

DESERTIONS: POETRY WITH A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

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DESERTIONS:

Absence my presence is, strangeness my grace
—Fulke Greville

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

MERE TREES WILL NOT DO: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

As a poet, I am not so much the artist who screams for immediate attention with theatrical colors and catchy quips swathed across billboards or municipal walls. Rather, I am more of a miniaturist who strives to comprehend and render the intricacies of feeling on a smaller plane, one who reduces scale in order to pay greater attention, to intensify detail, direction, scope. My business consists of treating the localized, a fraction of a moment in all of its aspects, for I believe that this is the best way to honestly acquire any larger view of experience at all. This emphasis on both examining the minute and compressing expression to its most potent form is the very purpose of poetry, and the brevity that comes from such a practice, as Horace bemoaned, may indeed lead to obscurity. Yet, when it is right, I feel that brevity can also be extremely revelatory. Such a claim guides my introduction, which in a fittingly small way examines some key techniques I employ as a poet in order to say what must be said without saying too much—to be precise without being limited or entirely closed off. The idea, as approached in the old proverb, is to see the forest *because* of the trees and to be trapped by neither.

Although “exactitude” may not be “truth,” as Henri Matisse once argued, I feel that it does allow for the most effective form of proof, and such proof cannot exist without conscientiously choosing apt and generative words in lieu of those that are superfluous and static. The occasionally brilliant stream-of-consciousness rant aside, I feel effective diction, which is the most primary aspect of poetry, is seldom a matter of a spontaneously produced mass of words. More often than not, it is a matter of the quality or precision of words, of magnification of detail through minimization of verbiage, of minding those “minute particulars” William Blake held holy. In this respect, when I wish

to evoke a day in the deep woods, I avoid using terms such as a “tree” or even “a native tree” when I can more specifically and accurately use something such as “bodark” or “post oak.” By selecting a specific type rather than a generalized term for such a central object, I ground my work in a sense of place while adding greater symbolic import to it: a “post oak,” after all, has many more definite metaphorical connotations than “tree,” and “a native post oak” secures the sense of place even better while also freeing up meaning by allowing modifier and noun to form their own metaphor. In sum, appropriate words rather than sloppy approximations are of the utmost necessity in order to create both an immediate tension in a poem and a sufficiently rich sense of multi-faceted meaning.

To better illustrate this concept in action, I will examine “The Algebra of Reality” as it is and as it might be minus the necessary specificity.

Early this morning
I awoke from a dream
of neat quadratic equations,
only to find an ungainly crow
stealing my raspberry danishes

My poem, although highly condensed—perhaps even gnomic—relies heavily on descriptive detail. As such, I think that it encourages a definite mental picture to materialize and invests each image, however contrasting, with a sound place in my overall argument. If this poem were stripped of descriptors and exactitude it would look something like this:

This morning
I awoke from a dream,

only to find a bird

stealing my breakfast

Obviously this version of the poem pales in comparison to the first. The vague time frame, the generic dream and the nameless bird, and the use of a bland “breakfast” do not afford the same visual potency or dramatic sense of juxtaposition that the original does. The poem falls flat without those little bits of diction such as “early,” “neat quadratic equations,” “ungainly crow,” and “raspberry danishes”. Each word holds a distinct position, and to remove one would diminish the scene, sentiment, and the thematic assertions I make regarding perfection in a sensual world.

In a very real way, much of my use of diction comes down to selecting representative imagery capable of carrying the weight of the work. I view language in much the same way that Ezra Pound does: it is fundamentally a matter of picturing an object and the ideas and feelings regarding that object simultaneously. The existence of ideograms attests to this fact: word, object and purpose are compacted into one (Pound, *ABC of Reading* 26-27). Such unity does not exist solely as a static substitution for a tangible object: it is in great portion that object and all explicit or implicit associations generated by it. To this end, perhaps one of the best ways I see to make each image speak most voluminously is by allowing it contrasts, by joining of variegated words, sources and associations in much the same way a writer such as William S. Burroughs might when utilizing his “collage technique” in the more cohesive sections of *Naked Lunch* or as Pound might in the better passages of his *Cantos*.

“Invitation,” a short poem of mine made in the vein of Charles Baudelaire’s “To The Reader,” does this by examining the ugly side of insinuation as seen from the

perspective of an old, arduous social institution—the cocktail party. As such, it necessarily requires that dramatic distinctions be made between the pretense of propriety and the actuality of intentions, which is best illustrated by an uneasy joining of incompatible objects seemingly arranged by the hosts with careful grace.

Before our guests enter for dinner
we consider exotic dahlias,
yet collect pigeon feathers
arranging them with utmost
precision in crystal vases
filled with vinegar

This poem produces psychic discomfort by juxtaposing the beautiful with the banal, by foregrounding the incongruent in such a way as to examine the cruelty and destructiveness operating below the surface meaning of either quality. The imagery I select consists of a series of compact and seemingly conflicting symbols that give the sentiment of fellowship a sickening tinge. The technique, which is akin to James Tate's revelatory layering process, seeks to create a sort of chemical reaction amongst the disparate parts, to make tangible the mutations of the couple's mindset. Though one may admire the crystal vases as such, their impact moves from comfort and elegance to that of aesthetic assault. Vinegar may indeed look like water to some extent, but the nose finds it out and knows it is an offensive substitute. Observant guests understand from the distorted joining of otherwise incompatible objects that any smiles and kind words the couple may proffer are less significant than their actual unspoken thoughts, which are far from open and altruistic.

Such synthesis through contrast is a constant in my poetry, and in this respect omission takes on a special significance. The omission of images—one form of elision that occurs in poetry—is in and of itself a valuable tool. I think of this emphasis on absence in much the same way that a Chinese graphic artist might. The Chinese concept of *ma*, which is simply the white space available before and after the black of the brush stroke is applied, is illustrative in this regard. *Ma* is the emptiness that must exist in order for the actual drawing to exist. Without a marked nothingness, the necessary something imposed upon the page remains impossible. It must be understood that, far from being simply a negation of form, an erasure, *ma* serves as a thoughtfully employed supportive opposition; it is as much a part of the effect as the ink itself. Poets such as William Carlos Williams and e.e. cummings who literally draw out the white of the page to deeply define the content and movement of its type, and poets such as Hart Crane and Philip Lamantia who leap over expanses of suggestive silence in order to sharpen their metaphors, manifest this principle. Despite the usefulness and history of such an approach, this purposeful suppression of information still strikes some critics as a regrettable trend indicative of annoying post-modern playfulness, some hangover from extreme imagism and the like, and they hold that such omission is an attempt to be obscure, or at the very least to needlessly disassociate words from recognizable meanings.

As long as such “obscurity” does not become a literary shell game of the Jorie Graham variety, I feel this approach not only provides a means to greater contrast, and therefore to greater meaning, but it also affords me a greater exchange with my audience. It is, in effect, a fertile form of shorthand, a succinct strategy capable of speaking volumes, which is the purpose of poetry after all. Donald Justice provides some insight

into this matter: “The truth is that obscurity, in the actual transaction between writer and reader, is not altogether destructive, despite the hard line taken against it by responsible critics” (74). Indeed, this “transaction” between creator and audience, one that also occurs between creator and creation, provides otherwise impossible associations and connections that keep expression thriving long after introduction. In short, as Justice agrees, it encourages participation rather than assuming a closed system, which is of utmost importance to me as a poet.

