UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

ASHES OVER THE SOUTHWEST

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

NATHAN LEE BROWN
Norman, Oklahoma
2005

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/837

UMI Number: 3162831



UMI Microform 3162831

Copyright 2005 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ASHES OVER THE SOUTHWEST

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
GRADUATE COLLEGE

By

_____
Robert Con Davis-Undiano

_____
David Gross

_____
Catherine Hobbs

_____
J. Madison Davis

_____
Deborah Chester

© Copyright by NATHAN LEE BROWN 2005
All Rights Reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Professor Robert Con Davis-Undiano: It is no stretch to say that you are the only reason I made it this far. Every time I "quit school," you came up with a good reason I should stay. Every time I ran out of money, you came up with a job or internship. The richness I take away from my education, when it comes to Chicano Studies, is invaluable and has had an incredible impact on my own creative work. The artists I have met while working at *World Literature Today* have had an effect on me that I can't even begin to calculate. Thank you so much, RC.

To Professors Catherine Hobbs, J. Madison Davis, and Deborah Chester: I deeply appreciate your willingness to "jump in" with me on this somewhat unruly, interdisciplinary project. I know the prospect of reading original poetry concerned you at first. But you stuck with me on it. Thank you so much.

I would like to say a special thanks to Professor David Gross for being "that" professor; the one who truly lit the fire under my passion for reading; the one who introduced me to some of the most fabulous minds that have affected—and continue to affect—my teaching and creative work.

To Elyon Wall-Ellis and René Jenkins: for all the forms I would have forgotten to fill out, and all the deadlines I would have missed… *thank you*.

– – –

Thanks to Billy Crockett for being such a good friend all these years and maintaining such a strong interest in what I was up to with this degree. Your encouragement along the way, especially at the Okie-Tex Star Party, was invaluable.

Thanks to Ana for putting up with me during this crazy, time-consuming process. You have been a bright spot in the midst of some dark years, ljubavi…

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Lavonn and Norma Brown. The time, support, love, and concern you have maintained throughout these twenty years of my higher education have been tireless. I'm only now beginning to understand this, because of my daughter. My gratitude is bottomless. And I truly believe you should both receive honorary doctorates in patience.

- - - - - - - -

Sierra – my daughter: You are the measure of my peace and joy, Punkin. You were the "mission" that gave me purpose and the strength to finish this degree. So, I offer—as I did the last time—the token of dedicating this work to you… *I love you, Honey*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Among the Okie Detritus 90
Grandma 91
Almost 92
Labor Day 94
Momentary Lapse 95
Soul-Savers 97
Chasing Autumn 98
A Note of Thanks 100
The Twig 101
If I Hadn't Walked 102
Donny 103
Another Case for Walking 106
A Strangely Beautiful Smell of Death 108
Peeling Orange 109
James, Brother of John 111
Price of Admission 112
S/U – Athlete Evaluations 113
Done 114
Thinking about Death 115
Visitors Guide 116
I Was There 117
Lasting Impressions 118
One Hour 119
Rockin' Au Pair 120
The Four of July 121
Burn 122
Beautiful and Gorgeous 123
I Just Wanted to Buy a Magazine 125
A Defining Dilemma 126
Lowland Heretic 127
Knowing Better 128
Found Out 129
For Some Reason 130
Good to Go 131
Serious Business 132
In the Pause 133
Critical Care 134
Inter-dimensional Thrift Shopping 135
The Work of Heaven 137
Honestly 138
The Matter of Main Street 139
Holy Cola 141
Since 1955 142
Out West 144
After 145

City of Holy Faith 146
Quiet Reunion 147
Perkin' Up 148
Smacking the Core 149
On Stopping 150
Family Plans 152
An Okie Mingles 153
A Palpable Patron 154
Protocol 155
Holy Jokes 156
Mestizo 157
PDAs & Ponytails 158
With Eyes to See 159
Flamenco 160
Renovations at the Santuario de Guadalupe 161
Santuario de Chimayó 162
Glorieta 163
Remember Los Alamos 164
Jemez Springs 165
But We Want To 166
Shits in The Shed 167
All the Pretty… 168
No News Is Good News 169
Nirvana at the Coyote Café 170
Over in the Plaza 171
Leaving Longevity 172
On Returning 173
Texas Almost Touches Colorado 174
Road to Nineveh 175
Perdition 176
Happyness 177
Elemental 178
The Quiet House 179
Where I Go 180
San Marcos 181
Highway 31 182
Simile 183
Necessities 184
Deficit 185
Again 186
United States 187
Odes to Nothin Bodeswell 188
Natural Selection 189
Daze in Juvyville 190
Red Light White Flag 191
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil 192
The Fall 193
Nothin Doin 194

Approaching Famous 195
Stayin the Course 196
Corner of University and Division St. 197
Cosmic Release 198
Sacred Stains 199
Glass 200
The Same 201
Reunion 202
Old & Wise 203
Beautiful Pieces 207
I Should Have 210
How It Works 211
Psalms 212
Ashes to Dust 213
Broken 215
Shattered 216
Firewalking 217
Either Way 218
Test 219
Clutch 220
Behold, I Stand 221
Psalm before the Storm 222
In Remission 223
Weak Defiance 224
A Wall for Wailing 225
In That Moment... 226
Eyeless and Earless 227
Half 228
A Month of Sunday 229
A Growing Concern 232
Holy Days 233
Resurrection 234
The Ordination 236
Entropy 237
To My Surprise 238
Losin' It 239
Makes No Sense 240
Makeover 241
Finding Jesus 243
Getting Ready 245
Peace in the Middle West 246
Flip-Side 247
On the Way 248

Ashes over the Southwest

An Introduction

Hopeful cynic.

These are the self-descriptive words that began the introduction to my master's thesis. I guess that in four years of continued graduate work, I thought my philosophical leanings might change. I thought a great light would shine down at some point and cure me of doubt, frustration, and fence-straddling when it comes to how I feel about the world. Though there's been no great shaft of light, I *would* say that I have become more hopeful. And I have discovered that I'm not alone. For example, in *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott tells of her priest friend who describes himself as a "cheerful pessimist." She goes on to explain:

> …this attitude is enough to rescue him from the bleakness that would otherwise have him psychically curled up in the fetal position. (206)

This increase in hopefulness is what carries me through some of the ominous topics I will discuss in this introduction: academic jargon; the current state of poetry; teaching. It is also why I close with the topics of passion, ardor, and inspiration, and my love for home and place. Yet, even in the heavier, somewhat darker moments, please know beneath it all is a deep desire for change, for "bettering" the problems.

What else has changed in me over the last four years? I now write a poem every day. I do not miss. I now read poetry, novels, or nonfiction every day. I do not miss.

Another big difference in me stems from what I do, and do not, accept as credible authority. I stand firm in my conviction that there is a strong tendency in the realm of theory for things to "appear" as if they have substance, when in actuality, they are mostly gas. I

even have a special marginalia symbol now that stands for "Academic B. S." I will speak further on academese later in the introduction.

This said, I must make clear that I have loved and appreciated my education and the professors who taught me. So there is nothing personal in my forthcoming arguments about academia. As a matter of fact, much of what I hope is a healthy cynicism in me, as well as "hopeful," stems from candid conversations with these professors whom I deeply respect.

In trying to unlock the mystery of the PhD process in a discussion with a professor one afternoon, he began, and ended, his part of the discussion with a single question: *Do you have a list of books you want to read that will take you more than the rest of your life to finish*?

Without need for thought, I answered: *Yes, absolutely*.

Then you're there, he said.

In light of this, I have come to believe that this degree—often referred to as "terminal"—is not an end or destination. It is not an arrival that culminates in a beautiful piece of paper for an office wall. It is, or should be, the recognition of a certain amount of ignorance, and a confirmation that one has reached a point of permanent commitment to the continuation of the learning process.

This introduction is in the spirit and form of a paper I wrote for a class on Walter Benjamin. The paper's title was "Pig Meat: Who Reads Dissertations?" The work covered many of the great authors students study in an English degree program—as well as many contemporary artists not on the canonical books—and explored their thoughts and feelings on the world of academia. I patterned the form of the paper around Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, a voluminous work that consumed a large part of his life. It is a collection of fragments—quotations and personal observations—on what he considered the "Capital of

the Nineteenth Century:" Paris. But, because of his keen eye and brilliant flashes of insight, it is so much more. It is a quintessential cultural and philosophical critique of the time-period that offers an incredible wealth of wisdom, thought, and, I would go as far as to say, prophetic vision to us now.

I must admit—though expecting the results I got to some extent—I was surprised at the quantity and unanimity in the material I encountered. Expressions on academia ranged from mild and humorous rib-jabbing to sardonic, if not outright dismissive, rampages.

I do not mean for this to be an exercise in cynical self-indulgence—a means for me to vent my frustrations with higher education. Instead, it is intended to be an honest, hard look at the realities of the outside world looking in, as well as an offering of insights from the fringes of educated society that very few souls ensconced on the "inside" of academia seldom take time to consider. For some on the inside, it might be a matter of simply not thinking to take a look. For others, it is a matter of careful denial. Either way, my interest lies firmly in the realm of: 1) wanting to be a better teacher and poet; and 2) wanting to write something that is potentially "useful" as opposed to "mostly gas."

Another good way of looking at the form of this introduction comes from Hannah Arendt's description of Benjamin's love for aphorisms in her introduction to the same book:

> Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface. (50-51)

This sums up the central passion and focus of my academic career. As I move on into the realm of becoming a writer myself, these "golden nuggets" of thought will vibrate in the back of my mind, not in a desire to be copied, but in the hope of supplying me with an image, a vision, of all the great authors who stand with me in my desire to create something new and beautiful.

As a lead in to the following section on *Influences*, I want to express my deep gratitude to *World Literature Today* for an internship that gave me so many opportunities to meet some of the great authors of our time. I had the privilege of spending time with them to and from airports and events in enlightening conversations—a priceless source of wisdom. I recall one such airport conversation with J. M. Coetzee, who a few months after his visit here went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature with his novel *Disgrace*. When I expressed a fear over the exams and dissertation defense I was soon to face, he quietly and simply [very much his demeanor] said: *You're in the game. Now take these final few steps so you can get through to the other things* [poetry and teaching] *that truly matter*.

Another experience was over coffee with Jimmy Santiago Baca—one of my favorite poets from the group I will later refer to as the "unacceptables." We were in a coffee shop in downtown Norman discussing poetry when he turned and waved his hand across the scene out the big picture window. He said: *This is what you have been given. It's beautiful. And you may be one of the few who can truly see it for what it is, and isn't. So write it. Write it well and with all your heart.* I was stunned by the obviousness of this thought that had somehow eluded me.

All my WLT experiences, though, culminated in the recent visit of the poet Adam Zagajewski as the winner of the 2004 Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Through his poems, his readings, and our conversations, I began to feel that I was closer to *being* a poet, instead of only an acolyte who hoped to be one someday. I know I will always be an apprentice of sorts. I think if I lose that viewpoint, it will be the beginning of the end. But there is that mystical point at which the apprentice, by nature of progression, steps up. And Adam Zagajewski's poems, advice, and belief in the validity of "plain-speaking," gave me the courage to do just that.

All who long to write know how moments like these impact us. They are priceless and, occasionally, the only things that keep us going. I would also add that they are, in large part, responsible for the increase in the "hopeful" side of my nature.

The poetry in this dissertation represents the writing, culling, and editing of roughly three years of work. Thematically, it covers a territory that revealed itself *through* the process of creation. It was not until I put together these poems in a single body that I realized they were a homage to the Southwest—this unique part of the world where I was born and raised. In this sense, it seems an appropriate offering to this university where I received all three of my degrees.

As I discuss each author listed below, whom I consider a key influence, and then follow with discussions on academia, poetry, teaching, passion and place, I want to explore the problem of poetry's place in our current culture and look for possible insights and answers. Occasionally, I will make reference to what I call the "unacceptables." Simply put, these are the poets I have encountered—either by accident, or by reference from a friend—who have not found their way into the academic discussion. Some of them appear to have been quite deliberately marginalized by the system. This most likely has to do with what they have had to say about the system.

Either way, the more I read—on both sides of the fence—the more determined I become *not* to accept this marginalization. If we want English and poetry, as it pertains to academia, to remain relevant to culture, these authors, and others like them, should be included in the discussion.

As I begin the discussion on my key influences in the next section, I want to offer this explanation from Garrison Keillor as to what might be, at least in part, the reason behind this marginalization:

> I wonder, Why do English teachers offer their prisoners so much Cummings and no Bukowski? Why do standard anthologies include one and never mention the other? Because one of them went to Harvard and had fine manners and lived in the Village, around the corner from the publisher, and the other was a day laborer and roughneck who lived in L.A. and had bad skin and looked like a gargoyle, that's why. (*Good Poems* xxii)

On Influences

> Young poets who don't think of themselves as apprentices are notorious for resisting influences. They don't want anything to stop them from thinking that what they've done is original. Originality, of course, is what occurs when something new arises out of what's already been done. Poets who remain poets have, presumably, worked through the terrors of influence, and are willing to acknowledge their debts by using them in order to go their own way. They've learned what Thomas Mann knew: "A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." (5)
>
> —Stephen Dunn in *Walking Light: Memoirs and Essays on Poetry*

I wrote in my master's thesis about the authors who had most influenced me throughout the program. I've ploughed new fields since then, and a fresh harvest of great minds now nourishes me in my journey toward understanding the poem. Some people, upon viewing my older list with names like Dante and Milton, might see this new one as a digression—as if I've "marched fearlessly backwards" in terms of quality. I do not see it that way, and I hope this introduction will help illustrate why.

While I have encountered many new "favorites," one author from my earlier work remains at the forefront.

Walter Benjamin

My love for Benjamin is rooted in the dichotomy of his attitudes and actions in reaction to the world around him. It felt as if he was always caught between two worlds—and the worlds kept shifting on him. Hannah Arendt, in her introduction to *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin—Essays and Reflections*, writes:

> … his erudition was great, but he was no scholar; his subject matter comprised texts and their interpretation, but he was no philologist; he was greatly attracted not by religion but by theology … but he was no theologian … he was a born writer, but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations. (3-4)

It was his love for literature, great authors, and their greatest moments, coupled with his lifelong frustrations with academia and certain requirements of scholarship that attracted me to his writings. The body of his thought—the part left to us—is an amazing "photo album" of an incredible mind at work in the politically and socially tumultuous time leading up to and during Nazi Germany. What continues to amaze me is how relevant they remain:

> The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. (*Illuminations* 90)

> Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated. (*Illuminations* 93)

> The truth will not run away from us. (*Illuminations* 255)

> Greatness is the eternal silence after the conversation. (*Selected, Vol. 1* 7)

> Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction. (*Selected, Vol. 1* 289)

Benjamin taught me to pay attention to the tiniest of details, the scrap of paper on the ground, the detritus of the world around me:

> A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. (*Illuminations* 254)

Walking was his means. And the smallest fragments from the streets or shop windows were his ends to searing insights on culture and philosophy. This is a good description of the way I deal with material for my "poem-a-day."

Benjamin is one of the few heavy thinkers, whose works can sometimes be thick with jargon and concepts that are difficult to understand, that I, simply, love anyway. I will wade through his words. There is a passion beneath them that speaks to me. And I truly look forward to more time to spend with his works.

Stephen Dunn

Stephen Dunn rates high on my list of favorite poets. He was the portal through which I began my descent into the world of the "unacceptables." He'll be found in Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems*, but not in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. And, frankly, when I read some of the poets who did make it into the anthology, I am left to question whether or not, after years of study, I have any idea what constitutes a good poem. If by chance I do, then I believe there is a game of favoritism, if not academic nepotism, afoot in the world of American poetry.

Dunn carries some of the outward appearances of the "acceptables." He won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001 with his book *Different Hours*, and he is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey. But not until recently have I heard his name uttered in the halls of academia. And when I found out about him several years ago, it was by way of a professional journalist from Texas who pulled his book off the shelf in a bookstore and insisted that I buy it.

When I first read Stephen Dunn's *New and Selected Poems*, I could not sit still until I'd found another book of his poetry. Here is one of many great moments in one of my favorite poems from the book, "At the Smithville Methodist Church:"

> Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.
> You can't say to your child
> "Evolution loves you." The story stinks
> of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. (*New and Selected* 184)

One of the chief discoveries I owe to Dunn is that beauty most often needs to be filtered through a certain darkness. A hard honesty should "lurk" behind the people and characters. Christopher Vogler, in *The Writer's Journey*, says that "Weaknesses, imperfections, quirks, and vices" (39) are how we keep our characters, our "heroes" interesting and realistic. And, like Vogler, Dunn believes there must be a "wound" behind great art. Consider these lines From his collection, *Loosestrife*:

> But never to have been outrageous or exquisite,
> no grand mistake
> so utterly yours it causes whispers (42)
>
> he was, after all, alive,
> and desire often sent him aching
> toward some mistake. (46)
>
> the way, I suppose, most of us will kiss
> a terrible scar to prove we can live with it. (50 – 51)

Here is one from his more recent, Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *Different Hours*:

> If beauty comes
> it comes startled, hiding scars,
> out of what barely can be endured. (82)

This realization had a profound effect on the way I look at my poems and on the type of tough, frightening honesty that they require in order to be true, moving moments of art. Walter Benjamin says it like this in his essay "Hashish in Marseilles:"

> I now suddenly understood how, to a painter … ugliness could appear as the true reservoir of beauty, better than any treasure cask, a jagged mountain with all the inner gold of beauty gleaming from the wrinkles, glances, features. (*Reflections* 140)

Walking Light: Memoirs and Essays on Poetry is one of the most influential books on writing I have in my library. These essays on the nature and craft of poetry held many discoveries for me. He helped me laugh at poems that used to make me angry:

> … the poem so civilized that we'd like to mess up its hair, take it for a joy ride. (3)

He helped me understand better why I have so much trouble with those poems:

> We can go months, even years, without ever being crucially spoken to. The simplest good poem is a small correction of that. (19)

Dunn, along with Bukowski, taught me that the poet has to be open to unusual friends and learning what failure has to teach:

> The realm of the unknown is contiguous to the realm of failure. The gambler, deep down, has made a pact with failure. He'll accept it because it has interesting neighbors. In such realms the soul … is fed, not to mention exercised. (73)

Opening ourselves up to failure and its "interesting neighbors" reminds us we are not above and separate from the world. I can't gripe about things I don't like without realizing the ways in which I belong to the problem. So, for every poem about global warming and the problem with over-consumption of petroleum, I must be aware that I, too, drive a car:

> Those of us who do not feel complicitous in the ills of the world always will be quarreling with others. (76)

> I prefer poems … which, instead of thumbing their noses at the bourgeoisie, confront it and us, return us to the strange, which, when delivered, takes its place next to the peanut butter and jelly on the table. (22)

For a poem to *really* work, it must quit sermonizing and recognize a mutual sense of guilt:

> The more poets are able to give a home to what is contradictory, ambiguous, and unruly, the more I would trust their sincerity. (109)

Another lesson Dunn drove home for me was this:

> An obvious given: In this country a poet must have another job. (137)

This was a painful, yet necessary truth for me to face. He also confirmed my growing suspicions about the contemporary poetry scene:

> When people praise a poem that I can't understand I always think they're lying. (145)
>
> I don't think I'd complain if I were overrated. (149)

When it comes to Dunn and the "unacceptables," I can hear all day long about what poets I should or should not like. But if I read a poet's work, and the sum total of my response is "hmm," then I am done. Jim Harrison, another of the "unacceptables" I recently discovered, writes this in his introduction to *The Shape of the Journey*:

> If after a few days I can't mentally summon the essence of the work I've been reading I simply don't care who says it's good and why. (2)

However academics want to evaluate the worth of Stephen Dunn, Billy Collins, or Bukowski—all of whom I will discuss further later—I want a poem to speak to me. I want it to peck away at change in me. I want to finish it and slam the book down on the table, spilling my coffee, and *not* be able to suppress a *Now* that's *what I'm talkin' about!*

Charles Bukowski

Now for the bottom rung on the ladder of "unacceptables."

I recently wrote a review for the Sunday Oklahoman of Charles Bukowski's book *Sifting Through the Madness for the Word, the Line, the Way*. In it, I described his poetry as being "like catching a jaded news commentator right after going off the air. Except that he hated news commentators." I would add to this now: *Except he would have gone ahead and said what he thought* on *the air*.

I'm sure there is a list of reasons Charles Bukowski is not considered a noteworthy poet in academic circles. But, as with Dunn, there has to be an explanation for the urge I felt upon reading the first Bukowski book I ever laid hands on, to go straight out and buy another. Why? Maybe I'm a bad poet myself, and poetasters love company as much as misery? But I do know this: a friend of mine was turned down for an academic position, and the main reason we came up with was that he'd done his dissertation on Charles Bukowski.

Whatever the answers to the above questions, I do have to credit Bukowski with contributing a critical ingredient to my writing. He taught me that if I was ever going to be a writer, I had to stop writing as if my mother were looking over my shoulder. Anne Lamott says the same thing in *Bird by Bird*. I had to cut that mental censor loose and lay things, clearly, if not crassly, on the line. Speaking about his mother-in-law, he puts it this way in "the barometer:"

> "WHY DOES HE HAVE
> TO WRITE THAT
> WAY?
> WHY DOES HE
> DO IT?"
>
> Well, you know,
> those voices
> past and present are
> always going to be
> there.

He goes on to explain, though, why those voices *must* be there. He says if they ever stop:

> I will know
> I have lost
> touch with the
> direct line
> to the mad
> and
> laughing
> gods. (*Bone Palace Ballet* 277)

If I were to guess why Bukowski is not liked in academia, I would start with the way he always raked the institution over the coals. Here's an excerpt from the poem "my comrades," where he comments on some academic acquaintances:

> this one seems to know how to get grant after grant,
> his life is a filling-out of forms.
> …
> that one had breakfast with William Carlos
> Williams.
> and this one teaches.
> and that one teaches.
> and this one puts out textbooks on how to do it
> and speaks in a cruel and dominating voice. (*Dog from Hell* 239)

In his poem, "the little girls," he questions the academic's authenticity, or authority, to qualify to be a poet:

> he was a professor and had never
> been in jail or in a whorehouse
> had never had a used car die
> in a traffic jam ;
> had never needed more than
> 3 drinks during his wildest
> evening ;
> had never been rolled, flogged,
> mugged,
> had never been bitten by a dog
> he got nice letters from Gary
> Snyder, and his face was
> kindly, unmarked and
> tender.
> his wife had never betrayed him,
> nor had his luck. (*Dog from Hell* 260)

There are more where these came from. And looking closely at his use of punctuation, one can easily see the next flaw that academics might wave in his face.

The bottom-line attraction to Bukowski for me is the unapologetic passion in his work—much like Jimmy Santiago Baca's—that often surfaces from the muck of a real and sometimes horrific life:

in other words
magic persists
without us
no matter what
we may try to do
to spoil it. (*Bone Palace Ballet* 153-154)

I feel a kindred spirit—a sense of *Yeah, that's what I'm talking about*—when I read his poems. And when it comes to a sense of passion and purpose in the artist, Bukowski burns down the house in "so you want to be a writer?" the opening poem of *Sifting through the Madness*:

if it doesn't come bursting out of you
in spite of everything,
don't do it.
unless it comes unasked out of your
heart and your mind and your mouth
and your gut,
don't do it.
…
if you're doing it for money or
fame,
don't do it.
…
if you're trying to write like somebody
else,
forget about it.
…
unless being still would
drive you to madness or
suicide or murder,
don't do it. (3-5)

These lines strike at the core of my main questions to the poets of my generation: What is wrong with passion? What is wrong with spirituality? What is wrong with wanting to *believe* in something again after the desolation of postmodernism? This, by the way, is the central theme of Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski's new collection of essays *A Defense of Ardor*. My interest in these questions led me to the discovery and subsequent influence of the Chicano poets. They are unabashed in their passion and sense of spirituality. I will touch on this more later in the introduction.

I want more from poetry than inward looking self-therapy sessions for some kind of collective manic depression in my peers that I sometimes refer to as "that Greenwichy Villagey stuff." Bukowski wanted the same and was much less polite about it.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

In a conversation with poet Demetria Martínez, another relationship I owe to *World Literature Today*, in Santa Fe, I asked her about Jimmy Baca. I was under the impression he'd been a little rough on her once in a critique of her poetry. After scuffing the dirt with her shoe, her answer was: *Well… Jimmy is Jimmy*.

Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in Santa Fe and christened in the beautiful St. Francis Cathedral there, just off the square. But the difficult circumstances of his childhood led him down a horrendous path of parental abandonment, brief stints with relatives, orphanages, state schools, and eventually a residence in an Arizona penitentiary. The silver lining to this stormy cloud is that the latter stint is where Baca discovered the power of words and poetry.

Here is how I found out about him: I had dinner in Boston with a friend, a fellow poet, who lives there. After the meal we hit one of the many bookstores in Harvard Square. As we ransacked the poetry section, my friend gasped and then shoved a book in my face: *Have you heard of this guy*, he asked.

No, I answered.

Well, we'll have to fix that.

He marched up to the counter, paid for it, and handed it to me. It was a copy of Baca's book *C Train / Thirteen Mexicans.* I read it immediately when I got home.

Allow me to say that some poetry I enjoy; some poetry I respect; and some poetry I *love*. But this poetry *messed me up*. And right off, I knew he would be considered an

"unacceptable." He was too passionate, too rough, too brutally honest, too many things. His poetry pulled me up out of my seat, made me walk circles around my chair, and talk to myself in public. He had put the hammer down, and I had to decide if I was going to join him.

Unlike Stephen Dunn and Charles Bukowski, I hadn't seen Jimmy Baca's poetry anywhere except in his own books. No academic anthologies. No textbooks. I suppose it's happened, but I have yet to find out where. I wonder if it has to do with a certain fear on the part of those in power. They may not appreciate the accusation:

> academic gossips … scrawl absurd little assumptions about
> me, that I am a rough tough guy, and wonder on the Net how
> my poetry ever got published and claim it is not poetry, and
> fill their profound PhD and master of English minds with
> ridiculous mongering rumors, and immerse their hearts in the
> trough chatter peddling tasteless hearsay while the rest of
> us—
>
> just do it. (96)

Here he sets up the coming section on poetry in this introduction, where I discuss the rift between the "acceptables" and "unacceptables" within the world of poetry. In the final poem of *Thirteen Mexicans*, he continues the argument when he shouts at all in positions of power who would censor and silence the good poets, that they:

> will always be discovered
> by people struggling to live with honor
> …
> by teachers who want to instruct without
> compromise. (143)

To those who would be good, who would live, work, or teach "without compromise," he holds them up high:

> I praise the man who would be a racist and is not,
> the one who could cheat and decides to be fair. (85)

He offers no apology for such simple, declarative moments in his poems. And in doing so, he speaks to the position of passion and place in the poet's arsenal. Yet as the reader coasts along through his claims and declarations, the images begin to pop out along the way.

> I've been digging stones out of my heart such a long time,
> biting each one to make sure I'm not throwing away gold.
> (132)

The metaphors begin to sing off the page. And this is when the reader begins to see the long road to recovery Baca had to walk. We hear him singing his way out of prison, learning to write as he went, so he could make a record of his journey. He says that during this time:

> dreams came to me like a piano playing in a dark alley. (42)

Jimmy Baca's poetry, along with that of Bukowski and others, set me on the path of my struggle with the question: *What is poetry's job? When does it matter? When does it not?* As a student in the middle of graduate work, I had to face that the poets I loved most had very little positive to say about academia. And where Jimmy Santiago Baca is concerned (his comments are so vitriolic) I was unable to use most of them in the upcoming section on academia where I discuss the problems of academic subculture and language. This is another characteristic he shares with Charles Bukowski. But his heart? His passion? Magnificent.

