

1986

# A Directory of Loose Ends

Angelique Cain Jennings

*Eastern Illinois University*

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A Directory of Loose Ends

(TITLE)

BY

Angelique Cain Jennings

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1986

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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THESIS ABSTRACT:

A Directory of Loose Ends

by

Angelique Cain Jennings

A Directory of Loose Ends is comprised of a collection of thirty original poems, and a prose afterword. The collection of poems is divided into three groups according to subject, tone, and technique. The afterword details influences, biographical elements, and inspiration.

The first group consists mostly of poems in which mythical characters such as Grendel, Penelope, and Ulysses, speak. Unidentified speakers also offer myths of other kinds, such as "Salvador Dali in a Wheelchair on TV," in which an imaginative speaker addresses the painter, describing for him a dream she claims he has had, and "Confirmations," in which the speaker details the myths of pregnancy.

The second group of poems, called Complaint, is characterized by a dissatisfaction of the speakers. Many of the poems are inspired by the places of employment around which the poems are centered. Others detail the speakers' unwillingness to accept nature as it is, and their preference for expanding the rules and forces of nature to include themselves at the center.

The third and largest group, Letter, consists of poems written directly to individuals. The recipients are friends, siblings, a novelist, a former husband, a lover. The subjects range from wineglasses to the vernal equinox.

The afterword explores the tension between knowing a good poem and learning to create one. Referring to specific poems from the collection, it examines the influences of such classic poets as John Donne, John Milton, and Emily Dickinson. Marvin Bell, Heather McHugh, Paul Zimmer, Jared Carter, and Mary Oliver are discussed as some of the modern models and inspiration for the collection.

To Hazel Barricklow, Helen Harrington, W.C. Taylor, and Edna

With gratitude to: Sally McCluskey, David Raybin, Beth Kalikoff, Bob Moomaw, Bruce Guernsey, John Guzowski, Betty Bence, Bob Zordani, Marco Bergandi, Jay Fisk, Kevin Gorham; my brother, Eric; and Pete, my hearty Nordic inspiration.

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Faint, illegible text, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

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MYTH

---

## Horse Park

Our tour guide says  
that horses run for love,  
allow themselves to be  
handled, learn what is in them  
to be learned, for love.

They do not choose  
the bridle, or the fence,  
but the one who puts them there;  
God said the horse  
shall fly without wings.

Come in from the barn,  
my mother says.  
A mist of dust.  
A muscled dance.  
I can not move.

Here, the whole embalmed horse  
lies under the statue  
next to the man he starved  
himself with missing.

---

Grendel in an Eclipse

I am alone in the dim backyards,  
you inside your houses  
just as well  
think all there is to see  
is a tiny dot of sun  
on the backside of a cardboard box.  
But this is the sun that I can know:  
grass quickly dusking  
houses growing grey  
half sun, quarter sun,  
new sun, dark.

Come out.  
An insect is trapped  
in every streetlight  
singing of the artificial dusk  
and under the tree  
a hundred bright earrings  
lie shrinking on the lawn,  
shadows drawing back  
into the things that threw them.  
Hunger is with me  
like an extra arm  
but if I thrust my fist  
between the planets  
and the ground,  
I can funnel the sky  
through space.

---

Salvador ~~Dali~~ in a Wheelchair on TV

You go home and sleep in a fever, sweating  
in your bandages and sad moustache.  
Into the room come women  
draping pizzas on their shoulders,  
saints whose eyes are smaller skies,  
faces and faces of you.  
Bellies and breasts slide open  
like drawers; your mind wants hips  
and thighs of fine blown glass to fill it.  
A yellow brush touches  
Currier and Ives into children  
restraining the wild teeth  
of horses, women whose singing  
trails behind them like a veil.  
Open your mummy clothes and  
you are young, rising  
to bring out canvas  
for dreams in a fever.  
The palette on your thumb  
is a clock; you paint  
what you saw when you were old,  
and molotov rosebuds.

---

Confirmations

In my family the women say  
you lose a tooth for every child;  
I have two teeth gone  
and a son: a child unknown  
predicted in my mouth  
as if one blank space  
equals another.

A woman will dream  
the sex of the child she  
carries under the steeple  
of her ribs; nine months  
the brain is a womb  
and the belly filled  
with only thought.

In a house behind a plywood hand  
well lit, swept clean,  
she claims a vision that  
that fills my palm with teeth.  
No turban.  
No glass beads.  
No cat.

---

Penelope Notices a Suitor

Sometimes a woman is taut  
as a bow no man can bend or string,  
will dream of crossing seas  
she has not seen, will long  
for a man she has forgotten.  
Sometimes she'll weave the knots of talk  
into a rumor of swelling sails.  
Unraveling. All her pictures  
growing half.

---

Comet

Not as I imagined  
having heard for years about it:  
long twisted tail  
like my sister's tangled hair  
something between fireworks  
and brimstone.  
Instead, out past the lights  
the thin moon hooks the sky  
like a cornleaf hanging  
in black air,  
every point of light above  
the tail-end of a nerve  
that rests its mouth  
against my skin.

---

**Ulysses Comes in Dressed As a Beggar**

I come from a battle with the sea,  
dreaming your recognition,  
your second virginity,  
an old wife made of the new.  
I find you tangled at your work  
bright hair hanging  
like threads from a loom.



Page 1 of 1

The first part of the document is a letter from the author to the editor. The letter discusses the author's interest in the subject matter and the reasons for writing the article. It also mentions the author's qualifications and experience in the field.