When I consider how Modernism led to this emphasis on foregrounding the tangible through strategic omission, I see that such a careful coupling of exactitude and elision continues to open up a wealth of expressive, multi-dimensional poetry techniques. Examining poets such as George Oppen and tracing his work back to some of the ideas set forth by William Carlos Williams and the like, I see this approach used to great effect. Williams, following the painterly ideas in Bruegel’s “The Peasant Dance,” employs such techniques in “The Dance” to insinuate movement well beyond the flat, one-dimensional surface of the page. This, though achieved through careful enjambment, slight rhyme and other such devices, is chiefly accomplished by propelling his dance imagery both inside and outside of the audience’s expected boundaries. His characters cast off static representation by negating pure objectification and thus allow better interaction with the audience. Williams leads the procession of images across several intersecting lines at once. This not only mimics the concept of dance itself, but also implies that readers themselves are engaged in the activity, even if only at an interpretive level. Thus, the solidity of the imagery coupled with the removal of some of its mediation leads readers

closer to active rather than passive reading. I, in following similar lines, aim at providing the same sort of energy and inclusion within the majority of my poems.

On some level such a situation as discussed above always occurs, since “imagining and interpreting engages the reader in the task of visualizing the many possible shapes of the identifiable world, so that inevitably the world repeated in the text begins to undergo changes” (Iser 250). However, in “The Dance” readers are so actively engaged by the merriment that they need not wonder exactly what it all means. They intuitively comprehend and shape/reshape meaning. Thus, in my view, a truly participatory poem never eschews the connotative interconnectedness of the words themselves as they appear from multiple perspectives—this being seemingly impossible anyhow—yet it never resorts to a sort of coy approximation of its argument either: the “minute particulars” apply as much to appearances as to conditions, to its obviations as well as omissions.

According to Howard Nemerov, the purpose of such an approach is “to reach the silence behind the language, the silence within the language” (178). By looking at “Gypsy America,” I can illustrate the importance of setting solid imagery against emptiness. The poem starts out very concretely, placing the lush life of a celebration against the bleakness of the world containing it all.

Forty gypsy families gather for cherry tea and roasted lamb
Behind Bunnton’s broken storefronts and stalls

And Babel’s once bitten tongue bleeds brilliant verbs
Through the slum earth of Chicago,

The concreteness of the epicurean imagery reinforces the negativity, or spiritual absence of the city. Here, I set a sense of discrepancy between the interior and exterior in motion and continue to do so in order to establish the necessity, if not outright sanctity, of the vibrant, insular experience inside the hall as it is viewed by the gypsies.

For the Romani code turns Roland-Taylor's concrete sole

Into vermilion silk and brooches of Mexican gold

Now a snag occurs in the sentiment. A contradiction arises when I reveal that the celebrants have not only removed themselves from the body of the city and its unwelcome strangers, but have also banished one of their close members, in effect causing him to remain not only an outcast of his community, but a stranger no matter where he goes. As may be seen in the following stanzas, their outwardly pure joy, then, becomes a sinister, vindictive emotion.

Here, where word wends home, all know

The only one to suffer the poor articulation of loneliness

Is that twice-silenced informant,

That twice-banished son of Christ's double-crossed nails—

He might as well be Arnold's scholar

Or any *Gadjnow*

My audience, for all it sees on the surface, never directly receives any perspective other than that of the community since the object of its vilification, the informant, remains physically omitted from the invective. In this respect, my decision to leave the informant

voiceless, to eschew an omniscient narrative wherein he would be allowed some defense, serves to create a realistic sense of tension. For, as is often the case in such matters, the sweeping judgment of the group obscures the details of the individual's defense, and the wary reader, withholding sudden judgment and approaching reading as an act of resistance, will recognize this issue well enough.

The informant, the member of the community with too loose a tongue, the explainer, the compromiser, has had his tongue figuratively cut out. The "brilliant verbs" he "bleeds" are wasted on exterior world, "the slum earth of Chicago," and as such he is rendered an ineffectual poser, a "Gadjo" or non-member. My allusion to "Gypsy Scholar" further reinforces the fact that he may be able to talk the talk of his community but is really no more than a well-versed outsider in such a world—an informed imposter.

His banishment is not only a loss of preferable physical proximity; it is also a matter of being silenced, and ultimately a matter of being destroyed. Without a shared language—that entirely necessary cultural construct that allows expression, relation, shared vision—the man is left to whatever ill circumstances (so his former friends and family hope) befall him during his lifetime banishment to the "slum earth" of physical and spiritual significance. He will, as his former friends and family claim, not only be denied their company, but also the company of heavenly hosts in the afterlife. In this sense, they equate their presence with the concept of godliness, which calls into question the very conception of heaven and hell that they hold.

Stripped verse by verse and ring by ring

Of earthly hospitality, and cursed with a purse

Of worthless plug nickels, may he

Never bribe St. Peter's key, never budge beyond that gate,

For his betraying brown eyes, words and wishes

Remain as unclean as any black cat crossing any crosswalk

Or the bloody shadow

Which leaves baskets of fish uneaten and spirits undrinkable,

This mythical turn in the imagery, especially in lieu of the realistic meal I described at the beginning, creates a definite contrast between what constitutes a healthy community and a noxious mob. The "bloody shadow" atop a "basket of fish" creates a disturbing image that at once repels readers and reinforces the concept that the banished informant is considered a blight upon the body of the community. After giving full reign to their hate, they accept his absence, and close up all dialogue. Casting off the intolerable memory of his presence, they awkwardly attempt to enliven the party at hand.

But he is gone and nothing more can be done,

So tonight within the rented remnants of Bunniton's hall

Forty gypsy families retie the knots of Babel's tongue

And play a minor movement in an off key

I apply a similar layering technique in "Disarmament" which utilizes an episodic structure based upon bits of interior monologue and lists that are meant to mesh both an external and internal inventory. Within all of this I also employ severely juxtaposed

cultural symbols in order to expose and critique the discrepancies in the junkie narrator's and Diego Rivera's related concepts of revolution. Though a key difference exists between the two types of opiates the two men indulge in, I argue that they nevertheless equally abuse them in order to achieve a means of seeing—which is to say existing—that can never be anything other than false. Each engagement remains an escape. And, in terms of that *ma*-like negation, the gap that I expose between mutually exclusive truths creates a field consisting of two mirrors where images both direct and peripheral collapse into the middle of an empty vision similar to that illustrated by the Bosch triptych “The Garden of Earthly Delights.” That emptiness of vision, that actual flesh and blood, earthly existence halfway between opposite ideals and eternities, is the middle panel of the triptych.

In part “IV” I set descriptions of the Rivera painting “The Distribution of Arms” against and with descriptions of the junkie's room, freely abutting and blending the two, and foregrounding every image, both to maintain a tense, claustrophobic mood and to raise one of the key questions of the poem.

In spirit

or in theory

Diego Rivera distributes the arms

colliding, spilling, flattened crowd of patches,

grey and yellow, natural colors

Your eye the only eye meeting mirror-wide

wrenches together yours and mine—

your broken crook's thumb
and crooking index near the trigger guard
guarding a crowning tantrum, propaganda

The question of whether or not Rivera's desperate arms and the junkie's coincide "In spirit/ or in theory," and if they are essentially the same man no matter the individual intentions they proclaim, finds momentary answer in the stanzas that follow. Whereas my first stanza brings Rivera's painting both literally and figuratively into the junkie's room, my second one examines how the painting and the room itself reshape one another in a physical and metaphysical context. I intend for the third stanza to suggest both the junkie's attempt to critique Rivera and resist the seeming sympathetic magic his ideology and art cast upon him. In short, the junkie is struggling with deconstructing and then reconstructing Rivera's artful propaganda.

