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Trickster's Taxonomy

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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B.A. Pittsburg State University, 2002
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Abstract

Matthew Groneman explores the dynamic nature of language through a series of poems broken into three thematically-linked sections. The first section includes poems about the natural world, scientific processes and technological innovation. The second section is centered around poems exploring American culture, from the nineteenth century to contemporary times. The final section explores the speaker's perceptions of self, particularly with regards to the speaker's masculinity relative to societal expectations thereof. The poems play with concepts of fluid semiotics by employing notions of the trickster as narrator in several poem, disrupting binaries and complicating the nature of meaning. Also utilized toward this end are formal variations, homophones and various sets of jargon.

Keywords: America, Creative Writing, Poetry, Semiotics, Trickster

Introduction

Taxonomy is the science of naming things, of classifying terms in order to control them; in order to maintain order. This is what we do when we write. We try to define our experience of the world, to give voice to it and freeze it in time, make it observable and classifiable. The word's Greek roots – “taxis” meaning order and “nomos” meaning law – seem to suggest that once something is named, its meaning is absolute. Much like nature, though, meaning is rarely static for long. Had Linnaeus been born 100 years later, making him a contemporary of Darwin, he might well have abandoned taxonomy, realizing that change, even though it may be imperceptible, is a constant, and so the more narrowly one attempts to define something, the more flawed the definition becomes. Meaning is fluid. Over time, words morph based on cultural context, based on who writes them and by whom they are read. They build layers of connotation over centuries, or become forgotten only to be rediscovered years later by literary archaeologists.

Change, in some way, inhabits all of the poems collected here. “The All-American Trickster Blues” plays with our notion of myth, simultaneously expanding and disrupting the communal texts that comprise our folklore. The trickster archetype, by its nature, exists in order to bend our perceptions of realities experienced and imagined. The trickster most commonly comes to us through the Native American tradition (as acknowledged by the speaker of “The All-American Trickster Blues” with the line “I’m wearing ante-Columbian shoes), though typically I am working with the trickster figure as adapted by African-American culture in the work of writers like Charles Chesnutt, a version of trickster figures who showed up in Yoruban folk culture, such as the Signifying Monkey. In all of the cultures where such a figure exists, the trickster – a shape-shifting, complex figure whose forms constantly challenge our expectations – creates these disruptions so that we will see things anew, and thus gain richer understanding

through levels of meaning. He appears in other guises here as well. The speaker of “Personal Mythology” constructs the minutiae of a false history, playing with the past in order to undercut the present in hopes of changing what he himself means. In “Purple Reign,” the speaker’s carnivalesque description of Prince blurs the line between masculine and feminine, which is compounded by the speaker’s attraction and adoration. In “Man In Black Blues,” Johnny Cash’s dogs, Sin and Redemption, combine to create a duality in which, rather than a spectrum of salvation, both poles operate at the same time, disrupting our expectations. The trickster is there when America appears first as the amalgam “air came” in “Old Walt’s Returning.” Even Stewball starts out a trickster in “Stewball and Secretariat” before he is usurped by his own journey for the American Dream, showing that the trickster ethos is constantly in flux.

While changes enacted by the trickster tend toward the propitious, change is not always so, and some of the poems explore this side of meaning as well. “Listening for the Glacier,” in exploring the possible meanings of a poorly formed metaphor, suggests the dangers inherent in using language carelessly. In “Hunger Pangs,” it is the nurses’ insistence on breastfeeding that causes the baby to become malnourished. “Personal Mythology” looks at how language can be deadened by too many layers of meaning before ultimately suggesting that, if peeled back, those layers would reveal a more primitive, but also more nuanced, meaning. Most dangerous are the changes which, ironically, attempt to limit or slow further change. “Celebrity Poets” condemns those who use a position of privilege to publish subpar work at the expense of those who put more emphasis on craft. This impedes the progress of poetry since it becomes difficult to discover new poets when bookstore shelves – at least in the small mall bookstore I went to in Pittsburg, KS – are filled with Suzanne Somers and Leonard Nimoy, names that will sell even if the poetry is no good, rather than newer, less known poets like Kiki Petrosino and Frank

Giampietro. “B-Side” laments how the effects of technological advancement on marketing mean marginalizing eccentricity and minimizing whatever doesn’t easily fit into a schema; as we attempt to constrict discourse according to the market’s dictates, we also slow down its evolution by discouraging the experimental.

