

THE CLOCK OF BODIES:
A COLLECTION OF POEMS
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Delays, Failure, Etc.

Poetry is best represented by itself—not by analysis and certainly not by description, and a personal poetics is something we feel out on our own in the dark. The cultivation of a distinct, authentic approach to writing poetry proved, in my case, to be far more personal and demanding than I initially anticipated. Four years ago, when I was preparing to quit graduate school, a professor stopped me in the hall and asked me why I was leaving. A host of reasons leapt to mind—I lacked the discipline to study for my comprehensive examinations and had squandered a year I needed to spend studying; I felt suffocated and lonely living in a small town; I wanted to travel. Instead, I told him what most concerned me at the time—that I was not writing particularly well and did not want to have to defend a poetry manuscript I hated. “That’s good, Michael,” he said. “It’s called having standards.”

While it was not traditionally comforting feedback, it was the first time I had ever considered my situation from a perspective other than embarrassment and failure, and it helped me escape feeling cast as a restless, unmotivated student looking for an easy way out. Instead, it reminded me that I was an artist. And more than that—an artist *standing on principle*. It was a new feeling for me—after all, quitting school was probably the only instance in three years in which I showed a willingness to be accountable for my own substandard work. For the first time, I recognized that passing grades were not enough. My work was suffering. I had no artistic direction. I did not just want to leave, I *needed* to—or, I feared, I would finish my degree but never write again.

Consequently, although my time in Stillwater certainly left its mark upon this manuscript, most of the poems—perhaps two thirds of them—are either new or

dramatically rewritten. While it is unlikely that any of the work in this collection will ever be called groundbreaking, or brilliant, I find considerable relief in completing something that I genuinely believe to be the product of my best effort. All critiques aside (and there are plenty to be made), I like these poems. To a large degree, this stems from finally arriving at some of my own conclusions about what constitutes good poetry. Part of my difficulty in school was that I had no mature mechanism for filtering the barrage of contradictory ideas that inevitably fly around an academic community. At once naïve and fiercely insecure about my own independence, I was largely ill-equipped to stake out my own opinions, and as a result I left myself no room to establish a creative voice. I was afraid that I would inadvertently reveal what I realize now must have been abundantly obvious at the time—that I had much to learn, both as a scholar and writer, and virtually no confidence in my writing and in myself as a poet.

More than anything, I feared failure. I had spent too much time fishing around for objective verification that what I was doing was correct, and far too little time asking myself whether I thought that what I was writing was good. I fell into the habit of writing poems that aimed to be difficult to criticize rather than worthwhile to read, and what I took to workshops largely failed to be compelling in craft or content. Most of the poems were very early drafts—some written in computer labs on the way to class. And my peers could tell. Some of the more mature poets, particularly those who knew I was capable of much better work, felt affronted by the sloppiness of the execution. It took me several years to admit how intentional this was. It is possible to hide oneself from criticism by putting forward admittedly mediocre material. It releases you from the need to take negative feedback personally. By workshopping poems I knew were not ready, I was

denying ownership of my own work. Poetry is a nervous art. The rules are not static, and while they do not diminish in importance as the poet matures, the role they play and the ways in which one must respond to and challenge them alter a great deal. If you make it your object to write *correctly* rather than to write *well* you are almost sure to fail.

Because I could not accept that no instruction manual was forthcoming, my poems became so hurried, dull and risk-averse that I gradually stopped writing completely. By the time I left school, I had not finished a poem in over a year.

Over the next couple of years, however, I came to realize that my writer's block was not an illness. It was a symptom—an indication that old methods and techniques were failing and new ones were needed—and it was also its own cure. Eventually, when I became desperate enough, I began to shed anything that might have been keeping me from putting words on the page. Still, I spent the first three years after I left Stillwater reading very little poetry and writing almost nothing, paralyzed by a collection of often contradictory ideas and preferences I had absorbed with very little analysis or reflection—ideas that had coalesced to form a strict set of guidelines that stifled my creativity and inhibited experimentation. What I had to face was my aversion to holding myself personally responsible for the choices I made with my work. I was not afraid of risk. I was afraid of accountability. I was spending too much time thinking when, as Larry Levis once said in an interview, I should have just been writing:

Passion is what matters in poetry; and sustaining one's [sic] sometimes depends on really not giving a shit about anything else but just doing it....
The people who are telling you that you do have obligations, moral ones ... to their morals, are essentially just bullshit. You don't have to pay

attention to that. At any rate, you've already paid that debt and you paid it yesterday. (293)

One of my biggest problems was that I had yet to learn to write as an independent adult rather than as a student trying to please instructors and workshop peers. The confidence I lacked was a crucial hindrance to both my writing and my ability to discuss my own work. To speak or write is to edit. The act of creation is by nature also an act of exclusion—or, at the very least—limitation. To speak one word is to neglect speaking other words, and that can be terrifying to someone who is constantly afraid of choosing the wrong ones. Say what you will about the social nature of language—about various discourses and the role of communities in shaping expression and identity—from the perspective of the artist staring at the page, art is principally an existential act. It is all about decisions, and every decision has consequences. It was not just the fact of this that I found alarming—it was the difficulty I encountered reconciling myself to the practice of allowing poems to be limited by decisions—to be headed off from one direction and steered in another. It was not so much that I was unhappy with the directions I chose but rather that I resisted letting go of other directions I found interesting, and I was constantly concerned that I was making wrong choices. When faced with a problem, the surest way to paralyze yourself is to consider all the possible solutions at once—and not let go of any of them. In my case, writer's block came because I was profoundly dissatisfied with my own writing and simultaneously unwilling or unable to choose a different approach. It left when I stopped thinking about my approach altogether and decided see if the act of writing poetry itself might lead me out of my frustration.