Satellite-like sickle and hammer encircle,
hypnotic clockwork,
gears teething milk white meridians
upon the swirling tourniquet of evening

Leaden corneas linger, stifled
by bleached pink papier-mâché doors,
somersaulting plateaus
hung on gunmetal grey hinges
attached to mists which swim over
and twist each eyelash

until its bristles brush over a heretic tongue,
a hermetic feather of intention flung
brittle as glass against bullet blast

Blood is static,
a thorough Baedeker,
but a useless revolutionary manifesto:

the medium is the message, don't you know

The cross-purposes of both men find unification with the presentation of the junkie and muralist in similar pursuits—the manipulation of a commonplace visual field in order to expose its distorted nature. This act is akin to that which occupies me as a poet as well. Such a scenario poses the question of how the representation, or the interpretation, of any object can disassemble the inherent or standard function of that object.

The aforementioned visual aspects of my poetry create a multilayered sense of place; yet they also produce, much like Hart Crane's work, a very definite sense of metaphorical music, which is equally integral to each piece's overall effect. Images, like sounds, form distinct rhymes in my poetry. Shape, texture, color, and related sensory aspects establish leitmotifs that set the metaphoric tune of the piece. In order to show how matters of sight may rhyme in a way similar to that of sound, we will look at "Chinese New Year," which provides, like the Williams poem discussed earlier, an imagistic concert of sorts.

When the old ebony summits prop up the lilac moon
and incense twists through silken costumes,
let the brass chimes and bass drums join to call dance

into this shimmering land of stardust confetti.

Let hovering otherworldly lanterns illuminate
opalescent cedar berries and the crimson thistle nestle
lovers beyond the bustle of the square.

Let this crystalline moment of rhythm, this heady night
steady streaming with gold and crimson,
lift the mind beyond despair, allowing us to unravel
and cast off contradiction, to enter
the new year with no names, but with grace, invention.

One of my objectives in this piece is to join the musical qualities of the words to the musical qualities of the images in order to reinforce the flowing, celebratory quality of the moment itself. I balance them out through a variety of means.

First, I start with the sky: placing “ebony summits” next to a “lilac moon” establishes an opposition among colors, as well as one between degrees of real and figurative layers of hardness and softness. This opposition is constructed in order to provide a pleasing sense of unified tension and dramatic variety from the outset. I follow this line by moving away from the sky to ground level and to a distinct merging of forms: the incense smoke resembles silk and the two mix with and mimic the properties of one another. The chimes, which in their hard, metallic form relate to the summits and physical substance of the moon, and the drums, which have a soft, white skin similar to that of the figuratively supple “lilac moon,” propel the dance that makes the mixing of incense and silk garments at all possible. And this mixture, consisting of burning punks and bright fabric, mingles in terms of radiance and movement with the “shimmering

stardust confetti” and “hovering otherworldly lanterns.” I also add to this relationship of sky and earth by focusing on the confetti, moonlight, and lamps as they all drop from upon high to bathe the dancers below. All these at times disparate objects draw into one another, generating in essence an entire living organism, a body of experience.

Following this line of progression, I insert additional shades of color into the poem and continue on beyond the sky and the square that serve as a dance floor. The colors and textures spill over into a place of repose where “opalescent cedar berries” and “crimson thistle” aid in enlivening the vibrant visual field of celebration. Here, however, the “bustle” brought by the chimes and drums becomes a subdued but steady pulse. This pulse supports the intimacy of the lovers who seek a break from the beat of the crowd but who still wish to be connected with the larger life of the world. There, a radiant rhythm of opal and crimson meets their eyes. Additionally, dissimilar textures and shapes—the soft, round berries and the stiff, pointed thistle—work together to lend fecundity to the moment. I reinforce this rhyming visual relationship aurally as well by utilizing alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme: “opalescent cedar berries and crimson thistle nestle/ lovers beyond the bustle of the square.” The insistent beat and my use of enjambment, in this respect, also help pull the various rhymes and motifs together by establishing a sense of energetic continuity. Rhythm establishes context, thus in a poem such as “Gypsy America,” where two very different mindsets are necessarily contrasted and examined for their discrepancies, I place flattened, conversational lines next to more buoyant “poetic” lines. The occasion of “Chinese New Year,” however, calls for a steadily streaming, diverse sensuality; it is a poem about poetic possibilities, thus I maintain a heightened musicality in the language.

Proceeding from these lines, I employ “crystalline” as an adjective to connect it to the preceding “ebony,” “silken,” “brass,” “shimmering,” “stardust,” “lanterns,” and “opalescent” as a way to coalesce the gleaming aspect of the whole affair. My use of “gold” against the repeated “crimson” reinforces this continuity. Since I have established the pulsing physical activity, I feel it is now safe to transition to a more abstract activity, to state the sentiment behind the work. The celebration has eradicated despair, which in this context is a bland uniformity, an unengaging monotone or monotony: it is a sense of irresolvable and therefore static contradiction.

By locating a gentle rhythm amidst the swirling madness, rather than finding it so much bleak chaos, my couple comes to comprehend “invention”—a key principle for artists and indeed any person seeking release from narrow relegation and entrance into a potent state of potentiality. Such creation allows for each person to rename him or herself, to create identity and therefore the course of life now and to come. Far from being simply a half-earnest new year’s resolution made with a slur and cynical snigger, the resolve I present is akin to Adam naming the animals: it suggests the very ability to make actuality, image and sentiment one, to merge all aspects of life, to refine rather than to merely recycle an expression.

My focus on articulating imagery so as to render an abstract argument apparent leads directly to a discussion of how my lines and stanzas operate. For me, the line is a rhythmical, tangible, but suspended unit of thought or emotion that springs, be it completely or in recoiling fits and starts, across the page in one piece. My lines are formed with an eye and ear towards revealing the infinitesimal visual and aural rhythms, as well as associative capabilities inherent in each word. Thus, I often craft a line by

arranging the words so that they maximize their kinetic capabilities by playing off of one another in a multidimensional manner. However, since it is easy to lose control of momentum in free verse, I tend to favor short, run-on lines that pull one another along in fairly short, steady succession rather than rambling laconically or blazing frantically across the page like a bipolar gunfighter in a John Ford film.

Following this view, my stanza, then, is a complete unit of such compact, suspended thoughts and/or emotions that allies or contrasts itself with what precedes or follows it, though such a relationship may not always occur in a linear fashion. More often than not, each of my stanzas both refines the purpose and expands the potential of the others by providing assessment, detail, and commentary upon them. My stanzas, then, are similar to dialogue in that they communicate with one another as separate but mutually interested parties. They may agree with, contradict, or sometimes seek to silence one another, but they are always dependant components of a larger rhetorical modulation.

Even at their most elliptical, my lines and stanzas follow a pattern of inevitability. This inevitability is composed by following a conscious circuit of mental and emotional associations, then selecting the most important aspects of that twisting and turning route for inclusion. Once these affecting aspects are turned tangible, I first organize them tonally and then sequentially, favoring the movement of mood over the lockstep of linear time. In my view, setting tone ahead of the standard machinations of prose-like logic lends my poetry a truer sense of internal experience. This honing in on the nuances of such an experience is certainly my chief goal as a poet. An examination of “Summer Games” makes this approach and its effects clear.

The first stanza of “Summer Games” starts off with a general tone of melancholy nostalgia, a sadness born of slowly defeated idealism in a time of ostensible innocence. However, that nostalgia is most definitely tinted with a present day bitterness that sets the actions into critical perspective. Thus, the dominant tone I establish hinges on that sense of desperation borne of mixed feelings, and moves between an existence of drab and livid colors, and between longing and revulsion.

A mass of yellow dust bursts and powders the dirty feathers
as each of the shrieking sparrows darts off and deviates
from the seething knot, dragging itself well above
the town’s old cold war armory where the boys
hunt the last glass shards of gaping windows
with rocks and bricks until lunchtime
drags them back to microwave
movie lives, glossy comics,
to mamma, maybe papa,
to a million-and-one
colorful fistfights.

