A heavysset woman with no clipboard showed up at their house  
and spoke to the family in the living room, surrounded by cream-colored  
doilies and crucifixes and pictures of saints with rosaries draped around the frames.  
The minute she walked out the door,  
Scar said her father slapped her younger brother across the face.  
Now I'm wondering what might have happened that could have changed things—  
negotiation, apology, more firepower, books, cheese, non-involvement.  
Remember this if nothing else: my life is based on a true story.  
When that landing gear oozes into place and the captain starts his approach  
and I look out my window at a three-quarter-sized Eiffel Tower  
straddling a parking garage and a giant black pyramid trolling  
for gambling addicts in outer space,  
I realize, with the voltage of a Tazer jab,  
that no one in Iraq or Afghanistan or Sierra Leone  
will ever be privileged enough to go as far into debt as I am.  
In an hour, I'll be hunched over a five-dollar table at Binion's,  
content to be baffled and alive and patriotically blowing money,  
safer in Las Vegas than in a womb.



## Infertile Poem for Pregnant Women

I sometimes happen upon your kind  
browsing through the produce section  
or waiting in line at the post office,  
your skin so pale, your step surprisingly athletic,  
a virtual caricature of womanliness in all your parts.  
But it's not the breasts or the hips or the protuberance that burn,  
it's the *rhetoric* of your looming—  
suburban and reckless, lurid and luminescent, sacred and profane.  
At such times, I'm overcome with longing and I look away.  
Poets have no access to the gene pool.  
Now here you are, someone I once lucked into loving,  
five months gone with another man's work.  
This could be the only chance I ever get to kiss a woman  
with a child in her belly, so please do me this kindness  
before a continent of bad-timing  
clears its throat and turns to news.  
Give me your shallow, draining breath  
that smells of copper and oranges.  
Give me your lips free of wine  
yet moist with possibility.  
Give me your tongue when it's slow and heavy  
like an hour of island sleep.  
Give me your commissure and your apex  
and your median lingual sulcus.  
Give me your saliva as a palliative, and let me pretend.  
Let me pretend you're in the bathtub I don't have  
with that white watermelon rising

(no break)

out of sudsy water, all pristine and friendly.

Or at the very least, give me,

before the truth sinks in, the time of day.

## A New Doctrine

Cruise missiles should never miss  
the target, baby, but sometimes they do.

There's milk to be had  
if the cow can be secured.

When you bump your head on the corner  
of a kitchen cabinet, think of sand.

Love of country smells like barbecued paranoia  
when it's ripping you to shreds.

Apply bumper stickers and three integers  
to all wounds.

Stand in the middle of 51st Street with no alternative  
and hate yourself until the cops come.

Attribute everything to a misinterpretation  
of Jefferson, Jesus, and J.D. Salinger.

Now put your wrists together.  
Now swallow.

Poem for my Godson

*Owen Mack Carlson, born May 7, 2004*

I could hear you howling in the background  
when your father called me from the hospital  
the day after you were born,  
surly and perhaps a bit too lean.  
"The O.R. looked like a crime scene," he said.  
"They finally had to put a plastic tarp down."  
For twenty-eight hours your mother labored  
to expel you, glazed with fire, into her arms,  
your head somewhat misshapen from the havoc.  
Outside, the traffic mutely sluiced  
down Wilshire Boulevard  
and for once it didn't count.  
Sanction and retribution and post-industrial panic,  
the Apocalypse as foreign policy,  
the refusal of the bomb to pay a living wage to the sky—  
all the horrible errata in this world no longer horrify  
because you're here, you're out, you're free.  
No doubt you'll be handsome like your parents,  
keen of heart and mind like your parents,  
idealistic like your parents.  
When you're older maybe you'll agitate for change,  
maybe you'll find the answers on the field  
or in the flesh or in a manifesto of fractals,  
maybe you'll build something beautiful with your hands  
and give it away. So don't be shy.

(no break)

Wade out into your life and find your tribe.  
Stay informed, write things down,  
learn to play an instrument.  
Take heed of people who can tell you about failure.  
Risk everything, gamble nothing,  
and worship no god but love.  
Know that even if you get lost  
you will never be alone.

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VITA

Gerald Williams

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Doctor of Philosophy

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A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English, Creative Writing

Biographical:

Education: Received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Vermont College at Norwich University in 1995. Received a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona in 1998. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree with a major in English at Oklahoma State University in May of 2006.

Experience: Employed as an Assistant Professor at Marymount Manhattan College from 2004 to the present; a Visiting Assistant Professor at Roger Williams University from 2002 to 2004; a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Oklahoma State University from 1998 to 2000; Associate Editor of *Cimarron Review* at Oklahoma State University from 2000 to 2002; and a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Arizona from 1995 to 1998.

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Title of Study: CASINO OF THE SUN: A COLLECTION OF POEMS WITH  
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Pages in Study: 98

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English, Creative Writing

Scope and Method of Study: Drawing upon the literary criticism of various authors—from Emily Dickinson to Robert Bly to Stephen Dobyns—while acknowledging the work of poets who have directly influenced my own writing—including Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, and Sylvia Plath—my critical introduction investigates my prosodic techniques and fixations, confirms my connection to the post-confessional movement in poetry, and justifies my bleak yet satirical aesthetic.

Findings and Conclusions: In this collection of poems, I have applied elements of both the narrative and the surrealistic lyric, addressing subjects as disparate as family, alienation, death, idealistic love, alcoholism, and political and economic quandary — employing the casino's risk, tawdriness, and mystery as a controlling metaphor. In addition, I attempt to consolidate the major free verse craft devices in an edifying and entertaining manner.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: \_\_\_\_\_