

CUL-DE-SAC

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C O P Y R I G H T

BY

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CUL-DE-SAC

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Introduction

Although the poems in this collection have provided me with a deeper understanding of the craft of poetry itself, I cannot say they have led me to that famous discovery of a unique voice I'm supposed to be searching for as a writer. My need to write has always been more amorphous and inchoate than that, not so much a search for the voice as a voice or any voice--any convenient vehicle providing a pleasurable ride through the language and a productive exploration of the subject. At the same time, one of the chief premises of my work is that human existence is a strange combination of upheaval and a pathetic inability to cope with upheaval. History imposes a radical revision of values with each generation which our biology prevents us from ever expecting. To revise Charles Olson's dictum, what does not change is the fact of change, whether we will it or not, and, to keep pace with the reality of change, we must overcome the glacial weight of the past and the totalization of ideology in the present. Part of the point, the game, of doing imaginative work is to try to say more than I should be able to say given my historical situation, even though this is probably impossible. If it is in fact impossible, then my work can at least be a fiducial failure.

My sense of history and my attempt to derive pleasure from my craft have led me to various conclusions and

strategies in creating these poems. Since I assume history renders all received forms arbitrary, I cannot credit arguments for a given form which are based on appeals to the authority of tradition. My use of narrative free verse has presented obstacles to my game of speaking beyond my historical situation, so I have opened the form by employing fantasy and Holden's abstract image. At the same time, I often practice straightforward narrative free verse as a "guilty pleasure," though I take issue with the contemporary emphasis on accessibility because I believe it is ideologically overdetermined.

Ultimately, I affirm pluralism in aesthetic values and eclecticism in the use of form since these positions allow me the widest possible latitude in my craft choices. Artistic sectarianism sets itself up for exhaustion. Since I am always looking for new directions for my craft, new options in the game of resisting the closure of my historical situation, this analysis of the dilemmas I have faced in making this collection's poetry will imply some direction to the poetry I have not yet written.

All of these poems are written in free verse, not so much because I am self-consciously placing myself within that tradition as because I am personally attracted to the form. My few half-hearted attempts at traditional forms have left me feeling like I was filling out tax forms rather than writing poetry. At the same time, although I continue

to find free verse resilient and resourceful, I make no exclusive claims for the form itself. If my constitution requires that I work in free verse, it seems reasonable that others' constitutions would require the regularity of traditional forms or the openness and disruption of experimental verse. I object as a matter of principle to the de facto hegemony of free verse--to the degree it is still in place. (I sense its hold may have loosened in the past few years.) I hate to think a fellow poet's best years would be spent in relative obscurity because the form he works in is not in fashion--though I know such isolation may almost be one definition of being a writer.

Because I assume the historical process is essentially accidental and therefore arbitrary, I cannot credit arguments asserting the determinism of poetic convention. Proponents of such arguments want to pretend that there is an evolutionary teleology in the history of poetic convention such that historical success equals destiny and destiny equals the "natural" authority of tradition, thus this rather silly passage by Paul Fussell:

Clearly all fixed forms have begun as nonce forms and have managed to prevail into history because in their shapes and in the conventions of their dynamics they have implied a version of experience recognized as real or significant or comely by many succeeding generations. (127)

Here, Fussell employs the same bogus social Darwinism used historically to justify other hegemonies, such as robber baron capitalism, Nazism, and communism. To my way of thinking, the persistence of fixed forms or the dominance of one form over others in any given historical period has as much or more to do with "giddiness, fatigue, demoralization, complacency--the insidious pressures of systemic ideological inertia" (Scully 98) as the enlightened validation of certain forms "by many succeeding generations." To resist this "ideological inertia," a writer, James Scully argues, must be ever mindful that a given project is "not creation but a kind of revision--revision conducted in light of much that is present and more that is not"--that "The work as a text is conditioned, informed and confronted by layers of context" (99).

Dilemmas concerning context have perennially presented themselves in the subspecies of free verse I have used most in this collection, what Stanley Plumly has labeled the "prose lyric" ("Chapter and Verse" 1:27), and what Jonathan Holden has further subdivided into the narrative and meditative conversation poem (34-35). The prose lyric came about as a part of a general reaction to the "cant and code" (Breslin 2) and easy ecstasies of the Deep Image poetry. As prescribed by Plumly and others, it emphasizes voice and narrative over image, language play, and argument. Voice is the key element determining lineation. Line breaks trace

the inflections of the controlling voice, a signal of the perspective of the implied author.

Like the characters in my poems, I have found that outside considerations have pushed their way into the innocent sphere of my craft. For one thing, I have never completely agreed with Plumly's idea that poetic language play necessarily gets "between" a poet and "his vital sources" ("Chapter and Verse" 1:27). Since the "emotional and imaginative individuality of the speaker of the poem" (1:25) is itself a fiction, the "integrity" of the line and the traditional kit of figurative and sound devices provide considerable resources to both reinforce and counterpoint the characterization of that speaker as a narrative persona. Plumly never seems to consider there might be any variance in the distance between the implied author, the narrative persona, or the viewpoint character. A character, "whether the terms are those of a persona or a trinity of personal pronouns" (1:21), is only a mask for a speech the author is compelled to make. Plumly's impatience with the line, his injunctions to voice "over the integrity of the line" and emphasize "plot over pattern" ("Dirty Silences" 185), leave me much reduced space as an author to whistle and roll my eyes at my characters, especially since I do not have the room to digress and include the other perspectives that a novelist or a short story writer would. When the reader pauses over a line's language play, I have an opportunity to

underscore my characterizations or suggest different perspectives from those characterizations.

Like all other genres which emphasize narrative, the prose lyric also tempts the author to oversimplify his or her subjects. The conventions of narrative unity and coherence exert their own centripetal forces. An author can become so involved in the work of making a vivid virtual world that this fascination with the special effects of verisimilitude becomes an end in itself. When this happens, the work merely rehearses the author's uncritical assumptions about reality and reinforces the illusion that the world consists of simple actions resulting from single, self-evident causes. Good narratives resist this tendency and suggest the causality and significance of the action depicted are multivalent, ultimately indeterminate, and "centrifugal."

Just like Mallarme's imagery, which Plumly takes to task for imposing a "rhetoric of silence" ("Chapter and Verse" 3:23), the waking dream of a poorly conceived fiction can impose its own type of silence. It can overwhelm the reader with these special effects of verisimilitude without allowing him or her to consider what is being experienced. While I want to involve my readers in the work, I also want them to think about what they are experiencing, and I want to propose some direction to that thought. One way to suggest this direction is through language play and

attention to the integrity of the line. Robert Hass believes "the line, when a poem is alive in its sound, measures: it is a proposal about listening" (128). A proposal about listening is at the same time an implicit encouragement for thought.

I want to avoid the traps of "homogenizing" the perceptions and intuitions I have about my subjects, of obscuring their rough, fractal beauty, and of giving the impressions events will close off into "inevitable" endings or that my characters' motivations stem from single causes rather than "layers of context." These are not easy goals, especially in a form typically consisting of less than a hundred lines ("Chapter and Verse" 1:23).

In some poems I have injected the excluded context into the narrative through fantasy. In "The Perfect World" and "Sesame Street Pastoral," I use fantasy to dramatize psychological forces. The speaker's destructive idealism in the former poem is a freeloading houseguest who must die a natural death before it leaves him. Following a divorce, the speaker in the latter poem attempts to recapture a sense of a stable family life by escaping into a fantasy about Sesame Street, only to demonstrate how tentative is his hold on reality. Sometimes I use fantasy to dramatize a clash of ideas. The speaker of "The All-Too-Mortal Explains His Posture to Himself" displays his populist and individualist disrespect for the World Historical Individuals floating

overhead, and I have a bit of fun with William Blake's mysticism in "Vision Du Jour" by contrasting it with the biological pragmatism of his mutt. Fantasy allows me to foreground the context of a character's situation in a relatively direct way. Discussing metafiction in general, Patricia Waugh describes what I believe fantasy accomplishes in my poetry: it "offers the recognition" that "the everyday" is formulated through "social and cultural codes" which "brings it closer to the philosophical and mythic than was once assumed" (16).

One alternative to narrative poetry is to exercise Jonathan Holden's option, the meditative conversation poem, which is what I do with "Submerged Seriality Etude #4," though I use humor to deflate that form's tendency to wax Olympian. Yet another option to the dramatic lyric which is not dependent on "rendering a conventional scene with a protagonist" is what Holden calls the poetry of the "abstract image" (70). Used in the work of John Ashbery, Pablo Neruda, and Robert Hass, and with roots in French surrealism, the abstract image consists of a "highly abstract [proposition]" which "exhibits a peculiar epistemological invulnerability" (59). According to Holden, "Even though . . . [the abstract image] advances a sweeping generality, we have no strong inclination to test its truth or falsity or to translate it into some other terms" (62). Borrowing the phrase from Philip Wheelwright, Holden

believes the abstract image relies on the "Assertorial Lightness" we normally allow "poetic statement" (62). Its advantage over the deep image is that "the abstract image permits a kind of emotional complexity--an urbanity--which the deep image does not"; "the abstract image is not, as the deep is, limited to what Breslin has called a 'psychological pastoral'" (66).