The bits of dreamy imagery based on beliefs in boyhood strength are intertwined with images suggestive of ineffectuality, degradation and terror, and the lines, which funnel downward into near emptiness, drop one-by one from the sky to the ground.

Accordingly, each line propels itself downward from youth and represents a series of increasingly ambivalent but telling gestures that bleed away into adulthood. This is achieved in part by utilizing an insistent alliterative scheme. The thread of “m” words

here has the effect of an infant muttering “mamma” or humming a simplistic ditty. The repetition of “d” and “b” serve to temper this almost peaceful scheme with a warring, dualistic quality. And the use of “s” throughout adds a slippery feel to the whole sound, thus further highlighting the struggle between the impulse to rest and break free that the former and latter instances of alliteration respectively create. This stanza’s imagery and music, then, encapsulate a mood and an epoch at once in a concrete fashion.

The second stanza parallels the first. I intend for it to provide a contemporary redefinition and criticism of its precursor, and thus I follow a similar approach as described above. However, as similar as it is in form to the first one, the second stanza stands in stark juxtaposition to its less negative counterpoint. The bitterness hinted at above becomes dominant and a desperate elegiac mood replaces any vestige of strength previously pondered by the boys.

Fling the weight westward until this ceremony of thin bones
breaks down the arrogant pastels of a hell-bent dawn:
laugh and fight amongst nails and plastic knives
until the ashcans in empty lots, the avenues
blackened, cast off, ambulatory, call you
all into the slipstream to be born again
by a saint’s or statesman’s thumb
with all the strain of muscle
being torn, fingertip
to shoulder, pupil
to iris to stone.

The lines here “fling” the reader into a downward pattern from one aggressive game into another until the higher stakes and overgrown arrogance of adulthood crash into “iris and stone”. Again, I find the funneling effects of disappearing syllables and alliteration useful here. The poem moves from the angry, ignorant, but heady atmosphere of the heroic imagination to the disintegrating truth of actuality until only the sparse realm of regret and mourning is left. The further inclusion of the alliterative “b” and “s” ties in directly with the rhymes in the first stanza, thus creating a continuation in narrative, but the less extended, more concentrated variety of alliteration creates a greater sense of rhythmic tension in the second stanza. “W,” “a,” and “c/k” sounds push and pull at one another with a wailing, cursing violence appropriate to the content.

The first line of my concluding couplet, which is itself an envoi, repeats and reevaluates one key phrase from each stanza, as well as joins the overall alliterative scheme in a tightly wrapped package. It combines them in order to present a distinct cause and effect scenario and to further define the context of each stanza.

A mass of yellow dust burst, a ceremony of thin bones:

this is but one summer game, a game we always won.

Both lines of this last stanza contain roughly the same syllable count (15 and 13), which allows for my poem to settle its musical score, to achieve a sense of finality.

Additionally, this brief stanza is as lean as grief and signifies that the warring but mutually attracted dualities have attained some sense of acquiescence. My last line serves as an epitaph for those nameless people who were caught up in a culture of cruelty and corruption and spiraled from dubious battle into an infamous oblivion.

My analysis of the previous poems may be said to fairly describe many of the formal elements I utilize as a poet. Perhaps my approach may, on occasion, tend toward too much description and too dense a texture. However, I find that such a risk is necessary; for, when all of the elements come together I feel my approach can shape language into a song capable of sustaining pitch and meaning well beyond the confines of the page. Pound's insistence on "direct treatment of the thing" keeps me mindful of as much both on a tangible and abstract level (*Literary Essays* 3). His dictum, despite its utilitarian suggestions, also hints at a more mystical purpose reminiscent of the Romantic sensibility aesthetic. A tree is never merely a tree once it enters human consciousness: it is indeed a common, living object, but it is also a complex symbol that must be treated with full attention in order to expose its figurative potential (Pound, *Literary Essays* 8). If I can evoke such a momentary experiencing of the quidditas of that tree through concentrated detail and figurative relation, I may stand a reasonable chance of unraveling an important clue regarding the surrounding scene and even nature itself. This prospect—a way to work from the miniscule to the monumental—renders mystery a fertile and fruitful pursuit. As such, it makes my argument less a matter of grand conjecture than personal knowledge, which is, after all, poetry's primary province and ultimate use.

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CHAPTER II

POETRY

Invitation

Before our guests enter for dinner
we consider exotic dahlia,
yet collect pigeon feathers
arranging them with utmost
precision in crystal vases
filled with vinegar

Gypsy America

Forty gypsy families gather for cherry tea and roasted lamb
Behind Bunniton's broken storefronts and stalls

And Babel's once bitten tongue bleeds brilliant verbs
Through the slum earth of Chicago.

Here, where word wends home, all know
The only one to suffer the poor articulation of loneliness

Is that twice-silenced informant,
That twice-banished son of Christ's double-crossed nails—

He might as well be Arnold's scholar
Or any *Gadjnow*

Stripped verse by verse and ring by ring
Of earthly hospitality, and cursed with a purse

Of worthless plug nickels, may he
Never bribe St. Peter's key, never budge beyond that gate,

For his betraying brown eyes, words and wishes
Remain as unclean as any black cat crossing any crosswalk

Or the bloody shadow
Which leaves baskets of fish uneaten and spirits undrinkable,

But he is gone and nothing more can be done,
So tonight within the rented remnants of Bunniton's hall

Forty gypsy families retie the knots of Babel's tongue
And play a minor movement in an off key

Riverside

The river makes no lasting repast of stones
cutting short its hunger by grey shores
that shallow out a dusk worn rag-ended by rote

Here near the old timber ends pent fast by rope,
the dusty tract of twisted grass
denies my knees and mind a profitable path

As the last of the stray fishermen leave in boats
cinched tight against conviction,
the stones below blacken with the tide's bidding

The overhang alone collects the tumid seasons
in scarred sensations pinched behind
the endless ribs of rock starched by ruin or reason

And there is no reservation real enough, no path
abstract enough, to justify leaving:
the river withers empty with the length of seeing

Cinema

The subtext
of letterbox superstition
amplified by accordion
and a drunken audience:
Esoteric electric courses
through the underexposed starlet
numbing her ashen fingertips
by tracing the cold flagstone wall
over and over and never above
the melting edges of shadows,
while whispering with patient cadence
an ugly, simple, oath;
composing inexplicable motives,
dutiful in her vertigo,
each insistent eye
unravels impossible tapestries
and the outline of a crooked candelabrum
is the only prop still retaining
a cruel sympathetic magic—
a knot in her stomach,
eyelashes enjoined,
humming darkness, static:
Epithet
laughter
the distinct clink
of a dropped bottle
rolling aimlessly
down the narrow aisle;
a space between consciousness,
the credits
in alphabetical order

Oil Black Blues I

1.

The last light bulb in the bedroom burned out,
so I decided that I might as well call it a night.

Beyond this stout resolution I also concluded
that I no longer required the use of food.

In addition, I soon sought to avoid contact
with those voices which mocked my condition

As I listened to the pipes grinding down
the grout and tile bliss of my neighbor's kitchen.

2.

At first I grew impatient with this odd change
from the course of things, but I waited.

Now all peace gathered within this pact
withers the grace and virtue of my patience.

This way must remain despite—a way wound
tight must crack, distract, or save us—

As I hear cicadas groping blind across the blinds
I shut black blotted eyes: this dusk runs ageless.