Even now, after taking a considerable period of time to think and write on my own, I can explain with confidence what specific *poems* mean to do but am far less comfortable discussing what I mean to do—*myself*—as a poet. I simply think about it less now than I used to—although I probably write more. While I was taking classes (which I generally enjoyed, despite the fact that I never applied myself as I should have), I felt pressure to be as much a scholar as a poet, and my work in both areas suffered because of it. Not that it is impossible to be both, but the formulation of a manuscript—particularly in the early stages—demands full attention and, for me, a conscious suspension of aggressive analysis and criticism. This is not, perhaps, all that uncommon. As Tony Hoagland writes in *Real Soffistikashun*, “the poet is a perpetual amateur.... Even to remember what a poem IS seems impossible for a poet—one suspects that professors, or professionals, rarely have that problem” (60).

Poetics and Readability

Poetry is sleight of hand—the creation of meaning disguised as the revelation of general truth through particulars. Particulars are important, but we are not cataloguing data. There are no *correct* particulars, no arbitrarily necessary ones. The poem itself decides what particulars are important. I am far more concerned with creating emotional connections than literal ones, and thus the images and metaphors in this volume work to create a common space for shared emotional participation. If these poems, at times, lean too heavily on epiphany, it is not because I hold that poetry should be revelatory in the romantic or religious sense, but rather that poetry needs to contain a clear and intentional moment of recognition for the reader, when extraneous images and ideas coalesce into an

moment of emotional connection to the text. The images and metaphors are not correlative in a literal sense but seek rather to establish mood and blur the line between emotion and thought. The poems seek to work *with* the disconnect between subject and object rather than against it—to create a common territory for shared experience—an approach that seeks to be conscious of the bareness of imagist poetry, the sincerity and emotional vitality of confessionalism, and the insecurity about the efficacy of authentic communication which helped define late 20th century compositional verse. The aim is to use ostensibly authentic voices to investigate the conflicts between the speakers and themselves in a way that is as concrete as possible. In “After the Argument,” for example, the child’s limited ability or willingness to connect his tense surroundings to their broader implications gave me the opportunity to write what is essentially an imagist poem—defined (with the exception of the last line) purely by things and events rather than ideas. The intensely concrete approach is authentic to the voice and personality of the speaker, and for that reason, I think it succeeds better than “Night,” a similar poem, written at about the same time, which has a much less well-defined speaker, and thus seems far less grounded.

These poems use threads of narrative, when necessary, as a means to an end—a path to common emotional ground. In that sense—in the organization of poetic elements to create a moment of epiphany—these are traditional lyric poems. They seek to reconcile the distance and sparseness of imagism and Eastern poetry with dynamic, more character-driven voices. In practice, this has become a means for applying principles of Eliot’s “objective correlative” without fully buying into it—my own admission that the fact that poetry need not be dominated by the poet’s persona does not mean that one must seek to

eradicate the personality altogether. After all, even in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot loses his way at the end, giving a disarmingly personal reason for why he welcomes the notion of poetry as escape. After spending the entire essay emphasizing the need to liberate the *work* from the poet, he abruptly switches direction, advocating the possibility that the *poet* might be freed from *himself*—an entirely different proposition (43). One could argue, in fact, that the tension between these two objectives contributed significantly to his success. Even poems as fine as Eliot’s never escape Eliot. His assertion about meter is also just as true of personality. It exists with or without our acknowledgement. It can be subverted—maybe—but not escaped. Certainly talent makes Eliot great, but his failure to achieve the objectivity he strains for is what keeps his poems interesting.

Thus, these poems are far from being dense, philosophical exercises. In fact, they may occasionally suffer from being a little too slight, due to the fact that, for the most part, in this collection I have attempted to keep the poems both engaging and readable, bearing in mind Dickinson’s ubiquitous quote asserting that, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry”—if only for the reason that her method for judging what constitutes poetry is almost exclusively concerned with the emotional communication between the work itself and the reader. I believe that a definition of poetry should have considerably less to do with form and even content than *impact*—the specific ways in which the work elicits a set of dynamic responses from a community of readers. A significant portion of these poems, in fact, have a single, relatively simple goal—to crystallize a highly specific, nuanced emotion that is more readily experienced than understood—if only because that particular feeling is really the

result of a host of other emotions happening to intersect at once. Probably the most obvious example of this is in “Just Before the Owl Hit the Windshield”:

The headlights carved a tunnel
only the car could fit through
and there was the moon wandering
beside and ignoring me
like a coyote with his back turned
still watching with his ears.

Between stations some man’s voice
shouted hallelujah
every other word until he broke
the vowels and spat them on the dashboard,
and for a second I imagined
the swaying corn worshipping my car
was more than wind bullying the fields.

The point here is to express not just the emotion within the car, but also the speaker’s somewhat jaded nostalgia concerning the memory of an idyllic moment that directly precedes one that is considerably less pleasant. In certain ways, this poem cheats, but the way it cheats makes a statement about the way dramatic events alter how we remember feeling beforehand. The solitary speaker, crazy radio station, and dueling images of the headlights and the moon help indicate the speaker’s whimsical, semi-religious sense of isolation and privacy, but it is the title which completes the poem. The challenge of trying to relate the emotion tied to this specific event lies in the fact that it can really only be

“remembered”—not experienced. Any memory is likely to be permanently altered by a startling accident, and this is a poem about events casting backwards shadows on what we think are accurate recollections.