The whole of *Taxonomy* seeks to explore the nature of discourse as something living and breathing, able to communicate while still in a state of flux. In “Purple Reign,” the speaker, identifying with Prince’s sexuality, finds that masculinity, albeit not in a traditional sense, is among the things signified by high heels and strings of pearls. In “Southern Autumn Lament,” the speaker’s perception of what “autumn” should mean is challenged as he experiences a new climate. “Radioactive” deals with the primal way in which language changes us – especially poetic language. Like charged atoms, the charged language of poetry works on us both in ways we recognize and in unconscious ways that we will never fully understand. When this language comes out of us, it is changed. Language is like radiation in that the change can’t be undone, but only compounded. In “Eating Poetry” the physical state of the language is changed as the baby absorbs it and it helps her to grow.

Ultimately, language is inadequate, but, as “Sloth” suggests, since the beginning it has been our only means of making sense of the world. Humankind was controlling the world through language long before Aristotle noticed language’s power to bring order and began describing society’s institutions, classifying them using the method we most typically think of as taxonomy.

I. Experiments in Articulation

Radioactive

It splits our core, this elemental change,
each time iambs turn radium to radon.
Images spin around our nuclei
and madly threaten to break off, arrange
us into ions, short us one electron,
and then we'll all be atoms gone awry.

Yes, strophes change the human condition,
allusion interconnecting neural nodes
until we are a double-helix. Encode
the mind of Oppenheimer. His decision
was this: to build the bomb and drop the lode
when lines could put our ethos on a collision
course where words sear and brand our souls through fission
as permanent as the genetic code.

Dark Afternoon

The city is dark. Calm.
Lit only by a neon sign
blinking in the distance.

Somewhere, Salvation lurks,
waits for Death to ride by,
poised to lurch forth, pounce.

Indistinguishable, they will fall
from the dock – just one tight ball
we'll all gather around and peer
into the abyss, ready to see the bay's blood
boil, but finding only that the water
just rests – blank and impenetrable
despite our best efforts to make it mean.

Sloth

Language, too, moves slowly.
In the mind's thick canopy, our ideas
leap, but before these lines jump
across the synapse, at each word
our neurons must pause,
reflect, then refract each image.

Adam, our first scientist, branded
the subtle sloth a sinner in Eden.
But why? Blond-eyed with awkward,
inept beauty, its toes slowly curl
around branches –sleepy, yet graceful
as a dancer. Genetically lame, yet hardly lazy,
she moves like phonemes gestate.

Still, by studying the sloth we learn nothing
of sin. The only truth we discern is this –
slothfulness sometimes only looks
static; that it may signify a mind at work,
its gears grinding away just out of our view,
leading us to question Adam's too-long-standing
tradition and look for a taxonomy that doesn't tax.

B-Side

Musical artists treated fans like archaeologists, made them dig if they wanted their rarest, most treasured tracks. Buried beneath forty-five rotations of radio-ready grandeur, gems lay waiting to be discovered – enchanted quirks that hint at what lay ahead, glimpses of how an artist would really record if the studio were an aural playground where, when the walls of sound crumbled, diminished fourths splashed the soundscape cascading over bongo-beaten poly rhythms like raindrops, each plop an eargasm that drops onto the mixing board as a master, instead of being swept off the cutting room floor.

Now, all but digitally erased, such songs are only a myth. Occasionally they emerge as remixes tacked on for reissues or iTunes exclusive demos that require repurchasing an album you already own. Today the album is just a concept – not even an artifact – and it's gasping its last sigh. The single is already dead; there is nothing left to turn over.