Cyclonic

Bronze dedication,
copper wish,
spirals of conspiring lilies

adrift like soft white teeth
offering excuses
between fountain and pool

and none but the dead or indecent
to witness
the odd arc of the limbs—refuse

Terminus

Elegies entangle the arc of a hard whistle
echoing along the dirty halls of this dimly lit terminal,
and our eyes are annihilated by blood,
teeth crushed by the vinyl lining the length of the hall,
as we waver in and out of chaotic queue,
filing past grubby double doors and smudged windows,
uncertain if this is our departure or arrival,
worried if this is the life we are finally due to revise,
unsure of personal silence within the group,
troubled by the sharp plastic lettering that lies and refuses.

So we congest the exits, crowd the benches, waiting for connections,
estranged within as night translates the scrape
of every splintered shoe and the exhaust fumes of every idling engine
into hands on a claustrophobic clock face
that gnaws apart each aching nerve during the long journey forward
into a pale helter-skelter horizon full of alleys
and avenues where dreams are brought to bare—how we huddle here
in the fugue of some broken city square
where salvation's vagabond army stammers between penury and prayer.

Commerce

In Commerce Texas
pale August moths flit above
grey cigarette butts.

After the Fact

Beyond the glowering hum of the riverfront,
night spliced nervous currents through every wired dream
and not a soul slept in the city that night, searching by morning
for some sign, some solace as the sun flushed white full in the face.

With no aces

Beneath the blinding crush of glass monuments,
men rubbed overheated pates and felt their strength recede
as women smoked on broken benches, spines tense against the wind.

With no faces

Their senses vanished; subsumed or melted by the humid sky,
and commerce and concern devoured one another, caustic twins
drilling deep under the skin and into the skulls of paranoid passersby.

With no numbers

Now behind the slips of debilitated elm limbs,
insistence for an easy end to it all echoes against brick
walls—but no reprise, no further precursor, nothing to comfort
the course of long striving during the urgent hours before the uprising.

When nothing matches up

After the foregone fact, after the whole has been halved,
after all of the distractions, their smiles will collapse
into the bitter ash piles of scorched vanity
where hired hands play gin rummy.

Bust-bust-burst burst

With no aces, faces, or numbers to know:
only deadwood along the riverfront,
only deadwood this morning
beneath a burning bulb.

Cowboy Poetry

1.

During the first dirge of this empty age,
and way south of god's good land,
we roll low bellied beneath
reams of sheet metal clouds
with cattle caged in tow,
and clank late through the gate
into the lot of a state not so fair
as many claims may warrant or want.

Yet there exists no recompense
for the wicked west, so we brandish the best
of our branded flesh, victims of habit,
habitual at best, considering the cost of regret.

But the auctioneer awaits our solicitations
with unsteady eyes and an awkward gait,
so we drop with well-known repose
from cab to curb to dirt,
carrying our contraband concerns
and conspiratorial hopes close to the vest,
for the peace that comes from profit alone
must be kept quiet
until the last imperious figure
proffering our convictions
is sputtered in staccato diction.

2.

Under pools of latescent lamplight,
swarmed by sharp bullheads beaded
together like so many ruthless rosaries,
we gather our abstract blue gazes
with famous precision
as if understanding certain understandings
are more important than others
and best kept in pocket,
while our starched white linen kerchiefs
turn into chalky disintegrating moths—
the monotony of cheap tricks
and small town politics,
where broken jaws once broken

(cont., no break)

become jaws wired for double talking.

Stalking with poker-faced patience,
we haggle over ranges, qualifications,
and grades that simply appear fair and reasonable,
but there is time for repair; nothing is lost,
though no moment holds any real repose between
the malignant misaligned lamppost offerings
and naked corrugated ribcage coffers,
the lachrymose limits of commerce,
the knowledge of animal weariness, dumb despair.

But the dull auctioneer,
yawning, stomping, and fingering
his creased jeans, seems bored enough
to care for none of our peculiar beliefs,
as he moves mutely towards a ruthless drawl,
through the cathedral arches of sling-blade trailers
and the twisted rust remnants
of noon's non sequiter squeeze chutes—
but we always have promise,
yet persuasion is costly, is it not—
just nod cautiously.

3.
Never mind, need never stalls,
and caught like so many night-crawlers
creeping upon the milky mulch
of midnight lawns, we await the word
that seems final enough, final and tough:
the word reworded into words,
half-light hooks lowered into scaly jaws
and slipped into bowels slick with brown water,
the wonder-word, wound-word, word of mouth
made of greenback teeth and gunpowder.

And once the word appears pronounced,
surely, as tradition dictates, we must yowl
at 80 proof rot gut moons
and then discuss weather patterns in neutral tones:
satiated and saved of all embarrassing defeats,
our expertise of the sudden seems equitable,
even, even mutual, for we share
the heritage of grim accounts,
cigarette papers and cattle prods.

(cont., no break)

pushing through swinging saloon doors,
flintlock pickpockets who burn barns down.

But pop-guns and penny postcards
remain expected this far south—
and yes, why not, why indeed worry
about the locomotion of cowardice,
mangled dusk lowers now,
mingling wail and low, and so we shuffle
to stare at steel barge rivers
awaiting the rich words
our famous humility elicits
in the marketplace of a washed out world
full of well-meaning fools
and well-heeled hypocrites.

4.

We think, therefore we think, that's all:
a wish, a wink, a raised eyebrow and arm,
a kicked over spit can,
a visit to the stalls,
a cough an hour or so on,
and then two more dollars per pound:
the shifting weight of startled cattle,
the soft soil of hoof battered ground
where distracting patterns emerge,
distractions that keep us
from undue comparisons
of wealth, titles, deeds.

Astounded by insignificant jealousies,
we review the new diesel, ostrich boots,
fattened limousine calves, while we rifle
through the all-important papers
that might right the air rife with ripe flesh,
palely fingering imaginary pastures
of pastoral grace, we imagine
an image of eminence bygone at best.

But we will wait
and maybe find rest, after the auctioneer adjusts
the hung jury of his vest;
a taut target over walls of loose flesh,
red and bruised blue tartan buttoned up to his neck—
a fight, a prize, a purse, an investment, a bet,

(cont., no break)

yet nothing so much as fulfilling hunger—a necessity.

5.

As wise as time might have made us,
we cannot react otherwise:
our life lies entirely within
the almighty crosshair of cross-purposes,
yet our designs are best kept secret
if we are to succeed
in believing them ourselves.

Maybe with fomented force
we will re-thorn an old timey tune,
a song of yellow rose, and include
a verse which will allow the wind
to thresh weed and seed, so we can justify
bleeding a man, nostrils flaring acetylene,
while we wait out some brand of knowledge
we believe was bred in immoderate hardship.

Perhaps between the bile bred under-
bite of our cross-stitched grimaces
we will manage to mythologize
our indistinct incapacities
and turn an Indian nickel on its head,
all the while twitching
like so many unwise misers
with itchy trigger fingers scratching
the bald brains between our heads—
hard heads where meaning
brings nothing other
than the strictest stead;
a mean heartache—
a lean, lonely, lurid land.

Truculence

Hard to say if the pinch of Levi-Garret
or the binding seams of Levi-Strauss
brought about the true grit grimace
as we hauled out to your hallowed ground.

But you let the expression twist
into a big gummed grin once we got lost
a half mile off the hatchet ripped highway.

Where you gripped the Remington
and took aim at an unwieldy silhouette,
one of your endless prey—
a “stupid, god-awful smelling pine rooter”
dutifully stranded in the ditch.

Hushed upon tip-toe you crept closer
but upon closing in, the wild boar turned out
to be nothing more than a bulging bag
of extra-domestic garbage, and you,
a disappointed sharpshooter, simply tossed
its sweating contents into the bed.

Still you bragged of the untouched beauty
of this singular land, the unspoiled beauties
we could plug full of lead.

And now ready for a rougher, more honest reality,
we wobbled off towards your secret spot,
a prime plot of native plain,
as you flipped through the six disk changer
like a high noon six shooter,
searching for Hank’s pained yodels.