David Mamet

> Our distrust of institutions is great and well founded.
> We're always ready to believe the worst of them
> because we know we'll never *know* the worst. (*Restaurants* 108)

David Mamet's sharp, incisive wit and wonderful insight into society and culture sold me right from the title of the first essay in the first book I read: *Writing in Restaurants*. The title is "Capture-the-Flag, Monotheism, and the Techniques of Arbitration." Then came these words from the first page where he explains the importance of schoolyard politics:

> We all were lawyers in the schoolyard. We were concerned with property and honor, and correct application of the magical power of words. (3)

In this book, he seems to carry on the tradition of Anton Chekhov and Bertolt Brecht, among others. And, like the influences I've already listed, he is unapologetic in his views on institutions and academia:

> Thorstein Veblen said that the more that jargon and technical language is involved in an endeavor, the more we may assume that the endeavor is essentially make-believe. (5)

> The poker player learns that sometimes both science and common sense are wrong; that the bumblebee *can* fly; that, perhaps, one should never trust an expert; that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of by those with an academic bent. (94)

His critiques on censorship and culture echo Benjamin:

> We have, as a nation, become our own thought police; but instead of calling the process by which we limit our expression of dissent and wonder "censorship," we call it "concern for commercial viability." (17)

> We Americans know the real news never reaches the newspapers. We know the interests it affects are much too powerful to allow events which might disrupt the status quo to be truthfully reported in the press. (107)

His comments on art were equally strong:

> The artist is the advance explorer of the societal consciousness. As such, many times his first reports are disbelieved. (19)

> "Is God dead?" and "Why are there no real movies anymore?" are pretty much the same question. They both mean that our symbols and our myths have failed us—that we have begun to take them literally, and so judge them wanting. (35)

He speaks directly to my concerns on poetry, storytelling, and passion:

> My premise is that things do mean things. (68)

> …if you strive to teach yourself the lost art of storytelling, you are going to suffer, and, as you work and age, you may look around you and say, "Why bother?" And the answer is you must bother if you are selected to bother. (116)

In his later book *Three Uses of the Knife*, I am struck by his willingness to "preach" a powerful message in the face of apathy, even though he knows he'll get shot down by many critics. He continues the argument on the state of art:

> Art, no longer the province of the artist, has become the tool of the entrepreneur … So the conscious mind allies itself to art, and derives enjoyment from making money. (49)

> Artists don't set out to bring *anything* to the audience or to anyone else. They set out … to cure a raging imbalance. (51)

He also shows clear agreement with Benjamin on the Information Age:

> …we create and accept ignorance and illiteracy in the name of information. (55)

> We will not encounter art in information any more than we will find love in the arms of a prostitute. (59)

David Mamet freed my inner social critic, gave him license. He, in some ways, has become my contemporary Walter Benjamin. He showed me that not only is it okay *not to be liked*, it's a must to some extent, if I am going to speak truth to power.

Sting

In closing, I want to mention one other "poet" I've carried over from my master's work and before. Sting continues to be a major influence, a guide, in my life and creativity. One reason is that he is one of the few examples I can think of who has maintained integrity on the horizon of popularity. His musicianship is highly respected among peers in the jazz and classical world. And his lyrics show not only a strong background in English literature but give evidence of a true poet.

Some claim his last two albums "sold out" to commercialism. But concerning the latest, *Sacred Love*, I contend that anyone who believes this is not listening to the lyrics at all. There are tremendous moments of well-crafted poetry in these songs.

Here is an example from the song "The Book Of My Life" from *Sacred Love*:

> There are promises broken and promises kept
> Angry words that were spoken, when I should have wept
> There's a chapter of secrets, and words to confess
> If I lose everything that I possess
> There's a chapter on loss and a ghost who won't die
> There's a chapter on love where the ink's never dry
> There are sentences served in a prison I built out of lies.
> …
> There's a chapter on fathers a chapter on sons
> There are pages of conflicts that nobody won
> And the battles you lost and your bitter defeat,
> There's a page where we fail to meet
>
> There are tales of good fortune that couldn't be planned
> There's a chapter on God that I don't understand
> There's a promise of heaven and hell but I'm damned if I see

Overall, my influences have taught me less about form and content and much more about how my passion and the hopeful side of my cynicism are acceptable in the face of academic reticence, propriety, and postmodern depression. And where the limited list of names that appears above is concerned, I must say it pains me to think about the names not listed. Here are a few examples of great minds that should have been included: Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Billy Collins, Martín Espada, Ted Hughes, Robinson Jeffers, Antonio Machado, Demetria Martínez, William Matthews, Mary Oliver, Leroy Quintana, and Gary Soto—just to mention a few.

On Academia and Academic Language

> Have done with learning,
> And you will have no more vexation.
>
> —Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching* (#20 p 41)

Academic jargon has long been a source of anger and frustration for students, non-academics, and even many of the great authors and thinkers who are studied within the university's halls as well as many who are not. The problem of "insider speak," or what I will refer to as "academese" on occasion, looms just as much now, if not more than ever. There are a few worthy defenses of "difficult" and "obscure" academic language. Some of the more important ones will be covered here. Still, despite these defenses, serious questions and problems remain.

The argument could be made that it is pretentious for the inexperienced writer to critique the language used by his superiors in their writings and lectures, as though any challenge would be an exercise in sour grapes. One might say that the student is either unable or unwilling to do the work necessary to comprehend, and eventually command, the terminology required by the discipline. However, the frustrated graduate student does stand in some powerful company when it comes to the grievances over academic jargon. For centuries, great thinkers and authors have registered their complaints about this form of language, and many of them are the very ones taught in the university classroom. Though examples abound from all eras, I'll begin with something a little more recent than Lao Tzu.

Walter Benjamin was one of the early twentieth century's premier philosophers and cultural critics. His works, translated from German and recently published in a five-book series by Harvard University Press, offer thoughts on the subject of academia and its jargon

that are as plentiful as they are uncomplimentary. One of his humorous yet searing attacks on the subject, titled *Teaching Aid*, is recorded in his essay "One-Way-Street:"

> *Principles of the Weighty Tome, or How to Write Fat Books*
>
> I. The whole composition must be permeated with a protracted and wordy exposition of the initial plan.
> II. Terms are to be included for conceptions that, except in this definition, appear nowhere in the whole book.
> III. Conceptual distinctions laboriously arrived at in the text are to be obliterated again in the relevant notes.
> IV. For concepts treated only in their general significance, examples should be given; if, for example, machines are mentioned, all the different kinds of machines should be enumerated.
> V. Everything that is known a priori about an object is to be consolidated by an abundance of examples.
> VI. Relationships that could be represented graphically must be expounded in words. Instead of being represented in a genealogical tree, for example, all family relationships are to be enumerated and described.
> VII. Numerous opponents who all share the same argument should each be refuted individually. (*Selected Writings Vol. I* 457)

This excerpt clearly illustrates Benjamin's frequent exasperation with the institution of higher learning, and it so deeply resonates with common student frustrations that it comes close to being "enough said." And it was written almost a century ago. At the same time, as was previously hinted, it would be no difficult task to go back even further in time to Kafka and Proust, then to Flaubert and Goethe, and beyond, and find an abundance of the same.

When our language departs from the understandable, it not only frustrates students and non-academics but also creates the space for a sense of superiority—an almost gatekeeper mentality—among those who do know how to use it. This leads to problems among academic peers when it comes to the "Who decides who gets in" game. And what criteria do the higher up "who-s" use to make that decision. Consider these words from Charles Bukowski in his poem "after the sandstorm," in which he comments on reading a 1940 copy of the *Kenyon Review*:

> [to] marvel at the brilliant way those
> professors used the language to take one another
> to task for the way each interpreted literature.
> I almost appreciated their humor and sarcasm,
> but not quite: the professorial envy for one another
> was a bit too rancid and
> red-steel-hot. (*madness* 46)

In an interview with J. M. Spalding in *The Cortland Review*, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Charles Simic responded to previous comments about his work made by scholar and literary critic Paul Breslin, Professor of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry at Northwestern University:

> I would consider myself a total failure in life if Paul Breslin … admired my work. Everything I have ever done as a poet was done in contempt of what he regards as "good" poetry. A man without a trace of imagination or original ideas, Breslin is the incarnation of smug, academic mediocrity. He is as close to understanding poetry as Lawrence Welk is to playing jazz. (*Issue Four* August 1998)

Though Breslin may not represent all scholars in the realm of literary criticism, Simic does bring up what has been a consistent theme in my research: the artists and creators working within academia have very little patience for the academic literary theorists and critics who take them to pieces for not joining the system. The artists and creators see these jargon-laden critiques as little more than a thin veil covering a lack of original talent. As another Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Stephen Dunn, says in his book *Walking Light*:

> This may be why few poets are granted tenure. (143)

Early in my academic career I did little more than make fun of academese with friends in the hallways between classes. Occasionally, I would write scathing treatises on the subject in my journals. But over time, when I noticed how the problem persisted in hallway discussions from semester to semester, I began to believe something needed to be done. I can even cite the event that pushed me over the edge. A student of mine, along with his

girlfriend, tracked me down one day to ask me about a problem she was having in her freshman composition class. They had been given a handout and were supposed to write a response to it. The problem was: neither one of them had any idea what it was saying. He produced the text, and in the first paragraph I found this sentence:

> Increasingly, educational theorists working from bases in social linguistics and family resource theory are providing evidence of how the Discourses and associated language practices of particular social groups contribute to limiting educational access and achievement. (*Changing Literacies* 20)

It may not be, necessarily, incomprehensible to the disciplined graduate student, though, possibly to some—myself included. The more important question is: Why was it being used in a freshman composition class? At the very least, we should consider *when* to introduce academic language.

I realized a major overhaul of the longstanding institution, as a whole, would be problematic—okay: ridiculous. So this was the point at which I decided to survive the system and someday become a professor myself. It was not an all-encompassing answer to the problem, but, on a minute scale, it was a start.

On "Academese"

"Heterogeneity… interdiscursivity… extratextuality… polyvocality…" This is a list of words I found, all within a few pages of each other in José Arranda's book *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America*. Although this book supplied very helpful information in my graduate studies overall, the language was incredibly difficult to understand at times. There were many lengthy passages where, upon completion, I simply had no idea what had just been said.

To illustrate how this might be worthy of suspicion, I begin the discussion on academese with the example of Alan Sokal's article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" that he published in the Spring/Summer 1996 issue of the cultural studies journal *Social Text*. He is a professor of physics at New York University. As it turns out, the article is, he later stated in a follow up article in *Lingua Franca*, "liberally salted with nonsense." He went on to say that he wanted to see if an entire piece of nonsense, carefully couched in sophisticated academic jargon that "sounds good," could get published in a major journal. Sadly, the answer is yes. His intent and purpose might have been different from mine. But it's easy to see how the example works for me as well: specialized language in academia has climbed so high up into the ivory tower that not even the journal editors within the profession can recognize whether or not it is credible. This is, or at least should be, astounding.

In the realm of literary theory, it is not always necessary to use big words in order to say mostly nothing. Roy Harvey Pearce accomplishes it quite well in this passage from *The Continuity of American Poetry*:

> Thus: poetry, in being poetry, manifests the existence of a poetry beyond poetry. Such poetry, the poetry of the ultimate poem, is reached by decreation. Being reached, it gives us the knowledge which we must have if we are to postulate that rock beyond both imagination and reality, in which we have our ultimate being, even as it has its ultimate being in us. (413)

Granted, this is out of context, but the eye-jerking repetition alone is questionable enough where good writing is concerned. But what about the meaning? If poets ever decided that untangling the meaning or relevance of this statement, was important to the cause, I'm afraid poems would cease to be written, as we would be little more than deer frozen in the headlights of its mysterious "polyvocality."

Lytton Strachey, Cambridge man and turn-of-the-twentieth century eccentric prose master, had little patience for this type of writing. He offered this perspective on a compulsory reading assignment of Henry Sidgwick's essays:

> The whole thing seems to be extraordinarily weighty and interesting, but Lord! What a hopeless confused jumble of inarticulate matter. It is a vast vegetable mass of inert ponderosity, (Holroyd 99)

In *sifting through the madness*, Charles Bukowski comments on the possible overuse of the dictionary in the poem "regrets of a sort:"

> the users
> of exotic words
> have discouraged me
> from trying to use my
> vocabulary
> as if it was
> a shield
> for pretenders. (370)

I agree that the expansion and precision of vocabulary are important to academic endeavors. It is the only way we grow. Increasing vocabulary is both enriching and crucial to continuous improvement in writing. But there is a point at which language for show—in other words, for impressing someone at the next conference on "Biolinguistic Regionalisms in the Transgendered Literature of the Ultra-Marginalized" [a conference of my own invention to which any and all are invited]—becomes ridiculous, and I believe begins to border on being utterly meaningless.

Symptoms of my struggle with academese appeared early in my graduate career. Near the beginning of my Master's work, I wrote a poem titled "Rhetoric" for a creative writing workshop:

> after all of the words
> the nouns and the verbs
> I froze in a moment of dread

for what seemed to be something
turned out to be nothing
no thing had actually been said

so I hope in some way
somehow, someday
before the rolls are read

to think of a new thing
and *some*day say *some*thing
for nothing's already been said (*Hobson's Choice* 87)

Though a bit tongue in cheek, this was an honest response to the new language I was forced to deal with as a recent arrival in the English Department. Yet I was not only responding to the language itself but also to what some of its practitioners were telling me about the academic "rules" of poetry—not the least of which was: poetry should no longer rhyme. An elitist "We're past that now," I believe were the exact words.

A more direct response to the problem comes from poet Sydney Lea in a recent interview in *The Writer's Chronicle*. Lea has authored seven books of poetry. He was a finalist for the 2001 Pulitzer Prize and co-winner of the 1998 Poets' Prize. He had this to say about deconstructionist academese:

> My dissertation was my response to what were called "the Yale critics". And it really didn't work for me. I was trying to speak a language whose value I still don't quite understand, if value there be. It was literary theory at its most extreme at the time. I didn't understand what they were saying. I open up some of these postmodern screeds influenced by Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, and I just don't know what is being said. Insofar as I can understand it, it seems banal to me. (Giordano 39)

Garrison Keillor, a prolific author and radio personality, supplies an endless array of witticisms and humorous anecdotes on the subject of academia. His comments are almost strictly reserved for English majors. In the introduction to his anthology *Good Poems*, he quotes Charles Bukowski as having said:

> There is nothing wrong with poetry that is entertaining and easy to understand. Genius could be the ability to say a profound thing in a simple way. (xxii)

Afterwards, Keillor goes on to say:

> This is not what an English major like me cared to hear, back when I was busy writing poems that were lacerating, opaque, complexly layered, unreadable. (xxii)

Here he uses his keen sense of humor—and well-developed vocabulary, I might add—to drive home a serious message about how academese "infects" students. He admits the lingo was once important to him. But through making fun of himself, he lets us know that he, thank God, grew out of it. Keillor also illustrates why the problem must be solved from the top, down. If professors continue using the jargon, students will aspire to it in hopes of becoming professors themselves someday, and thus perpetuate the problem. Instead of asking the students to follow them into this foggy realm of "multisyllabic" words, maybe the professors should put the burden back on their own shoulders.

Jack Bickham, the late professor of professional writing in the Journalism Department at the University of Oklahoma, wrote in *Writing* and *Selling Your Novel*:

> Snobbery and phony intellectualism have no place in a professional's attitude. Oh, it's comforting, I suppose, to posture, boast and deceive yourself about your own attainments and the supposed inferiority of others, but it's self-defeating. (7)

Bickham taught professional writing in the Journalism Department after its split from creative writing in the English Department. Dr. Walter Campbell, so the story goes, led the split some time in the 50s. The English department had a tendency to live in the realm of theory, and Campbell wanted his students to have practical advice on writing *and* publishing. As a result, his students were selling their work quite successfully. This caused considerable

resentment in the English department, and Campbell decided to look for a new home for his students.

In their 2003 collection of essays, *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb mount a defense of academic language. They admit the controversy is not new. And they supply a sizeable list of some of the publications that have printed articles condemning, or making fun of, insider jargon: *New York Times*, *New Republic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *London Review of Books*, *Lingua Franca*, and *South Atlantic Quarterly*. They also point out the popularity of the annual bad writing award that is highlighted in the academic journal *Philosophy and Literature*. Yet, in the end, neither writer seems very impressed with the allegations in these articles. At best they appear to view most of the writings as quasi-literary expressions of pop culture.

One problem with their argument is that it seems as if they defend the usage of academic jargon by comparing it to that which is used in, say, medical school. In other words: *We go to school for a long time to learn this vocabulary. It's vital. It's necessary. And we want to use it*. My question to this would have to be: To what ends? What, exactly, does jargon accomplish that clearer language could not? And how can obscurity as a means possibly be useful? Moving on from these questions, we are then faced with others like: How does it encourage students to come in and be a part of the humanities? And, if we are going to make the comparison to medical school, we then need to ask why the general public's chief grievance with doctors is the sense of alienation and confusion they feel at the incomprehensible terminology used within that system. They don't understand what is wrong with them. They don't always understand what they need to do to fix it. They only know one absolute: It's going to be expensive.

Culler and Lamb also say that the problem does not appear to exist in the sciences and other academic disciplines. Only in the humanities are we raising a stink over the problem of academic jargon—as if to say: *They're not griping, why should we*? However, the Alan Sokal example from the physics world, discussed earlier, clearly illustrates that this is not true.

They do make a very important point in the introduction that needs to be seriously considered by those who officially rant against academic language in print:

> For the most striking feature of the accusation of bad [academic] writing is that it seems not to require explanation or demonstration, as if all one has to do is quote a sentence and people will instantly recognize how awful it is. (1 – 2)

I agree. It is not logical, or useful for that matter, to simply say, "I don't understand this. Therefore, it must be overdone nonsense."

Yet for all these defenses, do we just dismiss the accusation leveled by Denis Dutton, editor of *Philosophy and Literature*? Commenting in the *Wall Street Journal* on the bad writing award, he says:

> Kitsch theorists mimic the effects of rigor and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work. Their jargon-laden prose always suggests but never delivers genuine insight. ("Language Crimes" 11)

D. G. Myers, in *The Elephants Teach*, puts an exclamation mark on this point in his summary of Walter Hines Page's thoughts on the scholarly writing of his time. Page was a nationally popular journalist at the turn of the twentieth century, and as much as anyone, he supplies a solid glimpse of what the consequences might be. Myers says:

> The result is learning written up in a ponderous and impenetrable style, which cuts scholars off from the rest of the community and separates universities "from the life of the people," leading to "their loss of control and even of authority over the intellectual life of the nation." (74)

Even in the Robert Kaufman essay, "Difficulty in Modern Poetry and Aesthetics," towards the end of the book—the one I came to with the most openness and hope, because of its subject matter—I felt a little abused, to be honest. And on occasion, I actually felt like he was thumbing his nose at me with word pairings like "able reconjurations," "bardic oracularism," and "lyric mellifluousness." Sure, I can look up "mellifluousness" again. But the other two?

I will say that overall this book played a larger role than any other in affecting and reshaping my views on this problem. We should not automatically assume difficulty and obscurity in writing to be bad. And I agree with Culler in his essay, "Bad Writing and Good Philosophy," that ripping one or two sentences out of context is *not* good grounds for the bad writing contest. [By the way, I am also holding up Culler's essay, along with Walter Benjamin, as examples that it is acceptable for essays to be highly quotational.] The greatest things are not easily attained—nowhere more than in poetry. And I may actually agree with Hegel, one of the more difficult writers academia has ever seen, that initial difficulty and obscurity are necessary to an eventual, greater clarity. The problem with much of our academic writing is: *that eventual, greater clarity needs to be there… eventually*.

On Political Correctness

Another aspect of the problem of academic jargon lies in the extent to which we have cornered ourselves with the fear of falling short where the rules of political correctness are concerned. I take an example from the José Arranda book. The term Chicano appeared with an "/a" attached to it *every* time it landed on the page, thus: Chicano/a. Considering the subject matter of the book, it appeared quite frequently. By the time I reached the closing pages, the slashed term "Chicano/a" was driving me to distraction.

Academia needs to find an option, some solution, to "he/she" and "his/her" and all words that are slashed, so we can all get back to reading again. I, for one, would be fine with going to strictly feminine pronouns.

Robert McKee included this interesting paragraph on the "Notes on the Text" page at the front of his book, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*:

> To deal with the pronoun problem I have avoided constructions that distract the reader's eye, such as the annoying alternation of "she" and "her" with "he" and "him," the repetitious "he and she" and "him and her," the awkward "s/he" and "her/im," and the ungrammatical "they" and "them" as neuter singulars. Rather, I use the nonexclusive "he" and "him" to mean "writer." (before title page)

Albeit a controversial character in the world of screenwriting and workshopping, McKee, in this award-winning book, earned a considerable amount of praise—even among some of his former critics.

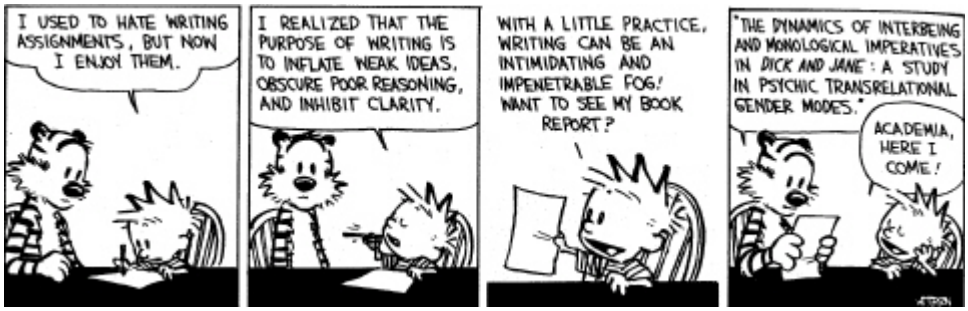
The real question at the bottom of all this is: Does the highly specialized and politically correct language we use become counterproductive in teaching? Is the neglect of good teaching worth the cause of good scholarship? At the least, the densely packed jargon intimidates and alienates students. At most, it may very well drive them into other disciplines, away from college altogether, or keep those on the outside from ever stepping in, or coming back, to school. Like Sydney Lea said in the same interview mentioned above: If he, who has been reading and teaching his entire adult life, doesn't understand it, how can they?

I have been a university student for over twenty years. During that time, I have spent many hours pouring over reference books like *Critical Terms for Literary Study* and *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Many of the seventeen-letter terms, no matter how many times I look them

up, continue not to make any sense. This repetitive exercise is tiresome and has not been educational. Where some sophisticated words and instances of specialized language may have validity, and can be useful in certain situations, words like “interdiscursivity” and “polyvocality”—neither of which appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for heaven’s sake—are simply ridiculous, and we need to find out how to “say a profound thing” in a simpler way.

I will close with two quick illustrations. The first is from a close friend who was finishing her master’s work in Perkins Seminary at Southern Methodist University. While wrestling with a particularly difficult text for a paper she was writing, she came across the term “monological intersubjectivity.” As if the term by itself was not enough to make the point, this parenthetical statement *actually* followed it: (experiencing another person).

The second? Well…



(Waterson 184)

On Creative versus Professional Writing

The English Department at OU prepared me very well for teaching freshman composition. My literature courses in Chicano Studies and early twentieth century Europe were excellent. And though my master's and PhD were in creative writing, I consider these literature courses to have been the most important part of my education.

Why is this? For one, my literature professors were exceptional. The other reason has to do with the creative writing classes and workshops I took. The central question is: Where were all the books? These classes only offered a few "suggested" or "recommended" readings. Otherwise, *all* we did was critique each other's work.

There might have been some "discussion" on craft, but I can recall no assigned texts on the subject. Some suggested readings touched on it, for instance Ezra Pound's *ABCs of Reading*. The others, though, were mainly references, like Lewis Turco's *The Book of Forms.* Where was Mary Oliver's wonderful little *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*? And why did I have to find out about it from my cultural studies professor. Where were Stephen Dunn's books of poetry and his incredible essays on poetry and the art of writing in *Walking Light*? And why did I have to find about them from a magazine columnist from Texas. Where were Bukowski and Baca, and William Matthews, and why did I have to find them on my own? Where was David Mamet, and why did I have to find out about him from a fellow musician while on the road touring? These books have helped me more than all my creative writing workshops combined in understanding the nature and art of poetry. Though I will explore these questions in more detail later in the introduction, I needed to register them here for the sake of this discussion as well.

Over an eight-year period, I had one professor, in one workshop, who tried to bring reading into the equation by requiring brief monthly book reviews. Outside of this class, all my reading occurred in literature courses only.

My stint with Professional Writing in the Journalism Department was much shorter. But there are still a few comparisons I would like to make. Let me begin with a word of praise on clarity. The assigned texts in my professional writing classes had a clear sense of purpose and clean structure that was an initial shock to my system. I was surprised by bolded subheadings, white space, and short, clear sentences. This was a far cry from the "weighty tome" aspect of English texts. But what I appreciated most was the good, constructive guidance on the mysteries of getting work published—cover sheets, cover letters, submission format, suggestions as to who and where to send material, et al.

I waited years for help in this area from my creative writing classes. At most, there was the occasional remark in passing: *Why don't you come in and we'll talk about it sometime*. And even then it was like pulling teeth. Yet in my professional writing coursework, I had an entire class devoted to creating and designing book proposals. The professors offered lists of books and websites for further sources. The textbooks had lists as well. It took one to two semesters to unlock a mystery I'd been groping my way through for years in creative writing.

The English Department may have forgotten how helpful even the slightest bit of information on these skills can be to the student. Whatever the reason for the failure, quite possibly the split that happened fifty years ago, this is a subject I intend to cover better in my future creative writing classes.

On the issue of learning the craft, which I will discuss at length in the section on teaching, I had the privilege of surviving a near-death experience in my Writing the Novel

class. It was both terrifying and enlightening for a poet, I must say. And I do believe, brace yourselves creative writing people, I learned more from this class about what is necessary to the writing of poetry, and what is often missing from it, than I did in the critique-oriented creative-writing workshops. The benefit had to do with intense discussion of "craft" and the critical elements of effective storytelling:

- Story arc
- Character development
- Tension and resolve
- Scene and sequel
- Structure
- Plot

Stephen Dunn tried to tell me this in his book *Walking Light*, but I missed it the first time I read it. Upon a recent rereading, I caught the advice this time:

> Too many poets are insufficiently interested in story. Their poems could be improved if they gave in more to the strictures of fiction: the establishment of a clear dramatic situation, and a greater awareness that first-person narrators are also characters and must be treated as such by their authors. (147)

This reminded me of Raymond Carver's comment that whether writing poetry or prose, he was still trying to "tell a story." Dana Gioia, in his 1991 essay "Can Poetry Matter?" argued that it was poetry's loss of storytelling that brought about the loss of its audience.

Discussion and instruction on craft were new to me, and the assigned books were just as helpful:

- *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, by Robert McKee
- *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, by Christopher Vogler
- *Writing and Selling Your Novel*, by Jack Bickham

These books pounded on the elements of good writing and offered insight on the nature of audience and why it is a critical consideration—audience being one thin line that so much contemporary poetry is not walking very well at the moment.

Robert McKee, the first author mentioned in my list, speaks directly to this issue in his book *Story*:

> Over the last twenty-five years, however, the method of teaching creative writing in American universities has shifted from the intrinsic to the extrinsic. Trends in literary theory have drawn professors away from the deep sources of story toward language, codes, text—*story seen from the outside*. As a result, with some notable exceptions, the current generation of writers has been undereducated in the prime principles of story. (16)

Now, on the other hand, the professional writers can relax their guard when it comes to students who want to be more literary as opposed to strictly commercial. And they could lower the volume on the criticisms of English students and professors.

Here is an example from Jack Bickham's book *Writing* and *Selling Your Novel*:

> Writing is a craft with learned skills. There is nothing very mysterious about a lot of it. You must, to be professional, respect craftsmanship and give up *mystical baloney* about "inspiration" and other stuff that doesn't exist except in *the fevered imagination of a few deluded English teachers*. (5, my italics)

I found this book to be very helpful on many levels. It was a tool critical to my survival in the novel class. But the italicized phrases in the above quotation go beyond irony.

Though the division between creative and professional writing is unique at the University of Oklahoma, the conflict is indicative of certain needs in the teaching of writing that I will further illustrate in the next two sections.