Eating Poetry

This morning, after her oats and pears,
I shared my Cookie Crisp with my daughter
until she was full of sugar and grain. So,
as I sat sipping my coffee and she her milk,
I was surprised to see her signing please.
“Please what?” I asked, only to see her point
at the Wakoski I was poring over.

When I finished the poem,
I gave her the book. She ripped
and crumpled pages and then she ate
a clumsy origami of a bite.

I almost tried to stop her, to pry the paper
from between her clenched teeth. I worried
“Hitchhikers” would leave her a little
lost, but too confident to admit it,
shaking off the signs of being burnt
by the scorn of orange ash
berries flaming up in cold solitude.

Instead, I let her eat it.
At seventeen months she already understands
that we must ingest words –
break the Latinate into monemes
then absorb them through collective villi –
and that through this slow process, intensive
as it is, we find only the nutrients within them.

Listening for the Glacier

“Glaciers a canary in the coal mine of Global Warming”
-CNN.com Headline¹

Not to worry, though. It’s only a canary.
Silent, it sings in bright yellow
tones, its song a portent of what will come
when the rutilant blood burns rivulets
into the ice and then flows.

We can just put a cage around the glacier
and drop a sheet over it when we tire of the song.
When we hear the glacier stop
melting, the bird stop
singing, hear only the rush of water
that means the glacier has melted into flood,
drenched our sheet as it runs through the slats of the cage,
we will only need to scurry away from these mined continents and go
where? The flooded, copy-editorless offices of CNN?
There, doves fly high dropping feces
onto its windows, reporters inside senselessly rushing
to write up a story about Congress ear-marking funds
for ark-development technologies.

As the writers and scientists waste time
mixing metaphors, the waters rise and soon
our bloated bodies will sail
an ocean filled with feathers
the color of jaundice.

¹ In the early days of coal mining, canaries were taken into the mines as an early warning system in case of gas leaks. The canaries would constantly sing; if they stopped, the miners knew they needed to evacuate immediately. The gas affected the birds’ blood stream and made the blood rutilant. This condition turns the blood bright red and causes it to heat up quickly. Once their blood was rutilant, the birds died of fever before lack of oxygen could kill them.

Southern Autumn Lament

I'm used to the air burning
crisp this time of year, fire filling
a cold that comes fast and hard. Crinkly
brown leaves shaking off of barren
branches so the wind can carry them
across the burning prairies, the fields
as they prepare to lie fallow.

Instead, in this southern climate
autumn slowly unravels
before slipping by unnoticed.

Here, grass continues to rise tall,
growing well into November.
This autumn is strange to me.
How can anything hope to be reborn
if it doesn't first seed and fall away?

II. Postmodern Frontiers

Stewball and Secretariat

Of all the horses in Kildare
Stewball was most blue collar.
On any of the other horses
you might risk your bottom dollar.

Then Stewball won at Kildare.
He was so filled with joy.
He took his winnings to the port
where a ship he did employ.

He sailed for America –
that land so brave and free.
He sailed because he thought he'd find
the gleam of liberty.

When he hit land, the sky was rambling.
He felt it burning red.
The rolling of the thunder strikes
almost knocked him dead.

He spent that night beside a mule
in a dirty alleyway.
The sun, it crossed the morning line
and he was on his way.

He took work where he could, of course,
to earn wealth and respect
but his dreams and opportunity
never once did intersect.

Sixty hour weeks in factories.
The pay was slow, but steady.
If opportunity knocked again
Stew knew he must be ready.

He'd started to grow thin and weak –
tired, emaciated.
Wage slavery had worn him down.
His racing days were dated.

He fired up to train the day
he heard about Churchill.
He saved money, found a place to rent
with gents just like Joe Hill.

Stew ran each day and soon he felt
his speed begin to grow,
and soon he drew the attention of
a young jock named Yarrow.

Yarrow jumped in the saddle;
Stewball stomped the ground.
They ran down to the roses
At the Churchill Downs.

It was there they had a big race,
the biggest I've ever seen.
The whole thing was being covered
by *Time* magazine.