Throttling over hilltop, the punch-line
of your local joke sputtered half had
as your buckshot black eyes widened,
hung and fumbling, on the valley vista
stripped to stumps, clods, dust.

Stung in that moment you simply swallowed
and squinted long at the wrecked refuge,
the steep slapdash of refuse, a forest belly gutted,

(cont., no break)

its bits of entrails scattered like tragic confetti.

Slow, slower, the morbid gyration downshifting
gear to gear, years in the making—
you made ready a firm recovery
with odd diverted eyes and an apology
articulated by an absent nod, going as much as gone.

But moving on may be enough—
weaving around ruts
on the thin thread of a government road,
positioning each tire's distressed tread
along vacant clay ridges
crumbling into pockets of sandstone shards,
you comment upon the holy wild now wasted—
the paper mill, a great employer,
but a greater destroyer—
all for a "pretty price" you say.

Stopping midway in dust cloud drag,
you take a pot shot at the grizzled ribs
of a barrel, belly-up, tense jaw caught in chew,
staring steer-eyed at the dull puff, you cough
"guess they gotta have jobs"—
lock the wheels up, punch the Dodge.

You shake it all off, you must,
after all there's still the hunt,
as we wind along calmly observing
old burial mounds picked over
by flea market barkers and university partners
until they are little more than riddled molehills.

We tremble through patches
of old growth hard woods turned brittle black
only to be replaced with viable pine saplings,
beside dragon bone potholes running empty
across red banks, a bead and beaver trade
river rerouted into a refuge for meth shacks
and disaffected Texans, past crooked cattail slews,
the sludgy dark scars scoring the fields.

Your thinning grin acknowledges the mess,
a bewildering return home at best,
but performed with the inexhaustible truculence

(cont., no break)

of a now rich amateur conservationist
and free season hunter
who's padded the pockets
of every game game warden in the county.

You shake off the bleak ridges and rooks
and exclaim, "can't beat duck season",
while cheating a fork in the road.

And bouncing over hidden cinder blocks
dumped alongside an old camping stove
you spill lukewarm coffee—
the dregs blending in with the tobacco
stains that creep through the thicket
of your Realtree sleeves.

The Brass Bird

The brazen wings
of this spinning weathervane
dizzy and estrange any deliberate angles
direction ever contained.

North pulls towards a tolling bell tower
of belief splitting ranks.

East recedes into a set of shoestrings
twisted around a sewer grate.

West directs the curtains for a play
about the playbill's nomenclature.

South intersects a love triangle
adding the unknown lonely other.

Earth's oblong surface
is sprained, crippled and crushed
into an inexact four

While this southern bird
soars frozen northward
among stray seeds and rubbish,
and above gutter and gulf stream

Navigating ad nauseam
the haywire incontinence
of another chaotic spring.

Oil Black Blues II

1.

How the first street sweeper arrived in cursing earnest
to bristle back slack humanity with an incendiary engine

At five; and we felt fine comfort in his brutal humanity
and ruthless courage, enough to forget certain worries.

As his blue brushes flushed rough against curbs—
rotten brown molars, blunted clumps of liquid earth—

We marveled at the necessity of his desperate art
and laid back to rest a bit and barter over token stars.

2.

But I, incautious, nodded off to sleep as he broke shift
and left the day's plaintive crush to drift among dahlias.

And you flinched, lost, within an abyss of dustbowl cities
where we heeded the haggard luck that limits a Judas kiss.

Thus, the two of us wandered through the limestone
lines that hide the blot of a rose garden gone to rot

With the hard knowledge of clean green glass shards
and red gum wrappers wiped nice by a stranger's pardon.

The Algebra of Reality

Early this morning
I awoke from a dream
of neat quadratic equations
only to find an ungainly crow
stealing my raspberry danishes.

Imminence

In a deserted parking lot
alarms are set to explode.

While city blocks blanched
by transit smoke strobe,

The green arrow burns
itself into yellow stone.

Outside the halfway house
the half-light buckles down.

As revolving doors grate away
polished chrome panes,

Light bulbs overdose
on oil spots and car horns.

When dawn becomes code
we wait with fists folded.

In certain settings
each acts as soldier.

Imminence conditions us
to redress our destroyer.

Chinese New Year

When the old ebony summits prop up the lilac moon
and incense twists through silken costumes,
let the brass chimes and bass drums join to call dance
into this shimmering land of stardust confetti.
Let hovering otherworldly lanterns illuminate
opalescent cedar berries and the crimson thistle nestle
lovers beyond the bustle of the square.
Let this crystalline moment of rhythm, this heady night
steady streaming with gold and crimson,
lift the mind beyond despair, allowing us to unravel
and cast off contradiction, to enter
the new year with no names, but with grace, invention.

Day's Transformations

Dust turns into crystal
along the vacant mirror
as shade replaces shadow
around the curtained window

Where a bluing sky bottom contracts
around two rust red smokestacks
shaping their awkward plumes
into delicate wounds

The horizon holds symmetry
as ashen sparrows dissolve
in ashen clouds
discovering nothing exactly

While an iridescent trace of sweat
collects what darkness is left
turning panes of poison nettles
upon themselves with pirouettes

All stands silent: no transformations left

The Scientific Method

Heaving the heavy edge of heaven over his shoulder
like a freshly woven rug, he carried constellations
and speculations alike into the artificial light
of his rented room in order to investigate—
thread by thread—the design some said
superceded and surpassed any dreams
any man may have of walking tall
upon the simple grasses green
where the fate of fall ceases
with the will of spring

Summer Games

A mass of yellow dust bursts and powders the dirty feathers
as each of the shrieking sparrows darts off and deviates
from the seething knot, dragging itself well above
the town's old cold war armory where the boys
hunt the last glass shards of gaping windows
with rocks and bricks until lunchtime
drags them back to microwave
movie lives, glossy comics,
to mamma, maybe papa,
to a million-and-one
colorful fistfights.

Fling the weight westward until this ceremony of thin bones
breaks down the arrogant pastels of a hell-bent dawn:
laugh and fight amongst nails and plastic knives
until the ashcans in empty lots, the avenues
blackened, cast off, ambulatory, call you
all into the slipstream to be born again
by a saint's or statesman's thumb
with all the strain of muscle
being torn, fingertip
to shoulder, pupil
to iris to stone.

A mass of yellow dust bursts, a ceremony of thin bones:
this is but one summer game, a game we always won.

Disarmament

I: Divide and Conquer

I was wasted with wet dawn
wading amidst the rib bone shoals
which ripple rusted mirages
within the Colorado

Not arrested, but slowed—
punch-line of a poor joke

Strafed by an arsenal of stones,
futile colons, dark larvae;
methadone—

So tired so long
and invited by none,
but by the grace of one;
sacred heart, coal and obsidian—
I summon Diego disarmed

Where stars fall upon invisible footfall
and confusion crosses the border
bound in garish gauze

Lenin threads rescind
until lint clogs my ragged throat
as brazen clouds clasp dawn shut

And I blame
the counterfeit Rivera print
kept under a plate glass counter top
for any indiscretion or want—

Peopled
peopled,
with pandemonium,
with claustrophobia,
each frozen moment
without heroism

Expecting
revolution

(cont., break)

II: Object, Objections

Ruthless
passion pushers
conjure forth a natural course
measuring desperation plot by plot

An unholy propulsion
of corrosion-cum-fomentation,
a festering reprieve
from exact emotion, a wreath
of confusing commotion
spun into an ouroboros of acidic intent
seething between gall stained tea roses—
the delicious conceit of altruism, I suppose

Though closer within the center,
a clover of red valves spins out slender arteries