The “Owl” poem is also consistent with my belief that much of the work of poetry is done by what is left out. Good poems respect coping mechanisms. They lead the reader to be more self-conscious about the process of making sense of a distorted viewpoint—of filling in the gaps so that the picture makes sense. In these poems I have attempted to choose my angles carefully—to create pockets of meaning that are not articulated in the works themselves. Sometimes the best line in a poem is the one left unwritten, and sometimes the best way to connect with the reader is to step back and create distance—some space for the reader’s imagination and analysis. Many of my early poems—particularly the more emotional ones—suffered from being too direct when they should have employed reticence in service of emotional expression. Reading Bishop, particularly, helped me see this. Her carefully distant voice – achieved, notably, through mastery of form rather than hyper-intellectualization – succeeds because it is fragile, repeatedly shattering before an awe that is nearly religious in its simultaneous evocation of terror and desire. The magnitude and austerity of Bishop’s world threaten to silence her but rarely succeeds. She could cower, but usually she sings.

Still, my first rule for these poems was that they at least attempt to engage—that they not encase themselves in a bright, unintelligible veneer. Good poetry must risk a connection with the reader—even as it recognizes that a direct or easy connection is impossible. Language is a contradiction. Because it preexists us as the product of social negotiations that had nothing to do with us, it is impossible to claim it (or even our own

thoughts) as our own. Yet, our ridiculous complexity—the stunning variety of our experiences and biology—renders perfectly precise, concrete communication impossible. No word is ever new, and no word is ever anything but new. We do not get to choose what a word means, and yet we do not get to point exactly to its meaning either. Language is a system of shared approximations, and poetry is an attempt to radically particularize those approximations in a way that creates an opportunity for shared emotional experience. Whether poetry comes about as the direct product of this aim or as a byproduct of the spectacular failure such an endeavor seems to guarantee is a matter of debate.

All I know for certain is that, as with Kierkegaard's religious seeker, intention is vital. A poet who has stopped trying to cultivate connections with readers has left poetry to toil in other fields. After all, it is possible to experiment without risk, particularly if the writer uses the designation of experimentation to escape allowing his poems to be judged on their own merits. I find it suspicious that such a large percentage of highly abstract experimental poetry specifically aims to elevate (or descend) beyond judgment. When avoidance of meaning is in and of itself a purpose for writing, the poems can only make the same point over and over. The creators of such poems do not just commit the imitative fallacy—they double down on it. It is the least risky form of experimental poetry imaginable, because the primary prerequisite for success is artistic failure, and they set the bar at precisely their own height. The works are diverting but hazard neither depth nor emotional engagement. Such an intensely philosophical approach precludes attempting meaningful connections between words and things, and so the poets, reluctantly it seems to me, dispense with attempts to make such connections in their own

work, and thus lose any chance of forging connections with the reader. Their scrutiny has moved past things, past even the atoms that make things, and into the space between the atoms that make things. They can see only the vacuums between particles—the emptiness that forbids matter from touching matter. Their thinking is so correct it is unintelligible. If they were lazier thinkers they would be better poets. Poetry has for centuries, and for varying reasons, worshipped particulars and allowed itself to be hypnotized by tricky relationships between words, objects, and meaning. But compositional poetry is too particular. It holds against language the distance between subject and object and refuses to forgive—even at the cost of writing dull poetry. It should refuse to forgive dullness instead—more people would read poems. As it is, these poets can defend their philosophy with remarkable efficiency. They just have a hard time explaining why it’s worth reading. As Doty writes in “Fog Suite,” there is something to be said for working with, rather than against, the trickiness of language:

What I love about language
is what I love about fog:
what comes between us and things
grants them their shine. (23)

Love and Politics

The love poems in this collection, which comprise the entire third section, attempt to address, without really answering, questions about basic human motivation. Larry Levis’ posthumous collection, *Elegy*, was certainly an inspiration here—in particular his playful titles and the deepening sense of concentration that develops over the course of

the book as he returns again and again to his subject. Like Levis, I wanted to visit a subject again and again from a number of different directions. Very quickly, however, the poems became an assortment of investigations into everything but love—in particular the complicating emotions that come with love such as grief, resignation, fear, nostalgia, and doubt. In that respect, they are almost *anti*-love poems—especially insofar as none of them are particularly romantic, and the speakers never manage to express much euphoria or devotion.

Because love poems tend to be more consistently personal than other forms of contemporary verse, these poems also gave me room to experiment with voice. As readers, we often contend that we are fully able to distinguish between the poem's speaker and the poet. Still, confusing the two is a difficult habit to break, and that provides ample opportunity for the poet to play with reader expectations and assumptions. Indeed, a certain type of deeply "personal" poem—like "Love Poem for My Mother" simply works better if the reader at least partially believes it is true. Over the course of this manuscript, drifting between distant, theatrical voices and ones that seem more genuine, allowed me to write a whole series of poems in between—including most of the love poems—that might be authentic expressions of emotion and might be indictments of twisted attitudes and values. This is also one of the ways I resolved a problem facing me when I was struggling with writing the political poems. Poetry always constitutes, on some level, a political act, but it is nonetheless a particularly useless art—certainly a poor instrument for instigating social change among large groups. Good poetry demands a certain degree of ambiguity and complexity—it must reward, even frustrate, close inspection. Large social movements, on the other hand, demand a

simple, relatively straightforward message for people to rally around and agree upon. Ambiguity creates dissent; dissent checks momentum, and in social movements, momentum is everything.