The other horses were thorough
and they all wore a crown.
They preened and they went prancing,
gussied up in their renown.

Stewball, he looked motley.
His coat was patched and skewed.
He sized up the other horses
and knew that they were screwed.

They sidled up to the starting line
where the others were lined up.
Along some sponsor's dotted line
it seems they'd all signed up.

One saddle said McDonald's.
Coke was on Seattle Slew's.
Secretariat rode for Pepsi
and for Microsoft too.

It was then Stew noticed who
people had their money on.
The richer horses ranked like kings
while he was just a pawn.

He looked closer at the riders
and saw some that he knew.
Henry Ford rode atop Affirmed.
The Donald rode Seattle Slew.

Harland Sanders straddled Secretariat,
that proud Kentucky Colonel.
The race seemed like an Old Boys' club,
but Yarrow wasn't quite fraternal.

All along the starting line
the horses started to stir.
Finally the whistle blew
and they took off in a blur.

Sanders rushed from the starting block
like Patton leading a battalion.
He snapped down his cruel crop --
cracked it hard across his stallion.

Yarrow pulled down close on Stew.
He gripped the reins real tight.
As they galloped 'round the second turn
things looked like they'd be alright.

When they reached the final straightaway.
Sec and Stew raced side by side
but right before the finish line
Stew fell into a slide.

Secretariat marched right over the line
and they handed the purse to him.
He rode away in a Rolls Royce trailer
looking so proper and so prim.

All the years since were kind to both;
their legends grew and grew,
but in old age, that skewbald's
reputation has proved untrue.

Now, Stewball soaks up past glories,
lives on legends of Kildare.
Under an umbrella with old Sec,
he naps in his lounge chair.

That afternoon in Kentucky,
he lost the Derby – it's true –
but he also got rediscovered
and soon topped the racing queue.

Appearing in ads for Franzia,
he chugged down boxed red wine
then took a spin around the track
while shouting "I feel fine!"

These days his biggest thrill is shouting
out "Spo-dee-o-dee!"
then defending himself to the press
when that draws the paparazzi.

Him and Sec live life in lush comfort.
Sec, sipping his Collins cup,
leans back and thanks his pedigree
for his fancy mint julep.

Stewball drains another goblet.
his head becomes a haze.
All the blood of his ill-gotten youth
he lost in an American daze.

Old Walt's Returning

Yesterday, I felt America when the breeze kicked up and blew *Leaves of Grass* across my
bookshelf.

I nimbly caught the wind in Sandburg's *Songbag*, then pressed my ear to hear
America blast through the bag's opening – a claw-hammered banjo battling the furious jabs of a
be-bop horn.

Then again, that night, I tasted Coney Island in carnival popcorn and Kansas in the burnt crusts
of the baker's last loaf

and this morning I smell America in produce and manure – both fresh in the farmer's market.

From far off, though, I can sense America crumbling, melting to a sticky ash -- just a
crushed bit of candy cane stuck between the slats of a crashing marketplace.

Still, I am hopeful.

Somewhere, Walt Whitman presses on, still seeking, still finding, still shaking phantoms
of the Confederacy from his beard.

Our modern Adam, he traverses this always renewing Eden that stretches from Ni'ihau to
Paumanok.

His words form secular blessings, incantations that ring through my brain,
and when the populace roars, America singing its songs of ourselves, our collective
neurons will fire visages, their vapor trails burning, glowing
like the rocket's red glare, shooting across the synapse, exploding like fireworks
up above this promise, above the world reborn in this city upon the hill.

Personal Mythology

I see myself in sepia tones.

I stare into the camera – my earnest eyes as dim as the dead's.

The only thing thicker than the dirt on the lens –

just one of the layers that makes this moment irretrievable –

is the dust caked beneath my long, yellowed nails.

Dangling, they clutch the unburnt end of a hand-rolled cheroot.