The second part of the document is the main body of the article. It begins with an introduction to the topic and then proceeds to discuss the various aspects of the subject. The author provides a detailed analysis of the current state of the field and offers suggestions for future research.

The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and a final thought on the importance of the subject. The author expresses hope that the article will be helpful to readers and that it will contribute to the ongoing discussion in the field.

---

COMPLAINT

---

**The Song of the Dogs**

The clock clangs twelve  
and all the dogs begin to bark  
as though a song has been arranged  
for midnight.

They are marking the moment dark  
begins to slide toward the dawn,  
calling from one gate to another,  
nose and nail;

singing the song of the long line  
of their kind, trying the wildness  
they have left.

---

Laundry

They've got a machine here  
helps fold sheets  
and I can play the radio  
unlike the girls who make up rooms  
who must be quiet  
for sleeping guests  
hours until checkout time.

All the stains  
come through my hands,  
strong from folding,  
clean at night.  
I make things new.  
The ruined and ragged  
go into a separate pile.

---

Born in Pearl Harbor

Students ask for supplies of cyanide  
to prepare for the end of the world.  
I want it too. Because of the bomb drills:  
kindergarten duffel bags, wash cloths,  
soap, old water. Mine had a piece  
of adhesive tape, naming me.  
Remember the number of your shelter.  
Do not cry louder than directions.

We were told we would survive,  
could safely eat washed fruit.  
Radiation is invisible.  
Fall-out is dandruff on the food.  
Where will you find water?  
In toilets, water heaters,  
cisterns.

I hoped I would be home with my mother  
who would not send me out  
to search for food. Do not imagine  
women hauling children behind them,  
men stopping work to watch a cloud  
grow. The patterns of their clothes  
will be sealed to their chests.

---

We Care Nursing Home

In the afternoon sun the new man talks  
within hearing distance of Beverly Ann,  
who's slowly spooning sugar with a fork.

The clicks of the clock on the nurse's arm  
stop. Beverly showered in meaningless sound  
in the afternoon when the new man talks

about whatever catches his eye:  
There's a woman in the dining room  
who's slowly spooning sugar with a fork,

holding the hem of her blue dress down  
with a hand as white as salt  
in the afternoon sun. The old man talks

of the places he's had, separate, in order,  
from birth, and Beverly watches the sun,  
slowly spilling sugar from a fork

onto the floor, moving her feet  
clockwise to grind the bright sand smooth  
in the afternoons when the new man talks  
about slowly spooning sugar with a fork.

---

Novel Boxes

My father's shirt box  
wearing paper doilies:  
the prize-winning  
valentine holder,  
danced away on the wind.  
Twenty-four red heart birds  
startled into flight.  
You trust me with your novel,  
claiming two hundred pages  
unbound in a shirt box:  
opened, an explosion  
of white wings.

---

**Rooms**

Each guest must feel  
he is the first,  
is home without the germs.  
On film they show us  
how to seal a bed  
by walking once around,  
and what we must not do.  
But I like smoking under vents,  
see no use in cleaning  
things still clean,  
believe that finders  
are the keepers.

---

**Bones**

Ernest said: We kept hunting dogs beyond that fence, fed them dead horses Lee McCann hauled in the state truck from everywhere, me and the boy piling bones in the woods. One morning Evvie admitted the boy belonged to Lee McCann and I started looking to see the glances he shot, catching the kid's thin arms, timid back. It was true. And I walked into the woods with my axe, thinking I wouldn't be right til I killed the whole herd of them, piled their bones up in the woods. I opened the gate and the dogs spilled out; Lee McCann gathered them up for weeks.



---

People Soliciting the Salvation of the World

Ducks Unlimited

That's not the way to go about it.  
Unlimited ducks will descend in formations  
large enough to frighten dogs.  
Depending on what they have eaten  
cover the kids in purple or white  
and their collective call  
will be obscene in its glory.  
In one morning they will strip  
all the berries I'm saving,  
blacken the pools of the world,  
rattle my roof  
honking at cars.

---

## The Illusionist's Marriage

### Houdini's Jacket

Magic is not, she thinks.

He appears  
to float a silver cup  
through lavender air  
with only the aluminum  
in his eyes,  
lifts live doves  
from a flame,  
links and unlinks seven rings  
with voices like bells, and whispers  
like a spoon circling slowly in a pan.  
She carries a straight jacket,  
buckles him: arms crossed  
in front, six clasps  
from neck to waist  
with a strap across the crotch.

In seconds he opens  
his shoulderblades,  
heals them back,  
steps free.

---

The Queen of Hearts' Box

Between them like a marriage  
stands the box, black  
as the slick laquer wings  
of his hair, measured  
to her body, one more costume.  
Two blades of surgical steel,  
he says, slips the first one  
past her ribs, the second at her  
knees. The eyes of the audience  
widen with their breaths;  
he mimes her body  
into three separate parts.

---

She Speaks of Levitation

I believe his hands as they stroke  
the air above me, breasts to knees;  
I have heard this story in eighty towns  
this year. Hands tense and  
my body rises, as it always does,  
to meet them. He moves the hoop  
from feet to waist then over  
my head, as though I have passed  
entirely through. I imagine  
his body pressing itself down hard  
on me with a weight as heavy as love,  
but it does not matter. It does not  
change the act at all. She is  
as light as love, he says.

10-10-1944

Mr. [Name] [Address]

Dear Sir:

I have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 10th inst. regarding the [subject].