On Poetry

> Poetry, as we know, is not very important to people in the United States.
>
> —Stephen Dunn, *Walking Light*

Whether one agrees with this statement from Stephen Dunn or not, there is some credibility in the source. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001 with his book *Different Hours*, has published thirteen collections of poetry, and is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey. Though poetry's lack of popularity in America exists in a matter of degrees, depending on the part of the country, it is worthwhile to consider why this might be so. For it is beyond cliché in the American publishing industry to say: *poetry doesn't sell*.

The contemporary poet's dilemma is—and seems to have been for some time—quite uncomplicated: whether to worry about the judgments of academia and the literati; whether to bend to the will and whims of commercial publishers; whether to care about the language poets; whether to attend the annual AWP conference; whether to decipher what some text or scholar says a poem must be and conform to it, or to write the poem as it comes—as it feels it should be.

Evidence shows that when trends in poetry lean toward the academic and/or difficult to understand, the general audience wanes. Conversely, when poets lean away from the scholarly and look more, in Charles Bukowski's words, to "say[ing] a profound thing in a simple way," popularity grows.

Of course, this is an oversimplification that needs discussion. But it does serve as a foundation on which to build a larger argument. In support of his earlier statement, and of the claim I just made, Stephen Dunn goes on to say in *Walking Light*:

> … the reasons for this are complex and reside deeply in the culture; among them are the capitalist privileging of acquisition over contemplation, the celebration of things more than matters of the soul, a general awkwardness that culminates in value being defined in monetary terms. And, to be fair, the amount of poetry that *doesn't* have much to do with our lives. (*Walking Light* 18)

In response to Dunn's claim, when the general populace finds the Maya Angelous and the Billy Collinses, they tend to read more. But when we offer up Ezra Pound, John Ashbery, or, more notably, any of the language poets, they turn away. My father, a PhD in theology, comments: *If I sense that an author is being deliberately obscure, I put it down*. Poets can lament this fact if they want, but there's not much they can do about it.

In her recent article "Who Are We to Judge: The Politics of Literary Evaluation," published in *The Writer's Chronicle*, Natasha Sajé said:

> The fact that [Billy] Collins' work is read and loved by many readers immediately makes it suspect. An additional irony in the debate over Collins's accessibility is the fact that he holds a PhD in Romantic literature. He has *chosen* to be accessible and accordingly is criticized for it by fellow academics. (31)

Herself an academic who teaches at Westminster College in Salt Lake City and in the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program, Sajé said right before that:

> The "difficult" poet's work is taught in universities and studied by scholars, something that poets in academia can't help but notice. Do we want to be popular or critically acclaimed? (31)

This raises the problem that, even within the halls of academia, there appears to be a deep division between students and professors where interests in poetry are concerned. If students are put in the position of having value dictated to them—not only where the poetry of others is concerned, but also in their own—there *will* be a battle of wills. Sajé took this head on in the same article:

> Critic Helen Vendler blames a waning student interest in poetry on the shift back toward the pragmatic theory of art and away from objective "perfection," but I would argue that it is New Critical readings of difficult poems practiced by experts like Vendler … that is responsible for any decline in student interest in poetry. As a Poet in the Schools, I found that students like art until that liking is regimented, restricted, and *judged*; in other words, until they are expected to evaluate the products they are being taught to produce. (31)

As we take on these problems and look for answers, I believe there are a few different issues that must be considered: the impact of modern technology and mass production; the question of the "Acceptables" versus the "Unacceptables" in the contemporary poetry scene; and finally, the small group of the "Exceptables" that bridge the gap between those two.

The Impact, or Problem, of Technology and Mass Production

In the age of ink-jet and laser printers—what many of the authors I will quote below refer to as the age of mass production—anyone who receives the blind encouragement of a mother can be a writer. As a result, there is a vast sea of highly questionable, if not very bad, poems and novels to wade through in order to get to something that actually warranted the loss of a tree.

One of the most love-worn books on the shelves in my house is *Very Bad Poetry*, edited by Kathryn Petras and Ross Petras. I happened on to it at the Grolier Poetry Book Store near Harvard Square one chilly afternoon. They warn in the introduction:

> A compulsion to write verse, and a happy delusion regarding talent—that is the beginning of a very bad poet … a wooden ear for words, a penchant for sinking into the mire of sentimentality, a bullheaded inclination to stuff too many syllables or words into a line or phrase, and an enviable confidence that allows one to write despite absolutely appalling incompetence.

> Some poets are granted these qualities by the Muse only temporarily—and then they go on to write good poems. Others are blessed, if that is the word, for their entire career. (xv-xvi)

You'll find no sympathy here. Yet there are certain degrees of honesty that are required from time to time. And it becomes obvious how huge increases in the quality and availability of tools for self-publishing could begin to create problems.

To emphasize the point, consider the following stream of thoughts from important writers that echoes this sentiment. I'll begin with Walter Benjamin who described early in the twentieth century certain side effects of mass-production in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

> For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press … an increasing number of readers became writers. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. (*Illuminations* 231-232)

Aldous Huxley takes it a step further and is not as diplomatic in his piece "Beyond the Mexique Bay," published in *A Traveler's Journal* in 1949:

> Advances in technology have led … to vulgarity. Process reproduction and the rotary press have made possible the indefinite multiplication of writing and pictures. A great industry has been called into existence in order to supply these commodities. Now, artistic talent is a very rare phenomenon. It follows from all this that in all the arts the output of trash is both absolutely and relatively greater than it was in the past. (274 ff)

Robert McKee, in speaking about movies and screenplays, says something similar in his recent book *Story*:

> Yet, while the ever-expanding reach of the media now gives us the opportunity to send stories beyond borders and languages to hundreds of millions, the overall quality of storytelling is eroding. On occasion we read or see works of excellence, but for the most part we weary of searching

> newspaper ads, video shops, and TV listings for something of quality. The art of story is in decay, and as Aristotle observed twenty-three hundred years ago, when storytelling goes bad, the result is decadence. (12-13)

Roy Harvey Pearce dropped the gavel on this issue in *The Continuity of American Poetry*, published in 1961. The clarity is wonderful:

> Technology, making for leisure to read and for inexpensive widely available reading matter, had created the great reading public; and technology increasingly dominated the creation, or at worst, the manufacture, of that which it was to read. To reach his new readers a poet had to work through publishers; publishers, in turn, in order to make their ventures pay off … had to make sure that what they published was saleable. The publisher, then, became the judge of what his writers might best produce. However much the publisher may have wanted to raise tastes and standards, always he had to be mindful of getting enough return on his investment to stay in business. The poet might even become a lecturer, traveling the lyceum circuit; but then he became more a personality than a poet. (204-205)

These words, though written over forty years ago about an era almost a hundred years prior, still ring quite—if not precisely—true for today. We appear to be living in the fallout of what he portrayed here. And in what he described as the inevitable outcome of it all: "he became more of a personality than a poet," we can hear echoed many years later in Charles Bukowski's poem "Captain Goodwine:"

> one goes from being a poet
> to being an entertainer. (*Fire* 177)

Bukowski would also be the first to admit that to an extent he did this himself. But he saw the tendency for what it was, looked at it honestly, and, I believe, maintained a degree of integrity.

Decades later, Jimmy Santiago Baca, who once toasted cheap wine with his sons over Bukowski's gravestone, focused on the same issue:

> You should know

> that poetry deserves more than a hee-hawing mule
> bowing its head onstage to the roaring applause
> of an audience mad about appearance
> and ignoring the substance. (*Thirteen Mexicans* 87)

Jimmy, by the way, quite frequently makes this point.

There is, at least, one true benefit that the new technology offers the poet that should be mentioned. And it lies hidden within the very mechanisms that made possible the glut of bad writing: the word processor and printer. With these tools the writer—and particularly the poet—has the ability to foresee the shape, texture, and especially the feel of the white spaces on the page. Stephen Dunn writes:

> …to let the white space around our words do some invisible
> work for us. (*Walking Light* 162)

The screen, combined with the occasional quick printout, gives the creator the power to rework, reinvent, and fine tune the final "vision" of the poem before committing to the bound book. Dana Gioia, in his controversial article, "Can Poetry Matter?" describes the shift-key typewriter as being the first iteration, invented circa 1867, of this powerful set of tools. This capability harkens back to the ancient Greek notion of the hands-on, totally immersed, and consummately "involved" artisan or craftsman. So, outside of the occasional tendency to overwork things, it is hard to see anything but positive value in this advance.

The "Acceptables" vs. the "Unacceptables"

With this technology-based logjam of would-be poets, it seems inevitable that groups, or warring factions, would split off from each other and try to seek out positions of power and influence. Even though there is no way the division could be as simple as only "two" groups, when it comes to finding a way into anthologies and university classrooms,

there does appear to be a line drawn between what I call the “acceptables” and the “unacceptables” who are writing today—or wrote in recent decades. One key difference between them is that the “acceptables” seem to be much more concerned about power of academic position and the reactions to their work at AWP conferences than the “unacceptables,” and they’re not above the use of pretentiousness in maintaining their status. At the other end of the spectrum, the “unacceptables” are often too honest, and occasionally ruthless, in their assessments of literary critics and the poetry “scene” that inevitably builds up around the “acceptables,” and so the academic critics writing in literary journals marginalize them into relative anonymity.

As oversimplified as this may seem, it does at least begin to define the line between the “acceptables” and the “unacceptables”—the poets we do, and do not, tend to read in university poetry classes. Of course, varying degrees between the poles will always exist. At the same time, it couldn’t hurt to take a look into the differing sets of cares and concerns between the two groups and try to determine which set tends to lead to meaningful work and what will be thought of as art in the future.

I am beginning to believe that the “unacceptables,” almost invariably, seem to have their fingers on the pulse of something deep and intense—filled with blood and hope and all the things that throb in the heart of human existence—that the “acceptables” are only wishing they could find. The “unacceptables” tend to have little time for the hassles of business and publishing—sometimes even for bothering to pay their bills. They are busy writing poetry. It is what they do—how they breathe. The “acceptables,” on the other hand, while waiting for inspiration to strike, are busy marketing, selling, pushing, reading, and adoring or despising each other. Many even openly and shamelessly *pursue* the prizes offered

by the literary world. It's as if the Nobel is the necessary criterion by which a poet receives confirmation of worth.

Donald Hall criticizes this phenomenon in his poem "Brief Lives:"

> *On an Ambitious Poet*
> He sought in his late work, which no one reads,
> The unavailing laurel of the Swedes. (*Old and New* 208)

Charles Bukowski, in his poem "how to get rid of the purists," admits it was a personal mission for him to:

> deplete, expose and shame
> the thousands of practitioners of
> the arts in all of their forms
> who have been subsidized by
> snobbery, dullness, and the willful
> push toward fame. (*Bone Palace Ballet* 196)

As a matter of personal observation, during my work with the Neustadt Prize, it has been the humble, hesitant, unassuming, and, therefore, somewhat uncertain laureates who have been the most interesting, and whose work I value most.

Of course, one must credit the possibility that the poetry of any given "unacceptable" might be just that: unacceptable. The converse is true as well. An "acceptable's" poetry may on occasion be quite acceptable. The main problem here becomes the element of subjectivity in art—a conundrum that could not possibly be covered in a short essay. But I believe that history bears out, at least in general, the patterns in the duality outlined above.

Charles Bukowski illustrates the overarching issue in the opening poem of *sifting through the madness for the Word, the line, the way*, titled "so you want to be a writer?" Though his thoughts are subjective as well, many American heads are nodding when he pleads with would-be poets:

> don't be like so many thousands of

people who call themselves writers,
don't be dull and boring and
pretentious, don't be consumed with self-
love.
the libraries of the world have
yawned themselves to
sleep
over your kind. (4)

But in his book *Bone Palace Ballet*, he takes aim at academic poetry journals:

tiny dribblings of
unreality,
boring probes
into the
nonsensical. (118)

No wonder Bukowski is excluded from the discussion, as well as the anthologies, in academic circles.

The "Exceptables"

Conversely, I would not want to be accused of playing down, or ignoring altogether, the importance of authors who either live on the "acceptable" side of the fence, or have somehow transcended the barrier between the two poles. I have read, and received much from, the masters and the anthologized as well. Where this subject is concerned, I am in agreement with Charles Bukowski in the poem "they arrived in time" from his book *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk through the Fire.* After listing names like Robinson Jeffers, D. H. Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Eliot, Auden, and William Carlos Williams, to name a few, he says:

those friends
deep in my blood
who
when there was no chance
gave me one. (325)

The only difference for me is that I feel the same way about both them… and him. Likewise, Stephen Dunn in *Walking Light* says that the history of poetry:

> needs always to be behind us, like a parent who
> simultaneously shows the way and, for our own good,
> cautions against divergences, whose house we must honor
> and finally leave. (4-5)

There are also times when I must pause at the edge of romanticizing the "unacceptables." In this passage from Roy Harvey Pearce, he posits the dangers of writing too close to home; too much within the specific details of one's time period; and too much in the current language of the popular culture:

> The popular culture of one age shapes and directs the
> nostalgia of the next. For ages which follow, it becomes first
> a curiosity and then a matter of puzzlement. (*Continuity* 252)

The "unacceptables" do tend toward this type of writing at times.

In this light, some authors/artists have conquered the mysterious space that exists between the opposing sides. Toni Morrison writes well and has critical acclaim. Sting is another example. He receives popular radio airtime, yet he also is revered among some of the world's foremost jazz and classical musicians as being an incredible talent.

The "Inaccessibles"

Within all this tumult, and forgetting about poetry's relative popularity at a given time, something remains crucial about this second oldest profession. I believe William Carlos Williams is correct when he tells us that people "die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." But let me emphasize the words: what is *found* there. I agree with Natasha Sajé, along with many others, that if anything is killing poetry in our time, it might be the number of poems in which there is precisely nothing to be found. So I would like to take

this opportunity to speak my conviction to one last group I purposefully did not mention in the introduction—the "language poets:" *We're glad you're having a good time. But, alas, we are not. And there's only so many times someone like me can stand never being picked to be on the team merely because he lacks the ability to live inside your mind*.

Garrison Keillor writes:

> There are the brave blurbs on the back cover ("writes with a lyrical luminosity that reconceptualizes experience with cognitive beauty") but you open up the goods and they're like condoms on the beach, evidence that somebody was here once and had an experience but not of great interest to the passerby. (*Good Poems* xxii)

Towards the end of her article, Natasha Sajé supports this conclusion in saying about the language poets:

> …while "difficulty" and "obscurity" are relative terms, another irony of "difficult" poetry is that the political aims of the l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poets—to reveal the constructedness of language and identity—are heard only by their peers. (31)

Stephen Dunn agrees:

> … those poems too often smack of tortuous lessons in school, and the breaking of some secret code. The important thing is to find poems that truly matter to us … Even those of us who pay close attention to poetry are regularly confronted with poems we can't understand, poems with unlocatable voices, unlocatable concerns. (*Walking Light* 18)

Robert McKee, in the introduction to *Story*, writes:

> Never, however, mistake eccentricity for originality. (8)

We see the consensus forming. If poetry marches over the horizon, leaving any and all audiences behind, what then *is* the point? Does poetry become nothing more than a personal therapy session discussing a past no one else knows anything about? Stephen Dunn, again, speaks to this issue:

> But poets *can* say what they mean, if they are wise and skillful enough … That [their poems] might be more difficult, demand more of us, is of course understandable and fine. But the poet must not love difficulty. That's the solipsism of the prig, the person who believes he/she has something so precious it's worth concealing. (*Walking Light* 33)

Even when Dunn comes to the aid of some of the poets who are being deliberately vague, he can't do it without a considerable amount of qualification:

> Poets who defy making sense and do it deliberately and often brilliantly (as Ashbery can) *are* making a kind of sense, and may be extending the range of what poetry can do, though they ensure that poetry's audience will be small and chiefly academic: i.e., composed of people inclined to equate a puzzle with that which is meaningful. (145)

I have spent time with the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, who holds, somewhat equivocally, as far as he is concerned, the Wallace Stevens Chair at Yale. He leaves no room for second-guessing when it comes to his thoughts on the language poets. In "Chapter Three" of his collection titled *Thirteen Mexicans*, he writes:

> Driving home last night, I thought about
> the lecture from a famous poet in Utah—writing poems for
> language only,
> splicing the hot wires of language, to reconnect them
> for more wattage to run the poem. The booklet I picked up at
> the desk,
> written by an esteemed academic, gave praise to these poets,
> set on stripping the word like a broken-down computer,
> programming the poem until it was pale, bland erudite
> language
> used only by a chosen few.
> I don't understand this type of poem,
> ticker-tape verbiage celebrating one poet's achievement
> in rounding the cape of verb, claiming a new discovered land,
> pillaging and ransacking the meanings,
> until the victor poet rides through the university hallways.
> (65-66)

Among Baca's awards are the American Book Award and the International Prize. And yet, mysteriously, I have never heard his name uttered at any convention, in any class or

workshop, nor have I seen it in any anthologies, except Bill Moyers' *The Language of Life*, which was, though excellent, not an academic enterprise.

I believe that Roy Harvey Pearce is correct when he reiterates the principle that something in us craves a beginning, middle, and an end. Robert McKee would agree. We want some sense of clarity, of knowing where we are within this story. It has nothing to do with length. Even the shortest of poems can still adhere to these three signposts of good storytelling. For example, the shortest poem in my book *Hobson's Choice*, generated some discussion among my professors in my master's thesis defense:

Las Vegas

Pair o' dice

Lost (34)

After some laughter and a few questions, there was the general agreement that they liked the poem. One of them went as far as to quip: "Now, I don't want to commit to this, but that very well may be the perfect poem." This poem has also been one of the most popular at public readings. What would be the reason it "works?" I can't say with certainty, but I think it follows in a strange and unusually brief sort of way the three principles of storytelling. The Beginning, which is the title, tells the reader where I've arrived: Las Vegas. The Middle, the first line, tells what I did while I was there: Pair o' dice. The End, the last line/word, delivers the punch of the ultimate outcome of the experience: Lost. Even the three-line structure bears out the example.

At the core of this argument lies the very pattern of our lives. We are born; we live out these crazy, plain, or horrible days; then we die. I believe that "language-play" for language-play's sake, and being vague and cryptic for their own sake is never going to be meaningful in poetry—or any other type of writing for that matter.

Of all the forms man has used to record his struggle with the meaning of existence, whether with pictographs or words, none have been around as long as poetry. There is something necessary about it. It is one of the first warning flags we wave in the face of government, religion, or culture spinning out of control. It has always been a primary means of expressing faith, hope, and love. It can even be dangerous, as Bukowski explains at the end of his poem "evidence:"

> from the Roman Empire to our
> Atomic Age
> there have been about an equal
> number of whores and
> poets
> with the authorities continually
> trying to outlaw
> the former
> and ignore the latter
> —which tells you
> how dangerous
> poetry
> really
> is. (*sifting through the madness* 228)

A more serious example of this same sentiment comes from Plato—who did not share my feelings of "absolute necessity"—in his ban of poets from his model state.

Needless to say, these arguments over "acceptability" versus "unacceptability," and the other groups mentioned, have had a profound effect on my own work. This is where I am glad I come to the table as an older student. I worked in the "music business" for almost fifteen years. I lived in Nashville, published songs, and toured with bands. I learned much from those years. I learned what I would put up with, and what I would not. I learned which artists were worth my time, and which businessmen and "think-they-are-artists" were not. Most importantly I learned what mattered to me about my own art, and what did not. So my study of the questions and problems presented in this essay, in essence, bypassed much of

that learning process for me in the "poetry business." I know where I stand, which is—in a word—with the "unacceptables." I will pay certain prices, and I have no problem with that.

Whatever anyone believes poetry's power and potential to be, I know that I will be tireless in my efforts to spread the word about its absolute essentialness to human existence. I'll close this section with the full quotation from William Carlos Williams' "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower:"

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there. (*Collected Poems Vol. II* 318)

On Teaching

To all the English teachers,
especially the great ones

—Garrison Keillor [dedication page of *Good Poems*]

I believe the future of the world rises or falls on education, and the future of education rises or falls on good teachers.

Charles Bukowski writes in his poem "the crunch (2):"

> what we need is less false education
> what we need are fewer rules
> fewer police
> and more good teachers. (*Fire* 313)

So what makes a "good" teacher? I see one aspect at least that would be difficult to "teach" to up-and-coming teachers. That would be: to have "lived" a little outside the context of the academic institution, and to be, basically, an interesting human being. I'm sure some "interesting human beings" do not necessarily made good teachers. But at the same time, the credibility game with students is tricky. And I have found that my background as a professional musician, minister, and Frisbee player, combined with as much world travel as I have done, makes a *huge* difference when communicating with students. The art is learning how to dish it out in small, reasonable amounts. And that is no simple art.

Robert Frost believed this approach was important, too. Though the "experience" he referred to was specifically that of being a working poet, his words still illustrate the same point:

> Students get most from professors who have marked wide horizons. If a teacher is a power outside as well as inside the college, one of whom you can hear along other highways, then that teacher is of deep potential value to the students. (Newdick 241)

Unfortunately, the current system isn't always looking for these people. There's no way to teach this aspect. The twenty-three-year-old who has spent the last five years on a crash course through college and grad work, with his face buried in jargon-filled texts does not make, I believe, the best teacher. As I said: It's subjective.

Of course, there is always the possibility that a worldly teacher could be a little too interesting. When asked what he would say if he were teaching a creative writing class, Charles Bukowski replied:

> I'd tell them to have an unhappy love
> affair, hemorrhoids, bad teeth
> and to drink cheap wine,
> avoid opera and golf and chess,
> to keep switching the head of their
> bed from wall to wall. (*Love Is a Dog from Hell* 233)

But I still believe his heart was in the right place.

Upon telling OU's President Boren at a recent function in Santa Fe that I'd been a student at OU since 1983, he choked on his coffee and said: *Well! We thank you for your support.* During this time, I've had a considerable number of opportunities to overhear and participate in conversations about George Hillocks. Fellow students who read him either love him or hate him. As for me, whenever my ideas for the classroom run dry, I often turn to his books for inspiration, activities, and the boost he gives in offering the courage not to give up.

At the most basic level, he tries to explain the differences between "objective" or "presentational" teaching and what he considers the opposite—"constructive" or "procedural" teaching. If I understand him correctly, a difference exists between: 1) standing in front of a room full of students and "telling" them what you think they need to know, then expecting them to turn that knowledge into successful writing on their own; and 2)

drawing students into dialogue about issues, allowing a forum for their interpretations, and then supplying opportunities to respond in writing to those class discussions.

Here is what "Professor Green" claims in Hillocks's book *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*:

> …[good] teaching can help students see they have "something going" for themselves, that they have a voice that people find worth listening to, then they will have some reason to begin to clean up the little [grammatical and structural] errors, and he contends that "repeatedly, they clean it up." (111)

Hillocks writes:

> Professor Green sees his job as more than coaching students to move from the implicit to the expressed. … [it is] to help his students achieve a certain kind of experience … to "coach seeing and coach voice" in the teller, so that "when it comes to the writing, it's already there." (90)

Not having been involved in any research like this myself, I can only say that these thoughts ring true for me in what I have experienced in the faces and actions of my students.

Whether the fault of society, the media, parents, or teachers, today's undergraduate student becomes easily bored. *So why teach creative writing?* This was the question someone put to me after reading my findings in the research for general exams and this introduction. And I must say the evidence suggests a rather tumultuous past and present to the field of creative writing. D. G. Myers records this history in the final chapter, "The Elephant Machine," in his book *The Elephants Teach*, that a century's worth of creative writing programs had brought us, as he quotes the poet Allen Tate:

> the academically certified Creative Writer [who] goes out to teach Creative Writing, and produces other Creative Writers who are not writers, but who produce still other Creative Writers who are not writers. (146 – 147)

Add to this the evidence the book offers to my concerns over the decline of reading in creative writing classes. Here Myers quotes the poet Mark Jarman, who detailed his two-year education at the best known program, The Iowa Writer's Workshop, in a letter:

> We were required to take 48 hours. Each semester, then, we took 12 hours—or at least I did. They did not all have to be in the writer's workshop, but I took all mine there… I really only wanted to write poems and was willing to slight my academic endeavors in order to do so… You could earn six hours for a workshop, three hours for a seminar or independent study. In your final semester, you could earn six hours for working on your thesis… *There were no texts in the workshops* except the poems written by the students; these were discussed weekly, and we met only once a week… (my italics 162 – 163)

This lack of reading texts is one aspect I want to work on in my teaching. Though I'm sure I will be challenged on it. I will discuss this problem more in the next subsection.

Back to the question: Why *would* I want to teach creative writing under these circumstances? Stephen Dunn asks an important parallel question in *Walking Light*:

> Over the years it's been important for me to think about why I'm in this profession at all. After all, so few of my students have turned out to be poets. If I'm not making writers, what am I doing? (138)

He goes on to speak eloquently of why. One of many reasons he gives is the opportunity to teach respect for language and principles for life:

> We constantly are confronted with versions of the world that don't correspond to our sense of it. On one of its levels, a poetry workshop infuses and restores a respect for precision, for finding the right words, therefore moving the writer closer to what can credibly be said about something. This is one reason why teaching still pleases me; over, say, a semester, to witness a student move in the direction of the true(r)… It's moral instruction in the guise of crafting and editing. (138 – 139)

For me, first and foremost, I have a passion to introduce people to *reading* and writing poetry, whether they become "poets" or not. Another reason Dunn lists for why he

teaches is that he believes the process also makes the students better readers. Apparently, he takes a different tack from the Iowa workshop. Secondly, I love to teach and want to be for students what my professors were, and still are, for me. And thirdly, in all honesty, teaching is one of the few professions that is somewhat conducive to the poet who desires time to write. Stephen Dunn says:

> The clearest thing it's done is give me more time than if I'd had another job. (*Walking Light* 142)

D. G. Myers quotes the poet Theodore Weiss on how teaching went beyond this for him:

> The workshop … has obliged me to sharpen and to justify my own attitudes toward writing, to rationalize and articulate them. Thus it has ripened my awareness of what I am—or ought to be attempting to do. (*Elephants Teach* 148)

I also realize, as a poet, there are dangers in teaching your subject. Many poet/teachers express concerns over this. Stephen Dunn summarizes this concern as follows:

> When you teach well you start to say things you didn't know you were going to say, perhaps things you had forgotten you knew. That kind of discovery is exactly what happens in a good poem or story. After teaching well, the poet feels less urgency to go home and write. We need enormous energy both to teach and write well. (*Walking Light* 140)

Overall, there are concerns and problems with the creative writing scene. But this remains exactly the area in which I want to teach. And, because of the problems, I am tremendously happy that I took the route of PhD. The MFA is considered the terminal, if not ideal, degree for teachers in creative writing. In some ways, this could make it more difficult for me to get a job. But in light of what Allen Tate says, there might also be a few advantages for someone like me. Consider again the description the Iowa workshop student gave of his program. The route I have taken has given me a much stronger background in literature and the *reading* of poetry. By way of the interdisciplinary nature of my program, I've

had experience with the concerns of journalism and professional writing as well as those of creative writing and the English Department. Also, doing the work at the University of Oklahoma allowed me to work extensively over the years with a literary journal, *World Literature Today*, in editing, design, and promotion.

The Problem of the Decline in Reading and Craft

> What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.
>
> —Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

My fears about the current decline in reading among Americans, and its inevitable effect on the concept of craft in writing, began in the classroom where I teach freshman composition. Every semester, I ask students what they are reading. Blank stares are a common response, usually followed by an inquisitive look that seems to say, "Do you mean: *What have I checked out on the Web lately?*" Any answers offered, where literature is concerned, usually have to do with books they were forced to read in high school. So I do get the occasional *The Old Man and the Sea* response. Granted, some students are excited about reading. On average, they make up about five percent of the class population. These few students aside, my curiosity and concern about the causes and effects of a society-wide decline in reading continue to grow, and my questions about it have now spread out into discussions with colleagues, as well as personal research. I'll begin by dealing specifically with the issue of the decline in reading, and then follow with its impact on the study of craft in the creative process of writing.

If this feels like old news, it was not to me. Reading has always been a tremendous struggle for me. I deal with "dual dominance" in my eyes. This is due in part from being left-handed as a writer and ambidextrous in most other activities. In short, my eyes compete against each other to be the one that leads the other across the page. Although I knew nothing about this condition until recently, its description—when I finally got it—parted dark clouds for me in understanding something that had been a problem all my life: reading is slow, hard work for me. I reread sentences and paragraphs multiple times until I catch myself and force my eyes to move on down the page.

