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## Some Permanent Part

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Some Permanent Part

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, Poetry

by

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May 2007

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## Introduction

Before I was influenced by any writer, I was influenced by my history and by the western Pennsylvania geography, itself metaphoric of both my family and my own sense of my identity. I draw the inspiration for much of my work from my family's western Pennsylvania heritage, evident in this collection beginning in the opening section of Pennsylvania poems and following through the second section of Florida poems, written almost exclusively in an attitude of being "not-Pennsylvania." The third section of poems presents a series of portraits and draws upon more objective, external accounts of characters from the news or from direct personal observations. This third section allows me room to reflect upon the helplessness of the individual in relation to his or her social condition, as Malcolm succumbs to Alzheimer's disease and Byther Smith continues to play blues to nightly inauthentic crowds of tourists. The contemplative death/rebirth poems of the fourth section return me to my roots, as my philosophical exploration stems from my own sense of loss and my search for some form of salvation or immortality.

My sense of history is defined by the stories of my family history and the social and geographical atmosphere of the Allegheny Mountains of western Pennsylvania that over four generations of my family have called home. My mother's family were miners, carpenters, and Brockway Glass factory workers. In my poem "Meditation At the Mine," I try to evoke the spirit of my family by coupling the vivid description of my great-grandfather's long-collapsed shaft mine with the stories my mother and grandmother have told me: my great-grandfather laid the tracks himself, bought a used rail car, and pushed it by hand after he'd filled it with coal he'd loosened with dynamite blasts and a pick-axe. By condensing the historical information, I wish to leave only the implied sense of his work and to speculate on both the transition I've made away from this area and the futile but necessary attempt to reclaim the past. Likewise, my

grandfather, a self-taught carpenter, farmer, miner, delivery driver—a strong man tied closely to the land—symbolizes to me an Appalachian renaissance man, an agrarian idol that I capture in the poem “Breaking Down My Grandfather’s Garage.” As he “marks each mortar latitude line / as square as he could measure,” his perseverance draws from me a poem that not only seeks to capture the sense of his self-taught craftsmanship, but ultimately catalogs the remnants of his legacy that are fast disappearing.

My father’s history also includes the people and the stories of Germanic immigrants who settled in a town fifteen miles from my mother’s family. Historically glass blowers, four generations of my family have worked for Brockway Glass as production-line laborers. In “My Grandmother,” I attempt to define my identity in terms of the lineage Grandma Bee embodies and illustrate the historical transition of the glass blowers becoming production line machine workers. Ultimately, I wish to define myself through the blending of all family members in discovering my identity as a historical creation.

Completing the geographic and regional link to my work is my marriage to a woman from neighboring Punxsutawney with a heritage of Catholic, Italian-American immigrants who have lived and worked for three generations as miners and railroad workers. My wife and I still attend Mass in the churches of her grandparents and parents. My subject matter expands to include a new sense of history and lineage in “Legacy,” where I posit a revelation/reclamation of history through the metaphor of a tureen my wife inherited from her grandmother. When Grandma Rosie “ladle[s] fish soup or groundhog stew” into the Italian tureen, she blends the regions of Pennsylvania and Italy, yet she retains her own authentic heritage in the lingering scents of anise and oregano. This poem ends the first section of the manuscript not only because

it details my most recent contact with the land but also because it represents a transition in my own identity.

As I write about later-stage issues in my life, I speculate more transcendently on afterlife, death, and preservation of my heritage. In Section IV, I deal with reconciliation and atonement in “Improvised Ash” and “Eucharist.” I explore the nature of guilt and penance in order to speculate that there is something beyond death and something necessary that the subjects in my poems find in religion. In “Eucharist,” the old woman needs to take communion in order to transform herself into someone holy, even though the priest is, himself, unholy. The search for God, salvation, forgiveness, is the transformative moment I wish to capture.

While I trace the style of my poetry to the deep image movement as Robert Bly re-developed it, the deep imagist most influential in my work is James Wright. When I first read Wright’s work I wanted to imitate it, but later, I realized that I simply wanted to write *like* him—to preserve the rough terrain and the honesty of hard work, but moreover to write in a straightforward narrative where the images come to evoke the consciousness that underlies the image. His later work in free verse is rooted in place, detailed in image, and revealing in the “deep” psychic energy of ordinary experience. Like Wright, I celebrate the natural elements of the Appalachian region and my origins to establish my identity. We both respond to our landscapes, mine Western Pennsylvania and his Eastern Ohio, as the grounds of American Indians. To Wright’s poem “Beautiful Ohio” which speaks of “Those old Winnebago men,” (317) I have my poem “Echoes,” written about the Indian Echo Caverns of Pennsylvania and “[t]he Conestoga men” returning. Also like Wright, I realize that while my hometown is stagnant, largely uneducated, and poor, I will always return, at least in my own mind. In particular, narrative lines from “At the Excuted Murderer’s Grave,” such as “one slave/to Hazel-Atlas Glass became my

father” (82), represent my own sense of place. Wright transforms into the escaped fugitive of Martin’s Ferry, Ohio while speculating on the life of the executed murderer George Doty because he focuses outward against the landscape to reflect his inner struggles. Likewise, I focus on my deceased ancestors and landscape to reflect my own inner struggles.

I also share with Wright an intimate connection with landscape, in general. As he writes “outside, the slag heaps waited” (124) in “Stages On a Journey Westward,” I kneel “among shale fragments” in “Meditation At the Mine.” I revisit many other thematic elements I read in Wright: defeated, small-town coal miners, sumac trees, and the dying town itself. Even in writing about Florida, I reflect on my own sense of sumac trees as they come to represent the land of my upbringing. The ferocious Florida trees replace the sumacs and represent my displacement from “home” by the dramatic shift in my geographic surroundings.