The [subject] has been reviewed and it is noted that [details].

It is requested that you [action].

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

---

LETTER

---

Wishing for a Directory of Loose Ends  
to Pete

There should be a number to call,  
or a book, periodically up-dated,  
larger than a New York phone book,  
where all loose ends are catalogued  
for anyone who wants to tie them up.  
Why Shakespeare retired at 45,  
what happened to Amelia Erhardt, more  
about the boy in my neighborhood  
who was severed by a train:  
his glasses were found down the track.  
There are people I used to know  
dotting the map of the world like cities,  
but I don't remember which dot  
is what person; I see them in cars  
that pass me on the road.  
If I wanted to find you,  
in the index would be entries:  
office hands, subtle after dusk;  
gentle corrections of spelling in  
a mediator's voice; page seven.

---

More Bones

I went to the woods without my gun,  
saw my dead wife bathing her feet  
like she used to do at the edge of the spring,

talking to herself, her skirt  
balled up at one side.

I went into the woods without my gun

to Evvie, her feet curled under her butt,  
legs printed with grass and weeds,  
like I used to find her at the edge of the spring.

Over there is the barn where my brother Ed  
killed a snake as big as Evvie's braid when  
I went to the woods without my gun

and couldn't have done a thing. And Evvie  
tries to call me away to her legs  
like she used to do. At the edge of the spring

she loosens her dress and laughs  
about giving me something to do since  
I'm in the woods without my gun.  
Like she used to do. At the edge of the spring.

---

Answer to Bob

Because of the vernal equinox  
I stole one of your lines:  
the one about hair  
being milkweed silk,  
several strands  
lifting like a hand  
inside this poem,  
the fuzz of your sweater  
mocking it.  
Don't worry.  
The day is said to be  
so equal to the night  
that eggs will stand on end.



---

Letter to Salvador Dali  
to Eric

My brother wants to make a movie\*  
with you while you still feel good. He  
knows that eyeballs near a blade will  
turn his teeth to ice, and wants music  
to open his chest like a surgeon, pin  
the flaps back against the shoulders.

\*Note: it is called The Fourth Salvador,  
who falls into the mirror of his dead  
brother's face and finds the old dog  
of the sea sleeping fitfully there, rides  
a flesh shell back, dragging a mirage,  
pockets ripe with breasts and crutches.

---

Z Dances Down Harrison Street  
to Bob

Z does his dancing down  
from rooms he keeps above the town;  
the Piper of Hamelin  
playing through the trees.

Z says sex is like a dance:  
his bed jumps over the moon  
with two faint dancers on its back;  
but he never knows for sure

she feels it lift, arch cleanly  
past the eye of night, touch  
head first down, sheets  
dropping last like leaves.

This is the way I make it, says Z:  
because my bed is set in trees  
I start out higher than the town  
and do my dancing softly down.

Z does his dancing down the street  
and up into his rooms  
where trees nuzzle the window sills  
and rummage through the wind.

---

Chopping To Music  
to my sister Lissa

You are so thin  
I hear the hollowness  
of your sockets  
and bones, almost  
the blue beat  
at your throat,  
want to try your body,  
fitting the tube  
of your jeans,  
denim hipbones  
brushing the cabinet,  
weight of my breasts gone.

I'm the ballerina  
of your jewelry box,  
spinning on a pin,  
balanced by one  
horizontal foot,  
arms limp pennants  
on a flagpole.

---

Card for a Friend  
to Nancy

From TV the man you love  
can't see into your bed  
that never sweats  
under his slick face  
singing on the wall,  
and no one else will wear  
a tux for you.  
You dream that your bloods mix  
into a child, more beautiful  
than any movie version.

Open the cover:  
a Degas woman  
drying herself  
with dance.

Under that, a message:  
you must learn a man slowly;  
not by the song he sings  
to everyone.

I want you to love  
your own fat ass  
not a man who says  
in interviews  
he likes big hips.

---

Depression Glass  
to Jay

I shouldn't give you  
these wineglasses  
because I know  
how these gifts go.  
There are eight.  
Seven break  
interrupting your breath  
each time one cracks.  
They are blue  
the color so sad  
under kitchen lights  
that soon you're sure  
I chose them for  
those mornings  
after friends.  
The last one  
catches dust and light  
in a window seven years.

---

Wondering

Does she wake beneath your arm,  
sharp sun like a parrot at the window  
fluttering yellow through her hair,  
blue across her breasts;  
does she follow you  
shedding the top layer of sleep  
in the tall grass to the shed?  
On the map it seems I could drive  
across a dinner plate, sit in your lap  
before noon, but I know  
there are three hundred miles between love  
and the thoughts it survives.

---

Valentine from a Thousand Miles  
for Pete

You sent me a heart,  
the stamp untouched,  
as though you delivered it  
by hand from somewhere  
in this town.

But it takes wine  
to make us real  
and heated in my bed:  
knees between knees,  
noises not intended  
to have sound,  
least likely dreams  
to lead to sleep.

---

Most Like a Window This Divorce

Most like a window--the blank blue hole,  
not that which fills it: not a fragile pane  
of glass secure in captivating frame,  
but the thing that is not a thing--the hole:  
a gap in the wall of days between us,  
through which we touch, through which I want to speak  
of whether your half of the earth is bare,  
your eyes and the breasts you've touched since mine.  
At night when the breeze goes cold and wild  
and questions the wall with its wings, I hear  
you answer: there is nothing between us  
to make a wall; some trees are never bare;  
your breasts are like eyes, and the window,  
a blank blue hole in a blank blue sky.