I have made a few sorties into the wilderness of the abstract image with these poems: "Opinion of the Interior Paramour," "Submerged Seriality Etude #4," "He Would Be Our Huckleberry," and "Libido Exorcizes History, Circa 1976." With "He Would Be Our Huckleberry," I have taken the further step of trying to make the narrative itself an abstract image, focusing on the general idea of artistic bad faith, along the lines of what the Irish poet Paul Muldoon did in his "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants" (85-109). "Libido Exorcizes History" has only a fragmented narrative and represents my attempt at a collage. The series of statements and images "mean" by their juxtaposition with one another.

Even though the form has its limitations and we must dismiss the authority of the authorial voice as being ideologically questionable, I continue to enjoy writing the prose lyric. Its virtues are those of any good fiction. It can be both moving and subtle, yielding a variety of possibilities for the study of character. Within its formal

parameters, I often find the existential contradictions of my characters sufficiently interesting. Such poems as "Non-Profit," or "Little League Glories," or "Reckoning" would crumble were I to impose the indeterminacy game on them--or they would become other poems which might be interesting within a different set of formal parameters. In any event, I cannot, at this point, bring myself to change them, and I shall continue to write prose lyrics, under judgment, as a guilty pleasure, relishing the absurdity of my role as a godlike author.

At the same time, I do not yet feel comfortable practicing a poetry of indeterminacy because I feel I have not mastered the navigational skills required for those open spaces. Just as I structure my free verse narratives around a sense of voice and by manipulating point of view, I try to make a poem like "Libido Exorcizes History" hold together by an intuitive sense of tone or mood.

Although its validity has been undermined as a formal category, voice still persists as something like a supreme fiction for me. I tend to perceive art and music as "voices" translated into mediums other than language. Poetry as a genre emphasizes the physical nature of language and can "mean" by shaping how we remember language sounds when spoken and by manipulating the typographical conventions of reading. Perhaps a clear and coherent theory of mood or tone is possible for poems which have detached

themselves from simple referentiality. Perhaps it is possible to formulate such a working theory as an abstract analogue to narrative voice. Perhaps not, though, of the language poetry and other experimental verse I have read, much seem to cohere by this abstract unity of tone.

Formal coherence, of course, is not the same thing as accessibility. If I try to be clear about what I do as a responsible craftsman, I do not at the same time champion accessibility "uber alles". Although I work very hard in my poems at being clear about what I in fact understand about a given subject, I also want to write the type of poems I like to read, and I am attracted to poems which elicit a pleasureable fascination by their seductive intricacy--even if, or especially if, that intricacy does not resolve itself. The successful poem, for me, pushes its language beyond "all that can be said" on its subject and finds that point where perception of its subject and the subject's "layers of context" depart into the inchoate, into an infinite regression of contextuality. It closes upon a successful realization of its failure to find closure concerning its subject. Like Umberto Eco, I believe the contemporary artist should be concerned primarily with clarity but so fiducial to the project that he or she includes what is unclear:

. . . the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing

but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear--indeed, so unclear that it would be ridiculous to pretend to define them from the uncontaminated podium of rhetoric. It would be only another way of escaping reality and leaving it exactly as it is. And wouldn't this be the ultimate and most successful figure of alienation?

(157)

When we fetishize accessibility as artistic dogma, we validate the schooling and conditioning that trains us to think of complexity as a forbidding tedium, and we reinforce the bogus identification of democracy with, as one journalist put it recently, "a dualistic view of the world," with "simple explanations to complex issues," with "easy answers" and "superficial analysis" (Hamerlinck 39). By so doing, we add further credence to the politicians, journalists, advertisers--the hordes of hucksters who already saturate us with their messages of dissembling clarity, messages which belie labyrinthine and inchoate truth. The first authentic move a writer must make in order "to resist the inclination to slip into cruise control--to resist giving up, or giving over" (Scully 98) is to avoid the temptation to impose a false clarity upon his or her subject.

One of the essays that has influenced me the most the past few years has been Jean Baudrillard's "The Ecstasy of Communication." I find his characterization of the contemporary "universe of communication" both perceptive and evocative. According to Baudrillard, in the contemporary world, "All functions [have been] abolished in a single dimension, that of communication. . . . All secrets and scenes [are] abolished in a single dimension of information. That's obscenity" (131). This obscenity of communication,

Unlike . . . organic, visceral, carnal promiscuity, . . . is one of superficial saturation of incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces. I pick up my telephone receiver and it's all there; the whole marginal network catches and harasses me with the insupportable good faith of everything that wants and claims to communicate. Free radio: it speaks, it sings, it expresses itself. Very well, it is the sympathetic obscenity of its content. (132)

The personality this universe of communication creates Baudrillard labels "schizophrenic" because "the unclean promiscuity of everything . . . touches, invests and penetrates [the schizophrenic] without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore" (132). The contemporary schizophrenic "can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no

longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (133).

Baudrillard's schizophrenic appears in at least one of my poems. The speaker in "Fatherhood and Planet America" dreams about an announcer in a television commercial and worries that the universe of communication in the form of the "forty thousand commercials" cluttering his consciousness undermines his ability to be a good father. The poem "Have a Nice Day" treats the brutality of Pinochet and his toady Townley as a fable about the universe of communication in which a computer virus mutates into an agent of judgment. The title suggests the "insupportable good faith of everything that wants and claims to communicate" (132).

Since language itself has become transparent and absorbed "in a single dimension of information" (131), one way of conducting a "mental fight" against the totalization of communication is to pose language itself as a scene of conflict. I have portrayed the role of language in human existence in a few poems in various ways. I use language as a conceit for humanity's place in the natural world in "CGAT." The speaker in "Chomsky and the Utopia of Language" is disillusioned by the easy generalizations in one of Noam Chomsky's speeches. The speaker's love of language is so great in "The Watcher" that it undermines commitment to his

family.

Some of my characters, existing as they must in Baudrillard's universe of communication, relate to each other through a "sympathetic obscenity" (132). They learn something important or make a significant connection with someone in the course of violating each other. In "Your Smile and the Dice of Desire," we see the speaker, while remembering his lust for a high school love interest--who was herself a victim of a series of abuses--establishing a "creatural" solidarity with her. In "Power Walking" the speaker learns about the physical and spiritual value of exercise while watching his baseball coach abuse his (the coach's) son. A man rebukes the oneupsmanship of a co-worker in "Love Notes to Kansas" by "doing the dozens" on him along the general theme of homosexual rape, only to then make a gesture of reconciliation.

I see Baudrillard's influence even in how I have structured this collection. I divided the poems into three sections organized roughly around the idea of losing and recovering a sense of personal "interstitial" space. Accordingly, Cul-De-Sac, the collection's title, suggests the effort to recover a private space since suburban cul-de-sacs are attempts to purchase privacy as a commodity. It also suggests a sense of being trapped since the phrase literally means "bottom of the sack."

I assume the personal and historical are inseparable,

that they interpenetrate each other. Typically, in these poems, the characters are caught in the shift of scale between that larger world and the smaller one they regard as their own. Often, the larger world undermines the characters' sense of coherence and integrity. Unattainable dreams of perfection and happiness haunt them, as in the poems "Bended Knee on a November Afternoon," and "The Perfect World," or alien presences possess them, as in "Fatherhood and Planet America" and "Greyface." Sometimes this larger world enters the personal as a beautiful spectacle, as in "Moonlight in the Bedroom" and "Sweet Darkness."

When threatened by the outside world, the characters typically try to husband the relationships they value. The speakers in "Castlevania" and "Fatherhood and Planet America" fret about the welfare of their children, while the speaker in "Snapshot from Our First Year" tries to protect his marriage from the emotional fallout of the past. In other poems, such as "Drunk," "Cul-De-Sac," and "Consolations of Linoleum," the speakers try to hold back temporarily the demands their personal lives make on them, while in poems such as "Have a Nice Day" and "His Healing Craft", I try to suggest the complex interconnections between personal and systemic evil.

Section 1, "Consolations of Linoleum," then, centers on the ideas of entrapment and of having our sense of own

existence emptied by outside circumstances. The poems about language are in this section because they all treat language as some sort of limit. Often, however, in this section's poems, the experience of being emptied itself becomes the source of a renewed sense of integrity, just as the harried office worker in "Consolations of Linoleum" indentifies with the impersonal linoleum cooling his feet. The section closes on this theme of remembered personal integrity with "Readiness on a Night at the Movies," in which the speaker is poised to do battle with the society that has compromised him.

The poems in section 2 play upon the idea of conflict, as is suggested ironically by the title "Many Cars Coming Together." The phrase "coming together," of course, suggests unity and fellowship, while the idea of "many cars" coming together evokes traffic jams and cacophony. Some of the poems examine personal violence: "Your Smile and the Dice of Desire," "Little League Glories," and "Meadow." Others, such as "Have a Nice Day" and "His Healing Crafts," explore the political dimensions of violence. The Internet provides a convenient metonymy in both of these two last poems for the network of culpability that generates violence. Pinochet, Townley, and the emergency room physician are "relay stations" in such networks.