I was helped with these difficulties by reading William Carlos Williams. For years I have been intrigued by the conflicted sensuality in Williams' "The Young Housewife," as well by as the sinister undertone beneath the charm and keen observation of the speaker. It is a poem that can either be seen as compassionate or derisive—as distant or self-indicting. He could be expressing his own freewheeling lust or he could be critiquing a repressive and misogynistic society—one in which, if the last lines are any indication, he admits he participates, perhaps even with culpability. Williams recognized consequences and contradictions, and he understood as well as anyone that love poetry presents a perfect opportunity to contrast tone with content—to raise questions about sincerity without offering clear solutions. Are love poems other-directed or self-directed? Do they represent the speaker at his worst or his best? These are questions that need to be asked about political poems as well—particularly when the one writing them comes, as I do, from what is generally a position of privilege. I found writing about sexism, or the Iraq war, or even the Tulsa Race Riots to be almost offensively bland unless I addressed—directly or ironically—the ways in which I, along with most people in my situation, have benefited from them or might even be partially to blame for their perpetuation. The point is not to tap into a vein of liberal guilt but rather to examine the anxiety that is necessarily inherent to being aware of injustice while feeling helpless to change the situation. Rather than risk appropriating stories that do not belong to me, or— even worse—giving the speaker omniscience and absolution so that he might make

judgments and observations from a safe, guiltless distance, I tried to make whatever points I made through the speakers' own flawed, sometimes ugly voices—which, if one sees “The Young Housewife” as an uncomfortable critique of sexism, is what Williams does.

Formal Considerations

The poems in this manuscript tend to be relaxed and conversational in tone. Consequently, while writing them, I felt the need to be particularly circumspect in how I constructed lines. Early versions of these poems tended to seem either unnecessarily dense or haphazard in their construction. Even after revisions, certain portions consistently felt rushed, while others seemed to struggle to gain momentum, and the breaks themselves often appeared random and ineffective—which is a particularly irritating problem when the lines tend to be short anyway and thus draw more attention to when and how they end. I tried counting syllables and even experimented with prose poetry, but while those methods added some consistency to the poems as a whole, they never really seemed to fit the tone or content of my work. My difficulties came to a head when I was working on “A Monk Considers his Vows,” which I liked from the earliest drafts but had a difficult time laying out on the page. Out of frustration, I began inserting five space breaks within the lines to slow down the pace and accentuate the poem's generally meditative tone. Here are the first two stanzas:

Finally you taste the solitude
you long for. It guards your tongue
like snow elemental

bare. Maybe

God is the sun boiling
clapping in his dark vacuum fierce
close as your skin or
the earth mute expectant

It may seem like a small, even obvious remedy, but at the time it had been nearly two years since I had written something I liked, and it felt like a revelation. Equally significant was the fact that, although it was by no means an original technique, it was one I felt out and applied on my own, and with it came the necessary (if embarrassingly obvious) realization that no one was going to find these solutions for me. It was a watershed moment, and it changed the way all the poems that came after it were constructed. Stretching out the lines gave me more flexibility with their length and allowed me to adjust the pace of the poem more easily. Furthermore, it provided another way, on top of line breaks and punctuation, to create space for a pause or a breath. The spaces also allowed me to think less about length or meter when I broke the line, and more about which words I was interested in emphasizing. Whenever possible, I sought to use breaks to create tension—to cause the reader, hopefully, to linger on the last word and snap to the next one, as I did with the last two lines of the second stanza, where the word “or” hangs in the air for a moment before falling onto the iamb of “the earth.” The first part of the stanza references the sun, and the line break, combined with the near palindrome of “the earth” attempts to underscore the speaker’s jarring return to the ground and to the anxiety of his immediate situation.

In general, line length tends to be uniform in the poems that are broken into stanzas and more irregular in those that are not. Much of this is due to the fact that these poems were intentionally constructed to be quickly readable on the first reading. My thoughts on intentionally opaque verse notwithstanding, this decision arose not so much from a fixed poetic as from a set of intentions for this manuscript in particular. The strength of these poems does not lie in their rhetorical density or difficulty. They tend, instead (although not always), to be sparer, cleaner works that often focus on sketching specific moods or realizations. Many of them are brief and somewhat slight. Some are meant to be read almost like haikus—easily read initially but rewarding upon closer inspection. When these poems succeed it is because they are intentionally more complicated and conflicted than they look.

Final Thoughts

I have given up trying to be completely satisfied with my own work, and, if I wanted, I could write another twenty pages about how, more than anything else, this manuscript ultimately served to show me all of the things that I was *not* doing well—and, once again, all of the other directions I could have taken with these poems. One of the difficult consequences of completing this manuscript was recognizing that as I approached the end, my notion of what constituted good poetry, and my understanding of how I wanted to go about writing new poems, was completely different from the works that constitute this collection. The poems I want to write now are different from the ones that I have wanted to write for the past two years. The next collection, hopefully, will

contain longer, denser poems about a broader range of subjects—ones more robust in structure and less dependent on epiphany.

But perfectionism never gave me anything but writer's block. This collection of poetry seeks to catalogue and investigate the confrontation between a host of difficult and complicated speakers and a host of difficult and complicated emotions. It intends to avoid obscurity for its own sake in favor of readability and a more personality-based complexity. At this stage, whether the works within it succeed or not is out of my hands. I am finished worrying about it, and I am willing to let them delight or fail. I am done hiding them. They are the best I have.

i. THE CLOCK OF BODIES

Album

In the pictures everyone around you
is always laughing.

The lens has snatched your hand
from its torrent of gestures and pinned it
beside your fat
ridiculous eyes.

It is obscene—
how some photos insist
on revealing only how much
you don't know about a person.

In the photographs they don't need to breathe
so they can laugh forever. Your wrist dangles
off the corner
and I feel that despair
that is not quite
like losing a memory
but almost this conviction that happiness
lurks behind us somewhere
content with itself if not completely
out of reach.

Leaving The Boat

I have not forgotten holding the candle
or its hot breath
against my hand light of the world
swallowed by a cavern of air...
Or the paper
sounds of knees and shoes
in prayer meticulous chains
of rhetoric binding us
or the pale afternoons with the newspaper
and school beginning the next day.
But one demands
to outgrow such things.
Not with anger but a kind of relief
and shudder the way a pigeon shakes dust
from his feathers—
to realize if each thought
I hoarded was wrong
new ones I had not considered
possible might open to me
as the world must have opened to Peter
when he saw fish gliding
beneath his feet before the tempest
made him afraid.