---

Your Shoes  
to Jenny

Hot evenings when the breeze  
takes the scent of old porches,  
I sit within seconds of your elbow  
and try on what it is I think you feel  
until my own breath seems wonderous  
and murderous to me.

There are reasons I might choose  
a woman lover: if the sea circles quickly  
around my feet, makes a small island  
on which I must live with only you,  
I will not hold out  
forever.

---

In RE the Marriage of Angelique Jennings

from this date forward,  
each from the other,  
we are barred from claim.

The heart is elastic, you know.  
A container growing tight  
with less to hold, cured  
by the predictable strength  
of words worn smooth by judges.

The heart is elastic. I know.  
Accommodating as a womb, it swells  
from facts in proper form,  
a plausible stretch,  
three phrases stronger than your arms.

ARTS AND LETTERS

The following is a list of the names of the members of the Arts and Letters Committee for the year 1965. The names are listed in alphabetical order. The names are: [Faint, illegible text]

---

**AFTERWORD:  
Arts and Letters**

The following is a list of the names of the members of the Arts and Letters Committee for the year 1966. The names are listed in alphabetical order. The names are: [Faint, illegible text]

AFTERWORD:  
Arts and Letters

I have always had more things to say than I ever had the opportunity to impart. When I realized that poetry was as natural as passing notes in class, I began to see that, in every poem, I am speaking to a person who is real and familiar to me. If I speak for Penelope or Grendel, I still must speak to someone. If I speak for a laundress or a farmer, I think of it as translating. All of my poems are letters. Notes I've written to talk back to someone, to give a solution, to have the satisfaction of the last word. Notes to complain about nature or people in authority. Each poem is an answer to something.

The first poem that ever caught my attention was "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." I could see the timid balding man who knew everything bad about himself. But it was the sound of the poem that captivated me. I fastened myself to two lines and they stuck in my head like a commercial jingle. I loved to repeat them:

I grow old...I grow old...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.  
(Eliot 7)

Five long o sounds sitting in a row, vibrating against each other, and me, chanting them like a mantra. I repeated the lines so many times that I began to explore the meaning without really knowing it. An old man might have to roll his trousers at the bottom because he is not as tall as he was when he bought the pants. But Prufrock was also afraid

to get his pants wet. The discovery that a poem can intentionally mean more than one thing appealed to my love of word play. The power of sound made me unable to forget the poem.

Richard Brautigan's poetry was the first I found that made me feel as if I was the intended audience of the work. And I didn't just read it, I involved myself with what I thought the poet meant. This helped me justify certain techniques, and helped me to reject others. I remember one about how a man with his hat on is about six inches taller than a taxi cab. I didn't want poetry to be that easy. But I did like a poem about sperm. No flowers. No lofty thoughts. I wasn't ready even to use the word breasts in a poem, but I was relieved that poetry didn't have to be sweet. Good.

I discovered Sylvia Plath, whose work satisfied the sullen, gently morbid personality I was trying to cultivate in myself. The images she created were strong and deep. Like a hobby, I collected lines from Plath's work, not sure why I wanted to read them each a hundred times. The images that attracted me most were the ones in which she gives inanimate things character, makes them reflections of herself, imagines motivations for them according to her mood. In "Candles," she says:

It is touching, the way they'll ignore  
a whole family of prominent objects  
simply to plumb the deeps of an eye

and she describes how she watches the candles' "spilt tears

cloud and dull to pearls" ("Candles" 148-9). She made images I could see. In Plath's poem, "Wuthering Heights," the speaker describes how the sky seems to need her, saying:

The sky leans on me, me, the one upright  
Among all horizontals.

(168)

and I liked to repeat that to myself sometimes, in a dramatic mood, walking across town.

In "The Babysitters," I found an image that was ugly yet fascinating. A deserted summer place is

Stopped and awful as a photograph of somebody  
laughing,  
But ten years dead.

(175)

and I speculated on the correct meaning of the last four words. Does but mean only? Or does but mean except? Puzzling over the most distant meaning of a word is something I learned from dissecting Plath's work, and something that I use everytime I read or write poetry. It was new to me that a poet can utilize all meanings of a word, instead of worrying whether or not his reader will choose the correct meaning.

I would take Plath's poems and cut out the lines I didn't like or didn't understand, making a smaller, more perfect poem. These constructions could shock me with their meaning, especially when it changed drastically from the meaning of the original poem. I still couldn't write a poem that I liked, but it felt safe to edit Plath. This editing taught me something about the motion of words: how they change according to placement, how they can be used in non-

traditional ways, how they can say a hundred things at once. It helped me see that sometimes an image will grow weak if it is displayed alone, and sometimes it will grow stronger. I cut Plath's "Last Words" to eight lines, and believed I had created a masterpiece.

I do not want a plain box, I want a sarcophagus  
With tigery stripes, and a face on it  
Round as the moon, to stare up.  
I want to be looking at them when they come  
Picking at the dumb minerals, the roots.

They will roll me up in bandages,  
They will store my heart  
Under my feet in a neat parcel.  
(172)

I also discovered e.e. cummings, whose poems appealed to my sense of humor and love of word play. I skipped the poems with liberal punctuation because I didn't want poetry to be that difficult. I found that even though cummings used puns, word splices, and took advantage of the multiple meanings of a word, he still fastened it all to a framework of strong images.