Most of the poems in this section don't "solve" the problem of violence so much as depict it and try to trace

its various sources, in systems of greed and power, in lust and envy, and in group psychology. The section's title poem actually provides an ironic contrast to the other poems. Though its theme is couched in violent images and diction suggesting violence, we see the speaker at the moment he is beginning to learn that aggression and mastery probably don't have much to do with loving someone.

Like the man in "Many Cars Coming Together," most of the characters in the poems in section 3 discover something they value in the course of running up against their own limitations, even though the thing discovered is mediated by the compromises, transience, and "commodification" of everyday life. The narrator in "The Burden of Peak Experiences" tries to understand why he is happy pulling hair clogs out of the bathroom sink. The man smoking his cigar in "Somewhere in the County" enjoys a sunset even though he knows its beauty stems from agriculture's rape of the land. In "Adversary in the Barn," a kid incorporates a painful run-in with a two-by-four into his fantasy play.

Like the characters in section 3, I have discovered in the work itself intimations of the limitations and possibilities of the human situation. Many of these poems have their source in my personal life, and the experience of reshaping my actual existence in the virtual world of language has been odd, to say the least. It has suggested that existence itself is somehow a fiction, both arbitrary

and subject to revision.

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PART I
CONSOLATIONS OF LINOLEUM

Cul-De-Sac

I turn off
the talk show left on
when I took the kids to school
and wife to work.
No class today.
I should do some work of my own,
but for the moment
all I want to do
is hear the cat swiping
at a plastic bag in another room
and hear all the other sounds
holding themselves back.

Mom, like me, committed
to a creed of rational self-love,
to survive, discovered
houses in her head
where she could step inside
and disappear for a time,
those nondescript places we all crave
because no one else will follow.
Some afternoons she would send
the four of us to various neighbors
or simply push us "outside"
so she could play Eddie Albert's
"Make the World Go Away"
over and over
to put away her list
of the living and the dead,
to get what I have now,
this evaporating solitude.

Through the window
I see the old woman
at the end of the cul-de-sac,
walking her dog.
All the productive citizens are
at their places,
and an emptiness opens
for the two of us.

Opinion of the Interior Paramour

Somehow the hungers and anxieties never peaked
 into the radical purity you expected.
 Nevertheless, this ghost of need
 returns as a hunger for a happiness
 as firm and pandemic as a new continent--
 certainly casting further
 than scratching the next epic
 on a pad in your country house
 or haggling over tactics
 for the next day's chic protest.
 Eventually even this desire for a clean ecstasy
 wanes. The wave of this impulse
 passes over you with a vague unease
 which will be as close as you ever
 get to the matter.

We do what we can for paychecks
 for quarter hour backyard sessions
 remarking the pattern of rot
 on the privacy fence
 or pushing upon the surface
 of sleep's pool on a lost afternoon--
 more and less than bored,
 the nerves thick with some sort of chemical,
 upon the liquid air and dark--
 into the first and only simulacrum,
 a shadow life in mottled sunlight.

The human dream is to access
 the all-knowing mirror from Snow White
 while the lover waits in the back room
 beyond wreaths and shelves of scent
 or someone is talking about a book
 in the old dorm room and you are laughing
 when you wake
 with the air like cold ether
 in your nose and mouth.

One afternoon you notice
 it's been four decades without rituals
 to remind you of your will and heart,
 four decades without rituals
 to reclaim your desire.

Greyface

I want the red numbers to apologize
for reading 4:18.
The fading anger still persists
from the dream where the blond
high school principal, careerist Nazi,
has cut me for coup
in the faculty lounge again.
I get up, relieve my bladder, kill
half a Mason jar of tap water.
You mutter something
from sleep's distant psychodrama
as I renegotiate the waterbed.
Are you trying to get that psychotic
to take his meds again
so his television won't smoke with auras
so witches' voices won't demand suicide?

Darling, allow me a working paranoia.
I'd swear some grey-faced bastard's
doing all of this,
stamping his image on our worries
like my head shapes the pillow,
setting up pressure alarms in the house of love,
making loved ones mouth his slogans,
picked up liked viruses during the habits of the day.

An automatic apathy, watching, waiting,
replaces the dream's anger,
another attitude soaked into the meat
because the world is horrible
and it's nothing new.
Thirty years marinating in the ruthless business.
Blasting caps were pressed into me
before I knew I was plastique.

Fear and anger are two bullet-headed thugs
sent by Greyface to keep us in line.
Thank you, Mr. Peckinpah,--
or is it Robert Schuller?--for the trope.
Feigning respect
we invite them in
and return their heads.

CGAT

The four molecules' initials
read like a child's primer
spliced with a trade agreement.

A penny's difference
between a chimpanzee
and a boy,
we play the lead
in the earth's
sentimental musical.

Our clownish
improvization,
the confetti of our follies,
revives its old tunes,
and yeast relies
on our catering
after the show.

Chomsky and the Utopia of Language

This must be some mistake. Why
do they let him
on the air? That true
believer in language
and its deep design. Free speech
and it will bring about
the clean, clear streets of simple humanity.
Modest grey professor
of the withering document, coolly
tossing names back in the face
of the evil State: IMF, World Bank, Private
Power, Media. Once spoken,
the words ping like popcorn, like
chocolates cast to the camera, snacks
of revolt, a pleasure almost
kinetic. Just as quickly questions
collapse everything to a code
of self-evidence. Of course
issues are easy. Of course
we already have the power.
These enemies are fictions, not constellations, not
the weather. They molt, crumble
in sunlight. Of course,
of course, of course. Noam
Chomsky is a horse, is a case
study in the voice
and its dubious power, that leaky bucket
of survival, that flat bell
of desire.

Submerged Seriality Etude #4

Irritated because I had to go out for toilet paper,
 I became angry out of all proportion.
 That petty snit braking the cap
 of a cavernous anger
 at at at
 the arrogance of the lights
 of the Mercury Marine factory,
 G. Gordon Liddy lights,
 guilty without apology
 at the scene of their crime
 they had the arrogance
 to point to,
 erasure of difference or debate
 in the grass's blank nap.--
 My comfortable life, my dulcimer days--
 marriage, family, right
 livelihood--seemed script
 petering out to a schizo's nonsense word
 surrounded by white space,
 one more apple down history's chute
 and history yesterday's alphabet soup
 nature tosses in the alley--
 everything I would depend on,
 even this view of night, skyline, factory backlot--
 all brittle as ice over dry puddles
 I shattered as a kid.
 Their emptiness fascinated..
 No form will contain
 this inchoate anger,
 this lust for the inchoate.

I think of Sartre's seriality,
 and my anger makes a fantasy
 which rips off Silliman's BART
 (Bay Area Rapid Transit)

and that section about waiting for the bus

from Critique of Dialectical Reason
 which Sartre died at his desk writing--
 trying to write his way
 to solidarity with the gardener
 outside his window.

I ride Sartre's Seriality Express.
 Staggering to keep his balance
 when the car lurches
 lights shift and blink as he comes to me
 stamps my ticket,

smiling through thick
 lips and thick glasses,
 predatory grin breaking
 on an intellectual who thinks he has you
 in his rhetorical jaws,
 Mr. Limpet the Evil,
 Barracuda of the Bourgeois,
 sea-demon of hell's Sisyphean sector.

Not even the way
 the wind mints my hair
 at the Tempo's anemic rev in the slow mud bumpy home stretch
 would mute my operatic mood.

Places unravel to relations,
 blips fall from radar,
 and physics got there before philosophy.
 Einstein's the gentle conductor this time,
 Captain Kangaroo before a chalkboard.

Relations oppressive or relations ecstatic,
 gangs of prepositions
 with, to, from, at, on, over.
 A few good stouthearted men
 in good company
 punk the minstrel boy
 to prove they're not gay.
 Or this wind in my hair
 or that night sex broke the program,
 no neural bile in the muscles,
 but a meal of her presence.
 My fingers back and forth across her nipples
 said I wanted to be with her
 our bodies honest gifts to each other.

But God's accident fools Einstein.
 Detective Science can't get a make on Mr. Quantum.
 Witnesses say he's two places at once.
 We're not even sure if he's
 a wave or a particle.
 He slips away from identity,
 but he's trapped in the underground.

I vandalize, I drive spikes
 in trees to bust chainsaws--to no end.
 To no end, I resign or I rebel.
 To no end, a deflated basketball seriality
 Buddhist thing, shifting one foot to the other
 upon my emptiness, waiting to take my ticket
 for the next coronary.
 To no end, those melodramatic thuds
 crusty basketballs

made in playground dodgeball,
grade-school Promethean,
the Human Torch delivering fireballs.