Starlings Gather While My Grandfather Is Dying

It begins with a black beak
snapping at a phone line
while he pauses to squawk to shit.

Others join him stupid and cranky
shrieking under overpasses on iron ledges
and the wheel wells of rusty cars—
frosting the street with droppings
so that road markings disappear.

Perhaps at midday a dark cloud lifts
as though to leave. The body rises
from the couch gathering its robe
clutching the armrest.

As if the earth were bound
to their wings they wind upward
until gravity hauls them down.

Burial
Tulsa - June, 1921

Sometime after white men
began dropping bundles of dynamite
from prop planes

the word *riot* seemed
inappropriate. So the city chose
not to give it a name at all

and simply to forget it happened—
hoping no one would discover
what it left to decay

beneath an unmarked swell of earth
at the cemetery beside the plots
of some black children.

This is a city that learned
immediately how to hide the obvious
How to herd families

into the baseball stadiums,
and because it was a mob
no one remembers the names

of the instigators, and none
of us has ancestors who participated
—no lean and tired men

loading shells into shotguns tucking
extras into chest pockets while their wives
put our grandfathers to bed.

It is the victims we remember,
and in our minds they are always running.
Their homes glow behind them

gutted and steaming waiting
to be buried by tired workers
who smoke cigarettes

while they startle their horses
and lurch forward the morning sun still
peeling moisture from elms that smoke

as though they too had burned
all night and dawn
smothered their limbs.

Deep February

I have no response to this bleakness except
yesterday I set an acorn on my desk

and planted three bulbs in my
neighbor's lawn without asking

to remind myself that though we say winter
is preparation for death, if I stand perfectly

still I can hear oaks gather their roots
settling into their stubborn meditation,

and nothing is more vibrant than an iris bulb
after its leaf has wilted waiting for a cue

for a warm morning in which to uncurl
and hurl itself into bloom

Post Script

I suppose it is the same revelation
other generations wake to
when their friends begin to die:
Less changes than one might expect.

But I tire of the brief,
humiliating surprise—how days meander
forward in their slow, uninhibited way,
and cars return to freeways each morning
to drive to work
just as they did before—

or how I assumed
your stereo would break when it did not
and still murmurs records you chose
night after night
of which you never tired

so that repetition sank them
into carpet and walls that now smell
of everything but you and I can barely stand
to be alone in my house.

Just Before An Owl Broke My Windshield

The headlights carved a tunnel
only the car could fit through
and there was the moon wandering
beside and ignoring me
like a coyote with his back turned
still watching with his ears.

Between stations some man's voice
shouted hallelujah
every other word until he broke
the vowels and spat them on the dashboard,
and for a second I imagined
the swaying corn worshipping my car
was more than wind bullying the fields.

Dreams I Have Now

I

You and I an empty table
I begin to eat you delicately at first
 twin eyes in lime vinaigrette
braised nipples and earlobes but I lose
restraint devour you thigh to clavicle
every part but your mouth you said
 you weren't hungry anyway

II

A barrel in your mouth
 A barrel that was in your mouth
leaping to leave a love letter
on the cabinet I spy another thought
pooling beneath your head
 that might be regret
 but who knows

III

Finding you trussed with steel
pinned to asphalt watching Death in boots
buttons and a black cap ask your name
so he can mark you down
 in his notebook
 I want to talk with you but
he waves me away

IV

Also the constellations
 are a loose spool of fire stuck
to my fingers I try to pull
it apart to give to you because
you want it and also it burns
 but I can't
 we are about to argue when
the spot where you stood empties
 and there is only silence.

Under The Weather

Too many ways to tell time
to need a watch or calendar—
consider the quality of light in season
garish hues in August
or pale diffident February the wash
of bronze across scrub cedars and sand
announcing the approach of dusk
to the clock of traffic
growling its way home from work.

Books or the internet will instruct you
how to build a clock of flowers
so that you may look out your window
and know it is time for lunch when
the Goatsbeard folds shut and the Kalui
Indians heard a clock of birds—
taught their children to heed the shrieking
branches at day's end and come home.

The calendar of magicicadas screams
all night and day for three weeks
until they bury their eggs and die
and if you were born into their song
you know when you hear it again
you are seventeen. Which brings us

of course to the clock of bodies
the rhythms within them
and their thick impermanent selves—
since anything that ages
is a clock anything that deteriorates
slowly while we watch our flesh
packed with inevitabilities

the slow march of repetitions—
of injuries and head colds
that would remind us of death
if we did not imagine ourselves
leaving our true bodies
when we were ill and returning
to them when we were well.

Today

I am the age you were when I was born.

Early Thursday morning
the sky finally emptied
pools on Bay Street sat flat in pockets
of asphalt as nurses handled the newborns
in their unimpressed way tagging
and cleaning them like auto parts

My mother wondered
about stretch marks and asked
for ice cream so you walked
a mile to the drug store
pausing halfway to sit
because you felt dizzy

wondering if you might still escape
watching puddles
blink back at the traffic lights
red green yellow

Oklahoma Centennial

Theirs were anxious faces
 exhausted and stubborn
and by the time they were thirty

even the women looked
 like old men holding
children on filthy aprons

and glaring at the camera
 as if to break the lens
with their defiance.

 Misery has a way
of persuading us to love
its memory when it leaves

and those who remained
clung to their homes with the grip
 of unrepentant thieves.

*

Some things are impossible
 to understand
unless you were born here.

The language of the terrain
remains difficult to follow
 —not obviously beautiful

or accessible though a prairie
has its own long conversation
with itself within a dreariness

unrelieved by dismal
 families of cedars
farmers plant as barriers to wind.