Maybe it is because of this problem that I have never taken books for granted. Of course, I would need to add to this the fact that I also grew up in a family that cared very much for books. Either way, this physical difficulty with reading is prominent enough that, in many semesters throughout my academic career, I would have to take only one or two classes, because it was the only way I could handle the reading load.

After a few years of interviewing my students about their reading, I began to interview other teachers and professors about their experiences with students. I talked to people with MAs, MFAs, and PhDs from the east to the Deep South, and from southern Texas to California. They expressed immediate and unanimous agreement with my concerns. One—a poetry professor at the University of Oklahoma—said that she has had students become outright contentious, openly challenging her, at having to read in upper division poetry workshops. She also expressed that this was a common subject of discussion among teachers at all the major conferences.

The exact causes of this phenomenon may not unfold in any purely scientific way, but there are many obvious places to begin. One would have to be the rise of the digital age. We receive and process information in completely different ways today—and at completely

different speeds—that may tend to turn us away from the printed page. News, statistics, gossip, quick answers to questions are all easily accessed on either television or the Internet. There is no real need to "go to the library" anymore.

D. W. Fenza, in his article "Brave New World: Aliteracy in America," published in a recent issue of *The Writer's Chronicle*, expands this argument in a summarization of some recent thoughts from Charles McGrath [former editor of the *New York Times Book Review*]:

> perhaps readership is declining because people are finding what they need on the Internet and because, perhaps, an avalanche of bad books buries the few good books published each year, so people are turning away from literary books. (24)

In other words the problem may not only have to do with the relatively recent switch to visual and digital formats; it also may have to do with the quantity and relatively poor quality of books being published today. The poet, Sydney Lea, who has taught literature and writing for thirty-five years from Dartmouth to Yale [among many others], criticizes this growing problem as well. While still considering the other factors, he says:

> But I think we ought to ask ourselves if the fault isn't at the least partly our own. If I, who have spent my adult life reading and writing and teaching poetry, pick up a poem to read and immediately feel lost, what's the likelihood that the much yearned-for general reader is going to spend any time with that stuff? (35)

Even if this is the case to some extent, it does not change the fact that there are still great books available, both old and new, that are worth reading, and there are qualified people around who want to help us find them.

D. W. Fenza's real complaint, though, appears to be that McGrath refers to Internet activity as "reading," and, therefore, according to McGrath, there isn't really as much of a decline in reading as some people fear. Fenza refutes this, supporting what my poetry professor claimed by saying:

> He should make that argument to AWP's teachers of writing and literature. I speak with hundreds of educators each year, and most tell me they can no longer assume that college freshmen possess basic reading and writing skills, let alone a strong background in literature, even though most students are experts in using the new electronic media. (25)

Some might cite America's undying love for, and steady course toward, instant gratification for the turn against reading. Things—like the news—that two hundred years ago took weeks, if not months, to receive now frustrate us if the web page takes a few too many seconds to load up. Yet, this is not a recent trend. While it is true that digital technology has taken it to extremes, Walter Benjamin, in a 1934 address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris blamed the newspaper for being one of the beginnings of the end:

> which denies itself any other form of organization than that imposed on it by the readers' impatience. (224)

And more than thirty years prior to this, Horace E. Scudder, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* during the 1890s, said the stories written for newspapers were degrading into "scraps" to be consumed in a single "gulp."

Others might claim it is our love for passive entertainment that is moving us away from the active nature of reading. We want the story delivered visually and graphically. [The more graphically the better.] The imagination required in reading demands too much work and takes too much time. Consider again the title of Neil Postman's book: *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

All of the above symptoms concern Peter Grandbois as well in his article "Exploring the Cracks," written for *The Writer's Chronicle*:

> The incessant data stream of information passing over the airwaves, through our newspapers, and computers, the political correctness that smothers any possibly aberrant thought, the insatiable need for sensation that powers

> modern society all serve to overwhelm any attempt at deeper reflection. (50)

Have we reached the point where we don't want to work for anything anymore? Have we lost interest in subtlety, understatement, and things that require long-term commitment? Look at the divorce rate in America. Do we no longer have the patience for that which demands time and study to fully comprehend and enjoy? If so, a decent-sized piece of literature may very well be the art form that asks the most of us.

These questions bring us to the burning center of an issue that the size constraints of this essay couldn't possibly leave room for. It is the bigger question: What forces, long-term habits, or capitalistic goals have brought the collective cultural mindset of America to this point. We can't blame the problem on the younger generation. That is a tired argument that grows out of laziness. Besides, computers are only 30 to 40 years old—*our* generation invented them. Few things have the power to cause societal and cultural decay that quickly. No, the currents responsible for the decline in literary reading in America run deep, through centuries, and have their source in capitalism's singular, subliminal message: Monetary value is the single criteria by which we should measure worth. Wisdom, tradition, faith, knowledge, honor, and active engagement with the human story—these are all secondary to the one true goal.

As I said earlier, the limitations of this introduction do not allow a full discussion on the causes of this problem. So I will leave it for now with these thoughts from Samuel Miller, author of the two volume series *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, published in 1803. They help illustrate how long the issue has been around:

> *The spirit of trade*, by which the authors and publishers first began, in the eighteenth century … has produced, and still continues to produce another serious evil. It too often leads men to write, not upon a sober conviction of truth, utility, and duty, but in accommodation to the *public taste*, however

> depraved, and with a view to the most *advantageous sale*. When pecuniary emolument is the leading motive in publication, books will not only be injuriously multiplied, but they will also be composed on the sordid calculation of obtaining the greatest number of purchasers. Hence, the temptation to sacrifice virtue at the shrine of avarice. (II 422)

Whatever the causes, the effects are beginning to take shape. D. W. Fenza's article not only introduced me to the crucial 2004 NEA report, *Reading at Risk*; it also speaks to the problem as I had initially perceived it in my students and in discussions with other teachers. Instead of "illiteracy"—which is still an important problem—Fenza's main concern has to do with what he calls "aliteracy." This is the term he uses [borrowed from Daniel Boorstin] to describe the growing problem of people who are able to read, but simply choose not to. If this is indeed a trend, it warrants some serious consideration of the possible consequences.

The statistics from the National Endowment for the Arts report, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, are extensive. They cover over fifty pages and two decades. And they deal mainly with individuals' responses to questions about their reading of literature [fiction, poetry, and plays] over the past twelve months. In consideration of space and time I would like to summarize some of the more poignant findings:

1. Literary readership has declined, since 1992, by 14%.
2. Reading among the youngest adults has declined by 28%.
3. Between 1982 and 2002 there was a decline in the reading of literature among higher education graduates by 18.7%.

Some of the most stinging comments in the entire report, though, come from the single page preface, written by the Chairman of the NEA, Dana Gioia. I understand he is somewhat controversial in the literary world. But I still think his comments are important to consider. He begins with:

> *Reading at Risk* is not a report that the National Endowment for the Arts is happy to issue. [It] presents a detailed but bleak assessment of the decline of reading's role in the nation's culture … Anyone who loves literature or values the cultural,

> intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society will respond to this report with grave concern.

He continues later:

> literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly … but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young. The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain. (vii)

Though there is a blunt, harbinger of doom quality to this, the situation does have a tremendous weight that is unavoidable. At the same time, when Gioia concludes the preface with the statement that we "can no longer take active and engaged literacy for granted" in America, he sounds as if he's unearthed a new, never before encountered, problem. Clearly, Benjamin and Scudder show us that this is not true.

In the eyes of Fenza and Gioia, the statistics *do* raise much higher questions about possible implications. Other statistics in the report reveal that the few people who do actively engage in literary reading are—considerably—more likely to volunteer and be involved in charity work, as well as attend/play sports, visit museums, and get out to see plays. No statistic is more telling, however, than the finding that the more active readers tend to watch considerably less television. In light of these, Gioia and Fenza question whether or not responsible democracy is even a possibility under such conditions. Will people have the historical and philosophical tools they need to process the often questionable news and information they are constantly receiving from electronic media? There are more potential problems than these. Time will need to weigh in on the answers. But the possibilities are frightening, nonetheless.

In the space where the importance of reading meets the question of craft in writing—this essay's next concern—there are few clearer words than these from the teacher and Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver:

> But, to write well it is entirely necessary to read widely and deeply. Good poems are the best teachers. Perhaps they are the only teachers. I would go so far as to say that, if one must make a choice between reading or taking part in a workshop, one should read. (10)

Are there other authors who support this claim? Anne Lamott says in *Bird by Bird* that as a child she "luxuriated in books," and in college she read "like a person taking vitamins" (xx – xxi). Natalie Goldberg in *Writing Down the Bones* recommends that instead of abusing substances the writer should "read Shakespeare, Tennyson, Keats, Neruda, Hopkins, Millay, Whitman, aloud and let your body sing" (51). Stephen King in *On Writing* says he usually runs through "seventy or eighty books a year" (145). This comes right after saying that he is "a slow reader." The list of agreeing authors would likely be endless.

On Craft

> If you approach poetry writing without reading great poetry,
> you will reach, at best, the level of your ignorance.
> —Stephen Dunn, *Walking Light*

This simple quotation from Pulitzer Prize winning poet Stephen Dunn sets the stage for the most common problem I have perceived in all my reading and conversations with creative writing teachers on the subject of contemporary poetry and fiction. It is that a surprising number of students do not want to study "craft" in workshops. They believe writing is based entirely on talent and instinct, and that the study of the elements of "craft" or "technique" are not only a waste of time, but might very well be a detriment to their work.

Stephen King, in his wonderful book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, alludes to a similar malaise that fell over the young, hip writing community of the late 60s:

> If you were to ask the poet what this poem *meant*, you'd likely get a look of contempt … Certainly the fact that the poet would likely have been unable to tell you anything about the mechanics of creation would not have been considered important. If pressed, he or she might have said that there *were* no mechanics, only that seminal spurt of feeling. (63)

He also says:

> Would-be poets were living in a dewy Tolkien-tinged world, catching poems out of the ether. (62)

King believes this experiment resulted mostly in incomprehensible fluff and was, therefore, a failure the first time, so he sees no need for us to repeat the mistake.

I must admit I come to this discussion as a convert to craft. For years, I was one of those students who thought writing should be purely instinctual, and you either "had it" or you didn't. But the longer I stayed in the game, and the more I experienced the continuous nudgings of a few key professors, the more I began to realize they were right. The best analogy I can bring to the conversion is that of a well. When my writing began to dissipate in a desert of repetitiveness, it felt as if a well were drying up. I was—plain and simple—out of material. And without an underground spring to replenish it, I knew the game was up. After reflecting on the words of my professors, I began to understand that the only way to fill the well is to read other writers, even if I don't emulate, and to study the elements of craft, even if I don't always use them.

In the early stages of my struggle with craft, Stephen Dunn helped me confront the issue with this thought from his essay "Bringing the Strange Home" in *Walking Light*:

> The audience for art need not be compositionally sophisticated, but the artist must be. (26)

I *loved* Dunn's poetry [still do], respected his prose, and in this passage I realized that instinct and intuition could be built on for the purpose of increasing impact, output, and effectiveness.

A part of the difficulty young writers [and many older ones as well] may have with the issue of craft is the slipperiness of its definition. I get a strong sense in much of my reading that different authors, when talking about craft, seem to be talking about different senses of the word. This leaves room for much confusion. For instance, novelist Alice Mattison, in her article "Coincidence in Stories: An Essay Against Craft," takes a very negative view of the term. She sees it as limiting, intrusive:

> That's craft. Obviously, the word is a metaphor when applied to writing, unless we mean by craft the teachable methods by which we learn to use word processors, or possibly the instructions we follow when we write grammatical sentences. Beyond such objective stuff as that, the relevance of craft to writing is doubtful. Craft is definite, it's prescriptive, it's safe. (8-9)

I understand, to some extent, what she is attempting to say. I even agree with parts of it on some level. If she is referring to lists of rules, forms that must be followed, and writing as if your mother, or an angry professor, is looking over your shoulder, then she is absolutely right. And, when it comes to the specific issue of "plot," Stephen King would be in absolute agreement with her. But this conception does not represent my viewpoint on the meaning of the word.

In his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, Robert McKee fills 466 pages with what amounts to a one-man campaign in support of maintaining craft in writing. He defines the term "craft" in a way that leaves room to move around:

> Craft is the sum total of all means used to draw the audience into deep involvement, to hold that involvement, and ultimately to reward it with a moving and meaningful experience. (22)

This breaks the definition wide open and comes closer to representing how I view the term. It creates space for more than just rules and restrictions. Craft now encompasses reading [input], mentoring relationships, peer critique, overall education, and the invaluable non-academic experiences that life in general has to offer. In this sense, the concept of craft is almost something that has to be pieced together until it makes sense to each individual artist.

I understand the hesitations expressed by thinkers like Rudolf Steiner and Wassily Kandinsky when it comes to the issue of craft, particularly where "forms" are concerned. To them, if the artist/thinker did not stretch, change—or really just move beyond—preconceived forms, his or her creative thought was dead on arrival. Yet, their writings illustrate a deep knowledge of those forms they wanted us to relinquish.

In his book *The Elephants Teach,* D. G. Myers alludes to a concerted effort in creative writing circles, as long ago as the late nineteenth century, to throw out all instructional texts on composition and grammar—all the byproducts of formal instruction. But Myers also tells of Brander Matthews who taught poetry at Columbia during the same time period. Matthews claimed in his textbook, *A Study of Versification*, that technique was being "grossly neglected" in writing instruction. So, again, as in the problem with reading, we see that we are not dealing with a new problem.

Natalie Goldberg strikes a balance between the opposing factions in *Writing Down the Bones* when she says, "we should learn form, but we should also remember to fill form with life" (126).

Even after considering these cries against it, the majority of opinion from artists seems to fall on the side of craft. The line of reasoning follows, that even though the process is mysterious and certain essential elements cannot be taught, it remains, as Mary Oliver puts it in her indispensable *A Poetry Handbook*:

> [Artists] require a lively acquaintance with the history of their particular field and with past as well as current theories and techniques … Whatever can't be taught, there is a great deal that can, and must, be learned. (1)
>
> It is craft, after all, that carries an individual's ideas to the far edge of familiar territory. (2)

The brief introduction to this book, as a whole, is one of the best essays I've encountered on the purposes of, and need for, craft.

In agreement with Mary Oliver and the others, I am now committed to the concept and cause of craft. I read voraciously, even with the difficulties it presents me, and I study craft consistently through reading the primary journals, magazines, and texts on the subject. And I have come to believe that the current trend in discrediting craft [and reading] will be a prison sentence for young students and/or practitioners of poetry, condemning them to a life of below-averageness and relative anonymity.

Annie Dillard in *The Writing Life* paints a clear picture of what I just described with this image of a student:

> If you ask a twenty-one-year-old poet whose poetry he likes, he might say, unblushingly, "Nobody's." In his youth, he has not yet understood that poets like poetry, and novelists like novels; he himself likes only the role, the thought of himself in a hat. (70)

Before this, she offers a long list that pairs certain great authors with the great authors they loved and studied. Then, in summary of both sections, she closes with:

> They learned their fields and then loved them … and they produced complex bodies of work that endure. Then, and only then, the world flapped at them some sort of hat, which, if they were still living, they ignored as well as they could, to keep at their tasks. (71)

Returning to Robert McKee's book *Story*, he offers solid agreement with the concerns of Dillard, Dunn, and King mentioned above. And he thickens the argument on the nature and necessity of craft—rather pointedly in places, I might add. He says:

> For most writers, the knowledge they gain from reading and study equals or outweighs experience, (15)
>
> Instinctive genius may produce a work of quality once, but perfection and prolificness do not flow from the spontaneous and untutored. (27)

These comments on screenwriting illustrate that there is much to be shared and learned across the writing disciplines, and that the argument seems not to be isolated to creative writing programs in English departments.

In all likelihood I will have more than my share of discussions with future students on this issue. In the Age of Convenience, not many would-be artists appear to be interested in the path of immersion—going to the deep heart of where an art form lives. Whether or not I give up the battle before it's over—as one or two fellow, more seasoned teachers have suggested—I still think craft and long-term commitment to studying technique in art are worthy endeavors.

Another reason for my determination to keep reading and craft a part of the curriculum is that I *know*, beyond any doubt, what the daily practice, or "calisthenics," of these disciplines have done for my writing. Every day for almost four years I have set aside time to either read poetry or a portion of some book on craft, and then followed the reading with the writing of a poem. No exceptions. Even during the week of writing these exams, I did not miss. [Though I'll admit one or two may have been uninspired.] And I know this daily practice has impacted my understanding of the mysteries of poetry and writing more than anything else I've done. This daily practice of reading, then writing a poem, gave me the

opportunity to incorporate and practice the techniques I had just read about. There are few greater teachers than this.

Though the question of the decline in craft is just as bottomless as that of the decline in reading, I felt the need at least to begin an exploration of the problem. I found no easy solutions. But awareness is a great place to start. I believe reading and craft are worth saving. And these opening sentences in the final two-page chapter of McKee's *Story* supply a wonderful summary of the reasons. I'll end this section on this note:

> Some, dreading that awareness of how they do what they do would cripple their spontaneity, never study the craft. Instead, they march along in a lockstep of unconscious habit, thinking it's instinct … and because they have a gift, from time to time their efforts draw applause, but in their secret selves they know they're just taking talent for a walk. (418)

The New Student

From my observations of fellow students and friends, students I have taught in class, as well as my own personal experience as a student, I have come across many who have a strong desire and determination to achieve an education. They are often a little older, with families, and working one to two jobs, or they are younger and lack family support and funds. They are the hardest working students, turning in quality work—when they have the time to finish, and they tend to participate in class discussion. And many of them are sinking.

This is not a call for lighter workloads. What must be learned, must be learned. At the same time, it is a call for consideration. I realize it's a Catch-22. Special consideration opens a can of worms for teachers. But I believe I received it at the hands of some very

adept professors. The reason for this section, then, is that I know many students who have not been as fortunate as I have when it comes to their professors.

To try to explain, I will give the example of my own story. As I mentioned earlier, I have struggled all my life with what I recently discovered is a reading disorder: Dual Dominance in my eyes. As a left-handed person, both of my eyes fight for leadership as they scan the written page. The fight results in a considerable slow down in reading tempo. Albeit an extremely non-technical description, it is the reason—I am now convinced—that I got frustrated and quit school five or six times. It is the reason it has taken me twenty years to earn a PhD. I may be assigning the condition more weight than it deserves, but after consideration of how much I *loved* my education and *lived for* the enlightenment, I can't locate any other reasons as to why I gave up so many times. I would receive the reading lists for classes, try to assess the load, and then decide whether or not to go and quickly drop the class. I dropped many times. The tough classes I wanted most—for instance, Dr. Gross's Walter Benjamin classes—I simply jumped in and did the best I could. And often, I would take the classes more than once in order to continue the reading. This was the case with my Chicano Studies work as well. I loved the material and was willing to fight to finish it.

Obviously, Dual Dominance is not the only "condition" I want to cover. By itself, it is not enough to warrant the discussion. So, I want to add to the list another problem. The divorce rate has skyrocketed over the last few decades. Because of this, single parenthood is now an epidemic. For those who have not been a single parent while trying to go to school, I'm at a loss for a way to accurately describe the intensity of the trouble this can cause. Schedules become nightmarish. It's difficult to make commitments—especially to extracurricular activities. There are also times when it is simply not possible to make it to class. I have dealt with all of these. Again, I want to mention that I experienced generous

understanding and consideration from my professors. But I reiterate, this has not been the case for *many* of my friends and students.

Now, let's add to this what appears to be at the moment anyway, an endless escalation in tuition and fees. And with this comes the unavoidable increase in debt. More and more students are working two or three jobs to make ends meet. I recall one semester in which I was receiving money from *five* different sources of employment each month. Granted, a couple of them were small side "gigs." But it did take all five of them, nonetheless. While this is drastic, I do believe that the "more-than-one-job" syndrome is a reality for many students.

Jimmy Santiago Baca describes his situation in the poem…

> Poetry goes much deeper than this. In the dark of the
> freeway,
> in my beat-up Volkswagen, I think words
> are important to a poor man, who has to survive in other
> ways
> than studying from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M.
> in the cozy corner of a library. (*Thirteen Mexicans* 66)

I realize the very idea of special attention or consideration is a tremendous problem, if not impossibility, for professors. I also realize this walks a dangerous line with another new student demographic—the student as "customer." These are the students who "feel" busy and/or privileged and decide that, since this is the case, and they [or their parents] are paying a large amount of money, we *owe* them not only an education, but a good grade as well. Their performance has little to do with it. I've not had as much trouble with this myself. But I'm hearing horror stories from fellow GTAs and adjuncts.

So, maybe what I am proposing is more a change in the system. Separate classes? Maybe. I'm afraid I don't have any firm answers to the situation. And I know that Internet classes are now very popular with this set. But I must say I am a complete and utter old

fogey when it comes to this new format. I wouldn't take an Internet class if my life depended on it. All of my best memories, spanning my entire education, stem from professor and peer discussion in the classroom. Whatever the answer, or answers, may be, I am merely asking that we think about these students as we consider changes within the institution.

On Passion and Place

I sometimes felt isolated from fellow students in the English department. I felt a passion for life, art, and place—a certain hope I wanted to hold out for the future of my home and the world. They considered these interests as naiveté. Many of them seemed to walk around in a cloud of postmodern depression that felt inescapable. In the introduction to my master's thesis, I put it like this:

> It's a seemingly terminal condition in which nothing can be allowed to be "all that interesting." Nothing can matter too much. And, even if it does, it can't be allowed to matter past a certain amount of stingily allocated time. (14)

David Mamet doesn't go along with this mindset either in his essay "A Tradition of the Theater as Art" from the book *Writing in Restaurants*:

> Every reiteration of the idea that *nothing matters* debases the human spirit. (21)

It may have been the particular group of students I entered grad work with, but for them, passion was reserved for what they disliked, and Oklahoma was high on their list. It got a bit lonely at times.

Their workshop poetry and conversations between classes had a central theme: everything is screwed up, and the whole shebang is going to hell in a hand basket. Of course, I wouldn't say I'm the most cheery person to ever bless the streets. But even the negative tone that sometimes surfaces in the previous sections of this introduction is underlined by the basic desire that I don't want things to stay this way. I want something better.

On my love for home, the title of this dissertation, *Spread My Ashes over the Southwest*, springs from the passion I feel for the part of the country I grew up in. These poems are the messages I've sent back from my struggles with that passion. It's not easy to love a place like

Oklahoma—a relatively flat land that so thoroughly roughed up the Native Americans who were displaced by the Native Americans who were forced here and then displaced by the settlers. There is a history of racism and injustice that has had long-term effects. Texas has its own peculiar personality from its past [and present] with the border culture. And though Colorado and New Mexico may seem as dreamy as a postcard on the surface, they have their own problems with ultra-conservative religion and high desert water shortages from Californians moving in and more. It would be a simple matter to fill a large essay with my thoughts on the differing personalities of these states, but I'll save that for the poetry.

So many of my friends as a kid, and throughout high school, were always looking for the moment they could "make their break" to a more interesting, usually coastal, place. But I always felt a certain gratitude for this quieter part of the country. Sure, I went through phases of wanting to leave. But they had more to do with an interest in adventure, excitement, and hormones than in "escape." I loved having my family and Oklahoma to come back to when I traveled. It felt like a savings account.

On Passion, Inspiration, and Ardor

To the best of my memory, I've always been a passionate person. Growing up, I was intense about stories and dreams of adventure. I remember the devastation I felt when I realized my desperate hope of becoming Tarzan was not going to come to fruition. The jungles of central Africa were in political turmoil. And the difficulties presented by multitudes of poisonous insects and reptiles, mingled with a lack of potable water, were becoming all too evident. Along with this, movies moved me to tears; girls were a fabulous torture [still are]; and I have never stopped wrestling with the urge to find a way to save the

world from destruction. There were ups and downs to this mental state, but overall it's been intense enough to cause me serious feelings of alienation at different times in my life.

Approaching forty now, my passions have found release [and relief] in more achievable pursuits. My desire to be a good father tops the list. Nothing comes before this. Poetry is the best therapist I've ever had and has become one small way that I may be able to actually help save the world after all. I feel the same about teaching. Also, my latest interest has become a love for family history and geography. I have digitally recorded aunts and uncles telling amazing stories of world travel and growing up in southwest Oklahoma that I view as an absolute treasure trove for future writings.

Having survived puberty and young adulthood, in spite of the death of some dreams and beliefs, I am beginning to feel a rebirth. I'm beginning to dream dreams again. And I am returning to some important beliefs I thought I'd outgrown. The biggest side effect of this rebirth has been a recommitment to words like passion, inspiration, and ardor. And it's been very nice to find out, after a half of a lifetime, that I am not alone.

Adam Zagajewski in *A Defense of Ardor* says:

> Too long a stay in the world of irony and doubt awakens in us a yearning for different, more nutritious fare. (9)
>
> Ardor, metaphysical seriousness, the risky voicing of strong opinions are all suspicious nowadays. They take the defendant's bench immediately, there's no need for lengthy, conscientious investigations. (20)
>
> Poetry … is brought into being by a certain exceptional and legendary state of mind known as inspiration. (129)

Meeting Zagajewski had as much, or more, impact on me as his writings. He spoke in quiet, yet determined, tones about the words and concepts of ardor, inspiration, and mastery not only being "okay," but also that they were mandatory "re"-considerations for the future of art. Every thought seemed a confirmation of my concerns throughout my graduate work.

Yet, he extended them, making me feel I hadn't traveled near far enough in my journey towards "something more."

Few people have the ability to drop all pretension like Jimmy Santiago Baca. This has already been illustrated in this introduction. But consider these spiritual exclamations from poem "Eleven" in *Thirteen Mexicans*:

> Blessed are you, blessed are you
> who continue to believe in peace, in forgiveness, in hope,
> blessed are your hands that offer help to the helpless,
> your eyes that refuse to turn away from injustice,
> your voices that continue to refuse to sell your heart, (86)

I cannot imagine such blaze of hope, such a blatant demand [with such biblical undertones], ever being given the time of day in today's halls of academia. We might discuss his delusional Messiah complex in light of so and so's writings. Soon enough though, we would return to our musings on the indecipherable.

In the introduction to *Good Poems*, Garrison Keillor shows his gratitude to Emily Dickinson's ardor by saying:

> …when you make flies buzz and horses turn their heads and
> you declaim *Wild Nights! Wild Nights!* and give hope some
> feathers, you are going to have friends in this world for as
> long as English is read. (xx)

On saying "yes" to hope and passion, Wallace Stevens throws the doors wide open in the first two lines of "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard:"

> After the final no there comes a yes
> And on that yes the future world depends. (190)

Stephen Dunn says in *Walking Light* that inspiration is a word we "shouldn't be embarrassed to use." He feels similarly about the soul:

> I wish there was more talk about soul. We've largely given up
> such talk, in favor of commerce, politics, the talk of people
> who expect answers, results. (72)

But he also warns us to be careful with words like these:

> But in cultures with theologies that concern themselves with the Divine, it seems to me that to have *many* spiritual experiences is to regularize what should be rarefied. (162)

On the deepest level, poetry needs to swim in the seas of passion, ardor, and inspiration if it is to remain necessary, vital. In Goethe's words, it must come from "What longs to be burned to death." And I hope Adam Zagajewski is right when he says:

> Perhaps one day ardor will return to our bookstores, our intellects. (*Defense of Ardor* 24)

On Place and/or Regionalism

In *Good Poems*, Garrison Keillor comments that the term "Regional," when it comes to poetry, "only means writers whose work might include references to farming" (xxiv). He even goes so far as to say that it is a "useless term."

A similar reaction can be found in Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*:

> When I first moved to Minnesota, Jim White, a very fine poet, said to me, "Whatever you do, don't become a regional writer." Don't get caught in the trap of becoming provincial. (145)

And I doubt it would be difficult to find agreement from other sources as well.