I'm having a tantrum now.
No, it's more hysterical than that:
the Billy Budd school of articulation.
Every conclusion, every value,
every syntax, these words.
How I am, writing these words,
how I was in the Tempo--
I want to push away the old story.
I have nothing to report.

Waves or particles, apes or heroes,
every lift a collapse
in the quantum fitting room,
every sardonic cavalier a fool for adrenaline
such that these lines scratched on the quantum shuttle
between aristocrats and hormones
only return with proper stamps,
proof of the journey, no contacts made.

He Would Be Our Huckleberry

His impulse is to forget--
to praise bodies with the minds,
histories extracted,
light chasing shadows
around blind eyes, nest,
uptuck. His firstborn
grooms in the bathroom,
drains the hot water tank.

He and we scrape our chairs
on the patio.
In dusk's last failing
a trick of the light:
he is we is we is he,
as both of us sift to black.

The flow of things hits
with the soft rush of rain.
On the road to Okmulgee,
he tosses out
a critical edition of Oedipus Rex
and with it, his memories, stories,
handfuls of chat upon asphalt.

Thunder breaks from the starting gate
only to rub its hindquarters against the windows
like old Spark Plug in his stall. This month
and well into the next quarter
we will only accept stories
about troubled childhoods
and cheating on standardized tests.

Why do
our knuckles whiten
around guilt loyalties
and why do the gold ones
constrict with fear
into feuds and necktie parties?

He maintains his tab in the Bohemian cafeteria
with a can of mousse and a good narrative line.
He sucks pepperoni
and drives the engine of analogy.
He's well paid
for his performance of The Infant Nihilist.
He holds the cigarette beside his head
and drops milk teeth in Pepsi.
His lines are too delicate to bear print,
a side effect, we've decided, of the olympian vision,

though he forgets to call guests to the buffet
and farts during card games.
His fat ass our fat souls,
in T-ville he ghostwrites
sonnets for drill sergeants
while Private A. makes good
his escape.

We realized his obsessions were boring
when the 6th planet exploded,
its debris forming a flaming crab.
No new religions were created,
but jewelry styles changed for a decade.

Meanwhile, a doe is suddenly
unable to breathe
as the rifle slug arrives
from the dazzling light.
On Oklahoma roads for hours at a stretch,
these landscapes known only
as waves caught in the act.
These hills are hangers
for the passions' costumes, though inconvenient,
tedium of remote ownership
implied by the garnish of barbed wire.
In Oklahoma Heathcliff
would have died in adolescence
from a lightning strike. But better that
than the scurrying we must do
around the edges of property.

Non-Profit

The maid's tafetta rustles
as she cuts the broiled liver.
It's too bright and hot by the pool.
He should have received lunch inside.

Squinting through the glare at bites
of liver, scalloped potatoes, green beans, apple sauce;
he thinks this has all been done.

Perhaps the Buddhists are right.
There is a place beyond desire this side of death.
Though no friends or family left,
he feels empty, at peace.

A plop of water and he sees the lemur
has tossed in a pebble from the walkway.
Reaching behind his chair for the cane,
he raps it on the cement.

Perhaps he should give the maid a raise
for not making small talk.
Perhaps he should send a donation
to a Buddhist non-profit this quarter.

Silently, the lemur retreats to her rope swings,
sits on the uppermost loop,
one paw in her mouth, watching him.

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The Watcher

These days, like any keyboard cowboy,
William Gibson's cyberspace
is my grimy, obsessive conceit
for my shadow living with language.
Bits of idea and image,
vague authorial presences,
gnarled green oscilloscope wires
of what I write--all
link, separate, recombine--
sunlight stirs dust motes
wind eddies debris.

This marvelous distraction language
effaces the body to a sweater's warmth
pressing on the back of a neck.
Emotions and hungers rush in and storm away
like bandits.
When I return to the merely physical,
eyes focus, limbs take on weight,
and I find a face half scraped
of shaving cream
or catch my son narrating his playground rumbles
or my wife talking office politics,
what they are saying all the more precious
because they are books of the moment
written on irretrievable pages of air.

That other place
only extends my own separateness,
the dead watching I have always done
as the thermostat kicks on the heating,
or the disc jockey begins to speak
from the clock radio,
and I return to a bedroom
that always looks like an office
We must have created vampires
as a scapegoat for words' whisper play--
their aristocratic hauteur, their damnation.

Snapshot from Our First Year

This snapshot you took
the first year we were married.
I'm on the phone
in my down coat,
underwear, and socks,
bedhead hair,
in that apartment
slow to warm.

That morning Dad called
with nothing to say,
rambling through
grief and guilt
about a pony
no one else remembers,
trying to remove
Brian's suicide
from parenthood's dossier.

"It tore me up
when your mother took
you boys to the city.
Don't you remember?
It was a little brown thing
with a fluffy yellow mane."

All that year
my brother returned
in dreams
from which you woke crying
about the steering wheel
in his chest.

This photo catches
how we survived,
you and I.
Your thumb smudge
at the top of the frame
is that dark thing rising
and hovering on its wings above us
when we came together:

doomed to survive with
a forgetfulness
and a self
thin as paper,
looking ridiculous
as a drunk birthday clown
ringing the doorbell,

pony's reins in hand,
on the wrong afternoon.

The Perfect World

It returns sometimes.
 I glimpse it when I channel surf,
 and there's a glinch
 between channel 39 and 99,
 see it as the video camera
 pans automatically in some committee meeting
 on ethics or economics, a sleek
 power broker just stepping
 out of the camera's view.
 Buffoon dream,
 ne'er-do-well disheveled drift,
 this disruptive Perfect World--
 Sunday afternoons when the window's up
 or I'm in the backyard and the breeze
 rises from the grass,
 snatches of conversation and laughter--
 it requires good company.

Fantasies about multiple partners,
 perhaps lust was the beginning,
 or the viral infatuations
 (every one a nymph in gauze)
 lost years in my youth on the sexual sidelines,
 scribbling their names into notebooks--
 what I'm interested in
 is how it has survived.
 Never could turn a dollar,
 never would turn a dollar,
 called it the poison
 of the world system.

Perhaps that stronger lust
 in the words, Mercutio's
 sleazy pathos,
 leviathan's lordly path
 through water beyond light
 in the minister's lecture--
 whatever the source.

It died finally
 in thrift-store clothes,
 in the recliner, holding a can of beer,
 its eyes inert glass at the spectacle
 of a gardening commercial.

*

Died over a number of days.
 I could hear a gurgle in its throat
 each moment I was happy
 and the hunger that was mute whining

stopped on rational treadmarks
leading into rational fogs.
Rolling the skid meter
on those treadmarks, the authority
of those moments pleads its case,
kids fascinated by a convict uncle.

Consolations of Linoleum

A weekend alone in my office,
staring at the floor
between stocking feet,
I cling to my fatigue.

Sometimes after wrestling
my kid brother, I would lay a cheek
on the kitchen floor, breathing heavily,
wrists scratched and swollen,
during a boring afternoon's bad temper.

With that eye-trick kids play,
the floor's plain opened up for me,
Spiderman's grace precarious,

a hand on the chair's curved aluminum leg,
cool slickgrasp metalsour,
my foot on a sharp bottlecarton edge:
a scuba diver or an astronaut afloat.

In the white collar paper
blizzard, the emptiness
of a good god damn under
my breath converts me.

Now I'm a radical zeroworker,
disciple of those anarchist bums
Bob Black and Bob Dobbs,
free for the moment
from schoolboy compulsions,
cramps of failure, lust for
praise, the stripper's cold kiss.

Ambition's hormones will collect
with my blood in my backside
soon enough.

I'm serene as this dusty blankness
this linoleum, its coolness
soaking through my socks.
I would serenely
buckle or bubble
from whatever earthquake or fire.

A change of form merely changes address.
My political fatigue,
the consolations of linoleum.

Sesame Street Pastoral

Let's say I mash the metaphysics button
on the remote, stare long enough
the ole' RCA goes holographic,
a good one too, so everything feels real,
not photons with hairspray.
The other thing's
the Sesame Street way--
that would be my vertical hold,
sidereal noise dampened.

Let's allow that security
won't bum rush me from the set.
I can sneak food from the caterer's spread
and Mr. Hooper's store,
and Bob's bathroom actually runs water
when I need to go. It's calm--
the copboss Klieg lights are turned down--
no custody lawyers, tax auditors, office assassins.

Big Bird sees me one morning
standing in the corner by his nest.
He asks who I am.
He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Noticed, I tell him.
Believing everything is self-evident,
Bird tells everyone on the Street
not to notice me. Until Maria
explains the situation, after which
they leave me alone--reminding me
all the time they're doing it.

The inane adventures and lame humor continue.
Something to do with Placido Flamingo
and should he sing for birdseed.
With his head tucked in his wing,
Big Bird falls asleep
warbling a snore,
and I'm left to this cool corner
of stage prop brick.
I want that first
sensation of emptiness
because I'm listening to a two-word language--
here and gone-- hope's shellgame-- spoken so fast
I'm not sure if I'm either.