A pick-ax leans against the granite. My mud-dried dungarees

flirt with the breeze. The fallow flowers on my shirt

blow this way and that, within me and without me. My skin

appears taut and lean. I fade into the adit. My beard – round as an aril

and filled with the promise of America – catches glints of the sunlight.

I know all of this is fiction – except for the flowery

shirt – but it is mine, the masculinity I've created

after peeling back layers of façade

perpetuated by politicians and muscle men. In this lie

I find more honesty, more that I can trust –

even if granite, that hardest

of American stones, is not native to a coal mine.

The All-American Trickster Blues

You know I got those mytho-American blues.
Yes, I got those myth-makin' 'merican blues.
I've been walkin' so long, I'm wearin' ante-Columbian shoes.

I gave my all to orphan Johnny. He was always deep in need.
Little poor orphan Johnny; wasn't nothin' he didn't need.
I put that mush-pot on his head, said go plant this apple seed.

I once was a famous black-smither. My hammers they cost a loan.
I got so famous smithin', John Henry wouldn't leave me alone.
I made his hammer so special, it got its own ring tone.

Makin' minimum wage at a pet shop, I once sold a snake to Pecos Bill.
Down at PetCo, I said "a rattler?" Pecos said, "I'll foot the bill."
Sold him one long as a lasso. He said, "Man, that's overkill."

I tried my hand at hydroponics, made a go for to farm the sea,
but I ended up a mix-master, mixin' pills for the pharmacy.
I made pre-natals for Ms. Bunyan just to pass on my karma, see?

Despite what you may have heard, I don't know no Uncle Sam.
Forget that rumor mill. I never met no Uncle Sam
and even if I did, he sure didn't give a damn.

I said I got those mytho-American blues
Yes, you know I got those myth-makin' 'merican blues.
I ain't been paid yet, but you know I earned my dues.

John Brown's Ride

The killing started in Lawrence
under the black cover of night.
Sheriff Jones torched his town
and squeezed the Free Staters tight.

Jones set to burning hotels
and the newspaper's printing press.
If the abolitionists can't spread word
they'll be in an awful mess.

As smoke clouds rose up in the air
John Brown rallied his sons.
They formed a band of outlaws
to do what needed done.

John Brown rode out to battle
up on his horse's back.
His sons flanked around his sides.
The night was cold and black.

They galloped across the dark plains
to Pottawatomie.
There they rode up to James Doyle's,
the man John wanted to see.

John threw a shin bone to the hounds
that gathered round Doyle's shack;
the dogs Doyle used to trail slaves
now clawed and bit his back.

Brown thrust a sword through Doyle's chest
and then his sons did the same.
John shot a bullet through his head.
Doyle had himself to blame.

Allen Wilkinson had just sat down
at a table lined in gilt
to count the bills that he had made
off all the blood he spilt.

While John's sons rode behind the house
to clear out Allen's stable.
John marched right into Allen's kitchen
and overturned his table.

They charged across the river, pounding
hoof beats in the dust.

Nothing but the heart of Dutch Henry
could quench their deep blood lust.

They came up to James Harris's house
where Henry had gone to stay,
not knowing he'd escaped to Missouri
some seventy miles away.

Brown forced his way inside the house
to find three men alone.
He pushed them out and marched them down
to the banks where moonlight shone.

He asked them questions each by each.
He spoke plain and clear.
The men had fought for slavery.
They were all filled with fear.

"Did you help burn Lawrence town?"
John asked James Harris.
"If so, was one of these evil men
your Godless accomplice?"

"I believe in a just and right god.
I burned down no town.
I disagree with you Free Staters
but don't put me in the ground."

John walked down the line
to James' friend Glanville.
"Tell how you came to know these men
and do you follow them still?"

"I am a Christian just like you"
said Jerome Glanville.
"I don't believe in killing folks
but slavery is God's will."

John Brown held up his lantern.
His beard glistened by its light.
"If you follow a righteous God
then you will see what's right.

Pity on your souls for ignorance.
Compassion is the only wealth.
I'm sparing you in the here and now,
but up there you're in ill health."