While I am a fan of both writers, I'm afraid I disagree on this one—unless they mean that to think a writer should write "what he is," "where he's from," and "who he knows" is stating the obvious, and, therefore, a waste of time to worry over. Otherwise, the statements confuse me. Every radio broadcast of *Prairie Home Companion*, and every novel Keillor's ever written is flooded with what I understand to be "regionalism."

Roy Harvey Pearce turns the tables with this in *The Continuity of American Poetry*:

> Yet an inside narrative must have its proper ambiance. Poems, like men, have their life only *in* a world. In this study that ambiance, that world, is the general cultural style of a poet's age as it is at once the background against which and the ground out of which he works. (12)

I agree. For me, it's impossible to believe that it is a bad idea for authors to write out of the richness of the "Where" that they know best. Are we saying they should write only out of the imagination, or about things of which they know nothing?

When we travel, we are "observers." When we are home, in our "place," we are "representatives." But really it even goes beyond this—somewhere into the realm of "being." D.H. Lawrence wrote extensive journals on his time in New Mexico. In his essay, "Indians and Entertainment," he writes of the white man's limitations as "observers" in this land. But when it came to the Indians and the ways in which they portrayed their history, culture and *being* in their celebrations, he said of the Deer Dance:

> Everything is very soft, subtle, delicate. There is none of the hardness of representation. They are not representing something, not even playing. It is a soft, subtle *being* something. (35)

Yet, at the same time, Lawrence proves that the literature of the "observer" can be rich and vibrant as well. This perspective is still needed at times. But to create out of who we are and who we have been, as well as where we are and have been, offers a deep undeniable power. To emphasize this, I return to the conversation with Jimmy Santiago Baca I quoted near the beginning of this introduction:

> This is what you have been given. It's beautiful. And you may be one of the few who can truly see it for what it is, and isn't. So write it. Write it well and with all your heart.

I remember in a recent conversation with Denise Chávez, she was enthusiastic over the fact that I had been digitally recording the stories and musings of some of my older

relatives. She said this was absolutely priceless where future writing projects are concerned, and it is a gift few writers have the privilege of recovering.

If I were to write about the Northeast, I might be able to create some interesting observations about the culture. I might even be lucky enough to inject some good humor into it that makes readers laugh. But ultimately, the quality of those observations, and the effectiveness of the humor, would be directly related to, if not dependent upon, the ways in which I compare the landscape and culture to my own in the Southwest. I wouldn't necessarily "know" a lot about the Northeast. But if my awareness is keen, the differences between the two cultures that I reveal could be very enlightening and helpful to readers from both these areas, as well as other parts of the world.

Though I may explore the world and write about it while I'm there, the Southwest United States will always rest like an ocean bed beneath all I see and experience. It will be the magic that makes my perspective unique from all others—the reason "my book" must be written too.

I'll close with the most powerful word I've ever heard in support of regionalism and "place." It comes from D. H. Lawrence's essay "The Spirit of Place" in *Studies in Classic American Literature*:

> Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality. (12)

Final Words

> I used to think it was virtuous to stay distant from academia but gradually I realized that any way a "serious writer" can get a living is fine. The problem with both town and gown is the temptation to write for one's peers rather than from the heart.
>
> —Jim Harrison *The Shape of the Journey*

I feel the process of discovery through education was a journey I had to take in order to come full circle and understand a little better where I stand in the scheme of things as a poet and future teacher. I don't want to succumb to the "temptations" Harrison is talking about in the passage above. Yet, I feel a certain permission here to be a teacher, and that I could work within academia and still remain true to myself as a poet.

Though I know the "cynic" part of my two-word self-description that opens this introduction will always be a part of who I am, I now feel a genuine desire to build on the "hopeful" part. In my effort to do so, I will continue to take courage from these hopeful and passionate words of encouragement written by one of the great, down and dirty cynics of our time, Charles Bukowski, in his poem "roll the dice:"

> if you're going to try, go all the
> way.
> otherwise, don't even start.
> …
> and you'll do it
> despite rejection and the
> worst odds
> and it will be better than
> anything else
> you can imagine.
>
> if you're going to try,
> go all the way.
> there is no other feeling like
> that.
> you will be alone with the
> gods

and the nights will flame with
fire.

do it, do it, do it.
do it. (*Fire* 408-409)

I've spent the last twenty years looking up words I didn't know in the dictionary, plowing my way through big, thick tomes, writing research papers that felt at times like medieval torture racks, and sitting through lectures that sometimes put me to sleep. However, because of the good professors [who taught, quite possibly, in spite of their own objections to certain elements of academia], I know now I will spend the rest of my life looking up words I don't know in the dictionary, plowing my way through big, thick tomes, writing poems and essays I hope will be more interesting than my research papers were, and giving lectures I hope will be less boring than those I sat through with all those "other" professors. The reason? Nothing deep or wordy, simply because I burn for it.

When I arrived at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1983, I was not a reader. I was not much of a writer, outside of some bad post-pubescent songs. I was not focused. My dreams for the future were filled with nothing except the delusions of musical stardom. Somewhere along the way, something happened to me. And the best description I can think of rests in these words Jimmy Santiago Baca wrote in his autobiographical work *A Place to Stand*, that tells of his descent into drugs and then prison where he, by chance, learned to read and write:

…words had broken through the walls and set me free. (257)

Bibliography

Aranda Jr., José F. *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003.

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *C-Train / Thirteen Mexicans: Poems*. New York: Grove Press, 2002.

- - -. *A Place to Stand*. New York: Grove Press, 2001.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." *Reflections: Walter Benjamin—Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Edited and Introduction by Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

- - -. *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin—Essays and Reflections*. Edited and Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

- - -. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume I 1913-1926*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.

Bickham, Jack M. *Writing* and *Selling Your Novel*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1996.

Brown, Nathan. *Hobson's Choice*. Edmond: Greystone Press, 2002.

Bukowski, Charles. *Bone Palace Ballet: New Poems*. New York: Ecco, HarperCollins, 1997.

- - -. *Love Is a Dog from Hell: Poems 1974-1977*. New York: Ecco, HarperCollins, 1977.

- - -. *sifting through the madness for the Word, the line, the way—new poems*. Edited by John Martin. New York: Ecco, HarperCollins, 2003.

- - -. *what matters most is how well you walk through the fire*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 2001.

Culler, Jonathan and Kevin Lamb. *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. New York: HarperPerennial – A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1989.

Dunn, Stephen. *Different Hours*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

- - -. *New and Selected Poems 1974-1994*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.

- - -. *Walking Light: Memoirs and Essays on Poetry*. Rochester: Boa Editions, LTD, 2001.

Dutton, Denis. "Language Crimes." *Wall Street Journal*. February 5, 1999, W11.

Fenza, D. W. "Brave New World: Aliteracy in America." *The Writer's Chronicle* 37, no. 1 (September 2004): 24–5.

Goldberg, Natalie. *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up In America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993.

- - -. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986.

Grandbois, Peter. "Exploring the Cracks." *The Writer's Chronicle* 37, no. 2 (October / November 2004): 49–55.

Hall, Donald. *Old and New Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.

Harrison, Jim. *The Shape of the Journey*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2000.

Hillocks, Jr., George. *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999.

Holroyd, Michael. *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.

Huxley, Aldous. "Beyond the Mexique Bay." *A Traveler's Journal*. London, 1949, pp. 274 ff. First published in 1934.

Keillor, Garrison, ed. *Good Poems*. New York: Viking, 2002.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books – Doubleday, 1994.

Lankshear, Colin. *Changing Literacies*. Bristol: Open University Press, 1997.

Lawrence, D. H. "Indians and Entertainment." *D. H. Lawrence and New Mexico.* Edited by Keith Sagar. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1982.

Lawrence, D. H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

Lea, Sydney. Interview with Marie Jordan Giordano. *The Writer's Chronicle* 37 no. 1 (September 2004): 34 – 43.

Mamet, David. *Writing in Restaurants*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting.* New York: ReganBooks: An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.

Miller, Samuel. *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*. Vol. 2. New York: T. and J. Swords, 1803.

Myers, D. G. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1996.

National Endowment for the Arts. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Research Division Report #46. Washington, DC, 2004.

Newdick, Robert S. "Robert Frost and the American College." *Journal of Higher Education 7* (1936): 237–43.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

Pearce, Roy Harvey. *The Continuity of American Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Petras, Kathryn and Ross Petras, eds. *Very Bad Poetry*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Sajé, Natasha. “Who Are We to Judge: The Politics of Literary Evaluation.” *The Writer’s Chronicle* 36, no. 6 (May/Summer 2004): 24 – 32.

Simic, Charles. Interview with J. M. Spalding. *The Cortland Review*, Issue Four: August 1998. http://www.cortlandreview.com/issuefour/interview4.htm.

Stevens, Wallace. “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard.” *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Edited by Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

Sting. “The Book Of My Life.” *Sacred Love*. CD. A&M Records, 2003.

Tzu, Lao. *Tao Teh Ching*. Trans. John C. H. Wu. Boston: Shambala, 1989.

Watterson, Bill. *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II 1939-1962*. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions Books, 1988.

Zagajewski, Adam. *A Defense of Ardor: Essays*. Translated by Clare Cavanagh. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

ASHES OVER THE SOUTHWEST



Among the Okie Detritus

Grandma

"Boy—
come on in out from unner that car!
It's time f'r lunch!"

Awed by her ability with language—
and still full from breakfast—
I thought, as a student of English:
Who else could do that,
rattling out five prepositions in a row
without even thinking about it?

I watched oil creep down my hand
and pondered my study in linguistics.
        All those textbooks,
and Grandma's still a mystery—
like when I was eight and she
        took me out to the garden
        through a banging screen door
        to show me our "supper…
        a' growin' outta God's groun'."

She *knows*
the language.

Almost

> *What I had so feverishly longed for then she had been ready, if only I had been able to understand and to meet her again, to let me taste in my boyhood.*
>
> —Proust, *Time Regained* (9)

Didn't think I'd find it, coming back
Highway 9. I wanted to swing by
your old house near the lake, my old
ginger bread hut in the forbidden forest.

I remembered 60th over to Lindsey.
Then, I saw the green street sign—
Flaming Oaks Dr.—draped in limbs,
and it all came back in a dry flash,
body humming, fingers trembling.
From there, the car drove straight to it,
tires crunching thirsty dirt clods.

I felt again the roaring waves of
good ol' Southern Baptist guilt
and the heat from hormonal fires
we tried to put out with gasoline.

I remember climbing through the window
in the silent terror of a teenager,
coming around the edge of your bed,
staring down in unspeakable gratitude
at the threadbare sheet that almost
covered your breasts, knowing
that was all there was
between us.

Your exposed arm and leg—
a moonlit painting of pristine skin—
threw my mind into desperate imaginings
of what lay beneath the curves, the lost
and found lines of draping cotton.

I smiled at the cliché of a sleeping princess.
Or maybe you weren't asleep.
Maybe you pretended,
admiring my admiration.

When I finally succumbed,
leaning down to kiss your neck,
your arms wrapped,
eyes still closed,
around my twinging shoulders
in a soft swarm of biology,
dreamily pulling me in
to the pool of your expectant form.

We darted in and out
of dangerous corridors,
danced on mossy graves,
denied that final bliss
from fear of blindness
and divine disappointment.

To get it back.
Just one night.

The ropes that would unravel.

Labor Day

Monday – September 3, 2001

Off work for the holiday,
I decide on a morning walk
in my beautiful nook o' the burbs.
Got to earn that double latte.

Across 48th Street, in a newer part
of the addition—future homes for those
who "want it" more than I do—I hear
Mexicans swinging hammers to 105.5 FM.

Further down, while Anglos check oil
in Lexus SUVs and scold children using
their upper class middle names, I think
of dirt in the creases of already brown hands
as they guide the numbing arc of a trowel.

At the duck pond, while barefooted yuppies
stroll barefooted babies and swing squealing
blond curls in the park, I think of Styrofoam,
and black coffee soaking a black moustache
during a wary-eyed break from the sawdust cloud.

Just past the park's Murrah bombing memorial—
a name most Oklahomans can spell now—
while good Baptists wasp their way around
concrete running tracks with Nippon headsets
blasting out a steady American pace,
I catch the explosive echoes of a nail gun
aimed by ojos cansados
that wait for el ocaso.

Back at the house,
while I slice a peach onto porcelain
and strip for the shower,
I try not to check my skin in the mirror
or think too much about Mexicans
building houses.

Momentary Lapse

Saturday – October 20, 2001

I work my way up to the north wall of
Oklahoma Memorial Stadium,
still on the outside with room to meander.

I draw in the smell of game day,
unique to sport-loving
minions corralled in titanic numbers.

Getting a head start on throwing down
trash, white parents
jerk the arms of crying children, because

it's against the rules not to love game day.
Love it or lose 15 yards,
to be assessed the following play-period.

Inside, the crowd roars like a
February wave
rolling into Monterey Bay.

Everywhere I turn, I see red
and white,
and the crowd begins to sing

stars and spangles over our beloved
Sooners, who were
last year's national champs and still

are undefeated this season at 7 & 0.
But today
they sing louder than in years past—

louder in a newfound love for an
injured nation—
louder for the cowboy hat leading it—

louder against pissed-off misanthropes
who fly 757s
into tall, shiny buildings in a single breath—

even louder against those who sent them,
in hopes they'll hear
how numbered their angry days are.

Just as they intone "and the rockets
red glare!"
I glance up to catch the American flag

framed in a massive array
of ESPN lights,
designed to rob night of its power.

I watch it wave in the Oklahoma winds
and for a moment,
for a very brief moment, I actually think,

"Hell yeah! Kill 'em all!"

Soul-Savers

I remember the fervor
we felt for “the lost”
in covert planning sessions
we called Bible studies.

Just one, one pulled from the mire

[of enjoying life in the now]
we said with a pious, yet sincere
crinkle of our Baptist brow.

———————————

I turn my head away with a jerk
at the sight of my old church
in a weak and futile attempt
to wash away this past stupidity—

a stupidity constructed through
millenniums of bad dogma,
which was “not busy livin’…
just busy dyin’,” as Bob Dylan,

a theologian of a different cut,
tried to tell us in the years
we couldn’t look past his
prophetic, soul-felt addictions.

My sighs and shaking head
signify the inevitable departure—
not from God, nor from Jesus
[still my favorite hippie socialist]

and yes, Son of God…
but… I do realize, I’m afraid,
that in the nouns and verbs
I now choose to express myself,

I’m beginning to lose them,
the “they” I once was…
and I’m struck with the fear
that *now*… it’s *me* they’re after.

Chasing Autumn

I'm mapping out this dreamy route
to follow fall throughout the year:

Late summers in Hudson Bay, maybe…
Nome… Reykjavik… a cozy cottage
overlooking the dancing spindrift.

September in St. Brides, Newfoundland.
So fit for a poet—a time zone 30 minutes
off from the rest of the sane world.

I'm thinking Cape Cod or Nantucket
for early October. Maybe Chesapeake Bay
for later in the month. I don't know.
They seem like places any responsible writer
would want to be caught alive.

Halloween would find me home
in Oklahoma, since I'm sure
Sierra and I will Trick 'r Treat
well into her twenties… and because
November here is a stunning scarab
only an Okie knows how to reach out
and touch in its yellow, orange,
and singing red glories.

December would be Cozumel or
Mazatlán. Since this solstice is one
of two that permanently trips up the
attitude of autumn, I might as well
be on a turquoise-trimmed beach.

I thought about Tierra del Fuego, just above
Cape Horn, for the lead off month of January.
Any place with the cajones latónes
to call itself the Land of Fire, must have
some latent magic or muse just waiting
to spring on some poor poetic soul.

February would split the trajectory
as I pop back over the equator
to Carmel, California—a mystical haven
for the opposing forces of mountainous,

teeth-gritting waves and languorous fog.
The Caffé Cardinale, nestled in a hidden courtyard,
houses two muses—one, invisible, who guides
my pen; the other, quite visible, who whips up
my Mocha au Lait with a sideways smile.

March might work in New Zealand.
I've only heard of its Tolkien-like beauty
as stoic afternoons give way to breathless,
kaleidoscopic sunsets over the Tasman Sea.
And if my failing lobe recalls, this is also
the home of the amazing bouncing poi balls.

In early April I'll bounce across
to my own personal legend of Tasmania.
I loved that crazy cartoon on Saturdays
with a nutmeg blur of tornadic fur.
From there, I'd migrate north to Melbourne
for the coffee shops and caffeine buzz
that flow through vein-like streets.

May—Santiago, maybe Buenos Aires,
or Valparaíso, Chile, if only for the name.
June—São Paulo or Asuncion.
All for descriptions by friends,
and for love of language and cuisine,
each riding on the current flow
or constipation of fickle politics.

In July I'd come home, at least for a week—
you know… to check messages and see
how much money Sierra needs—before
jetting off to Siberia—where I met a girl once
from Kogalym. It means "Doomed Place"—
a longtime curiosity, like the leper colony
of Molokai's western shore.

A Note of Thanks

I am terribly grateful to this morning's
low plains snow storm, a Vesuvian
display that floats in so softly, silently
to dust the flatlands with rapturous inactivity.

What command, with a single powdery hand,
to be able to halt all the silly motions
and illusory dreams of commerce.

My own kitchen table, windows onto whiteness,
a cup of tea, a bowl of oats and crunchy toast—
the stuff of an earthly heaven—a river
of love and letters onto these white pages.

Post Script to Yesterday's Poem

By the way—
there is no better situation
in which to sit, with that same
cup of tea,
and read
the
one
word
verses
of Mary Oliver
with all the
foxes
roses
and dogfish in them.

The Twig

The name “Jay” is what I remember—
witty, hands-in-pockets hallway shuffler
at Norman High our senior year—1983.

We carved out survival in the inevitable clan
of skinny misfits that the puberty gods create
in all high schools to balance out jocks and poms.

Nobody could ever come back on Jay.
Their budding intellects were no match
for his detached scrape of jeans on floor.

But he was so soft about it though
inside his sideways, self-effacing laugh
that always turned his eyes out the window.

Somewhere in the post cap and gown days
some unstoppable shadow overtook him.
A twig snapped in the back of his skull.

The dislodged lobes floated away
the psychiatrist said, at least that’s what I heard
from another ex-misfit years later.

He’s just entered the café where I write,
twenty years out from our adjacent lockers.
He walks slowly, cautiously now,

looking for the driftwood of his mind
with his one unglazed eye, nodding
up and down, rolling from side to side.

He sits down a few tables over, pushes
bits of iced cinnamon roll through
a bush of red beard and moustache,

all 300 pounds wrapped up
in a swaddling of thrift coats,
eyes out the window…

I miss it too, Jay.
I miss it too.

If I Hadn’t Walked,

I never would have known
the creek falls in a rush
off the bridge foundation.

I never would have heard
the scratch of Jay
claws on mulberry bark;
the bell-clang of pulleys
on flagpoles;
the huffing of a fat
bulldog running the
fence for a glimpse.

I never would have thought of
the breeze’s potential
for peace when not
blowing through open
car windows.

And I never would have counted
the ten boxes of Marlboros
in tangles of dry grass
all along the way
and had the chance
to contemplate why
smokers of Marlboros
are more prone to littering.

I did see one box of KOOLs…

every experiment has its flaw.

Donny

I was getting on my bike
in front of my parents' house.
His blue Nissan pickup
rolled up against the curb—
Georgia peach on the license plate.
He'd come from his parents' house
two doors down.

He starts.
Just wanted to say hey.
Hey, how's it going, Donny?
I'm gettin' divorced.
I couldn't drum up an *I'm sorry*.
He didn't appear to expect it.

He was surprised she'd left him.
I was surprised by his surprise,
but welcomed him to the club.
He seemed to need it.

Shannon's only eight. I'm not
gettin' to see her much.
Yup, I say. *Those little girls…*
they'll mess you up.
Yeah.

I miss a lot of what he says at this point.
I flash back to G.I. Joes and yellow helicopters
in fenceless backyards, back before
our parents drew the lines, dividing
play-spaces with chain-link and planks
that we now had to climb over.

It wasn't our parents' fault, though.
Progress had drawn the lines for them.
Fences are how we live together, now.

Just like the old lines of marriage—still there
in spite of the fact that everybody
works now, nobody really *needs* anybody,
and we've got millions of other potential
mates to choose from, once this one

gets a bit frumpy. Millions of others
who *have* caught on to the workout,
trim-down and tan-line approach
to life—the delusional holy grail
of propped up youth and Viagrified sex.

I think back to the time when Donny
struggled with speech problems—
when alligators were "atergators"
and elevators were "aterbators."

And I think of how clearly he speaks
now, of his pain and disappointment.
No misshaped words now…
now that his hair is almost gone,
and what's left is mostly gray.

I'll see you later.
Alright. Take it easy.

I pull away on my bike,
rolling down the street we
lived on for most of our lives,
thinking how necessary endings,
loss, divorce, and impending death are
to regaining youth and "living" it this time.

I ride by our old grade school.
Up-side-down children squeal on monkey bars,
holding the bottoms of their shirts up.
Some kick soccer balls at teammates.
Some run without aim. One loiters
alone down among the trees.

That one is me. Poor kid.

I ride past the playground's honeysuckle
scent from yellow and white petals
roasting in the morning sun,
and gasp at the flood of images,
memories—that tiny drop of liquid
on the end of the stamen when plucked,
pulled through and licked, a sweetness
so slight, it's more "believed in" than tasted.

And now, as I write,

I know, before today's sun sets,
I need to go back to the musty playground,
hang up-side-down from monkey bars,
drink the honeysuckle's wine and loiter
alone down among the trees.

Another Case for Walking

A snapping turtle, the size of a hubcap,
makes his way under the bridge,
through the shallow rush that ripples
over the corrugation of a drain pipe.
The soupy water glides up and over
his shell like well-stretched Saran Wrap.
He sees me and slowly turns around
with the wrenching effort of a ship
a million times his size, like the quiet
resignation of Eeyore on an off day.

Further up the sidewalk, I make
my contribution to the ever-changing
impressionism of "Smashed Mulberries
on Sidewalk"—a community piece
birthed by mostly unwitting artists
unable to savor the secret wine
of the beautiful stain.

I cross the weed-cracked parking lot
of an abandoned Wal-Mart, left
in a wildflower field like a disposable
razor. I cock my head to one side
in contemplation of the ridiculous
intensity of reds, yellows, and purples
in flowers I crush beneath my feet.

A grackle flushes from a Korean Boxwood
with the pulsating sound of a sprinkler
as I come up to the side of my café.

I notice a family back by the dumpsters,
mother and grandmother in lawn chairs,
daughter fast-pitching a softball to father.
The daughter screams to the mother
Shut up! Just leave me alone!
The mother, in an astounding moment
of "not getting it," squeals back in a high,
obliviously obnoxious tone of voice
I'm only trying to help, honey!

It's a bizarre form of child torture
found mainly in the suburbs.

And I fight the urge to walk up,
violently shove the mother over backwards
in her cheap-ass lawn chair, lean over
closely, and in a quiet, raspy voice say,
I'm only tryin' to help,
honey.

Instead, I step on into the café,
swimming in the buzz, beauty, and anger
that flooded my morning walk,
and choose to immortalize turtles
and bad mothers
and pause to wonder
how it is any poet
could, in good conscience,
drive a car.

A Strangely Beautiful Smell of Death

holds my attention
while I search for metaphors. It's…

like a foggy blanket of second-hand smoke
that lays to rest closing night clubs
where you find love you believe will last, or…

like the '84 Monte Carlo burning oil
in front of you on Main. You know
the blue-gray cloud is raping your lungs,
but something about the smell reminds you
of curbside car maintenance as a teen, your back
burning on summer pavement while you wrench
a bolt to change the oil of youth's invincibility, or…

like that steaming daily cup of Mocha au Lait
that holds your nose above it as you
reach for the chocolate covered espresso
beans—each one raking a day
from the autumn lawn of your life, or…

like diesel fumes dancing in a cabaret
of Proustian reminiscences about
high school ski trips and the older girl
who groped you in the back seat of the Rockies.

Peeling Orange

At six,
she plays with silky scarves
and Gammar's woolen hats.

Orange construction paper flies
from slicing blades to be glued and
slapped onto a larger piece of white.

She staples together unwritten books
from old business stationary,
astounding me with the magnitude
of its previous uselessness.

Leotards and lacy skirts bounce
and dance in the wake of symphonies,
a pristine tribute to innocence
in a blaze of crinkled whiteness,
wiping clean centuries of pure
academic talk about Beethoven.

But soon new school friends
will bring on the parental push-off—
friends denied the bright red
toolbox of childhood's imagination—
and the orange construction paper
will fade even further to brown,
as it's been doing since my childhood,
and Beethoven will morph
into exposed belly buttons writhing
on VH-1's "All Belly Buttons,
All the Time" channel.

So, dad writes a poem
destined for the attic
in hopes that someday,
from a certain loss or sadness,
she'll be driven up there
for the sake of sifting, alone,
and crack open this orange journal
that could have stayed blank,
and find these words.

Maybe her tears will fall
into mine, and she'll remember
the orange construction paper
I'm caressing at the moment,
because I've come home.

James, Brother of John

I barely know him—
but enough to sense the pressure
behind his punctured voice,
barely able to complete a sentence
for fear of its inevitable
lack of coherency.

Something happened
in a shoulder twitch of his past.
A throat-slit of well-aimed words
permanently cast his eyes
to the floor where they remain,
only occasionally making Herculean
efforts to rise and meet you,
as if a memory made of brick
were tied to a hole in each eyelid.

Relaxing in the weight,
head bowed behind
a stack of keyboards,
bleached hair, dressed
all in baggy black, he bounces
behind a musical wall—
salvation from a scarred youth.
A train he believes he's on.

Certain notes, a touch too loud,
are his spasmodic screams back
at the faces of what happened.

Someday, through the scales,
he may even find the key
to the rusted iron door of grace.

Being alive is his ticker-tape parade,
his testament to surviving
the scorch of adolescent mercury.

Price of Admission

A Saturday night game—suspended for fifty minutes at the end of the first quarter because of pouring rain and lightning. Something about the goose bumps, raised hair and raindrops on the beautifully tanned shoulders and arms of girls caught by the weather—the smell of it all dripping to dirty concrete along with the ketchup and mustard overloaded onto my foot-and-a-half-long corndog. Something about that sudden mid-September drop in temperature that makes you want to wrap your arms around those shivering shoulders—no commitment intended—just to… you know… take one for the team. Something about that third quarter interception and runback by the new freshman whose adrenalin speed clips the heels of the storm's lightning, and the fan's rolling thunder that follows. Something about a plastic tray of nachos sacrificed on the pavement by a thousand shoe soles, then baptized in Coke, leaving only faint traces of jalapeño slices. I don't know what brings me here. But the corndog alone is worth the price of the ticket I paid too much for on the sidewalk on Asp Avenue so the dad and his daughter could get on into the game. Cause you know, if it'd been a son, I'd a left 'em there like a sack o' potatoes.

S/U – Athlete Evaluations

I am to teach them
Freshman English.
And I am to evaluate
performance at mid-semester.

Of the three:
one listens, laughs
at my jokes, but rides
the razor's edge at "C-"—
a good kid, disarmingly
respectful and polite;

another is a blow-off,
no notebook in class,
didn't get course packet,
leaves like a prince
out of parliament
to go to the bathroom,
and did fairly well
on the essay exam;

the third sleeps
sitting up, eyes open,
and never completed
a sentence in his essay,
can't possibly pass
without that great,
smiling social worker
of college athletes:
plagiarism.

And the form reads:
satisfactory=S
unsatisfactory=U

But the law in Oklahoma reads:
Love the college football player
aS yoU love yoUrself.

Done

Galileo's on the Paseo.
OKC at midnight.

My brother's band is up
from Texas.
He's mighty fine
on a hybrid blond Telecaster.

Roland plays a five-string
1940s upright Kay bass—
the "Chubby Jackson" model—
eats only organic,
cleanses with special oils
and minerals, smokes
five packs a day.

Local artwork sings
off the burnt orange walls.

My kerosene candle throws
shifting arms of light across
these pages while the lost and lonely
whoop and clap over Bud Lights,

and I can't tell my brother
I have no desire whatsoever
to pick up a guitar again
and play in a cover band.