I found some cummings poems that I didn't want to edit, and I wished I had written them. Again, the strongest attraction was in the clear and visual images.

suppose  
Life is an old man carrying flowers on his head.

young death sits in a café  
smiling, a piece of money held between  
his thumb and first finger

(i say "will he buy flowers" to you  
and "Death is young  
life wears velour trousers  
life totters, life has a beard" i  
say to you who are silent.

(80)

\*\*\*

John Donne was the master of the letter poem, and his work attracted me by its lack of "poetic" subject matter, and the movement of meanings within a poem. I liked the way I could feel a poem turn and turn again as I read. For example, in "The Apparition," there are at least six little "shocks" for the reader in the first five lines. The way the poem moves makes it necessary for the reader to continuously re-evaluate what she believes is happening. The speaker addresses a former lover, and we learn of both through the speaker.

When by thy scorn, Oh murderess, I am dead,  
And that thou thinkst thee free  
From all solicitation from me,  
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
And thee, fained vestal, in worse arms shall see;  
(742)

In line one, I was shocked first by the word "murderess," reading further to discover why the speaker fears being scorned by someone he would call a murderess. Then, the word "dead" jars me again, forcing me to re-evaluate the word "murderess." Is the speaker simply being melodramatic, or is the woman a threat to him? I already feel something for him because I think he is the underdog. The third shock comes from the next fact that is revealed about the murderess. She will feel a sense of relief that the speaker is dead. The next line gives me a sense of relief, at first, because I recognize the action: the speaker is going to threaten to haunt his killer after he is



dead. It's an old story. But this is not what follows. The next shock is that the speaker imagines he will see the woman, pretending to be pure, in the arms of a man worse than he. I get some satisfaction out of that prediction alone, but the speaker continues. This pattern of poet anticipating the reader's interpretation, allowing her to get some satisfaction from what she feels will be a resolution, then standing that expectation on its nose, works until the last line. The poem becomes a wet fish for the reader to wrestle, but the fish can be contained if the reader has patience.

Of course, Donne's conceits captivated me. For example, in "The Sun Rising" (738), he treats the sun as though it is an unwanted visitor, and uses that metaphor to define the relationship between a woman and himself. I found that an extended metaphor could bring out a kind of creativity in me that I hadn't experienced before, by leading me down paths I never would have discovered if I hadn't set out to stretch a figure of speech as far as possible.

When I was writing "Most Like A Window This Divorce," I did not realize how closely a poet has to watch an extended metaphor. These metaphors have the ability to quickly escape and begin embarrassing a writer. I did not realize that how a divorce is like a window would be a large enough subject for a poem; I wanted to expand the limits of the metaphor. Where is the window? What is on one side of it?

What is on the other? What can pass through the window? What is the wall in which the window is set made of? The answers to these questions eventually became part of the poem. But I continued to muddle the poem with more questions. If the window is in a house, then what does the house mean? Are there rooms? How could a divorce be only one window if there are many rooms in the house? This became so complicated that I drew diagrams of the metaphor and still could not control it. Finally, the poem became a sonnet, which helped me restrict the language somewhat. The sonnet was a letter written to one person, instead of musings about how a window and a divorce are similar.

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Emily Dickinson's poems are very short letters. I learned many things about the sound of a poem by studying Dickinson's work. Her ear for repeating sounds was so finely tuned that I discovered it only by circles and arrows and diagrams. For example, poem number 824, "The Wind begun to rock the Grass," seems to rhyme, on first reading. But there are actually no end rhymes, and the sense of rhyme comes from repetition of sounds, sometimes only one letter, which unites an entire stanza. In stanza one,

The Wind begun to rock the Grass  
With threatening Tunes and low--  
He threw a Menace at the Earth--  
A Menace at the Sky.

The liquid sound of r and the harder nasal n's draw the ear and the tongue through the stanza, as does the s and soft c. There are only two long vowel sounds in the first

stanza: at the ends of the trimeter lines. The thr sound of "threatening" is picked up again in "threw." All these small units of sound, repeated, contribute to the sense of unity in the stanza.

By examining the patterns of sound in Dickinson's poetry, I learned to listen more closely to my own poems. I learned that it is not possible to monitor every sound in a poem, and it is not possible that every sound is put there purposely by the poet. But the ability to hear a line is as important to revision as it is to creation. Sometimes I discover that I need a particular sound in a poem, and my attention to the details of Dickinson's use of sound help me to choose one that lends greater unity, meaning, and music. Sometimes my search for a sound has become so specific, I have spent hours listening for a word: two syllables, starts with an s sound, ends with a t, means something related to work. It is actually possible to fill an order such as this.

In "Horse Park," my attention to sound was a springboard for several discoveries I made about the poem. I had written three stanzas and they were somewhat flat and lacked visual imagery. But I liked them. I was struggling with a fourth stanza, which I decided should be inserted between two others, becoming the third.

#### Horse Park

Our tour guide says  
that horses run for love,  
allow themselves to be  
handled, learn what is in them

to be learned, for love.

They do not choose  
the bridle, or the fence,  
but the one who puts them there;  
God said the horse  
shall fly without wings.

(Hooves raise a mist of dust  
as he circles her in muscled dance  
and waits for her to still,  
lifting his whole length  
Come in from the barn, my mother says,  
but for one breath, I can not move.)

Here, the whole embalmed horse  
lies under the statue  
next to the man he starved  
himself with missing.