*

The phone is ringing.
In a minute the machine will kick in,
an electronic echo glossing
a magnetic smudge.
Not my wife; she'll
drop me a line
to demand money she knows
I don't have,
the easier for her lawyer to document and garnish.

Probably my secretary
wanting to know why--warning me--
I'm not in the office at midmorning--

Can't answer the phone now though.
A translucent hand would mash into the receiver,
pick up nothing but blue sparks.
At the same time, I am left with my matter,
a yes, cocked ready.

Readiness on a Night at the Movies

A Guide to Mexican Poetry

says flower and song
were the gods of the Aztec kings.

I? Who am I?

I live as a fugitive, singer of flowers.

Tonight, in this theater, I choke
on chunks of Nestle's Crunch.
A mad robot probe
has turned the bald beauty queen
into an inflatable doll
the size of the Grand Canyon.

Oh my, it's a little too heavy handed, isn't it?
I can tell by the still heads, the upturned dazes,
this crowd of well-groomed boobs
is into it.

Sulu has to gulp twice at the display.
A sky of bald woman to consume,
like the ones in Japanese rape comics,

like the buxom sacrifice in white gauze,
tied to a stone altar
in the schlock poster
they sell on the streets
of Mexico City.

A weight lifter in an Aztec priest's costume
(elaborate head gear, tight mini-skirt),
his mouth on his fist
like Rodin's Thinker,
stares at her crotch.

I could
order a mass human sacrifice tonight.
A chocolate bitterness
bites the back of my throat
at this glut,
this latest segment
of the endless rolling spectacle.

You destroy your heart on earth.

Are you not always pursuing things aimlessly?

Twenty-two years in this crummy culture
to figure out it's OK to touch a woman,
and tonight I get a porno-shop doll

the size of the Grand Canyon.
I know I would dive
into this Great Oblivion
if I had a woman beside me.
"Oh, I would be so happy."

Do not throw yourself at a woman
as a dog does before a man who gives him food.
Do not behave like a dog . . .

In my head I have a purer passion.
Corporate space opera scenery crumples
before that multiverse theater
like brushing the edge of a magazine stack,
each blurred landscape the name
of a forgotten god, a buried ecstasy.

They say this is a place of difficulties,
of much filth and of restlessness,
a place without pleasure, fearful and desolate,
that there is nothing true . . .

Flower and song were the gods of the Aztec kings.
I wait for the outbreak
of a field of song,
my hidden savagery held
ready like a jackknife in my pocket.

PART II

MANY CARS COMING TOGETHER

MANY CARS COMING TOGETHER

This sun,
like a madman in a subway,
walleyes him
outside the cafe.
Starting a marriage,
he supposed,
lets a mess
under your skin,

not like his yearly
Minnesota elk,
a matter of hygiene,
a clean gun and clean aim,

or his jump
every few weeks--
an eye on the horizon
holds free fall
as the forearm pushes
to the ripcord
through roaring air--

or closing a sale
with a script
as evident
as a syllogism.

Across the noon crowd
packing the sidewalk,

wailing traffic,
she appears up the street, Dianic,

sweat shining on her arms and neck.
How she makes a door in the glare
opens a cool quiet to him.
He coughs,

the dust of his control
collapsing upon itself.

Your Smile and the Dice of Desire

Twenty years and it seems,
 as coarse middle age swallows me,
 that your smile, attending near rape,
 is my icon for how the world roars on
 without your daddy's pious stories
 we ignored, giggling and passing notes
 in the back pew.

The night you walked into the kitchen
 ripped green halter top stained brown
 with your blood, holding a towel to one eye.
 My desire bleeds from memory
 as from the exacto wedge a class ring
 slices in your temple.

Your mother storms away
 to grab something to cover you,
 and I follow the downward slope
 from shoulder to freckled chest to
 length of slack white breast. A parody
 of suspension just covers the nipple.
 I look up. You smile
 the instant before she returns.

Twenty years and I'm still
 boscoing your boob.
 I'm in that room
 with all the other men and boys
 who wait upon your mystery,
 Magdalene's secret Corinthian gospel you discovered
 because daddy's preacher voice scared you,
 because your mother believed
 in Dale Carnegie, in winning
 friends, influencing people.

I'm in that room with all your other men and boys,
 each of us yet another toss of dice,
 and, ah, again and again you proved
 Herr Heidegger wrong. Bones
 tossed together spark ecstasy, not guilt.

That one from junior high who thought you would look lovely
 with a whip laid across your back.
 That one who pulled the jockstrap over your head
 on the bus home from church camp.
 The one your daddy chased with his .22
 because he watched you undress through the window.
 The one who dug how you removed his boot,

saying you loved to serve him.
The one with long hair, packed muscles
but too cool to be an athlete,
rubbing his thick fingers between your legs
at the drive-in premiere of Trash,
didn't know you were such a dutiful daughter,
that I would overhear your mother describe
everything at the softball game.
Then there's that pathetic lug,
sheepish as Dumbo's mother,
with his sick tenor giggle and femurs like baseball bats
who delivered you bleeding to the kitchen.
You defended him to everyone.

At Joe's the waitress sets my tea on the table.
When the fluffy edge of her cutoffs
presses her thigh,
this wonderful lust for you
surrounds me, twenty years
after the fact, beyond my life
like walking into a mall store
thick with scent. This memory
my censor, my confirmation
that the world tumbles on
with blood and will
and the mad dice of desire.

Little League Glories

With a biblical style,
 the last play of his last
 season happened to be his,
 the game already lost. They would finish
 this last inning ahead. Riley heard
 the crack of the bat. A dark bird hovered
 a dozen feet above him.

Looking up, he absentmindedly
 opened the mitt on his chest.
 When he looked down, shades
 of Hollywood fable, there
 was a new, white, barely scuffed ball.
 The way he saw it,
 no play at all but a mocking
 grace, not nearly as wonderful
 as what his play with Bobby Cooksey
 would be,

who, half his size,
 was stuffed with grace
 at first base, shortstop, pitcher's mound,
 could always plug a heroic arc
 into center, his legs releasing
 a mad energy around the bases
 while Riley dutifully
 cooled the catcher with three
 swats of air, watched right field's
 clotted red clay bake until
 he, excelling in melodramatic hustle,
 was required to misjudge
 the incoming by at least six feet.

Bobby, always a gentleman,
 half his size,
 always careful not to tease.
 But it didn't matter. Riley ran to the bench
 from a field of frustration,
 from a season of looking like a fool,
 tossing the unearned ball at the plate.
 Just as they were about to go
 back to slap hands with our beardless,
 nonchalant defeat, he threw
 his knee into Bobby's leg.
 Ah, his open-mouth shock
 as one femur knocked into another
 like a good eight-ten split
 that late bright summer afternoon,

to leave him squalling in the dugout,
tears warpainting the dust on his face.
It was glorious, glorious.

Love Notes to Kansas at Our Local Bar

I don't give a--No, I don't care
who gets the promo--What?
Why, Kansas,
I didn't know you cared.
All this time I thought
that stiffness at the other end
of the bar was a squelched
belch, and here it is
the very lump of love,
your little rattlesnake
thick with venom
for my rosy red.
Whatsa matter?
Tired of banging bony coeds
with nun's smiles?
Come on, honey.
Let me butter
my nether throat.
Later we can share cigarettes
and read Ginsberg
to each other.

Kansas, Kansas,
sweetie pie, such
rage. Check that
school marm's snit.
Top uh' the world, Kansas.
Monotony land, smothered
with fruited oblivion.
President Elmerhower screams,
Run for the silos!
It's com-
plex!

Tell the world it's shit
often enough, Kansas.
Sing it
often enough,
to make it true. You dolt,
nothing's ever true enough
to talk your way out,
and I know years away from boot camp,
that old drill sergeant
still makes you wet your pants.

*

Look around, sweetie.
When wasn't it boot camp?
Trustee or not, when wasn't this prison?
Time for that old song.
All together now . . .

Have a Nice Day

Conceived by an IBM grunt
to make John Q feel helpless
when his screen grins back at him
and chants, "I'm stoned,"
the stone virus makes
all electronic impulses
into happy faces.

Perhaps one day
breeding in the eddies
of the Internet,
it will splice
with a digital volume
of Baudrillard or Friere
and mutate into a giddy
agent of justice.

We could have used it
in the days of Pinochet
to infect the dreams
of the world's Great Molloch
who assumed the shape
of the yellow mastiff
Pinochet trained
to rape prisoners in his discotheque's backroom.

The stone virus
could 52-pickup the mastiff
into a pile of Hallmark cards,

could static the nerve gas
Townley the CIA wantabe
stirred in his basement
(accessing Hitler's old hope)
to protect Pinochet's eastern border,
stirring while his kids raced by
on the grass above him
pass the squat window--

The stone virus
could static that broth
to cotton candy,

could robot dots from the 8X10 glossies
of Pinochet and his security chief
in the CIA files
into happy faces on the rusting key chain
in the trousers pocket

of the leg section that escaped the shark,
from the assassin's body the helicopter
dropped, pale meat still sour
with the shock of free fall.