Thinking about Death

lately, I've wondered whether
or not I want a gravesite
for young poets to come visit,
leaving prayers and promises
in the cracks of my tombstone
while contemplating the business
of worms.

Grand delusions aside, cremation
seems more my style, scattered
in fourths among the Arbuckles,
Southern Rockies, Sangre de Cristos,
and Big Bend, the four chambers
of my road-worn, vagabond heart—
granted my daughter's up to the task.

As in life, so in death…
I want 'em to have a hard time
finding me.

Visitors Guide

Calvin is my town's "paper boy."
He wears a crimson batter's helmet
with a football helmet's mask attached
somehow—a big 36 on the back.
He's on a first name basis, it would
appear, with 100,000 people
as he beats the main drags
with his over-the-shoulders
"Norman Transcript" bag.
The price is a quarter.
Everyone gives a dollar.

He used to be shy in his slowness.
But several years ago, some local-boy-
gone-big made a movie called "Possums"
I think, and based a character on
Calvin. Ever since, Calvin's owned
the place. His monotone has increased
in volume, and he graciously pities
those less fortunate than he, cracking
jokes with businessmen and politicians.

If you visit, take care where one thing
is concerned: *never* touch the helmet.
I watched a transplanted idiot
reach out in faux admiration once.
Three locals grabbed the guy
and jerked him away while Calvin,
arms raised in jaguar defense,
backed out of the café
and down the sidewalk on Main.

I Was There

Friday – July 4, 2003

in a white T-shirt and red gym shorts
pulled up over blue pajama pants.

My little girl, on her bike smothered
in crepe-paper, bows, and flags,
revved an imaginary engine,
her front tire almost touching
the bumper of the police car
that would lead the parade.

4th of July is a simple holiday
for Oklahoma Sooner fans.
Just add blue to whatever
clothes and cars you already have.

I was there for my daughter
who at seven was thoroughly
drunk on the thrill of being
"in" a parade, rather than
watching from the curb.

I was there for my friend, a soldier
serving us well, even though his eyes
are dots at the bottom of two big
question marks—punctuation
on his thoughts about our government.

I was there for my country,
dancing cautiously along in the fever
of maniacal arrogance that builds
to a degree more than hot enough
to burn down Rome a second time.

I was there for Independence,
liberty, and justice for all, concerned
that my president just might be
the most dangerous man in the world.

Lasting Impressions

I. Waitress in Boston:

"So, where's the accent from?"
Oklahoma. Where's yours from?
"What? Well… you're just…
a lot nicer than I thought
Oklahomans would be."
Well, you're a lot nicer than we thought Bostonians would be.

II. Yosi, in Jerusalem:

"Are you still having problems
with the Indians there?"

III. Vitale – Russian Olympic Rugby Player and Local Guide in Chimkent, Kazakhstan:

"Amerikanski Cowboyskis!"

IV. Three Israeli Soldiers at the Southern Checkpoint into the West Bank:

1 - "Let dem go."
2 - "No no! Dis bad."
3 - "No matter."
1 - "Where from?"
Oklahoma.
1 - "?"
Texas?
2 - "Ma?"
Dallas?
3 - "Oh! Dallas! J Rrrr Ewing! You know?"
Yeah… uh… he's my uncle.
1 - "Let dem go."

V. Waiter at Sam's in San Francisco:

"And, where are you from?"
Oklahoma.
"Ohmygod."

One Hour

Here where the chrome pin
fits tightly into the very last notch
of the Bible Belt wrapped wide
around the fat belly
of a nation stuffed with
Christians and cock-fighters,
there's hardly a car or pickup
on the streets between 11 and noon
on Sundays—a fabulous time
to go for a walk, catch God
on his cigarette break.

Rockin' Au Pair

So, my friends Andy and Marion
in the band Starlight Mints
are going on tour with Steve Burns,
the Blues Clues guy from my
little girl's favorite PBS kids show.

Apparently, he moonlights
as an angry young pop singer
on weekends away from his
screaming three-foot fans.

Anyway, that's what they'll do
this summer while I hold down
The Opolis Café for 'em…

just the kind of lazy, crazy
thing that happens round here

in my hoppin' home town.

The Four of July

Four of us.
Three have had wives leave
sporadically over the last four years.
One came home to a fiancée in bed
with someone else.

After the city's fireworks,
we drive south over the South
Canadian River and clear out
the discounted inventory
of a mosquito infested
fireworks stand—
each item a metaphor
for machine guns, howitzers,
grenades, and flame-throwers.

A hippie, a music teacher,
an English teacher, a captain
in the Air Force, all going back
to some beginning on the side
of a dirt road that leads down
to the baptismal waters of a patchy
home town river.

The dull red glow of four punks
lights the fuses as we hand-launch
M150s, strings of Black Cats, and
scream variations on *Deya go Bee-atch!*

After years of therapists
and counselors—so many
wasted hours—something flashes
in the pop and crackle of a thousand
tiny fires kindled near the quiet shores
of the soothing, expectant waters
that flow from God's patience—

"Buried with him…
raised to walk…
in newness of life."

Burn

Oklahoma in July
is a marshmallow
in a bonfire;
a branding iron
on the face;
a toad in the slow-
ly heated pot;
where Fahrenheit
screams until its eyes
turn red—
until the blood
rises in its mercurial veins.

Beautiful and Gorgeous

Two weddings in one day.
Temperature in the hundreds.

The afternoon wedding
in a Catholic church
reverberated in the absence
of a crowd. A friend
from the Frisbee field.
Found by a great girl.
Worked, last I saw,
in the Chick-Fil-A
at the Student Union.
The car with beer-can-
bumper-streamers, filled
with white balloons, is
an old off-white Love
Bug—the big round
53 sticker on each door.

The evening wedding
in the Coles Garden,
outdoors, barely held
the hundreds in attendance.
Groomsmen in expensive tuxes
and flip-flop sandals
on their feet, like a smart-
ass wink at the toiling masses.
Perfectly can-tanned
limbs flowed from strap-
less dresses, fanning
hundred dollar haircuts.
Two students I'd worked with—
an OU pom girl and a
soccer star—both
as sweet as they can be.
The get away car—a Lexus.

I wander through the pricey flood
of beer and wine, the multi-
colored buffet with smoked
brisket at the end, and
the Cakes of Gibraltar,
like Bogey in the Casbah,

and begin to think *They're*
the same everywhere.
The poor. The rich.
And the degrees between.
The poor: beautiful, struggling
under the weight of a government
that overlooks them.
The rich: gorgeous, struggling
to overcome tax advantages.

The Watts in L.A. has no
copyright on minimum wage
and desperation.
Greenwich, Connecticut has no
exclusive claim to padded portfolios
and fabulous little teenaged bodies
with all their fabulous little
teenaged problems made for TV.

The poor in Oklahoma
are beautiful too.
The rich in Oklahoma,
just as gorgeous.

I Just Wanted to Buy a Magazine

The bottom of my bookstore receipt
is a word puzzle, because
entertainment in my homeland
must never sit, rollover, play dead
for a while, like any dog is intelligent
enough to do. It reads:

blue blue blue blue red red red red r
blue blue blue blue white white whit
blue blue blue blue red red red red r
white white white white white white
red red red red red red red red red r

And I refuse to color it in;
to make a U. S. flag missing
eight of its stripes and all
of its stars,
because I'm sick
of a plastic patriotism that carries
Americans about as far and well
as open crates of blueberries,
strawberries, and bananas
the length of I-40
in an unrefrigerated truck.

A Defining Dilemma

Just bought the Oxford
English Dictionary on CD-
ROM; Second Edition;
Version 3.0. It cost me
319 dollars and 71 cents.

I look at the box sitting
on my table and think about
900 years of changes in language
and the 50 years of collecting them
into this work, and that the majority
of the entries came from a doctor-
gone-mad-serial-killer the editors
never met but trusted was
a scholar slaving away in
a garret, as opposed to asylum.

But, what's the shock, really,
when one takes a look back
at the psychological saga
of excessive scholarly research?

Sources aside, I begin to wonder
how much I want to know
about words, in all honesty.
Will digging in help me write
a more meaningful poem?
Or will it only take me
one step farther away from
the sophomore helping his dad
bring in the wheat from
the fields north of Watonga,
who takes a short break
on the tractor fender, scratches
his head through a John Deere
hat, and rolls his eyes at this
damn poem the new English
teacher asked the class to read?

Lowland Heretic

Down by the base of a wheat stalk
in the well-tended fields
of lower Great Plains republicans,
I lie
A green slithering democrat,
narrowly escaping the occasional
blaze of buckshot and crowds
at cockfights—roosters
with razor blades—enough
to even make this liberal snake
recoil in horror and disgust.

Immersed in the holy waters
of a good Southern Baptism,
I raise
a sinful hand up and out
toward the softly shaking head
of St. Jude in hopes he'll rescue
a shaking, lonely lost cause
from the rage of this red-faced
denomination that lords an iron
domination over the souls of
good people who have not seen
the fat blocking its heart and arteries.

Knowing Better

She sneaks in around 7am,
slips into the other side
of my bed—angel of seven
years—and we sleep until 8:30.

Her sleep, sound. Mine,
the nervous sleep of a dad
remembering the thoughts
of little eight, nine, and ten-
year-old boys—punks. They are.
We were. I was. Hormones like
unpopped corn slowly heating in oil.

I give up, shuffle into the kitchen
to pour our juices, and consider
having her discreetly followed
by a bodyguard for eleven years.

She follows, a few
minutes later, yawning,
rubbing eyes, still trusting
the world, believing life
might be the rainbows
and pots of gold promised
in her colorful books.

Over cereal she prays
aloud that God will know
we love him and appreciate
the toast with grape jelly.

I pray, lips pressed together,
that God will part the inevitabilities
of time like the Red Sea and drown
all the teenaged boys in our wake,
knowing her prayer is truer than mine,
and that Jesus is smiling at her
with one disapproving eye shot my way.

Found Out

I've daydreamed a lot
about where I would move
if I could shake this town
and its few thick chains:

Paris—until they find out
I'm an American
New York—until they find out
I'm an Oklahoman
Key West—'til they find out
I'm heterosexual,
each time moving on
when I'm found out.

But I've found out
moving is not what I want.
It's going and coming
back again that I love,
visiting all these places
I want to move to until
I find out that their
trashy back alleys
and smelly back doors
of restaurants are the same;
their politicians and lawyers,
rich and poor, beautiful
and ugly are no different;

and that their stupid people
speaking loudly on cell phones
in public spaces are exactly
the same as the stupid people
speaking loudly on cell phones
in the public spaces of my beloved
hometown.

For Some Reason

I watch the 8pm sun
throw shadows from ivy
onto red clay brick just
before summer storm clouds
wrap around the light, as if
they're tired of its heat
bullying us on August nights.

These small atmospheric kindnesses
remind me of the unsolvable
mystery of my love for Oklahoma.

Boston, Carmel… Santa Fe, Colorado
Springs… I'll go any chance I get.
But living in these places is less
a consideration all the time.
They're the beautiful girl
you're afraid to know
too well, because…

because this is home,
and I'll probably stay
right here
right where
my enemies will always
know they can find me.

Good to Go

I cross the tracks, head past
the front of Sooner Theater
and see Gates ahead of me
in a morning angle of light
through Bradford Pears.

He's got a well-muscled frame
with long, waving blond hair
and taps the thin end of a 3½ foot
tree branch back and forth
in front of his feet, making his way.

On any given Friday or Saturday,
in any given dimly lit night club,
you'll find him playing a mean
upright bass from behind equally
mean looking shades, but
with a smile on his lips about
what some must think is a handicap.

We approach the stoplight at Peters
at the same time. I stop because
of the red light and wonder how
he knows to. I don't hear anything.

I'm about to speak, when the light
changes, and I head out—small talk
never having been a gift. I step up
on the opposite curb and realize
he didn't follow. Concerned,
I whip around in search of appropriateness,
but while I fish, a voice from
the open window of an 80s red Datsun
hollers, *You're good to go, David!*

and Gates is on his way.

Serious Business

Three lines centered on printer paper:

The Diner will be closed
Aug. 11 – 15
(Gone Fishin')

taped to the glass door on East Main.
Three disappointed diners chuckle
Yeah, right about the "Gone Fishin'" line,
while they climb back into an economy car.

Just happening by, I want to stop,
rap on their window, and say *Oh …*
no, no, no … when Patch, the owner, says
"Gone Fishin'," he damn well means it.

In the Pause

The lights went out
in New York City today,
and I open the blinds
in my house
and look around,
thinking about
what I would eat
out of the fridge
before it goes bad;
how long the pantry
would last me;
how beautiful
the night would be.

Critical Care

I caught her out the corner of my eyes
and quickly pushed the OPEN DOOR
button to let her in, a grandma trying
to hide the twitch of worry in her eyes.

Both on our way to the second floor
Critical Care Unit. I jingled keys.
She gripped two huge McDonalds
sacks in one white-knuckled hand.

I, almost forgetting where I was,
almost said, *C'mon Mam, you know*
that stuff is why most of us are here;
why it's harder for them to find a vein.

But she's from a time and place that,
when someone is sick, hurting, and
families are paralyzed with fear,
you go and get them food and drink.

And she's right. And while we feed
the hurting their comfort, McDonalds
feeds doctors their business, and all
have a place in the great circle of life.

Inter-dimensional Thrift Shopping

Two sisters, both with long
graying hair swirled up
in untidy buns with clips.

Two guys, one a ceramic
artist named Sean, the other,
Keel, eats macaroni pie left-handed.

The three not eating, paint Sean's
avant-garde, pre-fired glops
that look like white tossed salads.

The first sister talks of dreams
mingling with reality and butcher
knives mingling with her ex's chest.

And Sean follows with tips
from Buddha and Freud and
some possible mild medications,

never looking up from his fine-
tipped brush, his armpits
darkening from the sweat.

The second sister speaks of Jesus
and the time the first sister tried
to kill her in their parents' house.

They had both been so religious.
And the first sister waved it off
and told Sean she'd gone to the

Wiccan place and gotten something
that calmed her down, and she
thinks she's doing better now…

And Keel interjects that he'd spent
twenty years stoned, and now
his little boy lives in Colorado,

and his little girl's in Florida
somewhere, and the second sister
immediately steps in with the fact

that the daughter she had not seen
for five years “appeared” next to her
in the thrift store today, and

the girl behind the counter had seen
her too and asked some questions
about her. And a long discussion

ensued with the four around the table
about whether or not this was a good
thing. And the eventual consensus

seemed to be that it was, and that
this was her daughter’s way of
bringing their spirits together.

And the sister was so glad,
because she’d bought a couple of
Indian dolls for the apparition—

you know… as a gift, little altars,
in honor of their afternoon of
inter-dimensional thrift-shopping.

The Work of Heaven

Sooner Football kicks off
tomorrow, doubling the size
of our little town—locals
and shop-owners bustling
around like coastal villagers
preparing for a hurricane.

Crimson & Cream flags
line streets, windows, and
car dealerships, and flap
just above the doors of every
Dodge Ram Dooley and
battered Datsun in sight.

And Jubal sounds reveille
as God rolls out of bed,
cracks his knuckles,
and prepares to detail ranks
of jittery angels about the coming
conflict in the prayers of players,
their mothers and grandmothers,
who will be praying against
the mothers and grandmothers
of players on the opposing team,
and how someone must lose,
and how heaven must choose,
and that it's a dirty business,
but, *It* is *what we get paid for*.

Honestly,

I'm thirty-eight and a half,
and she still packs ice chests
and picnic baskets for my road trips,
right down to the red and white
checkered napkins, plastic-ware.
And I want to tell her I have
money now; I've learned to shop,
don't eat at McDonalds anymore.
But I don't because I love her food,
and it's always so good.

Here at the tail end of a PhD,
she still follows me to the door
of the house I grew up in, forcing
Ziploc baggies of frozen bread
into my already fully-crammed hands
while telling me how to know when
things have gone bad in the fridge.
Her face betrays a genuine fear
that I'll eat the expired and die.
And I want to tell her I've had
twenty years of higher ed now
and have finally figured out
the whole mold thing, the smell
of bad meat and bad people.
But I don't because I need the bread
and am pretty sure I ate some-
thing a little funky a few days ago.

I've already lived longer than Christ did,
and I've still gotta eat my veggies
when I have dinner with her and dad.
And I want to tell her longevity
is not one of the hallmarks of my
profession, but I don't because I know
I need the fiber and, besides, nothing
in the universe can stand up to the sheer
force and power of a mother's love.

The Matter of Main Street

I pull past the back
of First Baptists Church
where I was the preacher's kid
for thirty years and park
on the west side of the tracks
under the catalpa tree. My tires
pop and crunch the marble-size
pod seeds on broken up blacktop.

I cross over the tracks on foot
and glance at my milky reflection
in the front windows of the Sooner
Theater, recalling a lip-quivering
performance of one of my high
school garage bands there,
followed, a couple of decades
later, by my little girl's twirling
body in a production of "Bye Bye
Birdie," her eyes exploding
into a system of stars.

Further down, I pop into the bank
that bought my house for me, pop
back out and cross Peters
to the Steppin' Out shoe store
at the bottom of the Vista building
where my ex-wife bought her white
high heels for the wedding.

Next door is the office I never
spend any time in, because you can't
help college kids from behind
a metal desk under phosphorescents.

Dad's not in his office yet
as interim director of the cool
Baptists—the ones who read books.

So I head on down the sidewalk,
past Bison Witches where I get
cheap beer and sandwiches with
buddies after a game of Frisbee;

past the Midway Barber Shop;

past The Diner, my favorite spot
for pancakes and bacon grease.
Bum's in there laughin' with somebody.

Two more doors down, I wave
at Mack, the always-sharp-dressed
owner of Goodno Jewelry—
dad's favorite golfin' buddy who
sold me the wedding rings.

Then it's around the corner
on Crawford to Opolis Coffee
where Suzie, or John, starts
whippin' up my au lait before
I even make it in the door.

John and I gripe about the president.
Dad and Mack step in to talk about
the latest graphite shaft over lattes,

and I pause to wonder if anyone
in New York or Los Angeles
would ask how my daughter and I
are doing with the recent change.

Holy Cola

On all four corners of 24th and Main,
suburbanites with red SUVs, white
pickups, and their plaid clad children,
unload big blue ice chests and hand out
free Cokes to cars stopped by the light.

Mine is one such car stopped
by their light, windows down
worshipping September.

One of the little boys pops up
at my little girl's window
offering the gift, and she
looks at me for permission—
eyes wide at the good fortune
and providence of it all.

I say *Sure, Honey, I guess,*
and when he hands it to her,
he slips in a glossy business-
sized card with it. You see…

I knew the card would come
with it. Because suburbanites
don't just leave easy chairs
without some direct command
from God or Commerce, or worse,
some combination of the Two.

And as I round the corner,
fingering the card that,
as I suspected, was ripping off
the Coca Cola logo to advertise
a local church, my daughter
says *Aren't they the nicest people?*
And I say *Yes, Honey*—choosing
not to follow with the "but"—
the "but" I might follow with
if she were a little older—

But, Honey … you do understand …
they're using Coke
to sell Christ.

Since 1955

Don's Alley is over on 29th.
I haven't had one of those
burgers in over a decade.

So I stop in, plant myself
in a deep maroon booth
with a thick wooden table
next to a dark brown stone wall,
all under dim lighting, and I
order the Jumbo Bacon Cheeseburger
with grilled onions, and my waitress
says *Sure thing, honey*, through
a smoker's cough—must a been
workin here since they opened.

I look around. Everybody's
got gray hair n' a gut.
One guy with two canes
orders Chicken Pot Pie
with pinto beans like a benediction
at a brush arbor meetin, and I see

Western art all over the walls,
one painting is an Indian woman
with her child, and I know
the two old farmers at table five
don't give a damn bout no Indians,

and I'm destroyin this burger,
everything I remember it bein,
and I'm thinkin *Man! This is it!*
This is what it's all about. And
I know it's takin a week off
the end of my life, and I'm
thinkin, over the next few years,
I'm comin right back here
and carvin off a few more,

and I know the two old ladies
just come in can barely walk,
but the waitress is spinnin
the third shelf of the Traulsen
window-display dessert-case,

n’ she’s spinnin it for me,
n’ I’m gonna eat that piece
o’ pècan pie she’s grabbin
no matter what

cause,
I’m just sayin,

Some things’re worth dyin’ for.

Out West

Didn't write a poem yesterday.
Bit disappointed.
I do shoot for one a day, though.
And most of the time it *is* for the simple joy,
the absolute love of it.

But when I'm honest with myself,
there *are* times when I do it
for no other reason than
to show those stuff shirts
on the lower east side of Manhattan
with thick scarves swirled around
white necks, on their way
to read at the hippie coffeeshop,

that Oklahoma swims in its own wealth
of crazies, criminals, and the general
insanity that goes with both. And
we read our poems about it all
in hippie coffeeshops too. And
it gets frickin' cold here too
in January, but we don't have to wear
no sissy scarves to make a point about it,

and yet,
in continuation of the honesty,
I have to admit—
our crimes do happen in a lower gear;
our crazies walk a little slower;

and I had to look up Manhattan to make sure
it's spelled with all "a's" and two "t's."

I just wish New Yorkers could wrap
their pallid hands around the simple fact
that the cowboys and Indians no longer fight
on horseback. We've moved it into the courts now.

After

I walk in the sigh of evening, the deep breath
that follows the flash of a summer thunder storm.
The sodium orange of sidewalk lights
almost matches the fringe of the cloud line.

Faces appear, as if from a flooded anthill.
Smiles break out in the strangeness of the cool.
Friends, unknown until this vernal moment
greet each other in a sudden camaraderie.

Fins and fishing poles salute each other
in respect to the cycles of life.
Squawking ducks and squealing children
with bread, dance in a circle of giving.

A damp breeze coaxes the smell of beans
and cornbread from an open window.
It mingles with oily pavement
and the must of rain-drenched wood.

Even in the dying light, though,
distant flashes remind me—
they will come to storm again
but only to revive the pulse of life.

City of Holy Faith

Quiet Reunion

Just pulled into the town of Holy Faith.
Big clouds promising, but not delivering.
Spanish Market in full swing. Big crowds
delivering, but not promising.

Bit of a muted entrance this time,
for some reason. Though Santa Fe is,
and will remain, a favorite escape
from the daily pains of earning a check,
I hear an increase in its groans and sighs,

a much heavier stress on its spine
from the profit and decay that always
seep into the most beautiful spaces
when discovered by wealthy tourists.

Along with arriving at the peak of pork
season, with its blinding Hawaiian shirts
and white calves above black socks and
sandals, it's also the tail-end of a bleak year
in which my soul has been holding up
my frail body and its embattled spirit.

My soul is tired.

It is not that I am unhappy to see
my old friend, or that we've lost
anything. Just a quieter reunion
than usual. More like I asked her
not to make any special plans
this time around—no fanfare
or fancy spreads—just time to rest
our tired souls against each other.

I'll bitch & moan about my terrorists.
She'll bitch & moan about her tourists.
And then we'll raise a toast at sunset
on the top floor patio of La Fonda—

To hell with 'em all…

Perkin’ Up

So ends the first 24 hours.
I’m beginning to breathe
here in the shadows of July, to
remember why I love this place.

The moment finds me beneath
what appears to be a nectarine tree
on the back porch in the backyard
of Jane’s, a favorite new watering hole.

Magic. This town grows coffee hideouts
like D.C. grows international resentment.

The discovery has cheered me up
in the fallout of depression
from finding Longevity Café
briefly closed for remodeling.

There’s been cloud cover all day.
Temperature’s about 15 degrees
cooler than home. What can you do?
Santa Fe’s a bitch.

Smacking the Core

The rotting apple core that is
my life these days, followed me
all the way to Santa Fe.

It hovers around my stomach
like an obstinate bee as I sit
in a favorite coffee shop to write,
struggling to endure what has
always been an easy joy.

It plops along behind me
in the thin back alleys, splashing
in putrid, iridescent pools, laughing
at my childish insecurity, smelling
a bit worse with each grungy bath.

It even followed me into
Longevity Café—paradise
on earth, and tried to spoil
my Vietnamese Spring Rolls.

But then, I ordered, in defiance,
the Ginseng Chai Pumpkin Pie
with Soy Dream Ice Cream.

It was as if I had smacked the core
right in the middle of its jiggling seeds
and sent it sprawling into the far corner
of the orange and red room.

I ate with joyful avarice.
People were smiling and happy.
Buena Vista Social Club crooned
on the stereo, and the core
huddled in the corner, shaking,
afraid I would stride over
and smack it again.

On Stopping

I turn around
just before 285 hits I-25.

Looks like an older couple
with a flat on a tiny trailer.

Texas tag, I notice.
The land of my birth
will make for conversation.

She has white hair and feeds
a steady stream of small town
drawl into a cell phone. Just like
all the Aunt Doris's I've ever met.

When I get to the trailer,
I see white hair, a sizeable belly
and black socks with tennis shoes
sprawled underneath.

Need some help?

Boy a' sher do!

That's when I catch it in the corner
of my eye—his aluminum hospital cane
lying on the weed-cracked asphalt.

I dig in with both hands and
let black grease seep into the pores
of my fingers like an easy tattoo.
I help like an English major
with the best of intentions.

When washers and lugs are tight,
he works his way out.
A big cut from the gravel
drips down his right arm.
He hoists himself with an adept
cane trick and hobbles to the back
of the massive Cowboy Caddy.

He throws tools into the camper shell

eyeing first the blown tire
leaning against the guardrail,
then the dripping red on his arm.

Briefly missing his message,
I finally offer to throw it
in the back for him.

He thanks me.
She thanks me.
They roll off.

I stopped.
I stopped because there's
hell in my life right now,
and I want God to notice me.

I climb back in the van,
watch my new tattoos wrap
around the steering wheel,
and wonder:

Did that count?
Is that what Jesus waxed
so intensely about in the
back of Matthew—
something about love
and the least of these?

Well, no Milkbone dropped
from the patchy New Mexican clouds.
And my motives were shameless.
I've stopped trying to fool omniscience.

Yet, there is the simple fact:
they needed help,
and…
I stopped.

Family Plans

I wonder how long
it'll take me to grasp
that mom's starting to have
some trouble getting around.
Hips and knees trick
the given ability to walk.
No canes or walkers.
But still, I wield denial
like a pair of pliers.

I love my mom.
Freud would have a hay-day.
And he can for all I care.
He can take all my confessions
and go play with them, and himself,
in the corner.

You've gotta love a theory
that tears families apart at the seams,
then sits back to analyze the settling
dust of *My $#!@-parents!* and
Damn kids these days! and…

I refuse to study Freud.
I operate on the assumption
that he and his mother weren't
exactly on the same emotional page.

Anyway, I think soon
I'll drive mom out to Santa Fe,
all eight hours, perhaps only to eat
Seared Salmon and Flank Steak
with a nice chardonnay
at the O'Keefe Café.

We'll top it off with bread pudding
smothered in bourbon,
a couple of art galleries,
and a few other
hyacinths-for-the-soul.

An Okie Mingles

La Plazuela
en La Fonda.

My usual table
in the back corner,
just out of the sunlight.

Enchiladas del Norte
y sangría con una
fresh yellow palm daisy
next to my vaso de agua.

The rough stone floor
slopes toward la mesa
in front of me where
a gray haired madre
y una hija linda
share lonche en paz
and conversation.

La hija is a
magazine cover.
But la madre es
mas bonita a me.

Something she knows,
something viejo,
something that holds
her shoulders back,
and her daughter
en su corazón.

A Palpable Patron

It's tough to maintain
a patron saint
when you've grown up
a Baptist preacher's kid.
But, when you've got one,
you've got one, whether
you're Catholic or not.

St. Jude, patron saint
of lost causes; intercessor
of desperate situations,
made himself known to me
over the last couple of years;
came to me knowing I would
not, being a Baptist, come
to him. And I appreciate it.

Turns out, by way of chaos,
hate, and tangible hell in my life,
I needed him.

Why should it surprise me—
God
reaching over denominational walls.

Protocol

I’m not exactly sure
how this saint thing works
on a technical level.
I just know
that when my questions
collect like cottonseed
in the air conditioner,
and God feels like he’s left
for Latvia because
he needs a break
from Southern Baptists,
it’s nice to have someone
to talk to.