Brown then turned to Willy Sherman,
brother of Dutch Henry.
"Your soul is darker than the skin you own.
You can't accept all men are free."

As the sun peeked over the horizon
John dealt the final blow.
The blood of three men stained his name
in early morning's eerie glow.

Man in Black Blues

There ain't many men been burned quite like Johnny Cash.
Life ain't burned many men, quite like it did Johnny Cash.
Still, he did alright, for being just country trash.

Johnny Cash's soul was blackened by too much remorse.
Just like a burnt coffee cup, he brimmed with too much remorse.
Now I wonder, does he ride the white or the pale horse?

Johnny Cash had a black dog, and he named it Sin.
Johnny Cash had a black dog, and he named it Sin.
He also had a white dog, and he named it Redemption.

Last night I heard his coffin ramblin' down the road.
Yeah, I heard him coughin', still ramblin' down the road.
His wheels rattled out "come and take me" in Morse code.

Was Cash the engine driver of that long black train?
Was Cash the engine driver of that long black train?
I pulled on that whistle and the horn called out "Samhain."

His heart pumped true grit until his soul wore coarse.
His heart, it pumped grit. His soul was real coarse.
Tell me again, Johnny, will it be the white or the pale horse?

I can still hear him singing to the men in Folsom pen.
I still feel him reaching out to the men in Folsom pen.
Every time I hear his voice, his empathy lives again.

He surrounded himself with black. That's the way we remember Cash.
Forever shrouded in black, that's the way we remember Johnny Cash,
but he'll only stay that way until they burn him down to ash.

Celebrity Poets

When the only bookstore I had was at the mall
the poetry selection there was really small.
A shelf and a half filled with actors was all we
had. No poetic celebs like Taylor Mali
or Billy Collins. Of course no Whitman or Mina Loy –
just stacks of paperbacks by Leonard Nimoy.

In middle school I read Mr. Mojo Rising
and even at eleven I knew he needed revising.
His book got panned – it wasn't surprising.
I can dig on the work he did with the Doors
but his nonsense poems are ink-blotted bores
and all he did with *Lords and New Creatures*
was shame his old English teachers.

Jewel wrote a book called *A Night In Armor*
full of pseudo-confessions of an icy charmer.
Over a million copies – the book was a big seller
but she didn't like it when critics tried to tell her
that a casualty is different from a casual man.
Her excuse – poetic license. Sorry, doesn't pan
out. You don't need a license to ignore the dictionary
but when so-called poets do, then that is just scary.
Maybe I haven't basked in enough Alaskan culture,
haven't shivered in a van like a frozen vulture,
but, Jewel, I can only empathize with pieces of you –
the ones with music; they are all that rings true.

No one can compete with Suzanne Somers
when it comes down to giving me the slumbers.
I think her publisher smelled a payday
when she posed for her poems in lingerie.
Now I'll admit that she looks like an Aryan
but that doesn't make her superior to vegetarians
or any of the other types of people she chooses to slander.
She doesn't have talent – just skin and candor.
If I could match that level of good looks
I'd still be ashamed to publish high school notebooks.

But the worst of the worst is Amber Tamblyn.
With her, you don't even want to get me rambling.
Child actress with the traveling pants,
jotting self-absorbed, unraveling rants.
Why's she even a poet? I'm at a loss.

All I can figure is she once dated David Cross.
He played Allen Ginsberg in a Bob Dylan movie –
can't you forget craft when you're that groovy?
Sorry Hallmark poster girl of the bourgeoisie
but you're no Peter Orlovsky.
Yet what's keeping my ethics committee up nights
is that she just gave a reading at City Lights.
I can't believe it. It seems real petty
to try to get credit by stealing Ferlinghetti's .

My big problem isn't that you're writing your feelings;
It's the fans groveling at your feet and kneeling.
Then again, maybe I'm being too harsh on your readers.
No one mistakes you for literary leaders.
If they did, Somers poetry might have sold faster
instead of ending up a footnote to the thighmaster.