The assassin couldn't take out
a scholar in the States with a point-blank Uzi,
couldn't maul resistance
as thoroughly as the mastiff.
The music wolfed the screams.

Better torture than murder as a rule,
the virus of defeat
requires living tissue.

Dr. Golden Rack

three vials of blood
gurgle full
an EKG sticky
electrodes hot
rubber finger
up the rectum
watch salt
lose weight
walk
don't run
you're a pre-existing
condition
insurance
not gonna pay
six hundred
eleven
dollars please

the crook
I toiled under
that year in the
automotive dep't
Woolco's before
it went broke
said Boys remember
the old clunker
you got on the rack
is a gold mine

outside his shack
grinning to himself
wizened Gary Snyder
dissipates,
rolls a cigarette,
watches with each puff
karma curl away

His Healing Craft

--for Norman Dubie

At shift's end he squeaks out,
the big doors of the ER closing
on his Reeboks, leaving the schizo
who must be EOD'd
and a sallow cardiac
to Johnson the new resident.

Back at the townhouse, red and blue numbers
streaming across the computer screen
tell him the divorce barely scratched
his portfolio, though he misses the girls
occasionally. North Carolina Timber
is rising stoutly. Infant leukemia
from its pesticides swells
the pharmaceutical stocks. An economy made
sanguine when bullet holes he plugs
at eighty bucks an hour find their place
in the national prison system,
generating more income
as an institutional bedspace
than a numbly honest minimum wage.

What I want to know is why
we don't simply
cleave the skulls
of the abominable middle class.

Fatherhood and Planet America

Waiting for the bus door's
swing-and-squeak to cough up my kids,
suckling my Zima
to no sound but the heat pump,
I dozed and saw him,
lit from behind.

His face in shadows.
His voice an oily, enthusiastic baritone
saying, For you parents
whose kids are professional saboteurs--
that was all, quick in the silent speech of dreams,
each word gone before it existed.
I knew with the strata and flow
of a dream's ESP,
he intended this a pitch
for some cleaning product or floor wax.

A mere forty thousand commercials
to place that spook in my head,
America and its plate tectonics,
its remote wars and global capitalism,
has no need to be subtle.
Impossible to ask it to leave them alone,
impossible to prevent its chewing them up.
Indeed, how can I act and not
in some way be its agent.
Daddy the voice of a greater order
in league with teachers and cops?

Somewhere in the layers of dream,
the future strikes terror
behind the nonchalant authority
of that unctuous huckster.
Note my unconscious joy at the rebellion
and how my tone now shifts to turn his scam,
serves my petty resistance cookies and juice.

Meadow

Your note said your ashes should be
spread over the hills,
but of course we buried you intact.
One last censure.
Grief and shock made us superstitious.
It was all a mistake somehow,
and you had to be allowed to wake up.

In the house alone the night you died,
Mother claimed for herself the right
to spend the last few hours with your anger
as it burned itself out
with the blue-white streetlight.
I watched through the trailer window

the hills I know how you felt about.
I feel the same way when I drive
back to visit Father. They roll off
to the horizon, and you think
you could be free of your troubles,
just by hiking over them,
though they're sectioned off by barbed wire
and only look like a quilt from the air.

CASTLEVANIA

Because the house where she was supposed to be,
where we sent her brother to fetch her for supper,
did not have a scrap of human habitation,

because earlier that week
a monster in California
dragged away Polly Klaas from a slumber party
while her mother slept in the next room,

because all I had of my daughter
had shrunk to her brother's bouncing flashlight
and my wife's thin voice
shrilling her name
through the subdivision's back acres,

the riverlike momentum of rhetoric
would not console me,
just as the simple fact
of her appearance,
sheepish and small in the back seat
as the car rolled into the driveway,
was not enough.

Often at night,
after locking the door and turning
off the lights, I stay up late enough
to listen to the family
breathing in their beds,
to eat the safe stillness
for a midnight snack.

Lately though, of nights, a restlessness
buzzes my gut, itches my palms. I channel surf.
I turn on the Nintendo
to vent my nerves
with its adrenal technology.

In the gothic landscape
of the video game Castlevania,
the buttons and joystick prove
there's not a werewolf,
zombie, or vampire bat
you can't explode
with enough hit points and time.

Boomer Lake

Autumn ladles its cold silver
across this municipal bathtub.
The crappie must be huddled in a ball
at the base of the bridge.
The wind, bending me
to the steam of my styrofoam cup,
initiates the season
with a bit of tacky melodrama,
jiggles the cedars as if a bear
were about to appear in suburban Stillwater,
or they were pompons twitched
at the first football game.
I'm the town doctor
reluctantly privy
to everyone's life history
now swaddled in sweaters and coats.
The ritual's silly, bleak, and easy,
a school play,
and I will be holding the costume
as we walk to the parking lot.

Bended Knee on a November Afternoon

With their pale grey November light
sifting through the miniblinds--
often afternoons like this one
usually coat me with
the dust of the dumps
I'd be down in,

the residue
of teachers', parents', preachers'
homilies
that my life should amount
to some ever-elevating standard,
or that I should be
Perfection's next blue plate special
because I can't quite pull off
that volume of fortunate accidents
we weigh brilliant.

But today I've had my nap.
(Never confuse fatigue
with spiritual defeat.)
I can remember my covenant
with myself, made sometime in adolescence
after authority's fascination paled,
a covenant for all possible pleasures,
legislated and unlegislated,
and a craft pursued for itself,
not to heft the weight
of western tradition, least of all
to crack career coup. Noodling,
Frank Zappa pointed out, can be good
or bad. If it's bad, hell,
it's just noodling. They pick up
trash on Thursdays.

All honor and money
to the brilliant, but I pray
for the fiber to dodge
the hordes of bad-tempered,
untalented goons the brilliant
(unsure of their own worth)
always send our way.
And I pray for the tongue
to teach my children this,
as I pray for their luck and beauty,
as I pray this ditty
is ugly enough
to make me beautiful,

as I pray for the continued health
of my father-in-law
who can be frequently called upon
to fix debts outstanding.

The Animal Who Smiles

In the calendar photo taped above my cluttered desk,
a polar bear breaks head and shoulders
through an ice flow, mythic vitality
absent a moment from eyes and snout,
dripping fur already freezing into
water rolling an iron bar behind
the one cleared forepaw
which can't quite catch hold.

In another, a green snake
slides the edge of a red leaf,
tapers from one eye fixed to the camera,
contemplating lunch or being lunch.

The nun from church camp twenty-five years ago.
Her head mottled in light and shadow
while an old projector
clattered images of kids bloated
with starving, flies on their lips--
she broke a thin smile,
adrift in her hermetic faith.

A member of her species,
she could almost erase the actual world
for the virtual one in her head,
could almost draw sustenance
from the latter's brighter, cleaner colors.

Below bear and snake, among these flat fictions,
salon portraits of my family. Our smiles are
starched replicas of the smiling we do
between battles royale for
bathrooms or car seats
or quarrels over how close to dark
to come inside. Among these flat fictions
which is the animal
who smiles upon what it sees?

Libido Exorcizes History, Circa 1976

strands of stereos weave barbed wire
 tripping down garfunkels
 macho stud proletariat with an axe
 chases Andy Warhol
 (his arms already missing)
 capitalist decadent wimp you see
 no good for nothing
 who sucks blood from sleeping wirgins
 as they walk across campus

relations between science and religious bourbon-sipping
 uncles
 dressed in wisteria

gentle treasons
 double-entendre acid
 we don't have any tokens for these banana chips
 spiraling vine between chimp meat and the machine
 walden sometime
 scribbled leaves stuffed in books
 painted cinder blocks and broken glass

dance dog paddle
 when autumn leaves fall

a medieval computer under vision
 cracked sundial in the room
 couldn't break guts to rake leaves

both my houses make a profit from worms' meat
 mercantile bastards hanging a seven-year-old
 while towers turn red in the sand
 ultimate hope in the bomb don't you know
 critical mass between journals and comic books
 billowing Michaelangeloes

slime of milkweed
 stale cornchip
 processed poison
 lie
 look and there's the Boston strangler presenting his thesis
 self-supporting wages 24 hours of fatigue daily Chicago
 orgies
 and all the nickel hamburgers down by the Jordan
 old man knows his prey
 clubs of black hands for some heroin

*

Zygon holds the secret
alphabet and papyrus were wrongs before the fact
but as for that
trying to kill the vacuum
the weed merely feeds it
what we need in the streets of San Francisco are mirror
tricks
regular wizard sparrows in the streets
only one flesh

The Thing from Another World

Turner's colorized version is less bleak than the original black-and-white.

The North Pole is the ultimate ghetto.

Mr. Scott, the reporter, reminds me of my father because he is tall and skinny.

They're joshing, all-American guys, except for the doctor who sports Lenin's facial hair and never uses contractions.

And the guy with the froggy voice who later dubs Japanese movies.

The doctor laments the loss of the saucer.

The three ascending chords of the trumpets are almost as scary as the monster himself will be.