Holy Jokes

I've discovered in my reading
that countries and places have patrons
too. Peru has Joseph. Paris,
Genevieve. But, when I looked up

these United States, it said:
    Immaculate Conception.
I cocked my head in a question mark,
smiling with only the left corner

of my mouth. I could have sworn
I heard a distant, taunting laughter
echoing all the way from the halls
of Rome—a kick from the boot of Italy.

Yes. America, America: a land
gorged on the belief of its own
holy birth; blessed above other
nations; defied on penalty of death.

No room for a humble, humiliated
Christ here among corporate mergers,
ordained politicians, and new
crusaders against the forces of evil.

Mestizo

U.S.—
east to west, the push,
west European against
the frontier; a frontier
that kept moving west.

THEM—
south to north, the sweep,
indigenous groups cut clean
by shiny conquistadores.
Albuquerque *before* Jamestown.
Santa Fe *before* the Mayflower.

WE—
Mexican. *No.*
Mexican-American. *Kinda.*
Chicano. *Maybe.*
Hispano. Criollo. *mmm…*

Indian. *Not exactly.*
Native American. *Mostly!*

PDAs & Ponytails

Not feeling overly inspired,
as I'd expect from wandering
the streets of Santa Fe and haunting
some of the best coffeeshops anywhere.

But my soul's still weary from the latest
blotch on my karmic rap-sheet.
Just need to sit down for a while.
A rock or log is fine. Just a week or two.

And the City of Holy Faith
idn't a bad place to do it. Profundity
is such a wicked, exhausting game.
And I'd like to give it a rest. Maybe write
to my journal, instead of an audience.

As for "being" a writer?
Don't know why I bother sometimes.
World's got enough of 'em to choke on.

Why … a "real" one just set up shop
right outside my door, on the patio.
And he's got a laptop, PDA, ponytail,
and chocolate croissant. Now …
how'm I supposed to compete with that?

With Eyes to See

Santa Fe works hard
to hold on to herself.
Tourists creep down alleys,
through cracks, over walls
like dorky conquistadores—
conquistadorks armed
with cameras and credit,
trying to take the land again.
But Santa Fe is much older
and wiser this time—older
than the landing of pilgrims
in the only three boats American
history high school text books
seem to remember.

I feel the city's eyes watching
this time, arms around its treasures,
wanting to be generous,
knowing the price.

She tries to be patient
with small minds that hack through
entire lifetimes without ever
realizing
bread and wine, stairs and dirt,
can be sacred,
Holy.

And I want to help her,
though an outsider. So,
I come quietly, tread lightly,
leave… in Faith,
brushing away my tracks.

Flamenco

Well Honey…
it's sort of a…
Spanish Riverdance.

Sierra wants to know
what I'm getting us into
this time.

Oh, she says with weak approval.

Her dry sponge eyes begin to soak
up the room the second we walk in.
The stage, the lights, the paintings,
the mood.

She sits in my lap, little back shooting
straight up in anticipation. House lights
dim. Black boots pound the wood floor
of the hollow stage. Her eyes double in
size. A flurry of black clothes and
black hair fling sweat on the front row.
Her hot, moist little palms
squeeze my thumbs white.
A beautiful red dress
paints ruffling circles
in flood lights.
I hear a long,
whispered,
woooow…

It's late. She falls asleep
at the end of the second hour.
Not from boredom,
but exhaustion.
As I carry her out,
she whispers,
eyes closed,
This is a
nice place.

Renovations at the Santuario de Guadalupe

Jesus is on his back
on the grand piano while
workers repaint the santuario.

He's an old, time-worn
piece of wood with chips
on the knees, one on the forehead—
white scabs on one tough man-God.

The painters turned off
the mariachi music on a
white-splattered radio, so we
could discuss sacred images.

And I notice, through the scaffolding,
the nails look as if they go through
his feet, the cross, and into the piano,

and his head, normally bowed
when the cross is upright, looks now
as if he's trying to get up.

Santuario de Chimayó

The tears of last year's prayers,
prayed in this very spot,
well up in my eyes, lids and lashes
like sandbags that can't hold the rising
river. Soaked villagers stand on
muddy hills in my mind and watch
homes and stores fill with brown water,
cars and bicycles twist and wash away.

The prayers for protection and healing were
answered, but now sit like moving boxes
piled in the corners of my heart, abandoned
because of indecision. One by one,
while resting in this rough-hewn pew,
I open boxes and scatter my lack of trust
in God like a panic of doves.

Jesus weeps
and smiles at the same time
in the face of every crucifix
in the sanctuary.

And I smear the dirt
of a miracle on my forehead
and wrists while Christ
wipes my tears with a bloody thumb,
opens his other hand towards the door.

I walk out into a different shade of light,
weak from a baptism few Baptists
could ever understand while standing
in the shadows of their giant crosses
in the giant parking lots of their giant
churches in the suburbs of heaven.

Glorieta

Baptists come, no, they
throng—Catholics come,
Baptists throng—
to their massive, gated hideaway
in the Sangre de Cristo foothills,

chanting creeds built on the cooked
bricks of fear, like any faith,
or cult, that's carved out an
adobe niche in the small valleys
peppering New Mexico's landscape.

They suck the life, bleed the high
desert's water, from the indigenous
they claim to love. Much like
the indigenous they claim to love
all around the world and consume
in holy fires like napalm cutting
a path through the hearts of nations.

But here, in retreat, they sing
and sway to the 2% milk fat
of pasteurized praise songs
carefully sifted through the mesh
of dogma by huffing and puffing
old men manning buttons and switches
behind the big curtain
to whom no attention
should be paid.

Remember Los Alamos

Best part's the drive in.
The town itself leaves me
a little dry, like every time
my president utters "nuc-u-lar"
for the type of weapons
everyone else should not have.

I'm sure there's something
at its core, something cool
like winter, or a hot nightlife,
but I can't find it.

I turn right on Oppenheimer Rd.
hoping something will explode
into view, but it only goes 100 feet,
then dead ends at the public library.

The bumper sticker at R Books reads:
Los Alamos
Birthplace of the Bomb

The trees are all dying in the hills.

And I'm sippin' heavy coffee in Café Allegro.
A Japanese family sits two tables over—
two fabulous daughters with fabulous tattoos.
And this Peach Granola Muffin's just glowin'
with flavor like there was a great big buttery
meltdown in the back of the kitchen.

Jemez Springs

Think Rain! screams a green sign
nailed to a tree across the road.

I glance back and forth from the sign
to the angry clouds boiling over
the mountains in every direction.

After the last bite of spinach burrito
on the screened-in porch of the Laughing
Lizard, I'm surprised I'm still dry,
the sky having grumbled like a bad
stomach through my entire meal.

But not even the Jemez Thunder
can squeeze a drop to slake
the devastating drought;

just like the Paraclete down the road
couldn't help the problem priests
everyone thought were here to dry out
from addiction to sacramental wine,
but as it turned out, were here because
of a penchant for little altar boys;

just like Father Mac—the one guy
some locals think might have been
trying to heal the situation—
couldn't stop the doped-up maniac
from bludgeoning him to death,
even though he put up a fight,
and even though the maniac claimed
to have been abused—a claim
no one at the time thought to check
against attendance records.

And my eyes come back to the sign
nailed to the tree, and I think about Jesus
and all the priests later released into
the surrounding hills full of little boys…

the very moment my waiter smudges
all my fresh ink with *his* summary:
"Some creepy shit."

But We Want To

We never quite touch,
outside those occasional
light slaps with the backs of
fingers on the other's shoulder,
eyes going wide in a smile,
as if to say *I can't believe*
you just said that! when really
you do,
you do believe it,
and you want to believe
in all and more,
even love.

We never quite kiss,
even in the moment we pause
beneath the acacia in the square,
Christmas lights dangling from branches,
subdued in the distant glow of St. Francis
Cathedral. Not even when our eyes meet,
lock, and linger in desperation,
because we know the ropes
and chains back home will lead
to separate cages like the ends
of every Shakespeare play combined.

We never quite say it,
because words fall like leaves
to the ground and drift away
in the late summer rains
of Santa Fe.

Shits in The Shed

"Poets are shits,"
Tony Mares told me
over Golden Margaritas
at The Shed—told me
that's what his third wife
told him over—quite
possibly—margaritas
when they first met;

this one being the marriage
that has worked the best
for him.

And I thought: *Well … yeah …*
I mean … I can't fight her on it.

But isn't this what pairing up
comes down to? You gotta
pick your shit. Choose one
and go with it.

And I must say,
Tony and I were
two fine shits
that night in The Shed.

All the Pretty…

Down on the square
tonight
they're all beautiful:

unwashed guitar players,
low-rider pimpin' dopes,
the crazies preaching to ions;
even the Guccied-up wealthy.

Hell … even the Baptists
from up the highway
look lovely tonight
in the glow,
the sun low enough to blind
in its reflection off sidewalk bricks
on San Francisco Street.

And even the lady dressed all in black
with a goofy looking black hat that
just paraded through the square
at an angle holding high a long
flagpole with one flag on top—
the Stars and Stripes all in black
and white—and another just below it
with the crossbones of a pirate flag,
but instead of a scull, a frighteningly
good knock-off of George W's mug.

No News Is Good News

Haven't seen a TV in weeks.
It's on at Frankie's in Pecos
this morning, though. And…

well… there's nothin' on it now,
just like there was nothin' on it
that last time I wasted 30 minutes,

because there *is* no *new* story:
soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq
are dying to the tune of two or more

a day and coming down, mysteriously,
with pneumonia in much greater numbers
while Bush, Cheney, and Ashcroft

talk over tea and croissants
about North Korea, the Middle
East, and "other" issues…

Nirvana at the Coyote Café

I had the house sangria,
the steak burrito—which has
a much longer, fancier name
in Spanish—and finished with
chocolate cake, ice cream,
and coffee, all in and on white
porcelain back in the corner
of the upstairs, outdoor patio.

A blue, red, and green, neon-lit
parrot glows like an evil shaman
in the corner to my right.

A street light blazes copper
just over the breast-high wall
to my left, and Christmas lights
are strings of flashing popcorn
on the top floor of the Plaza Mercado
just across Water Street, and I,
upon lifting the last sip of coffee
to my lips while a cool breeze
combs my hair, remember
the one thing
God seems to want most,

so I raise the cup higher
toward heaven first
in a silent toast
before lowering it—
now sanctified—
to my mouth,

knowing
I've honored
the agreement.

Over in the Plaza

I sit on a park bench,
knees tucked into my arms.

The breeze is cool in the wake
of an evening thunderstorm.

The clock on the corner of Palace
and Lincoln glows 10:30,

same time as the night we passed
through the square like two moons

in and out of patchy clouds,
much like the sky's moon does

right now, showing its light
only now and then.

Loud-talkers laugh and screech
over beers on The Ore House balcony.

Two policemen stand, hands in pockets,
on the corner of Lincoln and San Francisco,

and two city workers wheel off chairs
from in front of the stage across from

the Palace of the Governors, as if
something is over and not coming back.

That's when a couple kisses beneath
the lights strung in the acacia tree,

and that's when I have to leave, because
something is over, and it's not coming back.

Leaving Longevity

Yellow floodlight
and lazy drizzle
glaze the red brick patio
just outside my window.

The usual muffled frenzy
of hippies left early tonight,
leaving only the easy bass
of the stereo system.

In a quiet goodbye to the muse of
enchantment, I order the Ginseng
Chai Pumpkin Pie with organic
crust and High Desert Honey.

Save penance for the everyday
guilt of home and uncertain
tomorrows. The mail
will surely make me pay.

But I have to leave Longevity.
Can't afford too much Santa Fe,
its Holy Faith of excess creativity
and ambrosia of the Lotus Way.

Besides, my publisher
couldn't possibly afford to print
four books of poetry a year.

On Returning

I snuck back into town
one more time this morning
before hitting 285 to 40.

Café Pink. Roger and Annie
have fixed me up for the road
with a mocha au lait and scone.

It's in the upper 60s here
at my patio table. I'm soaking
in it before the 103° of home.

Yes… an eight hour drive
can raise you 43 degrees
in the southwestern summers.

They tell me to pop back over
in early October for the leaves.
I think I'll oblige them.

The soft breeze on my shins
makes it impossible to stand,
let alone think about leaving.

But my little girl's picture on the table
sings higher notes in my soul's opera,
and I must go home for the sake
of love and all it means to be human.


Texas Almost Touches Colorado

Road to Nineveh

A favorite way to flee
the religious filibuster
that is the state of Oklahoma
is to hit I-35 South to that
material Emerald City
in the north of Texas where
Dorothy's house bounced
on the unsuspecting witch.

As I blow down the inside lane
and cross the Red River—
tainted by Moses' divine dipstick—

I see a mighty storm blowing,
racing up behind me, so I
quickly move over to let it pass—
a preacher's wife in a nutshell brown Caddy,
late for a Friday evenin' potluck,
designed to keep men out of bars.

There's just enough time to read
the license plate—"PRAISEM."
I toy with the grammar
'til I get lost in Denton.
I make a U-turn at Scripture Street.
I'm not kidding.

Finally, in Oz, I successfully navigate
the corner of Beltline and Preston—
America's most dangerous intersection.
So says my most dangerous friend.

Now, at his house, we settle into cushions.
And no matter how much wine and cheese,
no matter how much I love to hate religion,
our talk often turns, eventually, to God.

Perdition

I sat on a beautiful lawn chair
on the beautiful back porch
overlooking the beautiful pool
of the beautiful home
of my beautiful friends
in a suburb of

Dallas.

And, all the while,
the incessant growling,
hacking and coughing
of an industrial-sized
Ashplund tree mulcher roared
and sprayed its wooden sputum
into the back of a diesel-humming
orange and black truck
like some sick, anachronistic,
metal mastodon—

as if the twenty first century
needed to add a new circle
to Dante's raging hell
in order to keep up with
the magnitude and volume
of its planet-sodomizing sins.

My friends are moving to the Hill Country.

Happyness

The First Baptist Church of
Happy,
Texas

burned to the ground
not long after a tornado
had blown its roof off.

hmm…

Elemental

There is a place I know
where the air around the cedars
heals the heart of its arrow wounds;

a space I've kneeled in
and felt the foot of greed
lift its heal off the neck of my soul;

where my lungs pull in life
filtered through the blood
and sand of these Texas hills;

where the fingers of my mind
relax their grip on the illusion
of answers and absolutes;

where the fire of creation burns,
and the rock of art's necessity stands,
a memorial, midstream in the waters.

The Quiet House

Deep among the cedars
in the hill country of Texas,
overlooking a deep canyon
stream that feeds the Blanco,
there is a cabin with front
and back porches as big
as its inside. Big as its heart.

Hewn wood and crafted stone
dance in a peaceful revolution
among nature, leaving deer
indifferent to its presence.

When I honor its code
I can almost hear the ants
marching down the counter;
the conversations of ghosts
among the burial mounds.

And when the steaks are grilled
to perfection, the cabernet
poured to the brim,
and the breeze perfumes it all
through the frayed trunks
of cedars,
time diverts

into an easy
flow of dreams in the night
that will make tomorrow's
day an easy return.

Where I Go

A quiet angel sits
on the southern rim
of a lonely overlook,

a hidden guardian
among the blue
rock and cedars.

She offers rest

to the singer
whose song wilts
in the heat
of an earless audience

to the painter
whose brush hardens
in the primary colors
of market demands

to the poet
whose prophecies
bounce off the doors
of a dying church.

San Marcos

The grit and hipness in this town,
stares you down like the glowing tips
of cigarettes between every first
and second finger of every hand
in The Coffee Pot, where I sit
by the window looking out across
the street at Lady Justice holding
the scales atop the courthouse,
suffocating in a thick glaze of silver
like a cheap version of the girl in *Goldfinger*,
like the cloud around the girl in front of me
with her head tilted towards textbooks,
but like, talkin' on her cell phone, like
she's not too young to be, like, smoking
and, like, drinking coffee, you know?

And I wonder if her dad's a cowboy
like the bronze statue of a horseman
there on the corner of LBJ & Hopkins
who through the haze in this place appears
to have smoke pourin' from the barrel
of his pistol pointed up at the big Texas sky
as if to say *Don't come down here … don't*
even pass through these here parts…
unless yer serious, ya' damn Okie."

Highway 31

I cut through the heart
of Colorado today.
Highway 24,
cheesecake of America:
thick sliceable frosting
        of layered snow,
        whipped cream
atop a black forest filling
        of spruce and pine
with a rich brown needle crust,

nature's way of fighting to keep
the fundamentalist hordes home
from church on a Sunday morning.

I zipped right by
a roadside marquee
that jerked my neck
for a brief second:

        "Revival Canceled"

Simile

> /`sImIlI/ *n.* 1. esp. poetical comparison of one thing with another using the words 'like' or 'as' (e.g. *as brave as a lion*). 2 use of this. [Latin, neuter of *similes* like]
>
> — The Oxford Dictionary of Current English

I've been trying to think of a simile
that would do justice to

that slow drive home
after that storybook first date
where your arms occasionally bump—
because you're wanting to touch
but are afraid of being overt—
while walking over the bridges
of a gaspingly romantic town,
like Manitou Springs or something,
and the fact that this is not a good time
in your life to be feeling this way
makes your heart pound against
the wall of practicality even harder
because you know…
you know…
you're sunk,

and all I can come up with is—
it feels a lot like

that slow drive home
after that storybook first date
where your arms occasionally bump—
because you're wanting to touch
but are afraid of being overt—
while walking over the bridges
of a gaspingly romantic town,
like Manitou Springs or something,
and the fact that this is not a good time
in your life to be feeling this way
makes your heart pound against
the wall of practicality even harder
because you know…
you know…
you're sunk.

Necessities

Weatherman told
of the coming storm.
This very afternoon
Denver could see more
snow than its ever seen.
The Springs could get
two to three feet.

We made plans.
Little yellow stick ‘em lists
multiplied into confetti
throughout the cabin:
bread, bacon, and marshmallows;
kindling and logs;
jugs of spring water;
park the car down the hill.

Mountain Survival 101.

Then it hit mom
in a flash of panic—
“Books!
We must get to the
Book Broker downtown!”
How fortunate the wine shop
was right on the way.
Barely enough time
for groceries and firewood
on the way back.

Deficit

Over coffee
at the Red Cup,
the one who *is*
Spanish—
looks
Spanish,
speaks only
Spanish—
stoically dries tears
of boredom before
they leak out,
fingering his mug,
eyes on floor,
then the door.

The one who is *not*
Spanish—
does not look
Spanish,
mixes English with
Spanish—
is patronizingly proud
of his limited
Spanish which
he's obviously working on
to communicate better
with employees who are
Spanish and,
of course,
out of his deep appreciation
for the exchange rate between
the peso and the dollar.

Again

Wrestling always with when
to speak and when not to.
Wondering if I'm wrong—
my uncertainties no match
for their absolutes. My freedoms
no match for their creeds
and doctrines that scream
This is it! at every corner
in every town of this nation.
The Pharisees are alive and well
and flocking to Colorado.

Yet, even in my uncertainty, I shout
from the rocky foothills my protest,
scream from the gutters *Yes!*
You're right! Jesus is coming again!
And he'll be just as pissed
as he was the first time,
and he'll throw your welcome tables,
piled with propaganda and tracts,
just as far as those of the money-changers!

And I'll be thrown into anonymity,
metaphorically beheaded, sentenced
to the dungeons of Dobson's *Focus*
on the Family in the Springs—
the New Jerusalem—and my head,
rolling on its filthy floors, will still
be yelling about the rape of scripture
until Jesus does return to put a finger
to my lips, letting me know in the glow
of heaven's eyes, he'll take it from here…

again.

> "The vision of Christ that thou dost see
> Is my Visions Greatest Enemy …
> Both read the Bible day & night
> But thou readst black where I read white"
>
> —William Blake
> From "The Everlasting Gospel" (p. 78)

United States

Except for the thin membrane
of Oklahoma's Panhandle,
Texas and Colorado almost touch.
On a clear day one could almost see
smoke signals from the other
drift up and over Black Mesa,
where jackrabbits jet among sage.

There is something of the in-between
in this windblown space where
my four favorite states hold hands
in a delicate agreement—
not quite trusting each other,
but trusting "all else" much less.

There is a quiet hill here that
never forgot the Trojan War,
the Fall of Rome, or the Spanish
Inquisition, because it never
knew they happened to begin with.

There is a small town here, Boise
City, that knows World War II,
because in '43 a home team B-17
mistook the courthouse lights
for a test range down the road.

Here where Texas almost
touches Colorado, the rocks
and stunted trees stand
between states, between
generations, between galaxies.

This place laughed the day
the power-grid shut down
in New York City—snorted
at their panic and shock.
This place where I first saw
the rings of Saturn through
a friend's eight-foot telescope
at the Okie-Tex Star Party.

Odes to Nothin Bodeswell

Natural Selection

Mrs. Burleson
Mrs. Munn
Mrs. Hackler
Ms. Beckett
Ms. Phenning

kindergarten through 4th grade,
in order.
Nothin remembered them
off the top of his head
right down to which ones
were Ms.es and Mrs.es.

How can a person do that?

A person who
forgets garage codes
and parents' cell phone numbers…
forgets first anniversaries
and Tax Day…
forgets he *owes* me…

Daze in Juvyville

Who are these people?
And why am I here?
he always said in high school,
when Nothin started thinkin
like Sartre and Chekhov
before knowin who they were.

Ammonia bathrooms, Master
Locks, locker room pranks,
and the big-boned jocks,
made up the brown stew
of a comin distaste for academia—
a long night of food poisoning
he never quite recovered from.

Red Light White Flag

There's somethin about
the house where you lost
your virginity
going up for sale.

Nothin pointed
out the car window
at the front room,
remembrin couch pillows
thrown down on brown shag,
the girl's friend asleep
in the back room under
the dull glow of Magnum P.I.

You don't wanna overanalyze.
But you know it means
somethin…

Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

He talked about a spot,
high in the upper limbs,
where he could lie down.
Like a comfy lawn chair
with a window out the top,
framed in pecan-shaped leaves.

This is where it started,
he said. *Hours at a time*
starin at stars, slowly
comin to realize
that the cross-shaped
platitudes delivered C.O.D.
by Poloed and Dockered
Sunday School teachers
were actually dipped, not
in the depths of Jacob's Well,
but in a crock of shit brewin
at the Baptist Vatican in Nashville—
land of mullets, skinny black ties,
and consecrated entrepreneurs
rakin it in for Jesus!

The Fall

Nothin lost his religious virginity
in the back seat of a big white
church van on the way home
from a mission trip to Provo.

There to save the Mormons
from themselves, I suppose.

The girl was wonderful too.

But when the spiritual cherry
popped, later in the night over
a philosophical crisis havin to do
with the moon, he knew,
in spite of still lovin Jesus
for bein a homeless hippie,
that the whole church thing
was now an undone buckle
in the Bible Belt.

Nothin Doin

Women were the strangest thing
when it came to Nothin.

One minute he's livin in Nashville,
datin a manic blond Coppertone girl
from the latest issue of *Southern Living*,

the next he's back in the OK
and can't buy a date for three years.

He got married once to a girl
who somehow hid the fact,
for seven years, that she
was actually a Junior Leaguer
at heart. When she came out,
she informed him he didn't make
enough money, and never would,
and succinctly released him from his
duties as husband and father.

Another three year drought ended
in a mysterious cosmological explosion
that, when the dust settled, found him
in the theologically impossible embrace
of a Quaker poet-prophetess.

Approaching Famous

If there's anything Nothin
is sentimental about, it's the bad
garage music of the 70s and 80s.

To him, there simply wasn't any time
greater than that time when we'd had
nothin but time and made music
without really knowin yet how to
play the instruments, the only criterion
bein—nobody older than nineteen
could like it.

Playin synthesizers in the dark because
the red, green and yellow LEDs
looked cooler that way.

Distortion cranked, because distortion
remains, to this day, the single greatest
invention for disguising a lack of talent.

Stayin the Course

He can walk the creek at sunset
on the Westwood Golf Course
and relive a thousand childhoods,
puppy heartbreaks
and jungle dreams.

He told me once,
on a moonlit night,
he stripped and ran the length
of holes five, six and seven
in a fit of sex with the spirit
of the cosmos. Somethin about
all the things he was done with.

But a friend made of tree limbs,
night owls and a whisperin creek,
who, no matter how much you
bitch about life, returns only
arboreal hugs and the steadfast toll
of a bullfrog's song, can save a man
from any number of nervous breakdowns
and bad marriages.

I walked the course with Nothin once
and sensed its deep love for him
and understood its reason—

he doesn't like to golf.

Corner of University and Division St.

Nothin's pen is poised
over nonacademic thoughts.

There'd been a plan…
a plan of PhD, professorship
and dinner parties with other erudite
sandals, sport coats, and frizzy heads.

Now his blood and gray cells tire
of pretentious sentences birthed from
desperation and fear of missin tenure.

He wants to reach out, brush the swayin
breasts of mountains and skyscrapers,
write down the breath of gladiolus
and the guttery death of mislaid souls.

There are words he tries to remember
from a dark brother. Somthin like
life is a series of road signs and bomb blasts.
And the only way to fail is to freeze
like a deer
in the glare of their paradox.

Then it comes in a sacred echo—
Just walk on
David…
walk.
And when it hits,
dance before the ark.

Cosmic Release

It's the craziest thing.
Nothin's nuts
on the Ultimate Frisbee field.

He plays with passion, poison
and a vengeance against
customized demons.

His soul finds nirvana
with grass in mouth,
dirt in shoes, and
strawberry patched knees.

His cleats, when dug into earth,
fire a quiet proclamation
out into the universe—

Don't fuck with me! …
and I'll be yours forever.

Sacred Stains

Nothin's little girl
rules his system of planets.

He rearranges universes
for her; creates new suns.

When the wifely word came down
in a black shower of "not enoughs,"
he was no longer husband.

Then, by bias of law,
the limbs of his fatherly tree
were shaken 'til most of the hope-filled
apples were scattered on the ground.

Now came his three days
with Jesus in hell, resurrected
in the truth of three words
made permanent in stains of green ink
on the insides of his forearms—

Be Grateful *Cherish*

Glass

She was standin on the freeway.
And he could pretty much see
retractable claws beneath fingernails.
But he's an idiot.
He stopped.

Left foot on brake, right foot poised
above accelerator, he rolled down the window.
Her sunglasses were hidin somethin,
but he was too tired to want to know.

The door closed, she started in on
the last hundred miles, and he was fine
with bein along for the ride.

He pretended to look at the road.

Passin cacti and sage gave him
somethin to focus on between
frequent "that sonofabitch"es
and "I swear, if I ever"s.

He threw in an occasional nod and
mhmm… to keep up a plastic concern,

waitin for the windshield to shatter.

The Same

We pull into a city in the light speckled darkness of a January night.
Another stop somewhere in the bowels of the Southwest.
Another link in the chain of belief that our songs should be heard.

On the radio, Ronnie Milsap reminds me, “I Live My Life at Night.”

Nothin pilots the van into port by the amber glow of LEDs
and the bright fast food signs that blaze in the black air
of every Frontage Rd. in every conurbation that blesses a dot on the map.

We scan well-lit green signs for a certain exit number to a certain hotel
that will hopefully have a certain food source nearby.
Tonight it’s EXIT 8B – Ramada Inn – SUBWAY.

Room 261 – same color scheme as the last
same telephone – same horribly loud wake-up ring –
same little red dome light that blinks with messages like a silent toy fire truck.
He stares at the yellow “Local Calls 50¢” sticker while talkin
to his baby girl through a painful, broken laugh.

His feet are under that same sheet
washed a million times of its seedy past.

The battery’s dead in the same TV remote
refusing to jump-start the same Jurassic Zenith.

Tonight it will be the same band playin *Blues Eyes*
Cryin in the Rain in the same lounge down the hall.

He turns out the light and lies down inside
the same questions: *Why am I here? What was it I wanted?*

He stumbles for the same bathroom in the dark:
Seems like it was…
on the other side of the room…
last night.