So this goes out to all the faux-Poes,
the ones who hawk self-published woes,
the ones whose wait would be eternal
if they had to first publish
their work in a journal.
All you celebs try to keep it real gritty
and ignore that you're adored just for being pretty.
Just being a star doesn't make you witty.
If you submit to my mag don't expect any pity.

III. Candidates for my Hamartia

Hot August Night

As an infant, I took Neil Diamond very seriously,
listening to *Hot August Night* while lying snug in my crib.
Later, he went Vegas, and I turned smug, the casino glitz
keeping me away for far too long. When I started
listening again, I knew why it was *this* album I fell asleep to.

But now, it wasn't quite déjà vu. Instead of sleep,
I wanted to leap, shout. I had found myself again.
I popped up in the cowpoke comedy that filled side two
of four. I am the forsaken, old carpenter
crafting for no one in "Morningside." I can
at least appreciate "Done Too Soon"'s impulse
to attempt to simultaneously empathize
with Jesus Christ, Ho Chi Minh and that American
Judas, John Wilkes Booth, all in the same verse.

And I'm there again on the album cover –
the way Neil looks so lost. Distraught, he stands
staring down into the void
between his hands. He is handling our hamartia –
that paralytic fear that when we step to the brink
we will realize the future is sprawling, a nebulae
of the unknowable. All we can do is prepare
for the performative catharsis that must soon follow.

9:30

That was when we heard the garage door.
Mom began reheating the meatloaf.
Ten minutes later you stumbled in
sloshing a tumbler of box wine and stinking – a surprise,
since you didn't smoke. You clutched the kitchen
counter, felt your way across the floor
until you found mom, then groped her
while she tried to brush you off. One violent wobble
and you shuffled off to the bedroom, cursing
her under your breath
as you went to change out of your suit.

The meatloaf warmed, mom screamed
toward the back of the house, then sent me
to find you. After a few rounds
of yelling down the hallway
(no one believed you were half deaf
and you couldn't hear us at all
when we found out we'd been wrong),
I huffed back to your bedroom.

I didn't see you
at first. I thought you had slipped
out the front door and back to the bar, stung
by the guilt of making yourself unwelcome.
You were there though, and when I turned around I felt you –
or at least your elbow – as it brushed against my heel.
You had fallen
asleep, drunk and drooly, on the closet floor.
You lay there, curled in the fetal position,
wearing only your thin black socks.

Valentine's Day

In preschool, I smuggled candy in my sock – hoping to win the girls' hearts with a sweet tart or two. I recognized the strangeness of keeping candy in one's sock and imagined myself a superhero, hiding taffy – saltwater mixing with ankle sweat -- the way Batman might hide his Bat-a-rang. It worked. I play-dated every girl who was worth play-dating. Perhaps it was because everyone knows clandestine sugar tastes sweetest

but I'd often forget the gifts of molded sugar, remembering only later when I found them melted around my ankle; even without sugar to give I somehow maintained that blend of charisma and moxie, the courage I needed to flirt.

By third grade, that confidence had vanished. During the Valentine's party in Ms. Tucker's class, I hid behind the rain slickers hanging down from hooks on the wall.

In the aftermath of broken scissors and paper scraps,
I have no construction-paper heart to show.
I speak only in the faded Red 5 of stale conversation hearts.

Purple Reign

When I was a child, my mother
abandoned my siblings and me
in the aisles of the First Avenue
Thrift Store. We wandered the aisles
like a trio of lost vagabonds
until we stood before two wire racks
covered floor to ceiling
in all styles of womens' shoes.

Before long, my brother -- the same brother
who fifteen years later, when Prince
was a has-been, would rub in the face
of anyone who listened how great
Prince's hits were -- held up
a pair of satin pump heels
strung with hideous mustard-seed sequins
and suggested we send them to Prince
courtesy of his fan club. Six years younger
than my brother, too young
to understand, all I could do
was wonder why a man needed high heels

and it would be another twenty years,
before I stood beneath a stage
where Prince's glittered, clear stilettos
ground into the platform just inches
above my face, the tattered threads
of his faux-gypsy scarf brushing my cheek
and his ass-tight yellow pants gyrating
just another foot beyond that,
before I would fully understand.