An intense and serious exorcism,
the imperious torment of Kahlo's hours
pulsing with fierce carnality—
cleaver of killers, killer of calories—soured

An untenable habit
with no apologies

No chorus crowning
the half-note mouthing of a malcontent,
and I wince, astounded at her inventiveness

For I require no cacophony, siren song, choir,
only the obvious, uncomplicated harmony

Mute
musicality

Ripping through the tumult
of too many radio towers and swinging
through the stinger of a turn-style,
I arrive immobile on streets of rubble
beholding a black branched gate

Stone idle

(cont., no break)

beneath stone dry vines, I decide
any direction doorbells a dream
and any eden is disposable
for another rises again

All the same, I wait and imagine
painting my way out of corners,
but response strains and remains residual,
the same inconsequential parsimony
parceled out postmortem, squaring
the shoulders of a Romanesque kingdom
of thorny keynote speakers
with certifiable baggage and contraband needs

III: The Score

Cursing and haggling
with the inhuman humidity,
I angle a weak-kneed crossing
from gutter to grate to the cut-rate,
and ripen from plum purple
to burnt brown, spine stiffened
yet my neck bends into oblivion—

Soiled, tired, deplorable,
but for the mother-of-pearl buttons
I am but a suggestion of self—
a series of muddy gestures melting
into the scourged earth

Covert, I weave through walls
of dull ochre and gold,
their collusive strokes spill—
a kaleidoscope of swill—
spectral sub-colors half-holding
the awkward corridor that leads me
long beyond my will or means

Straining shoulder blades,
sweat tracing my chest,
through the sordid path
to any rented room for rest

I invest
in the unseen

(cont., break)

A slattern pageant of drapes,
bargain basement bulbs
and citrus tinged lips—
a room facing west
for a boarder best left alone—

Best close the door, breathe,
lose the clothes, no telephone,
better yet collapse, detest, concede

Tar tipped nails
sconce ears for echoes
upon rented pigeon feather pillows
until vertigo desists
and noon drowns in carnival sweat—
dynamite droplets crawling
across a drowsy tongue
primed for cinnamon sticks and rum

Come, rearrange your wits—
frantic laughter unravels
the canvas, an adobe shroud,
a clouded mirror
gilded with silver never silvered,
rise and remember

That *fight about the spoonful*
blooms a paradox of purpose withered,
if only tomorrow,
if only the weather—

Stripped,
splayed—
a terrible headache

I must lie down,
I must lie,
amid blue light diffusion,
I must dissolve
this endless procession of menace
I must end

This endless procession of witness;

(cont., no break)

gaudy glare of cathedral beads
tossed upon tortured, bleeding gums,
need for betacarotene, groaning
stitches, a hindrance, a suspicion
regarding holes in the walls, stitch work

Cyclonic switches bringing monitor lizards,
broadcasting meteorological koans
through post-Aztec astrological asterisks,
their thin smiles full of bones

IV: Estrangement, Entanglement

Paralysis persists as hope,
and these lies,
defiant lines,
crowded faces deformed
like stone scarred fists,
rely upon silk worms,
a sylvan slide in essence,
sideways to sidewise
from elbow to wrist

In spirit
or in theory

Diego Rivera distributes the arms:
colliding, spilling, flattened crowd of patches,
grey and yellow, natural colors

Your eye the only eye meeting mirror-wide
wrenches together yours and mine—
your broken crook's thumb
and crooking index near the trigger guard
guarding a crowning tantrum, propaganda

Satellite-like sickle and hammer encircle,
hypnotic clockwork,
gears teething milk white meridians
upon the swirling tourniquet of evening

Leaden corneas linger, stifled
by bleached pink papier-mâché doors,
somersaulting plateaus
hung on gunmetal grey hinges

(cont., no break)

attached to mists which swim over
and twist each eyelash
until its bristles brush over a heretic tongue,
a hermetic feather of intention flung
brittle as glass against bullet blast

Blood is static,
a thorough Baedeker
but a useless revolutionary manifesto:
the medium is the message, don't you know

Methadone fingers enfold
plastic pushpins and impale maps
of planetary systems upon sandstone walls

Though Diego Rivera—
Babylon, Oxnard, San Luis Rio Colorado
—I lie alone and know you and those

A triptych of strained ligature,
a paralytic fuse of rivers
strung across the tumid sun
temple of carcinoma victims
sacrificed upon pithy postcards

V: An Invitation and Vision

Cross-legged sitting below a pitch roof
I remove the deluge of shadows
which support that prop, the moon,
and seed a tomb full of veiny palm roots

Omens,
nooses,
fruit for the crows to pluck
with deft aplomb

Of the sudden,
but ever coming,
fronds crawl across the window;
a hothouse punctured by its own
iron spired flowers
and thrice flayed by panes,
pollinating exhaustion in spades

(cont., break)

As sweeping landscapes smash
within the interior of night,
I spleen the sheen of a sand grain
and drink the dust of daylight away

Magnification of a clod,
an odd rusted opal full of fossils
fallen soft under hardened heel muscles

People
without cause
people causes,
casualties turned brown
skirting the ground

A cycle recycled,
two times the minus mark—
wanderlust of stillness
still in use,
and nothing
the stark natives will reveal
without a steep appraisal
or steeper deal

Diego,
for a solitary dollar
I will ignite the infinite fuse—

Diego,
lie silent,
do not move—

People
people,
harrowing petroglyph sparrows
perched on dirty bridges and roofs,
knitting together maypole markets
full of wilted confetti
and starving ringworms

Each kind action breeds
a blighted treasure—
an arsenal
disarming violent spring—

(cont., break)

Absolution,
caffeination,
deus ex machina

The bullet between
decoy geese, the golden fleece,
peopling beyond any suitable peace—

As Yuma shadows the silver spoon
that mixes the milk curdle moon

VI: The Examination

Strange, Diego
has crooked teeth—

Refuse,
if doing so leads
to any actual action or belief

The greed of distraction
and the actual distraction—

Barons of porcelain paste
selling grace with wooden jawbones
and defecting to the Soviets—

Say it ain't so, my dear Jeeves—
defecation is an exacting errand:
the abject precision of need,
the tragic clarification of errors
no longer pending release

A futile, useless translation:
J' accuse

Accusation as advertisement
must receive

An unjustifiable transaction
and foolish
beyond any sooth-saying you—
a needle
in a hayfield overgrown
with milkweeds

(cont., break)

The pollen air,
a funeral seduction
of voluptuous aromas—
The common denominator
of dare being need—
an implosion,
a feast

Diego, the Colorado freezes:
a massive one-dimensional mural
of affixed memory
imbues this room
with a thin prism of purification:
a cold pastime indeed,
this dream's dread,
dead in deed and stead,
instead of removed
form upon form feeds
revolutionary pupils
dilate and bleed
into La Paz without any peace

Diego Rivera—
sundial,
color-wheel,
confusion—
do not move

Heaven's shroud remains full of holes
as stars plunge into the Colorado
heaving heady at arms length
and distributing sultry perfume
in secret
to gold plated agents
who sleep in silent peace
on the other side of my room

Diego,
a reminder,
do not move—

Diego,
you look tired
but intent on retribution

Rewind

You might want to try
Libeled Lady—

Cosigning dotted lines
leading to an effervescing sleeve end,
a gold link to Goldwyn to gawking
while rigging up the mock lioness'
thin representation—

Promotional allure assured
through an immense poster posted
along wrought iron iris fences,
so bewitching, her stills spinning—
slattern definitions, verdigris limits—
the mutability of airbrushed lipstick,
the femme fatale winking
a dreamy lid askance—

Patent pumps and cotton duck alike
line this improbable boulevard
where eminent men spin fantastic images
through a series of eclipses
until elliptical wakes pollinate space
into shape and raise round a bouquet
of rouge constellations along its width—