The doctor patronizes the captain.

The captain's girlfriend is a secretary who talks to him with her breasts.

Lt. Barnes lays an electric blanket over the monster who will soon escape its block of ice and kill dogs.

They all discuss what the alien's arm is made of, the doctor concluding the alien is a vegetable that can't die.

Mr. Scott calls it a super carrot.

Delighting in the alien's lack of emotion, the doctor reminds us that some earth vegetables can think.

They find a seed pod in the palm of the severed arm.

The hand begins to move.

They check a series of storerooms and doors.

When they open a box in the greenhouse and a bloodless dog falls out, the doctor concludes the alien lives off blood.

Mr. Scott provides comic relief with his irony and sarcasm.

The alien is waiting behind the greenhouse door which they nail shut.

James Arness's hairless white head. His growl. His bulk.

They discover the alien has hung two greenhouse guards upside down to drain their blood.

When watered with plasma, the arm sprouts seedlings which each contains a wailing fetus.

The doctor, not thinking well because he hasn't slept for days, refuses to acknowledge the alien is a clear and present danger.

The captain wants to kill the fetuses, but the doctor thinks this threatens science.

The girlfriend lists all the ways to cook vegetables.

They track the monster with a geiger counter.

Mr. Scott recalls the heroic example of Sgt. York.

The monster arrives and they set it on fire. The monster departs and cuts off the heat.

They retreat to the generator room and set up an electric trap.

The doctor makes a final plea for the cause of Science.

The captain reminds the doctor science produced the atomic bomb.

The alien picks up a 4X4 to use as a club.

After appealing to its better nature, the doctor is knocked aside.

Electricity reduces James Arness to a smoking lump of coal.

The boys josh the captain into taking a vacation with his girlfriend.

Mr. Scott radios a warning to Anchorage:

Watch the skies everywhere! Keep watching the skies!

PART III
VISION DU JOUR

The Burden of Peak Experiences

There are moments when good spirits
hit me from behind,
an endorphine rush of lucidity and self-possession,
and I dearly love the movement
of no matter what I'm doing,
pouring tea for dinner or Drano
into a clogged bathroom sink.

There are moments I walk in the Australia
of those tourism brochures and travel films,
the Darwinian farce of survival
reduced for me to a hermit crab dragging away
home as he finds it,
as the sun makes a light show across the surf
and the surf collapses
to a topaz pool at my feet.

There's still the careerist circus,
tyranny of clock,
the money hassles and old grief
itching the eyes occasionally.--Enough.
Buy me a beer and I'll detail
all the pathetic excreta
you can inventory. This happiness is
obviously not utopia's real estate
so much as temperate interludes formed by
the sighting of right livelihood at thirty-six,
plausible self-definition including
a politics not requiring martyrdom by crypto-fascists,
and an ability to reduce old grief
to that occasional itch in the eyes.

In the calculus, life stinks.
That's what makes those moments
of animal faith such miracles.

A sense of place remains after chaos
has blown the house away.
Not so much storm's eye as weed's flower
surrounded by tornado debris,
blind perennial folly
rooted in reasonably dependable dirt.

Somewhere in the County

Somewhere in the county,
two score combines are razing
fields to stubble like the one
across from the driveway now
as I draw on this very good Dominican.
Wheat dust curls in headlights
as trucks pour grain
into elevators' dungeons. A Martian,
training his telescope
on the brown cloud
over the belly of the turtle continent,
might think giant beetles were attacking
the hordes of ape meat.

So much activity the climate
is commissioned to provide
the entertainment. Dust
smudges the heat like stage make-up.
Now saffron, now salmon,
now wine spilled on the coffee table.

More than happy to place my indolence
opposite busy earth and heaven.

Vision Du Jour

On an afternoon off,
away from the engraving plates,
Blake buoys his bobber
over a cottonwood's reflection
both he and his mutt want
a fat fish to flip to ribbons.
Waterbugs scratch fading light trails
through the cattails.
Ballistic dragonflies vector by.

While good mutt whines, frets
at what he feels but cannot smell,
while pond surface wavers and twinkles,
Blake sees his brother's laughing spirit
tug at cottonwood branches,
sweating pearl of Heaven. An angel,
musclebound, curly-haired doorman
of the Holy, drops and, just as giddy as said brother,
yanks his fellow fool back to the perpetual party.

The pond light of a failing afternoon
glows oily with the divine. Blake's flushed
cheeks tell him this was his routine mess
of the miraculous.

His empty belly growls with happiness,
but companion mutt past all patience barks
and dances, nipping at the biscuit
in Blake's vest pocket.

Adversary in the Barn

He plays toward
the warrior's
final glory:
relishing one's death
at the hand of a final
adversary,
in this barn
of horse aura,
hay scent,

but there's
a new move
to his Zorro game
with a fence stake.

A support
for the hay bin, 2X4,
thrusts like a rough
playmate, juts
pain into
his eyesocket,
and with it
a touch
of melee's
actual indignity.

Tin walls'
mocking echo
or something
with no voice
laughs at even
a pose of strength.

Rawness
in his palm,
the shame before
dead walls,
his sword hand
goes slack.

But the bales
will keep his secret,
and dust floating
at his waist
is too sleepy to notice,
as he sneezes,
begins to wheeze.

The eye stubbornly
signals its cue
for more play.
Perhaps a pirate this time
or cyborg flashing
a ruby laser
where an eye
should be.

Drunk

"People take drugs because they work."
 English professor commenting on drug abuse.

Two quick boilermakers
 to dissolve the week
 gummy with tedium
 and stupidity
 while The Parent Trap's rosy drone
 lulls Hannah and her sleep-over friend.

This sweet video vertigo, chemical
 Utopia, my lover,
 sloshing with humanity,
 presses my cheeks
 between warm palms,
 leads me
 into the bedroom,
 sperm scene
 from Moby Dick.

Bitch's crazy, I know.
 Could start
 screaming furniture against the wall
 or touch
 my forehead and pop a vessel,
 years drooling "I want a gun"

or jerk a jar of cockroaches on me
 in the middle of the night, vector
 my family against
 90 mph railings.

Foil stars stuck on crepe,
 prom night for Beelzebub,
 the way light breaks
 through a heavy glass
 can suck you dry.

But it's not gonna happen, right?
 And danger makes
 for better sex--
 worth the risk.

Roughneck turned out
at close of Doolie's bar agrees, adds,
"Not gonna happen, right. More
than likely. Drink's
a dear comfort, dear
in this ole' world."

POWER WALKING

Almost ready for mere endurance's
 slow victory lap,
 I'm taking the pleasure of oxygen,
 that pleasure of one color, almost pre-coital,
 in muscles' flex and release,
 food's anti-matter, health's tasteless bread,
 the plant's chaste daughter
 which I approach
 with a ritual of pebbles.
 One pebble from the driveway for each lap,
 dropped home when I'm through.
 Three pebbles in my pocket is a mile.
 They tick like the kettle
 Mom would use to heat the Kaola,
 grey healing mud, salve spread
 on the washcloth, dried to clay
 on my chest while Dad paced
 puffing his Salems
 that winter night years ago
 after the asthma became pneumonia.

That night, lying there as Dad cried over me,
 his hand upon my head,
 "Don't die, Hugh Riley, don't die,"
 death meant nothing.
 Dad seemed silly, and I was bored
 trying to trace Miller's bouncing ball
 through the snow on the TV.

I didn't want that heavy feeling
 on my chest, and I didn't want
 my nose to hurt or to feel hot,
 but I was unconscious of death.

Now lungs struggle with the stretch of asphalt,
 and the old chatter brain
 babbles over some unfocused anger
 which seems it would never be satisfied
 should it choose something to be mad about.
 There would always be some anger left--
 like the summer afternoon Randy Coopersmith's dad,
 Dewey County's own Dr. Moreau, tried to cultivate
 heredity with torture. There I was in 110 degrees
 half a klick away from the oil rig,

jogging to Coach Coopersmith's pickup two clicks away.
His Randy was a dozen paces behind,
yelping with each pop of the belt,
his penance for being a no-talent southpaw
like his father. But the anger didn't hit then
even though my lungs heaved in air like hot molasses.
Under everything I knew my stride would keep me ahead.
He wouldn't hurt me because Dad was rich and powerful.
The anger hit, curling back my lips,
as, in clean white t-shirt and underwear,
I lay on the floor by the air-conditioning vent,
floating on cool air and a physical serenity
I had never known, Mom listening
on the phone as Coach Coopersmith
explained how Randy and I "got too much sun."
I was angry because he was right--
a man of black-rimmed glasses, too much Brylcreem
in his hair, and western shirts with snaps for buttons--
about how good I would feel.
This cool serenity justified his brutality.

Now I'm almost ready for the chaste daughter's clean
company,
her grove far from the vanity of man and the doom of
fathers.
The labor thins me to lungs and a brain
over Buddhist legs worked beyond fatigue
to burn with their own wisdom.