Even in the eastern quarter
of the state
where the landscape buckles

and grows a pelt of scrub
oaks—bright sycamores and hickories
near the river beds—

the trees hunch gnarled and miserable.
Those rooted at the edge of forests
peer out as if fearing attack.

*

One learns to notice driving
through this place how our lives
are mocked by so much space—

how the houses
look like toys a child left
in a field.

*

How else to explain the way
my mother fears
the mountains? —Their obdurate

confidence. The ribbon roads
and dinosaur shadows
drifting across their faces?

To her they are just walls.
She feels safe only on top of them
where she can see properly

miles and miles
into the comforting irrelevancy
of the plains. —My mother

who still believes in God
but wakes in panic
at night the knuckles

of her heart white with dread—
growing so afraid of death
she wishes to die.

—Who has never seen the ocean
but would love it because as at home
we always see what is coming.

Taking You Home

I know when you're nervous.
Today we have the same tell—knuckles
raking tree trunks. And you collect
cigarette butts from the ground to slip
in your pockets.

We tell each other stories. One in particular
you have remembered lately: our uncle
shooting wild kittens in the field behind the house—
how he carried the scuffling box until
he disappeared in the grass, and the boys sulked
on the porch because they weren't allowed to watch.

You heard the pistol snap
open the afternoon like a safe heard our sister
burst through the back door screaming
as though from inside you,
and what you did not see you dreamed—
the slick impatient bullets
leaping from the barrel into skull and bone.

Now we smile on the way to the car,
reaching for the stereo, laughing at the list
of advice they gave for your new life:
when to eat, wash, jog, medicate,

and when you thrust it out the window
and let go I am not surprised,
but I turn up the radio afraid
you will ask if I wanted to run
into the field with the other boys.

After The Argument

My job is to watch
the picnic table with a bench
missing and grass sticking

to paper plates
scattered in the yard.
A big dog I don't know

licks films of butter
from corn cobs,
prints from

plastic wine glasses.
Smoke drifts through
the bathroom

window screen
in fine gray lines.
In the kitchen

a large bowl
slides through my mother's
fingers and shatters.

I hear swearing. A lawn
mower rumbles next door
and coughs exhaust.

This is such a nice
high swing.
When I jump
it feels like flying.

Elegy With A Curfew At 9

The waves preach their dull
sermon on inevitability and devotion,

returning back and back again
to the same point—

that they will always be here
outlasting me. I want to say,

There will always be languid bodies
watching *you* always

a small boy dragging
carcasses of kelp up the beach

while his mother reads.
But then at 830

she stands and leans
forward. She could be any age

shaking sand from her hair as she did
when she was fifteen,

and yes I know that prick of light
sputtering above happened

so long ago 100 million years
and now muttering past us.

ii. WHAT THE TELEVISION SAID

What The Television Said

Politics aside their faces
 at least
should be considered

even if to lay viewers
 they all appear the same
the grubby howling mouths

and on their robes—
 grip prints of blood that
once released dry into small
 disfigured smiles.

We should consider that
 although we find it difficult
 to tell them apart
we must not reduce flesh
 to numbers. Though

we may be forgiven if their habits
appear crude anachronistic
dispensable even cowering

as they do beneath
the sophisticated elegance
of our missiles whistling quietly
on the way down.

A Monk Considers His Vows

Finally you taste the solitude
you long for. It guards your tongue
like snow elemental
bare. Maybe

God is the sun boiling
clapping in his dark vacuum fierce
close as your skin or
the earth mute expectant

beating beneath your feet—
shoots bending slipping
lightward. Maybe
the yawn of August is closing.

You stand on a tongue
made of corn uncoiling
beside the interstate guarded by teeth
preparing to snap.

Solo In The Christmas Pageant

If the audience is the empty night
hanging the cold Pleiades
above the ocean,

then she is the kite
nestled in the rocky wall

who holds her breath and waits to sing
to test the air with quick
unsteady wings

and finds the current
just before she falls.

Three Types Of Ghost In Marion Co.

Ghosts of the bodies of snow
settled into fields and ghosts

of their spirits becoming steam
pausing

like geese finishing
their long drink

from the slough pond who
turn to gaze as if posed

a question then bury their wings
in the fog and are gone.

Permission

Blessed Mother most of us
would have forgiven
you even had we known
 even if you did not ask
for forgiveness and just
took a long walk by yourself
 in the desert—
You who had been blessed
but not asked the uninvited
Presence in your body
the angel named but you
might not have had you
 seen how love's
descendents look nothing like her
 or felt the bitter
temper of his heart punching
its way out or sensed
 the tempest coiled
and waiting in his lungs.

Night

A drawer half open
half full of moonlight

Two candles unlit
beside my bookshelf

A lighter, a pack of cigarettes
I meant to throw away

The white wire shelf
that collapses, wakes me

A dog barking at the wind
at the early smell of spring

Halloween

They say the blast lifted a man
from his feet and threw him into a book store.

It is evening and I am opening
a bottle of wine over the newspaper

which says of those closest
to the detonation that their bodies

broke like striplings—
the air for a moment full of lipids

blood and hair.
Somewhere a preacher is calling

this the judgment
of God and a sign of the times.

Somewhere someone
cinches the straps of the next explosion,

and if he prays it is to scrub away
resistance or fear as I would.

I notice squirrels have again
tipped the bird feeder in the front yard,

and that despite the rain
beginning to clatter on the windows

most of the neighbors
have set out their jack-o'-lanterns.

One by one
their grins snap at the wind and go dark.

Bar Fights

Admit it. There is no pleasure
like dominion—

the infliction of pain.
No better way

to discover how ruthlessly
you love yourself to feel the beast

throw his fist
against the tight skin of your heart

over and over a crescendo like joy.
All great virtues

aspire to this—
to leave no space for thought

or calculation.
Your fathers strike through you.

You belong to them.
You have always belonged to them.