This race is rent—
a bombshell emptied between mirrors,
apertures, bulbs, signatures,
which reinvent the myth
and recreate the premise
that seeded Eden's initial sinful business—

Amidst benches, litter, graffiti, gum spots,
shop windows reflecting
ulcerous spit upon sidewalks—
how the throngs wish to witness
her devilish declamations—

So wanton they watch
weary profiteers attempt to settle
on some sense of direction,
yet grope among negligible stars

(cont., no break)

for a less offensive
form of knowledge—

They cannot forget the red carpet,
contractual clauses,
mascara black tantrums
and mechanized monocle's glint,
the matchstick fodder
that mints hothouse myths
and gardens of dispossession,
the impenetrable pretense
of thick theatre lenses
pinning down a pin up
thigh-wise through needle eye—

Jean Harlow,
fleshy harlequin,
half cup heroine,
may arrive in fantastic satin
smiling and nodding nicely
without Marilyn's proclivity for pills,
but twice her appetite for rye—

She may reload,
she may blow a few kisses,
she may even cry—

But you,
the viewer removed,
might want to try
City Lights or *Why Be Good?*—

Without the extemporaneous outtakes,
with the image on mute

A Tidewater Tale

Entranced, she forces a nimble fiddle bow
behind the white eye lid of the black expanse
and falls into dance alongside jealous yellow lights
advertising cash on demand amidst blades of blue grass
until each sways like strings on the hips of mandolins:
this impressed the potential members of her band
who remained anonymous until the rain began.

Miasmas

Miasmas remain nature's favorite eye rhyme,
imperfect once you say them fast three times.

1.

Rain clouds—

From atop the scenic city overlook, life resumes:
sharp light mines the moon until it's shorn dry
while our sight refuses to deny the nightlife
of the ideal orange sun now passed by
like a starving, lovesick buffoon
with a swollen black eye.

2.

Silt clouds—

Diving beneath the waste of harbor, life resumes:
the sunless salt encrusting the underwater
caverns keeps the dim shores above
sapped of vegetation; strafed,
broken and without shrine
like museums after riots
in a desert paradise.

Interlude—

Solar, lunar, the surface sweats cirrus to grey the blue:
no matter the cycle assumed, no matter the moment.

A murk of urchins and minnows swirls beneath us:
no matter the current kept, no matter the exceptions.

A miasma of cityscape lies between: blunted beacons,
magic lanterns cast by amateurs to shadow substance.

3.

Smoke clouds—

As we eye smoking trash barrels, life resumes:
the roll over contentions and sweaty searches
for sense among water worn flagstones
cinched together with wood posts,
rope and fumes of rotgut rye:
they insist, revolt, groan
out human kindnesses,
foolish insults, cries.

Tilt the bottle at the horizon until it spins free and splinters,
dismissing the boardwalk winter with an eyeful of silence.

Absentees

Intermittent awe
indecent ebb of chance
we adjust the horizon
sweating out our wine
casting stones softly
at the swollen breeze

Dusk comes over
running upon clouds
a leaf curls under
where veins fork
falling ashes settle
smoke rolling west
from the east's mouth

All will sleep spent
hot breath overhead
those who must believe
meet in another town
there are questions held
and there is time itself
across those huddling hills
where wonder stands still

Spring

Springtime found her pregnant by the errant mortician
she plucked from a sordid Southern pub
across from the gutted rock quarries and gas pumps
hemmed in by molasses black ditches
where honeysuckle and dust choked bottles grow restless.

Springtime found him drifting far from right or sobriety
crawling upon the school baseball diamond
overshadowed by broken old willows and poplars
budding back white into the black sockets
where stars replaced red bottle rocket bursts with silence.

Springtime found them both botched and approximated
peeling back the metallic leaves of labels
only to send them spent into the dew-wet breeze
that still etches out old robbers caves
and collapses chimneys choked with old dogwood debris.

Springtime leaves them lying side by side near the slew
slugging back the sad jargon of gypsy days
and the season changes little but the company of fools
as night drops catatonic across a cricket's leg
like a slack bow string straining from a battered juke.

La Paz

For those souls emptied out along the Colorado
by the faux stone shoulders of civilized desire,
by the magnesium mail and short-circuit shows
of betrayal and the bottom-line;
know now that you may lie low and behold
cumulus clouds rolling the polestar forward
as sweating palms unfold oblong almond dreams
driven darkly beneath obsidian arroyos
until time slows, hour ingesting hour,
day divesting day, and fragrant dusk comes
unalarmed, silver and sand strewn, harboring
ivory night on noon's tongue, forked and fertile,
nourished by a wine kind tide of tiny fish bones
—know the mind makes omens of such circles
even when the T.V. tower shatters your nerves
and the postal service forgets to deliver the news

VITA

Caleb Stephen Puckett

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: DESERTIONS: POETRY WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical: Caleb Puckett was born in Albuquerque, NM to Lynn and Steve Puckett on September 29th, 1975. Following this, he lived in numerous small towns across Oklahoma, thus learning to make friends with no local prejudice to guide him, fend off hoodlums, and make a constant companion of his imagination. Upon graduation from UCO in 1999, he lived in Arizona, dividing his time between the Colorado River reservation land, and a stretch of Route 66 that died out in the high desert. During these years he worked at no less than 27 jobs, ranging from hay hauler to theatre director, among many others. These jobs enlarged his spirit and sharpened his senses more than any bestseller could, but he nevertheless remains compelled to commit many of their revelations to page for the ostensible education and amusement of others. In 2002, he entered OSU to further pursue his writing and to fall for his wife, Sayanti Ganguly. They reside by the Arkansas River in Tulsa, OK along with their pets, Roxy and Bluto.

Personal Data: 30 year old white male of average height, weight, education and means, who has a disposition that betrays any statistical certainties.

Education: University of Central Oklahoma, Bachelor of Arts 1999
Completed the Requirements for the Master of Arts degree at
Oklahoma State University in May of 2006

Experience: Instructor and Librarian: Platt College, 2005-Present
Instructor and Tutor: Tulsa Community College, 2004-2005
Administrative Assistant: OSU Writing Project, Summer 2004
Teaching Assistant: OSU English Department, 2003-2004
Writing Tutor: OSU ASSA, 2002-2003
English Teacher and Theatre Director: Ash Fork High School,
2001-2002
English Teacher and Coach: Parker High School, 2000-2001

Professional Memberships: OSU Creative Writing Association
Assistant Poetry Editor, Nimrod International Journal

Name: Caleb Puckett

Date of Degree: May, 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: DESERTIONS: POETRY WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Pages in Study: 64

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: The critical introduction of this work focuses on the poet's craft. It chiefly addresses his employment of imagery and omission, and illustrates how they are employed in creating visual, aural and metaphorical textures within the poems. The bulk of the creative thesis consists of original poetry that exhibits the theoretical and technical aspects discussed in the critical introduction. The poems exhibit a variety of moods and explore a variety of concerns, ranging from marriage to war, but all of them are tied together by a thematic emphasis on the difficulties of attaining, maintaining, or even breaking free from certain community and cultural expectations. Most of the poems question the tenability of many common behavior patterns and attitudes by closely studying the emotional and intellectual nuances contained within and perpetuated by such norms.

Findings and Conclusions: The poems, as a whole, argue that certain human beliefs and approaches must be carefully reevaluated and modified in an appropriate manner so that increased ethical and spiritual welfare may overtake centuries old ills. The poet submits that individuals are solely responsible for initiating and following through with this course of action and that such responsibility will provide a more fruitful social milieu for those people included in and presently excluded from larger community concerns.

Advisor's Approval: Lisa Lewis