The third stanza was very different from the others. I asked myself what I liked about it and how I could justify the fact that it was so different. Did that mean it did not work in the poem? I decided that stanzas one, two, and four were non-visual, but that the poem could work that way because of the fact that the speaker is relating the tour guide's speech. The third stanza could be much more visual and musical because it recounts a memory, more sensuous and physical than anything the tour guide has to say. But I still didn't like stanza three, so I asked myself what works about it. My answer was, the "mist of dust" and the "muscled dance." When I saw the two phrases paired I knew that they played off each other so musically that I would be wise to preserve that. The repeated s sounds combined with the m's, d's, and t's, to make two quietly explosive, very rhythmic lines. I attempted to repeat those lines again in the rest of the stanza, but too much is too much. I finally

decided the other lines should echo the rhythm, instead of the actual sounds, of the other two lines, and pared the stanza down to:

Come in from the barn,  
my mother says.  
A mist of dust.  
A muscled dance.  
I cannot move.

\*\*\*

Another poet who had something to teach me was a much more painful instructor than any other I have studied. It took me longer to learn to enjoy Milton's work than I would have liked, and I thought he had wrapped barbed wire around his garden to keep me out. The way I finally found to approach the text was through comparisons with other poets I have studied such as Shakespeare and Spenser. It was easy to gain entrance this way because there are many similarities in the work of the three. But Milton's characters are enhanced by the comparison. Because the art of letter writing requires that strong characters lie beneath it, I was intrigued.

I have not been able to unwind the complexity of technique Milton uses to create these fully developed, well planned and executed characterizations, but I have been overwhelmed sometimes by the way his genius works. His character of Satan is so well defined that the reader could never confuse a passage spoken by Satan with the speech of another character. And this distinction is not made by the subject matter of the speech itself, but by the character

Milton has created making himself known through words, just as any human being may attempt. It is easy to forget that Milton created these characters instead of merely recording events and personalities as he witnessed them. For example, in Book IV of Paradise Lost, Satan answers an angel who has threatened him with chains:

Then when I am captive talk of chains,  
Proud liminary cherub, but ere then  
Far heavier load thyself expect to feel  
From my prevailing arm, though Heaven's King  
Ride on thy wings, and thou with thy Compeers,  
Us'd to the yoke, draw'st his triumphant wheels  
In progress through the road of Heav'n Starpav'd.  
(970-6)

These must be some of the most poetic threats and insults ever written. Even in a scene in which many fallen angels speak together, it is impossible to confuse the demons. Each is an individual with characteristics not possessed by any other of the group. For example, the following speech made by Belial could never have been made by Satan.

I should be much for open War, O Peers,  
As not behind in hate; if what was urg'd  
Main reason to persuade immediate War,  
Did not dissuade me most, and seem to cast  
Ominous conjecture on the whole success  
(Book II 119-23)

This, too, is a passage in which one character disagrees with another, but, unlike Satan's speech above, politeness and restraint do not allow the words to sound nearly as insulting.

Milton's work did not inspire me to write an epic, but it did give me specific goals for the life and detail I can attempt to inject into my characters. It showed me that

speech is a sure way to make a character real. I am attempting now to develop the ability to more fully describe a character by the rhythms and sounds as well as the meanings of his speech.

\*\*\*

I have learned as much from the poets I have met as I have from the poems I have studied. Poets talk more often about the process of writing than they do about their poems. If you know how to write a letter, you'll recognize when to do it.

Marvin Bell visited Eastern and, along with a reading of his work, gave a workshop on writing poetry. I was surprised by the subjects Bell chose for his poems. A love poem to the woman who'd been with him when he ran over a squirrel. A poem to a lover whose ass he'd photographed. His poems were about running, sweating, falling out of love as well as in, and encountering Nature, not always friendly or accommodating.

Bell's work is both amusing and sad at the same time, a quality that attracts me. He presents the sadness he finds in a matter-of-fact way, and the reader may choose either to be amused, or depressed. He creates an emotional paradox for the reader in the space of a few lines with observations such as:

The woman abandoned is an old story  
The gulls won't feed on.  
Every so often, you must dress it up.

(29)

My life seemed more full of poetry when I stopped

looking for only the beautiful pictures. Bell talked about a balance that poetry demanded. He said joyous abandon must be held down by ugly things or it will ruin a poem, and that love must be explained and explained, the beautiful parts and the ugly ones. Bell tries again and again to define it, as though he believes he'll eventually understand what it is.

So there is also camera-work in love.  
So there is also work.  
But the mind wants to dwell on the body.  
(16)

He uses the what-if trick. What would it take to replace your love?

even if the muse her  
self lay down for my pillow,  
still I missed you Westward like sin.  
(17)

Love has little to do with the Poconos or a heart-shaped bath tub.

Marvin Bell helped me solidify my poem-as-a-letter theory when he talked about why he wrote poems. He said that a poem is always an answer to something. To a person, a poem, or a news clipping. He talked about the poems he and William Stafford had written back and forth to each other, and said to think of each poem as a letter. This helped me to develop voice. I could imagine speaking to one person when I didn't have anything to say to the world. I stopped thinking of The Reader as though she were my mother. The more my voice developed, the more I found to say.