Attack of the Ice Mutants

I lie that the ice will mean a delay--
I have to leave for school early,
but I really want to see
its success, the stiff silence, the street

scored and polished to slate.
The grass, firmer footing,
a mat of swizzle sticks,
crunches under my boot.
Trees bow under oppression's chandeliers.

Returning home, I don't have popcorn
when I catch the final scene.
The afternoon sun in its tattered
Confederate uniform musters a rout.

Melodramatically, glass anacondas
give up their grip from power lines.

Silicate crabs, exploding
with yellow light,
scramble for cover.

Seems today I can only
clutter such alien beauty
with the bric-a-brac
of my fantasy.

As I step into the street,
gutters giggle
with crystalline blood.

Halloween 1991

This afternoon seems intimate
 with the end of things,
 loiters with the suggestion
 of a wider sanity,
 like a soldier back from a distant war,
 as out from the other children
 crisscrossing the schoolyard,
 my darling monsters bounce and babble
 into the car,
 faces smeared with green and white make-up
 from Wal-Mart kits,
 wearing black capes and old clothes.

Like puppies in a box,
 we yap only to hear our own voices.
 The day makes its presence felt
 in a glance, like passing by
 a stranger in a hall you thought was empty--
 no, more a recognition, like noting your own
 affection for a lover
 when he or she talks to you.
 As I drive through an overcast autumn
 by the Matthew Brady poses of the trees,
 I become convinced the dead
 are watching us.

Of course the dead have other agendas now.
 This sense of their well-wishing observation
 is just my fantasy.
 Its voice is only a whisper
 inside my head
 like laryngitis or like warm whiskey
 in my chest.

I blame this childish daydream
 on pagan books I've read--
 what they tell of the day's old significance.
 Old enough to have collected some dead myself,
 I often find I need their presence
 to soften the narrowness of living,

as if to say, Look,
here is the life we're leading.
We're foolish, but we're innocent
under everything.
Support us. Make us happy.

The All-Too-Mortal Explains His Posture to Himself

I intend no disrespect
with how my shoulders hunch
and my hands go to my crotch.

Of course, I see Them floating up there,
Their hands and arms grey and swollen
with Their divinity, They Who
wear the world round
with Their gifts.

Nor do I intend any disrespect
with how the water I make
continually shatters and reforms
Their image,

but I'm on my way
to Candide's barbecue
and I must do
what I must do.

Reckoning

for Edward Abbey, one of founders of Earth First!,
author of Desert Solitaire and The Monkeywrench Gang

Larna takes our two scrapping kids,
as an act of mercy,
to a Van Damme double feature
so I can get my grading done.
Sprawled on the bed,
I stoically lift each leaden page
of improvised analysis,
freshman insight into the Romantic lyric,
case studies in years
of compulsory miseducation,
intimations of a bad future
for the kids. I'm rehashing
petty departmental turf wars
by the time I finish.
With a bad taste in my mouth
for my species,
I light a Cuesta Rey,
channel surf to a fishing show
and the soothing babble
of huckster good ole' boys.
When they cut
to a commercial for Eagle Claws,
I hear the wind
raid our subdivision,
set the rafters moaning.

Heat, dust, light, broad spaces in it.
The kids will return with grit in their hair,
will wash out enough to dip a miner's pan.
I remember Uncle Jasper's ranch
by the North Canadian.
Pastures, gullies, cliffs there
don't see hominids for months at a stretch.

My fanatic cigar purifies itself to ash
while the wind sends the house
on wagon axles across the prairie,
the old antenna wire slapping
the living room window,
the storm door rocking and creaking.

*

Ed Abbey loved cigars. His last trip
down the Colorado, he must have mashed
a soggy stub between his teeth
though that stretch was almost gentle,
the rapids more spectacular than dangerous
because he'd discovered he was sick
and wouldn't be better. At what point did
his age, his sickness, the late autumn
convince him the emptiness
behind the cliff's face, under white water,
wasn't the dunes' soft erasure,
and so couldn't comfort him
as the wind lulls me?
It became his first wife
who died in New York.
He left her body at the hospital
to walk the city streets
with a loaded .45 in his coat,
in a rage to deliver
his reckoning for
a poisoned world.

I have shower duty tonight:
Seth will forget his towel, will
forget to rinse the tub,
Hannah must have the temperature just so.

His last time down the rushing Colorado,
Abbey wanted his latest wife and the first one,
he wanted the few people he trusted.

MOONLIGHT IN THE BEDROOM

No sound from the kids' rooms,
and Larna breathes evenly beside me.
The medicine has not yet taken hold
so perhaps I've mistaken
high blood pressure for high spirits,
but the moon and the willow
with its broken branch
throw a silk print on the mini-blinds
a pattern like wings spreading. Within
an opiate circle cast by the broken willow,
the thinnest tissue separates me
from slipping my body like a kimono
to a brighter nakedness, a moonlight
patch under the tree. There
with spent outflows to watch
life parading by, something like
the last scene of Raising Arizona:
Hannah takes her diploma, Seth
waits for his bride with the preacher--
How lovely this fantastic persistence
in moonlight and how generic.
Still better than the simple emptiness
sitting on the chest of a boxed corpse
logged with formaldehyde, better
these standard issue idylls
than the thousand possible scenarios of sorrow
which wait for my children.

Until sleep muddles, I'll let them roll
and taste the accidental arabesque of silver wings.

Of Solitude and the Sinus Migraine

Steel band around my head,
clamps underneath my eyes,
forehead's patch of muscle bunching
over knobby skull, plucking
arteries in the temples.
I hold my head on the pillow just so.
The pain, oddly, pushes me back
to a distance, a solitude
which seems complete,
not pleasureable, or if pleasureable,
a pleasureable emptiness.
This is the mind's way
of handling pain. This sustained
witness of empty rooms
arrives on its own.

My solitude has changed
since I was young
when my wanting to be an astronaut
was a curve pitched
into perfection's attic window,
and solitude was
a wish's shell of perfection,
for the world and I were
never perfect enough.

Long after the Halloween
I was the pirate
with my cap flintlock and plastic cutlass,
I forgot perfection for
the pirate's pleasure and desire's empty room,
the emptiness a pirate takes
into the world--serenity of a need met,
riot of new treasure; a pirate's solitude
makes the world
a distraction to the world's work,
survival elaborated into a heroic style.

Now the pain, surf's white noise,
puts me in an abandoned beach house;
my mind, my life, my world--
a film montage on a blank wall:
Do stop signs mean the world stops?
How did the opossum make
friends with the cat?
Completing the paper next week
means the political group

begins next year--
I lay my forehead
against sleep's cool
dance of oblivious fragments.
The colors, almost sufficient,
cast through the windows.

Sweet Darkness

The rabbit hunched low in my headlights,
 seeking invisibility in stillness
 alongside the driveway halogen washes
 white, runs away only
 when I switch everything dark.
 My blindness from the headlight glare
 recedes before this half-moon's light.
 I really must go in
 to give my spoiled son his All Sport
 and grade my papers--but this night.
 Plunging neckline of an evening gown,
 city lights snugly sequin the horizon.
 Softest, sweet darkness embraces its stars
 who make their points beyond any purpose or voice
 through cloud scraps, gauze accents,
 remnants of this afternoon's broken storm
 filing over town in grandiose retreat.
 I saw a blackbird on a telephone wire,
 a knot of black thread, torn
 from a fistful of knots
 I usually see on the drive home,
 tugging an invisible cat's cradle
 in as many places,
 bouncing and pacing the car
 then up and sweep and a silk drops
 to the field. This little dude
 twitched his head in manic camera angles,
 perhaps wary the hawk, patrolling the scrub acreage
 outside of town, would make
 his malevolent arc from the gilt
 operatic whipped-cream clouds.

From a brown chaos,
 my own doom drew near the summer I fell,
 canoe thump pitching me into the Illinois.
 Violently water is dirty acid in my nose and mouth.
 Not able to swim, I pushed from the bottom,
 silt tugging at my boots. Pulling water
 beneath me in a deaf panic, I tried to climb
 a chest of drawers that was too high. Water propped
 me upright and absurd in its limbo,
 its terrible anonymity. Through the brown blur,
 the swirls of my buddies working toward me,
 death, a literal dark sphere approached,
 tearing space as an idea,
 its black rim within an arm's length,
 or rose in the back of my head,

a cool darkness reaching
or a calm place I could go.

That sphere must have been a night like this.
The man down the street, reading his Bible,
gives it up. A second longer,
in this slipping October night,
the houselights eccentric and contained.

2
VITA

Hugh Tribbey

Candidate for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: CUL-DE-SAC

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Mooreland, Oklahoma, on February 13, 1956, the son of James and Dorothy Tribbey. Married to Larna Jones on July 25, 1981.

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Experience: Employed by Cullen Middle School as a teacher, 1983 to 1985; employed by Palmer High School as a teacher, 1985 to 1986; employed by Throckmorton High School as a teacher, 1986 to 1991; employed by Oklahoma State University, Department of English, as a graduate teaching associate, 1991-1995; employed by East Central University, Department of English, as an instructor of English, 1995 to present.

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