They welcome you. They recognize
the bruises on your hands.

Gentle Man

He prefers his bagels lightly
toasted with a dab of cream cheese,
and to those behind the counter seems
effeminate perhaps in a slightly
different context deviant—
gentleness being such an easy mask
for perversion. Until we find it hard
to know who is kind
if fastidious and who is hideous—
we who were raised to love
kindness and to fear it.
Because how many truly kind men
do you know?
(It may be nothing.) Still,
as he gathers bread in one hand
and in another coffee,
a woman counts his change and ponders
how deep below
the surface lurks brutality.

The Men's Movement

God only knows they needed
something to rescue—
their lives felt so empty
without battles and quests.

Necessity dictated,
without women to heed them,
they become their own damsels
to save from distress.

Thirst

Being sophisticated, we assume the conqueror deserves this fate. We note de Bry's ignorance—how he etched the Aztec captors bald and slimy, with Mediterranean features, their cohorts behind them roasting human limbs over bonfires, though they weren't cannibals.

A native holds a vessel with a pair of tongs and pours molten gold into the mouth of a Spanish conquistador. Other captors dance above him while droplets of gold bounce around his lips as if he was swallowing water or beer.

Surely, the scene was calmer—as quiet as the line of smoke streaming from the back of his throat or the whine of his wrists and ankles in their restraints. His torturers have burnt out his voice and now they proceed with silent care, not spilling a drop. No fellow prisoners with missing legs bleed alone on straw mats. The wives sing to themselves as they prepare dinner while the children chase each other through the brush. The soldier hears all of this, and we, being sophisticated, assume he recognizes what a horrible curse he has cast upon this people, and is inconsolable.

Why It Didn't Work

He was the type of person who gave cigarettes
to homeless men,
and she was the type of person who didn't smoke.

He was the type of person who went to a reading once,
and she was the type of person who didn't answer.

She was the type of person who sang
in the shower,
and he was the type of person who forgot
to bring a towel in.

She was the type of person who ran for office,
and he was the type of person who vacuumed
on first Thursdays.

She was the type of person who climbed into the backseat
with Jack Kerouac,
and he was the type of person who sang in the shower.

He was the kind of person who tore pages from the phonebook
and regretted it later,
and she was the type of person who peeled
tomato slices off her sandwich and held them
in her fingers as if she didn't know what to do next.

He was the type of person who pretended to like dogs,
and she was the type of person who saved
quarters for laundry.

He was the type of person who talked often of sex,
and she was the type of person who masturbated
in the shower.

He was the type of person who joked with the server,
and she was the type of person who didn't have a favorite color.

He was the type of person who recognized types of airplanes,
and she was the type of person who made her boyfriend
hang the pictures.

She was the type of person who forgot to bring
her own bag to the grocery store,
and he was the type of person who still wanted to be an actor.

He was the type of person who liked the type of person
who sang for no reason,
and she was the type of person who was irritated
by the type of person who peeled the labels off beers.

Lot's Wife

Rapid tongues of goats and sheep
sing dry songs upon her ankles,
mindless of smoke that creeps

between the ruined homes and trickles
back to heaven, bored, above their heads.
She becomes an idol—silenced, stilled,

her flock approaches, needful and is fed
if not quenched. Its members bully
forward, hooves erasing tread

marks left as censures by her family
who, when instructed, tucked and ran
with panicked deafness that helped them flee

as angels roared orders and Sodom burned,
flames blooming inwards like the heart of God.
But Lot's wife heard screams, and turned.

Thomas Merton Meets Thich Nhat Hanh

Back turned. You knew he
was a monk by how gently
the door closed. He bowed.

III. LOVE POEMS

Love Poem

As blue (your eyes, I mean) as
salt, peach trees, the steel-tilled soil
the blue earthworm loves, blue as fire
hydrants, tire rubber, single malt scotch
in crystal tumblers, stop signs.

Your eyes are blue as brick, as snow,
dogwood blossoms, as blue as oranges,
lemons, lime sprinkled on grave-bodies
in a sack, blue as a blush, as tennis
balls, cotton, steel and tobacco—

blue as cream filled tarts, marbled
slabs of filet mignon, ruddy pork
haunches, blue as any random
thing, the stones filling my mouth, wet
pebbles pinching my tongue.

Love Poem With The Scent of Antiseptic

I think of my grandmother in 1938
riding trolleys through downtown Indianapolis
madly in love with Joe Louis,
keeping her secret from friends and especially her father
who was in the Klan.
She used to wish her freckles would melt together
so that not even the quiet men in the back
could tell what she was,
but great-grandpa loved the word nigger to the end.
Stern like his brothers warped in the trenches
and oily ship bellies of the First War a church-going
man who read newspapers and wrote the editors—
As a child I would wait for the word to appear
in his mouth first a whisper then louder
over laughter and winks from his children—
a fat, buttery note he sang like a spell
which no one could pry from his jaws though orderlies
scolded as they wheeled him room to room,
his veins gulping with rage beneath a wrap of skin
pale as wet paper—more transparent each day
until he died and his coffin made its soft
sealing sound above him, and when
my grandmother speaks of him she always says
But you know my first crush was a black man.

Love Poem Between Two Addicts

If you drink I will love you.
If you pack your organs like olives
liver/kidney/lungs into
the tart mouth of a bottle,
I will love you. If you hide yourself
in some car rattling south,
wake between strangers, walk out
into the sun blazing on the asphalt
like a migraine. If you light your blood
on fire leave a trail for me to follow,
I will eat your ashes.

Love Poem Between Two Addicts

Beneath slender shadows
children shriek over the gulls.

The kite pursues.
A burst of sand.

I am leaving.

You lean your body
into bold practiced
strokes.