Reunion

Old & Wise

—a 20 Year Reunion

1. Thick & Thin

the thick that got thicker
the thin that got thinner
the thick that got thin
the thin that got thick
then
the spooky few who
remain carbon copies
of the babes & bastards
they were two decades ago

2. Faces & Name (Tags)

one fleeting panic attack
after another as you
register face but not name,
flash eyes down to sticker
hopefully before you're caught,
shout the first name immediately
as you shake his hand—
wrap your arm around her shoulders

3. Beer & Wine

brown bottles & curved glasses
of red, white, or pink
held & sipped for much the same
reasons as in high school—
insecurity, fear of some deep
unknown, wanting, still, to fit in

4. Ins & Outs

some ins are now outs…
some who were outs
are now ins…
some ins are now so in
as to be untouchable—
so in they didn't even show…
some outs are now so far out
words are unintelligible,

faces register no expression

5. Fire & Ice

unavoidable groups form
in the cavernous bar—
smokers to the right,
avoiders to the left,
drinkers to the back,
abstainers to the front,
Christian fundamentalists
still out on the sidewalk,
and a small fold
of the smokers *and* drinkers
form in the far back right,
flying their flags
of chainsaw voices
and volcanic laughter

6. Ball & Chain

some came with…
some stayed home, watched kids…
some happy, at ease…
some miserable, aloof…
some making a swap

7. Love & Loss

the middle school love of my life—
once made passion and pain
race laps in my heart—
tells me I broke hers
so tiny & beautiful then,
so tiny & beautiful now

after a glass of red
I ask her out to dinner,
give her the chance
to make me pay for my sin,
she turns me down
in a way so soft & kind
I didn't know it could be done—
like a crushed velvet pillow

there is someone,
a woman she loves dearly,
and I smile knowing

I could have been that bad,
and I let her know
if the “she” doesn’t work out,
there is a “he”
ready to repent

8. Said & Done

it is the next morning
and I sit perusing
the black yearbook
I bought at the reunion
because I didn’t want it
back then, and I mix
the black & white of youth
with last night’s color of age,
and they begin to hit me
like waves at high tide:
angst
shyness
low esteem
awkwardness
lack of words
lack of fashion
lack of knowledge
lack of carnal knowledge
lack

and I realize now
the big guy who scared me
had a horrible family—
the poster child for
in-school suspension,
now in and out of prison
five times and smiling,
laughing with me over a beer;
and though he’s so tall,
he looks so small
and vulnerable

and I realize now
the gorgeous blond track star
was and is, in many ways,
as shy as me and had waited years
for me to ask her out, because
she told me so ten years ago
at the last reunion, and it’s
taken me this long to absorb,

to begin to believe it, and now
she looks as beautiful as ever,
and yet,
approachable

and now I realize
the geeks were to become wealthy;
the homecoming kings, bald;
the football players were to get fat;
pom-goddesses would become wallflowers;
wallflowers: fashion models
and I

I would lose eleven pounds
before this reunion and come
looking good, doing what I
desperately love for a living;
a confident, horribly happy
human being

and now, I contemplate
the cliché—*after all*
is said & done,
I would never
want to go back

and I think, at least
in this moment, *ohh*…
hell no… *I* would…
I would go back in a heartbeat—
knowing now what I couldn't
fathom then? Yeah…
I'd love to try it now
& again.

Beautiful Pieces

Prelude.

We pick them up, over time,
but putting pieces back together
after twenty years
isn't all that easy.

Luck allowed me to slip a few
back into the puzzle tonight—
the second night of the big reunion.

Act I.

Baggy jeans and a bright yellow t-shirt.
The literature had instructed "after 5"
attire. So I wore exactly what that meant
for me. The others? Knocked-out
dresses, suits, ties, $300 shoes—

one of the more effective middle-
fingers I've ever shot. Topped off
with my copper-blond highlights,
silver rings and necklace, a thin
tightly trimmed five o'clock shadow.

Act II.

We leaned in and hugged.
The scent of her neck, her hair—
perfume in need of a bottle.

We talked about our different
types of shyness back then.
I said the main malfunction
of my particular brand
was, *it kept me from*
ever asking you out.
I should have done that.
Her smile, a deep flash;
her nod, complicit;
eyes, a whisper—
Yesss. You should have…

Her husband, a few feet
away from the homecoming
queen I could have
come home to.

Act III.

Another untouched love,
because I believed her
untouchable, I did not
speak to; I did not hug,

but a buddy just told me
had asked about me
at the after-party
last night, then slapped
my back and said,
Should o' been there,
idiot.

I smile inside
the warm fuzzy thought,
this third glass of wine
sipped into the mind
while invisible orchestras
blast "Nessun dorma!"
into the curtain call of night.

Postlude.

Some things don't matter
how late they come.
It only matters that they come.

Tonight I put a few books on the shelf;
lowered a few mysteries into quiet graves.

One sun will not set for me.
But it will guide me well
into life's next battleground.

I've learned *could-have-beens*
are not bad things. I pour
them into water, and it turns
pink, purple, blue, or green.
I stir for days.
I'll sip for years
the sweetness of loss

and know,
though twenty years late,
that to walk to Carlsbad,
California from Oklahoma,
buy a billboard and sling paint
until the message is clear:

Jenny—
It Was You!
You Were the One!

and then walk home,
is a perfectly acceptable
thing to do;
that to fling
beauty, hurl love
into the cosmos,
like a palm-sized diamond
into the sea, is one of the few
true powers doled out
to each and all of us
in equal portions.

I Should Have

blazed straight in,
raked a storm of paper
and name tags off
the registration table
on my way, slapped
a ten down on the bar,
said *This is for two*!
grabbed one Newcastle,
downed it like Penelope
Cruz in a Coke commercial,
marched right over and
proclaimed to Tane
You were the hottest
damned thing on two
finely tanned legs
that homeroom ever saw,
and you made it hard
for me to stand up
*at the bell every fric**k**in' day*!
then waltzed over to Christine,
pinched her right on
that magnanimous ass,
then, for the coup de grâce,
danced the salsa over to Jenny,
taken her graceful, gorgeous
cheeks between my palms
and laid a big French kiss
on her luscious lips,
just before walking back
to the bar, grabbing
my second Newcastle
and heading for the door,
picking up the pace
in front of a growing
wake of husbands,
and boyfriends,
and feminists.

How It Works

Every poet needs a love
they can never actually have;
a delicious pain that digs
but does not debilitate;
a dream that remains dream;
a dream that fulfillment would destroy.

It's the carrot on the end of fishing line—
that diamond too near the earth's center,
that pearl in the oyster, down in
the darkest depths, both the size
of a thousand years of legend—
the soupy birthplace of myth.

Mine is blond and lives in
California, where she must stay
in order for this to work. Because,
if she divorces, moves back

to Oklahoma, looks me up,
it will serve as Samson's crew cut,
severing all my poetic wires, leaving
a temple-sized pile of rubble and ruin.

Ashes to Dust

I sit on the outskirts
of the last few years
watching the edifices,
artifices,
of a previously peaceful,
somewhat directed, life
burn to the ground,
mostly gray smoke now,
the thunder of flames
reduced to a coughing
afterthought of
smoldering indictments
and popping epithets.

My forefinger quivers,
innately scrapes
at an ashen smudge
on my forearm,
inducing a quiet,
angelic laughter
at my amazing lapse
in understanding
the laws of the universe,
thinking I could make it
look clean again with enough
time and spit.

I soon leave it
in a sad gesture to remembrance,
and instead use the finger
to mark in the hard-baked sand—
a Messianic counting of sheep,
because shepherding may be
the only thing left to me
in the midst of this new,
Pacific-sized desert
descended from a warped
and brooding troposphere.

Not one of four geographic directions
offers a resurrected view.

So, I look back down and think

maybe I'll start with toes,
because toes
are most familiar
with the honesty
and demands of dust.

Broken

I look at the empty page.

Nothing.

So, I'll write from the bottom,
stack these letters and words—
maybe even enough punctuation—
around my feet on the rocky base
of the dry well I've fallen into—
stepping up one layer at a time—
until piles of broken literature
raise my head to the surface.

There's little light down here.
But I only need a little—
enough to be able to read
the piles of broken literature
written by others.
To see how they got out.
To see what they did when
they got back to the surface.

Shattered

Help me, God!
Please…

I throw in a *Please* to soften
the demands of desperation.

Even though I'm not worth it,
you've always been great
with the not-worth-its.

If you pull a great rescue here,
I'll let it be known.

May not tell Oprah.
Doesn't seem your style.

But I'll tell the mice in my attic
and a few others that matter;
who listen with the ears mentioned
back in the gospels somewhere.

Wanting to hear…
wanting to get it.

That's where I am.
It's all I've got:

Pieces of shattered soul heaped up
with a shovel of bare hands
bleeding from the sharp edges.

Firewalking

There's something about
knee-bending
moments—attacks
on the soul—that force
our noses to the gritty
carpet and hold us there
until we wake up to that
pesky, incessant trope:
God is the last bastion.

There's something about
these red-eyed occasions—
the desperate pulse bulging
in our necks—that fling
an entire lifetime's baggage
out into Saturn's rings.

And when we survive, stand,
wade the Stygian void,
walk the luminous coals,
we find
a power
that throbs with life
and laughs
in the face of death.

Because, once we've seen
the phosphorescent center
of his promise of presence,
we drop the clutch and grasp
of daily desperations
in a shatter of release,
no longer afraid
of silence;
no longer demanding
cloud-written messages.

The next breath… next step…
signs enough.

Either Way

There comes a point
when one chooses between
“something” and “nothing.”

If you choose nothing,
there’s really no need
to waste any time
railing against those who
choose something.

No loss. A lack of anything
requires no maintenance.

But, if there *is* something,
how can anyone who
believes in nothing
blame the one who believes
in something
for proclaiming to the one
who believes in nothing
that there just might be
something
to this something-thing?

Test

I step into the flames.
Let the burn do its work.

My time with Christ
down in the under.

I breathe as best I can,
unafraid to be afraid.

Hair singed away.
Skin turns to coal.

Must wait til it's done.
Then, I'll step out,

dead, or
unstoppable.

Clutch

There's
something
about the very
bottom. Something
about not knowing if
you'll make it out alive.
There comes a point when
fear and pain lose power,
 and you begin to let go,
  realizing the only thing
   left is to watch for what
    God will do in his timing.
     You release your grasp
      on dogma, and hope
       grace will hold.

Behold, I Stand

My hand shaking—
not from caffeine.

I realize now
the only choice left

is to throw a bucket of
water at the gates of hell

and wait for the raging reply.
God, please, stand behind me.

Catch me. Hold up a hand
to defy Dante's flames.

Heal the gaping holes
in my body and spirit.

Psalm before the Storm

The letter goes out tomorrow.
A letter that will incite anger,
rage, and nightmarish hatred.

Lord, is there a power
more powerful than mine;
a prayer more prayerful?

Are the groans of angels
language enough?

Sling your meteoric love
at this nightmare.

I'll give witness.

In Remission

How could I have done it,
here at the front edge of older
and wiser—waste seven
phantasmagoric months
in the den of a demon
that landed me in a
graveyard of lawyers.

But here I am—
clouds of bats flapping against
the insides of my skull—
lighting candles and praying
with my face to the floor
for things C. S. Lewis told me
to be careful about; things
like the miracle of Juan Diego's
boy with the broken neck.

Like my friend Jim, on his knees,
praying about the mysterious,
black, they-only-know-about-
this-sort-of-thing-in-Houston
lump in his left triceps.

I need God to be touchy-feely,
big-hearted, big-handed—
heaven's own Coast Guard.

And all C. S. can tell me is:

gotta write poems anyway;
poems without answers;
poems right up to the moment
the black hood let's go
of the guillotine's rope.

Weak Defiance

When the news grows fangs…

When the doctor stares at the floor
before he reads the diagnosis…

When we swing open a squeaky
screen door to the sunglasses
of an unsmiling highway patrolman…

Before any words are uttered,
our minds fly away,
like a sparrow when the back
door bangs the frame,
and we flutter off
to repaint the walls of hell,
to tidy it up for an early arrival.

In these capsized moments,
we run down to the basement
of worst case scenarios.

It's as innate as drinking water.

This time, though, I
swim against the great river.
I *choose* the possibility of good.

The current is strong.
But my arms pound
the torrent of waves,
while my feet search
for sand and rock.

A Wall for Wailing

I need a wall
this strong to lean
my life against.
Jerusalem stone,
yellowing in the scorch
of history, yet
mighty enough to stand
over millennia,
calming
the manic blur that shakes
my soul into desperate
inaction.
I have no proper hat,
no tassels or curls, no
Torah scroll or phylactery,
but I feel the hand
of something big
urging me forward anyway,
a heavenly breath
of acceptance and
permission,
a love
above the law.

In That Moment…

In the moment you turn
from the facts and evidence
on paper and take to staring
at the ceiling fan instead…

in the moment you relax fists
and lower arms in the face
of the oncoming punch…

in the moment words
cease to be the means
of rant and prayer…

in the moment victory
loses its appeal—
feels the same as defeat…

in the moment you realize
no place could possibly be
as interesting as the path
you take to get there…

in that moment, you are ready
to live the beautiful life
that only comes from being
ready to die a beautiful death.

Eyeless and Earless

The altar candle
drones

a light the presbyters seek
but, theologically, are not
allowed to find—

a truth the elm limb knows
as it scrapes a white path
in the burning brick outside
a summer-laden church.

Back inside,
yawning glances
at s l o w watches
reveal an awkward truth—

a laughing, sideways truth
that yearns to moralize
the hilarious sadness
in these pews,
but knows not to cheapen
itself in such an easy display.

Half

In dreams of hope and blood
I place a rusty bucket below
my soul's leaky faucet
to catch the drip of words
that wage attrition's war on my mind.

Sometimes, when it looks half empty,
I throw it out the back door
believing it will nourish
beauty of a more wordless nature.

Other times, when it appears half full,
I dash it onto a canvas of opaque fibers
and stand over it for hours, days,
head cocked to the right, then left,

believing…

believing that even half
of all this crazy world's
hopeful and bloody dreams
could mean the difference.

A Month of Sunday

I.

It starts with the agitated beep
of my alarm clock, angry it was set
for such a ridiculous hour.

Then the wrestling match—
do I care enough to shower,
or should I just wash hair?

In the mirror I think
It's not all that bad as is… then,
Damn, I forgot to shave last night.

Now I'm in a hurry.
A "cereal only" kind of hurry.
A "cereal in the closet" kind of hurry.

Did I wear that last week?
I don't remember. I don't care.
I take a bite, set the bowl down.

Beginning to work by natural light,
I mull over how beautiful the morning
would be without the responsibilities.

Shoes tied, bowl in sink, keys in pocket,
guitar cases packed, I lock door,
go from door to car, *Do I have it all*?

II.

Quick setup and sound check,
then lead the acoustic praise and
worship at the first church—

always with the eyes closed because
I want to seem sincere, but actually
can't bear the thought of what I'm doing.

But they pay me well enough.
Next—I quickly tear down
and move on to the next church.

Here it's electric guitar and background
vocals—a little more fun. I keep my
eyes open, looking for a date.

But the last thing I want
is a good little Baptist girl
full of relentless Baptist guilt

that forever hovers behind one,
making sure sex is a dark jungle
of terrifying beasts and stinging insects.

So, I quickly tear down again,
grab the box of leftover donuts,
head back to the house thinking:

I should go to the main service,
because the pastor is a friend
and I hurt for how he has to

baby-sit Christians in this playhouse,
when he'd rather be with sinners
he knows live closer to God.

III.

I go home anyway and begin
the ceremonial removal
of corduroy and put on the priestly

garments of cotton sweatpants
and school paraphernalia while
firing up the tubes on the altar.

Today's offering—Rams vs. Bears.
I prepare a sacrifice of wine in dancing
sunrays at play on the floor of my

sanctuary. Will God be pleased?
Is God ever pleased? Depends…
on whether your pastor is pleased or

pissed with the world around him,
the wife God's "given" him, and his
children he believes aren't drug dealers.

Depends on whether he believes terrorism
is an unfortunate side-effect, or the tool
of a God who hates fags and abortion doctors.

IV.

I lose my ability to care as I don the cleats and
slider pants of The Church of the Blue Dome
and feel my blood rising to the occasion.

Windows down, the sunroof back,
I drive slowly—extending the sacred
passage—to the Ultimate Frisbee field.

I arrive to the smiles and waves of the lost—
sacred, obscene gestures of deep friendship.
A love the church could never understand.

I spread the communion donuts before
my fellow church members, not a saint
among them, and we give thanks.

We hit the field, run until muscles pull,
smash into the ground, and then,
leaping up into blue, I feel the crash

of forgiven limbs and torsos, and
jump up, grass in mouth, dazed…
gazing into the face of God.

A Growing Concern

I'm a bit jaded.
But I still tear up every time
Linus, haloed in light, tells us
what Christmas is all about
from that empty school stage
in *A Charlie Brown Christmas.*

I admit my cynicism.
But I still pull my blanket up
to wipe my eyes when the bell rings
at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life.*
The little girl makes her proclamation.
Jimmy Stewart smiles up at Clarence.

I often agree with Goethe and Flaubert,
Chekov, and so many of the others,
when they refer to the stupid masses.
But, lately, I put my hand over my heart
and sing the National Anthem at football games.

And I flat out cry when my daughter
wraps her porcelain arms around the left
pant leg of my jeans and looks up
with blazing blue eyes still void
of all the shadows and doubts that eat
away at mine, and I find myself slapping
at a creeping, irrepressible urge
to pray.

Holy Days

Most of my offhanded holiday poems
hover around the prodigal family's return
at Thanksgiving, for some reason.

I would say it's because Christmas
and Easter are a bit too sacred
for the eye-poking darts of a poet's pen,

but it's not like Christmas hasn't been effaced
by long term exposure to the red, green and gold
options fromVictoria's Secret barelywear,

or a drunken Santa Claus stumbling
out of the giving zone onto 52nd Street.
It's just that the baby in a manger still has

the power to silence angry cities on the eve
of his celebrated birth, in spite of our vain
efforts to tie him up in lacey bows and ribbons.

And Easter… well… all the pink bunnies
and yellow eggs in the world haven't
been able to shake off the truth about

death… the necessity of it… the power,
and how it ultimately leads to forgiveness.
Poems cover this topic like snow in Juneau.

I wrote a poem about May Day once.
But that was mostly about ripping scripture
out of context, and crosses doin' wheelies.

I wrote a poem about Labor Day once.
But that was mainly about Mexicans hammering
out the Anglo-American dream of subdivisions.

Maybe it's because Thanksgiving rides on the backs
of flapping black coats and big, dorky hats
with belt buckles above the brims, the costume

of brow-scrunched Puritans who came to save
the indigenous with the Tryptophan of dogma.
One of the faces of religion I don't mind slapping.

Resurrection

Phone rang at 8:59 am.
And before the second ring,
I relived the last three days
and two nights down below:

as my blood dripped
onto test slips, then,
transcribed onto paper,
six and seven syllable words
deciphering nucleic hieroglyphs
on torch-lit walls in my body,
told the myth of my life
and death;

as I lit a Wal-Mart Virgencita
candle and spread pebbles
given me by my daughter, like
bones from a witch doctor's bag
cast onto jaguar hide;

as I, deep in the entrails
of night, scratched the floor
in an effort to decode
divine communiqués
in the flick and bounce
of yellow flames;

as I never quite uttered
selfish prayers for redemption
and wholeness, paralyzed by
eleven million orphans in Africa;

as I awoke this morning
to a heavy snowfall,
bowl of corn flakes and banana,
phone beside my hand, waiting

Phone rang at 8:59 am…

Sixty seconds later,

I set it back down.

I turn my eyes to bright windows
and see the reprieve
signed in tears
on a blanket of grace
softly covering the barrenness
of a long relentless winter.

The Ordination

Lucifer simply
had a job to do.
His flash and fall
were not an accident
or some angelic fit.

His heroic dive
created thought
and the possibility
for love

as much as
any power
or pair of eyes
left gazing
over heaven's edge
at the necessary
blazing
of his trail.

Entropy

I'm not sure a life begins
until disgrace
has entered through some
unexpected door,
run its leaky course
like an exploding dye
in the spinal column.

Limbs no longer respond
to messages from the top
for lack of trust.

Maybe this is why Genesis
begins with a fall
and goes down from there.

Maybe this is David's insatiable
thirst for failure; Solomon's
kaleidoscopic lament, his passage
into God's promise of wisdom.

And maybe this is God
and Satan having tea
over Job, both concerned
he has suffered
too much blessing.

To My Surprise

It seems that after a while
we'd give up any and all
shock
at the human being's capacity
for mind-bending badness—
infanticide, the holocaust,
a mother pulling up in front
of Grandma's one day
with the new boyfriend
and dropping three kids off,
permanently.

The first chapter alone
in Jimmy Baca's *A Place to Stand*
is enough to send one
philosophically packing
into the hills of New Mexico.

Then again,
maybe that's the key to the lock
evil tries to hide in deep shadows:
Remain surprised.

Let the surges and jolts
of war and rape
snap the wires of sensibility
like a May tornado in Oklahoma.

Then jump up, if you can,
and stare the source in its face,
raise an arm with an extended
forefinger at the end,
and let the badness
know
that you know.

Losin' It

God's gone mad.
'Course
how can you blame 'im?
Think about it—
you sink a million, or,
ten thousand years—
[whatever you wanna believe]
into this project—
        there are many ways
        to define: "helluva
        long time"—
and then
your crowning achievement
sells itself down a filthy river
of McDonalds and Wal-Marts.

We sent in a team of psychologists,
but he refused medication, laughing:
What the hell are you talking about?

I invented fucked-up. You know?
For color. But I never intended
for everyone *to hook up with it.*

We sent in a team of ministers,
but that *really* pissed 'im off.
Before they even got a chance
to whip out a tract and remind
the Lord of all Creation of his
Four Spiritual Laws, he shot off:
Look! I cut off communication
with you jackasses over 1800
years ago, and I'm not about
to start it back up again
with the black hole you've created,
sucking all the spiritual light
out of my universe.

We still see 'im now and then
among the rocks and trees,
walking along the shore at night,
puffin' on a Swisher Sweet.

Makes No Sense

Even with the invisible weights,
the residual dumb-bells, time
has tied to my neck and shoulders,
I smile more than I used to, raise
my head skyward and laugh with God.

Even with all the pennies lost
down the drain, the occasional
minor fortunes washed away
in a flood of bad decisions,
I am more grateful than I used to be.
I cherish each minute awarded
like it's a quarter's-worth of time
on the mechanical horse in front
of the old grocery store.

Even though I think people are worse
than I had initially suspected
as a young man—full of crap
beyond imagination—I love them
more than ever, wanting to play
in their lives like a pony in the edges
of a pond that occasionally stops
to take a long deep drink.

Makeover

They've pulled him from the cross,
Brooks Brothered him out in a deep
navy suit with a maroon tie
and some nice leather Cole Haans.

When he tries to step into the synagogue
for prayer, they grab his elbow and suggest,
Uhh… we don't go there anymore. We have these
nice new buildings out on the interstate.
Much more conducive to larger P.A. systems,
offerings, and live television feeds, you understand…

He makes a dash for the tomb in hopes
of a few days rest, but they won't have it.
No time. Service starts at eleven hundred
hours, so hell will have to wait.

We're on air in five… and the techs
flip on the spotlights, blinding him
before he can raise his forearms in front
of his eyes, and only because he's God
does he understand the way in which
his image is beamed to a satellite
and then turned back towards earth
in a spray that reminds him of the
original rejection and brings a small smile
to his lips at this protestant stab
at some sort of hip transubstantiation.

After the service—that leaves him
feeling unheard once again—some
of the wealthier members want to
take him to lunch at the Oak Tree
Country Club. He would prefer to find
a quiet hillside for some meditation,
but they recommend Mondays as being
perfect for that and warn him to watch
his head as he ducks into the back seat
of the black stretch limo.

The pastor asks if he'd like to come over
and check out the Cowboys on FOX
or just head back to the Marriot for a nap.

And Jesus breaks at a dead run
for the pond on the eighteenth hole
and wades out as far as he can,
because there is no boat this time,
because there are no fishermen this time,
and instead of turning to try the message
one more time, he drops his face
into his hands, weeping uncontrollably.

Finding Jesus

My shoulders jerked up
when the preacher's spit hit my cheek.
I began to listen like a berated child.

Folks! Jesus is *comin' again!*
And it could be any minute *now!*
Just look at the sins of this world!

So during the next tear-soaked prayer,
I slipped out the back to wait for him
out in front of the First Baptist Church.
Eyes scanning the sidewalks, I wondered
what he'd look like this time.

Impatience took me across Webster St.
to the First Christian Church. I looked
for Jesus there. Nothin' doin'.

From there, I walked a block over
to University Blvd. and turned south,
finding no Savior in or around
McFarland Methodist either.

As a last ditch effort, I continue
down University to First Presbyterian
and catch my breath for a second
when I spot a homeless man on a bench
in the shade. Not him, but the closest
thing I've seen this morning.
I ask him if he's seen anything
of a heavenly-type being. He raises
a brown paper bag and slobbers out
a profoundly quiet, "Yesss…"

When I realize that's all he's going to say,
I shrug it off and slide back around
the back alleys to Campus Corner.
The Korean-owned Sunshine Store is open,
so I buy a longneck and sink down,
depressed, by the payphone out front.

Half way through the bottle, some guy

in camo pants and a sleeveless black
T-shirt squats down next to me,
asks for a sip.

Sure… I say, staring blankly
at the pavement.
He's respectfully quiet.

So, it's a minute or two
before I recognize him.

Getting Ready

I've filled my home
with sinners.
Frisbee players
and Lutheran seminarians.
Gnostic engineers.
Mormon environmentalists
and a returned Baptist missionary
for color—more color
than Zaccheus could have dreamed
possible.
I've even thrown in
a lawyer and a tax collector
for biblical soundness.
All here for the card games
and little smokies with root beer.
All in preparation
for the Savior's return.

Peace in the Middle West

Always the same.

My friend sees God in an ankle-length
black robe with glasses and gray hair,
nose scrunched in a “hmm” of concern
over all the ink on your life’s page, and I…

well… I see a paint-splattered smock
and unkempt hair, a brush paused
above canvas as he re-imagines all
possible histories for a present future.

My friend sees books in Greek and Hebrew
with footnotes in fat concordances.

I feel the Braille of rocks and fish
and angels blowing up pumpkin balloons.

And we simply do not, will not,
agree as we annie-up between sips
of Honey Brown, each trying to read
the cards in the other’s eyes, laughing,
taking turns losing, and…

No Hitlers sprout from
a pair of twos.
No children die
in a straight flush of clubs.
And no families are shelled
out of a full house

in our war fought with poker chips
and one-eyed jacks.

Flip-Side

They've reduced my hours
and pay
disproportionately
at the job where I try
to keep college kids from leaving
God, because Christians
drive them crazy.

My tuition waiver
doesn't waive
as much as it used to
at the job where I try
to teach college kids to write
a complete sentence, because
somewhere in the line from parents
to television to a state
that doesn't see fit
to pay high school teachers crap,
many of them
can't.

All this combines with the fact
that there isn't much call anymore
for folk musicians with a story,
but no light show or bellybutton ring.

And so, when I kneel at night, light
a candle, I thank God through tears
for these tools that teach me daily
the fabulous beauty of simplicity
and peace that can only be obtained
through a release of possession.

On the Way

Dad's retired and on his way
to pinch-hit preach in Tulsa
on an October Sunday morning.

He has a certain coffee stop
just before the turnpike,
a favorite form of meditation.

He pulls up to the window and
reaches for the football-shaped,
rubber coin purse in his pocket

that I remember playing with
when I was five, or so.
She leans out, "Mornin'.

You all dressed up.
On your way to church?"
"Well, actually, I'm on my way

to Tulsa to preach this morning."
"Oh! So you a pastor…"
"Yes." "Well… would you pray

for me right now? I got some
negative people and thoughts
in my life I need to get rid of."

Dad says sure, then she asks
for his hand. He reaches up.
He prays. She squeezes.

And I imagine myself into
the car in line just behind him
seeing the white hand extended

from the cuff of a white shirt
clasped by the two beautiful
black hands at the ends of a gray

uniform's sleeves and wonder
if the sight alone would be enough
to bow my head in worship with them.