Bell talked about where a poet could find poems. He said he gives himself assignments. Restrictions bring out creativity. I have discovered things about myself and about a poem from assigning an exercise to myself. The title poem of this collection, "A Directory of Loose Ends," was an assignment. To me, little mysteries are like knuckles scraped on brick. They don't hurt very much, but they are annoying. I decided I would write a poem about things I'll never know. There were enough things that I had to throw some of them out, but even then, a list of things I didn't know was not going to make a poem. What I needed was a solution. What could be done about loose ends? Well, someone should have invented a directory

larger than a New York phone book,  
where all loose ends are catalogued  
for anyone who wants to tie them up.

This wasn't a perfect solution, because the directory does not really exist. But now the poem does, and it satisfies something in me, even if it doesn't bring me any closer to the answer of what happened to the boy in my neighborhood who was run over by a train.

Bell read his work the way I wanted to read mine. And he read it just a week before I was to participate in my first reading, so I was fertile ground for a lesson. He used his hand to count the rhythm of each poem, a hand I remember much better than his face. I'd been told before that a poem was simply a dramatic monologue. Bell acted out his poems with his voice, as if he believed it too. I had

liked the poems before the reading, and the poet's voice added to them. I wanted to do that with my own poems, and I wanted to do it deliberately.

When I started to care how the poem would sound aloud, my writing changed. Now I wanted to write poems that would stand on their own if I was not there, but could grow bigger with a competent reader. I cared about how one word played off another. Now I listened to a line; I used to worry only about the sense it made.

\*\*\*

Heather McHugh's poems are letters that describe the speaker and leave the recipient in the shadows. Each poem speaks in a strong personal voice about love and dangers. The work is full of word play, puns, twisted clichés, and sharp images. This is serious poetry having a good time with itself. There is a wit in the work that I like. By mixing it with a solid image, McHugh sometimes manages to revive a cliché and make it work, both the image and the cliché benefitting from the partnership.

the moon poked to distribute more or less  
indwelling alloys of its dim and shine  
by nip and tuck, by chance's dance of laws.

(17)

I began to explore passages in my poems, uncovering more meanings than I'd first intended, adding to make the words mean more, subtracting to make them mean different. I wanted them to ring against each other, sometimes harshly, sometimes sweet. And I wanted the poem to point like a neon arrow toward the one person to whom it was directed.

McHugh believes the poet should call as little attention as possible to her own mental processes. When I started using things like "I imagine, I know, I see, I wish, I dream, I think," more sparingly in my work, I was forced to discover other ways to make my mental processes understood. I found that the best way is to simply believe your own premise, or at least procede as if you do. The first lines of my poem "Salvador Dali in a wheelchair on TV," were originally

I see you  
on the evening news  
your nurse and yourself  
the same white;  
I imagine you go home  
and sleep in a fever.

McHugh asked me how I would say this if I was determined not to mention myself in the first lines. I was at the point where I didn't want to turn loose of anything in a poem, unable to edit my own work nearly as well as I used to edit Plath's. But finally the first six lines became "You go home and sleep in a fever." McHugh said when you set up a situation in a poem, you are saying to the reader: believe it or not. No amount of explaining will sway the reader if he decides not to believe it, so a poet is only writing to the reader who will buy the premise anyway.

McHugh also talked about titles. She said that a title is another entire line of poetry, and should be treated as one. In my Salvador Dali poem she showed me how adding two words to the title would make it easy to eliminate the first four lines. When I began to consider titles as something

other than simply restatements of the main idea or clever plays on words, I began to expect more from them. They did not disappoint me. Now I think of a title as reader's directions. A brush with which to paint the poem. A Clue.

\*\*\*

Paul Zimmer's poetry amuses me in a whimsical/sad way, and even though I don't like angels dancing in the poet's study, or a limbo in which famous dead people eat sandwiches and listen to jazz, I found the method behind the poems fascinating. Zimmer creates characters who appear and reappear in his poetry: Wanda, Barney, Imbellis, Julian. The poet himself becomes a character called "Zimmer." One character speaks to other characters; they seem to carry on a whole life somewhere and we only see small parts of it. This arrangement makes it easy to take advantage of the redoubling effect of the characters' actions. Zimmer writes a letter to Imbellis. Imbellis answers. Barney knows something about Wanda. Julian knows something about Wanda. Though the ways the characters may be grouped is not infinite, it is endless in its possibilities.

I wanted to create characters. I still do. There is a secret to it that I am working to discover. I think that strong characters are growing very slowly inside my work, and may reveal themselves full grown, at a time of their choosing. Ernest, a character I made half from an old man down the road, and half from my desire to retell the stories he used to tell, never does anything perfectly right in a

poem, but I can't give up.

\*\*\*

Jared Carter's poetry is like letters written to me about the stories I have heard since childhood. He seems to know the same people I know, with different names. He writes about:

Folks who believe tornadoes  
Are alive: that polluted streams  
Rise from their beds  
Like lepers, following after  
Some great churning, twisted cloud.

(4)

I can fill in the blanks. In my family the story is that cows have been lifted into the air and set down three counties away without harm. A piece of straw was driven through that very fence post in a tornado back in '49. The Tolins' dog was blowing out on its chain like a flag in the wind. That trailer park has been hit four times in the past ten years. Carter's poetry amuses me because he has drawn on the past of his family and community to create it. But it amuses me even more because it inspires me to think of the stories that belong to my family.

Carter writes about the kind of mid-western person who has myths, stays away from cities, and knows the roads. He tells the stories of a county and, like Faulkner, he chooses a name full of angry vowels: Mississinewa County. When I write the stories of my family, I'll name the place Douglas County. Everyone can pronounce it. A difficult name like Mississinewa leaves a hole in every work where it

appears because it forces most readers to either stumble or skip.