Hunger Pangs

Your thighs were thin
as corndogs, neglected drumsticks
I thought you'd never toddle on,
the day we brought you home.
Your cheeks began to hollow and your weight
dropped. You weren't so fragile
that I needed to be scared. The nurses,
after all, had told us to just keep trying

to get you to latch, that you'd eat
when you needed to. Still, posing
for new-daddy pictures, I held you
at arm's length, terrified
and nervous, knowing I'd be
the bad dad, the clumsy one
to accidentally break your sunken skull.

You would grow smaller, more fragile –
scarily so – before you began to grow
the day you started eating not
from the breast, but the bottle.
By then – fearful for you, fearful
I couldn't handle fatherhood – I had to cling
to something, and I chose you,
cuddled you close, and pressed your cheek against mine
until my heartbeat sped up to meet yours,
and, growing up, yours slowed down
to meet mine.

Occupational Nomenclature

I envy the perfect symmetry of Li-Young Lee.
It is the same with Heinrich Heine.
Jorge Luis Borges is nearly as covetable and
William Carlos Williams really got his word's worth.

Countee Cullen, Basil Bunting – perfect pairs of trochees.
Sassoon could start a line of iambs; Siegfried nearly fits
and at least alliterates. Walt Whitman, Marianne Moore,
Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Garcia Lorca and Lawrence Ferlinghetti
fill the air with assonance and consonance.
Jack Kerouac has a nice, unobtrusive rhyme to it.

So, what were my parents thinking?
Owen would have almost been fit
to sit side by side with more poetic names
in the contents of some anthology. But Matt?

Other writers' names announce themselves, blast off the page
with the force of a can(n)on. How can I hope to compete?
Entering Ellis Island, we could have at least kept Von
Gronemann. Then they could have named me Ron,
or Don Juan. One day, when I am a grown man
I'll look in the contents and see Matthew Groneman,
and I hope, by then, it won't just make me groan again.

Villanelle for my Thirtieth Birthday

I'm turning thirty. I'm growing old,
but at this age I'm not yet the helpless type.
If something needs done, I don't need to be told.

Most days I wear my trousers rolled.
I admire suspenders and smoke a pipe.
I'm turning thirty. I'm growing old.

On days I don't bathe I smell a little like mold.
Varicose veins cross skin in curled stripes.
I look like day-old fruit. I don't need to be told.

I've forgotten how many games I've bowled.
My gray matter is rotten, overripe.
I'm turning thirty. I'm growing old.

My calorie counter has been paroled.
I don't need any of that diet hype.
I'm healthy enough. I don't need to be told.

I don't want to be the old man who needs cajoled,
the curmudgeon who just bangs his cane and gripes.
Still, it might just be part of growing old;
if I end up that way, I don't want to be told.

Ornithology

Unless you mean Charlie Parker,
I'm no expert on birds,
which is why I only think
it's a robin I hear tweeting away
as it hops on the ceiling tiles
in my daughter's new bedroom – her first bedroom
that isn't shared with her mother and me.

I think it's a robin
because Bobby Day told me
they tweet when they rock, but
it also sounds like the stuffed cardinal (it's red!)
that dangles above the baby's car seat.

Either way, I'll end up dealing
with it using the same method –
crouching with the lights dimmed,
blanket in one hand, broom stick
in the other, poking the ceiling
and ready to pounce
and cover it. Outside,
I'll unwrap the blanket and release it
back into the bright, scary world.

VITA

Matthew Groneman was born in Kansas City, Kansas. He earned a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and Political Science at Pittsburg State University in 2002. He earned a Master of Arts in English, with a Cultural Studies emphasis, in 2005. He joined the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans in 2008 and studied under the tutelage of Kay Murphy while working as a teaching assistant and research assistant to Murphy, Randolph Bates and Miles Harvey. He is currently Assistant Professor of English at Vincennes University in Indiana.