Love Poem For My Mother

I was sixteen and thus unfamiliar
with the sight of a woman lost in a room
as if she could not imagine
how she could possibly be there—
caged between the bed and wall
with her eyes crawling side to side
from the photographs of her children
to the lamp and the dresser and back again.

I wanted to comfort her and I wanted
to drive away and leave her
alone with the body she was becoming
—a body promised by books
she brought home packed
with delighted women measuring
the growth of their breasts their wide
areolas smiling across the page.

Books in which I found
my mother in photo after photo:
Exposed in stirrups on cold
doctor's tables Grinning at men
who leaned ears to her belly
Sliced horizontally in diagrams
revealing stages of fetal growth—

nothing to prepare me for the woman
kneeling on the floor pulling
her hair with one hand
while the other dug its nails into her hip
so that when I hugged her
it was like holding a stranger
who has survived a car accident
who finds the embrace awkward
but is so upset she doesn't care.

Love Poem With A Proposal In It

Servers pause as they pass the table, holding
bread in wicker baskets. *Let's get married*
I say, and your gaze replies; it measures
with an undertaker's eye for adjustment

control—the painting of the corpse—
prudent adjustments reserved for weddings
and wakes, for respectful
uncles passing the casket or the cake.

I, too, speculate. And you know that I
have plans I wish to make, to shape our sons
with a failed athlete's eye for glory, glitter,
to teach the swagger of a star and rake.

You fill the pause with butter
and smile. I smile back for mine,
the moment's sake (our faces hide
economies behind their eyes).

O, hell—why not? Think of the swarms
who came before us, wrecked
their own, their children's lives.

We are shadows fumbling,
counting, pacing, marking toes
we tag and shelve
carefully, with undertaker's eyes.

Love Poem For A Habit

You were something more than
an occupation for my hands
though if I am honest it is my hands
who miss you most—usually
when they are chattering
with bellies of tables or the silver rings
circling the tops of beer cans.

Also (foolish me) my lungs
miss you. —The relief of the match
and permission to sigh over and over
to mill with other penitents
and watch our prayers expand and vanish
down the street—

and not that there is any way
to recommend such a cold
betrayal of the body
but God
what beautiful clouds we made.

Love Poem While You Are On Vacation

I hope you are happy.

(I hope you are not
too happy.)

I hope you are happy
except
for missing me.

I hope this is often.

(I hope you are
miserable.)

Love Poem As A Duel For Power

Time draws us from identity
and emotion and sincerity

is the most flattering form of deception.
How can you say

you understand who you are, besides?
Already, crows devour

your trail of clichés. You will never get home.
Even your body—

planted belly out back
curled gazing squarely into me:

a question mark turned
upside down a short stem

that is your perfectly
slender neck

which you have lifted your hair
from to cool—

It is impossible to love
what you are not allowed to answer.

Love Poem For Snow White

Say he is Prince Charming
and she is asleep, and

he smokes first
to give himself time to think.

(She would have seen the cherry from
his cigarette float
in the dusk. She would have seen
it lean over her.)

She will wake and wonder
about that moment, plucking
leaves from her hair
while he pisses beside his horse.

And she must wake because
those are the rules,
even if she can't believe him
—though he tells her

over and over he only
kissed her and just
to wake her— He crosses
his heart.

Love Poem For A Word

Exceptional in your ability
to break yourself open
with your own strength—

hum and note spliced
together a stitch of disharmony
closing your vibrating end.

Really you are not flinty enough
to match your explosive
reputation. Though I suppose

you might also be used
to describe smoke
lapping drearily at the sky afterwards

and the ashes lying
shocked and scattered on the ground.
I suppose that too is love.

Love Poem With Honeysuckle

In August it hardly ever rained
and we argued like everyone else
 whether you could fry eggs
in the afternoon on the patio,
 which remained warm
long into the night and glowed
against our heels when we stomped
 to shoo away mosquitoes, standing
before the fence scratching
 the backs of our knees as star by star
shook itself from the haze
 and broke awake.

I never told you
how I longed to plunge forward
 tear loose armloads of blossoms
and make them spill their summer
 sadness above our heads—
For you this was ritual. Silently
 you taught me to pinch the blooms
between my thumb and forefinger
 as if loosening the mouthpiece
of a pale medieval horn—
 to slide the long fiber
from its sheath and break the mouth
 over my own reaching
 out my tongue.

Love Poem Between States

I admit there are days when I am glad
we are no longer so young.

I think of the drive home in the blizzard
when we were fighting—
firing the engine past semis and rigs spinning
on the bridge over the Mississippi,
speeding because we were pressed close
to hate close enough to love it tempt it.

That night while you undressed
I was still standing in the snow waiting
for the police bent over the rail between snow
and current so tired of being twenty-seven.
When you saw me watching
you said you were too angry to make love
but we could fuck if I wanted
and I laughed but afterwards
you stared at me as if nothing was answered,
and I clung to your back
as you fell asleep close fearfully—
the way a skeptic clings
to questions no one can answer.
To the doubt that saves him.

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VITA

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Thesis: THE CLOCK OF BODIES: A COLLECTION OF POEMS WITH A
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Pages in Study: 68

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Scope and Method of Study: The Clock of Bodies consists of poems written over a six year period (2002-2008). Some of the works were written for workshops with Lisa Lewis and Ai Ogawa, but most were written independently during a break from graduate school. The manuscript is divided into three parts: The Clock of Bodies, What the Television Said, and Love Poems.

Findings and Conclusions: Most of the works in this manuscript are short lyric poems that seek to create moments of epiphany. Because they are more concerned with creating emotional connections than literal ones, the images and metaphors in this volume work to clear a common space for shared emotional participation. The first two sections are themed primarily around conflict, grief, protest, and spiritual ambivalence, while the final section investigates emotions and events that complicate romantic and personal attachment.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Lisa Lewis