Carter's work appeals to me because the stories the poems tell are familiar and real. Just like a family story that is retold at each gathering, Carter's poems do not suffer from repeated readings; the language adds to the pleasure of reading the poem more than once. "Watching by the Stream" makes the reader the listener in a long and intertwined monologue of gossip about people who sit on a bench uptown and talk among themselves. It begins by drawing us into the gossip:

You've already noticed that in this town  
they don't put the walleyed people away.  
They let them wander around, like moths  
That cannot find the way to light.

(25)

This catches me right away, not only because the poem assumes from the beginning that I've noticed something about this town, but because I've lived in towns where they don't put anyone away, no matter how strange. Towns with more than their share of walleyed creatures who sit on the "concrete parkbench bolted to the bank." Carter continues to pull in the reader (who, if he is anything like me, will now believe he is a listener in this town) with lines like "You already know all that," and, "You have already stood there watching them/ Watch you." Before he knows it, the reader finds he is in the poem. He has an Aunt Tiz, a grandfather, and a history in this town. It's frightening. If the reader does not play the part of the listener in the

poem, he automatically becomes an eavesdropper.

Because I want to tell stories like this, I not only like to take Carter's poems apart in an attempt to analyze how they work, I like to analyze myself to see why the poems work on me. What happens to me most often when I read Carter's work is that I want to answer it with stories of my own. In other words, a letter in answer to a letter.

\*\*\*

I don't always write letters to people; sometimes I argue with nature. My relationship with nature has always been an uncomfortable one, and usually my letters are in the form of a protest or complaint. Mary Oliver's poetry appeals to me because she uses it to detail her strange love of the risks that nature holds. These risks do not usually excite me, but I can almost feel them when Oliver wants me to.

In "August," the speaker gathers wild blackberries, eating as many as she can, until she seems to become only a tongue, and "ripped arms," unable to think. She tells us, "all day my body/ accepts what it is." She is under the spell of the woods, where the berries "hang/ swollen" (3). I like the hushed tone she takes, trying to spook her reader into feeling the fear/fascination that she feels. Even when Oliver uses an exclamation mark, I don't think she means to shout.

Like Marvin Bell, Oliver writes about the ugly things in a matter-of-fact way. She tells of

the perfectly black  
stillborn kitten

with the one large eye  
in the center of its small forehead  
(6)

She knows this is a disturbing image, and she uses it to play on the reader's morbid side, inviting him in to the world where nature is not safe. If the reader has any wildness left, these poems will find it.

Oliver lets the reader know exactly what she expects him to see in the lightning she describes.

how sensual  
the lightning's  
poured stroke! and still,  
what a fire and a risk!  
As always the body  
wants to hide,  
wants to flow toward it--strives  
to balance while  
fear shouts,  
excitement shouts, back  
and forth--each  
bolt a burning river  
tearing like escape through the dark  
field of the other.

(17)

She writes about a natural world whose dangers are enticing. Some of her characters disappear there and do not return. But the poet remains in our world, receiving signals through lightning, blackberries, and moles, trying to scare her readers with her visions. My feelings for nature have never been as intense as Oliver's, and I usually approach from the opposite direction, expressing a kind of negative wonder, or lack of complete satisfaction. But sometimes I discover a compensation for my dissatisfaction. I want nature to improve itself by operating according to my opinions, and at the same time I want it to make itself more surprising, less



bound by rules or laws. Beneath all this is the realization that none of this is likely to occur.

For example, in my poem "People Soliciting the Salvation of the World," I begin to explore my lack of fondness for the outdoors by answering a "Ducks Unlimited" commercial. What will happen if ducks are unlimited? They will mess up everything:

cover the kids in purple or white  
and their collective call  
will be obscene in its glory.  
In one morning they will strip  
all the berries I'm saving,  
blacken the pools of the world,  
rattle my roof,  
honking at cars.

I don't say would, I say will. I can see it. On whose roof do they gather? Mine. To bring me embarrassment and grief by using my house as a headquarters for heckling humans.

"Comet" complains about nature in much the same way the preceding poem does. Wandering out at three in the morning to see a comet can be a disappointment. But the beauty of the night may give some consolation. Aside from "Horse Park," "The Song of the Dogs" is the only poem in this collection in which the speaker feels any attraction toward nature, and in this case, nature is so mysterious and alien in its behavior that the speaker does not offer an explanation, but merely reports.

Unlike Oliver, I don't want to scare my readers, and I am too lazy to disappear into the world she describes, leaving only my bonnet behind. But I sometimes feel an

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Unlike Oliver, I don't want to scare my readers, and I am too lazy to disappear into the world she describes, leaving only my bonnet behind. But I sometimes feel an

unfriendliness toward nature, and I feel nature growl back at me. Mary Oliver's poems show me what I might choose to do with that energy.

All along I've been learning the art of letter writing. The trick of thinking about each poem as a note. This simplifies the process of writing because, of course, a letter must have an intended audience or there would be no need for it. A letter usually requires an occasion and a situation. Of course it also must have a speaker, and that speaker's personality may be caught in the punctuation, sound, and rhythms, as well as the words and their meanings. The persona to whom the poem is directed comes into the work second-hand through the speaker and what he chooses to reveal. I don't have to search for opportunities for poems. There is always something that requires a comment, clarification, or an answer. What I am doing with my own poems remains the same as it was when I started. I have something to say, and a poem is the most satisfying way for me to say it.

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