While my work has also been influenced by the “Florida” poems of such as poets as Elizabeth Bishop, mine seem to be more pessimistic, perhaps because I feel “out of my element.” For instance, Bishop captures “The Fish” of her famous poem in the vivid description of “his brown skin h[anging] in strips / like ancient wallpaper” (2715). While I might utilize her sense of simile, or more likely metaphor, her poem seems to celebrate the vibrancy of the landscape and the perseverance of the fish that has escaped from five previous “catches.” All in “The Fish” becomes “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” (2716). My Florida poem “Grass,” reflective of my Florida poems in general, utilizes images of nature overtaking and destroying the human world. The speaker in “Grass” seeks to keep the grass in check, just as he wishes to destroy the stand of palms in “This Tree.” Bishop, however, allows her speaker to release the fish in a display of something that might be called admiration of the fish’s fighting spirit.

I borrow also from T. S. Eliot's sense of mortality. I found "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to be the most vivid depiction of aging and self-doubt, even when I first read this at the age of seventeen. As I continue to teach the poem each semester, I never tire at Eliot's masterful use of rhythm, allusion, and implication. While I do not claim to have written a "Prufrock," I find myself considering questions like "do I dare" and statements like "indeed there will be time" (1422) as I compose poems that deal with death, particularly in a poem like "Malcolm's Piano" that laments Malcolm's running out of time and his descent into Alzheimer's disease. Coupling these ideas with a 2005 University of Tampa reading by Steve Gehrke, at which he read a poem about his own kidney transplant, I wrote my own transplant poem, "Organ Donor" to demonstrate multiple perspectives on the philosophy of a life that would otherwise have run out.

In revision, especially, I have begun to utilize Olson-esque notions of the line as unit of breath or utterance to liberate the unconscious, and I have also been influenced in a similar manner by James Dickey's split line. While these features are not prominent in my work, I have begun to use them in order to expand on my voice. In "Meditation on a Drive," "Improvised Ash," and "A Poetics," I allow the lines to dictate their positions and create multiple margins. The subject of "Improvised Ash" is the frightening and violent act of forgiveness by ritual. As the ritual unfolds, I want the lines to move the reader back and forth, breath by breath. The opening poem of my collection, "At the William Penn Museum" uses multiple margins to create lines as steps to indicate the ragged edges of the escalator, a machine that symbolizes to the speaker fear and destruction.

Furthermore, Olson's themes provide a sense of guidance for me. Nina Baym, editor of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, claims that in his Maximus poems, "the facts of



Olson's own life...are used as a point of departure for an ambitious effort to project the entire historical, geological, and social presence of the town" (2705). In part I, Olson celebrates

The roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones  
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks  
of my city! (2706).

Just as I list the objects that define my family in "Breaking Down My Grandfather's Garage," Olson lists the items that comprise his town, and both poems announce the intention of the list, mine in declaring "What's left," and Olson's in the exclamation "my city!"

In building my poems, I find that I also agree with John Ashbery who believes that language is ultimately a series of references that are further determined by a continually elusive series of referents both outside and inside language, itself. Ashbery demonstrates an "urge to locate subjectivity" (Norton 296) while working with shifting and multi-referential language. In his attempt to stabilize the shifting referents, Jody Norton continues to describe Ashbery's thematic search for "self-knowledge" as being "constituted by a series of reflective glimpses, cinematic in their framed brevity, but lacking any governing directorial intention" (282). I try to capture my own sense of these glimpses and to minimize the shifting syntactical structures that lead to misunderstanding in my work. Coupled with Wright's influence, I see my own use of these glimpses as the point where my work becomes deep image, where I want my images to create the experience and generate the meaning in an overall narrative structure. For instance, the "pink diluted mass" in the last line of "Eucharist" is the "blood" of red wine and the "body" of the Eucharistic wafer blending into one substance, diluting into a mass in her mouth that overlaps linguistically with the "Mass" at which the old woman would have, in Roman Catholic terms, "taken the host." The physical mass of wafer and wine in her mouth makes sense to her, or

rather, the ritual of blending the metaphoric “body” and “blood” leads her to some sense of salvation.

On the most literal level, my journey is geographic, but I also make a journey in spiritual questioning. In the collection, I question my identity in terms of my origins and my history, and then I question what lies in the future. As the poems come full circle with this spiritual examination, I recognize that the world is a temporary place for us, and that as we build our own metaphoric rooms in which to live, we will soon outgrow these rooms and need to build others. Therefore, “A Poetics” becomes the final poem and summary of the series. This manuscript, “Some Permanent Part” seeks to discover the elusive “permanent” or lasting parts of my life, even if those exist only in my memories.

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I

At the William Penn Museum

Escalator steps  
                                appear  
  from  
the floor  
as if by magic then  
                                level out  
until the steps seem to be made of water  
                                floating  
  to heaven. I first

learned the difference  
                                between elevator and escalator  
  when in the 1970s I heard the news:  
the shoelace of a boy my age  
                                had caught between  
  the moving steps  
and he lost  
his leg.  
What did it feel like, being  
                                squeezed through this narrow,  
  ceaseless  
  succession  
of gashes to  
  some hell  
  below the museum  
out of reach of the coffin safety  
of the elevator  
                                reserved for old or handicapped people.

From the lobby later, I watched those stairs,  
  broken  
  by the  
                                jagged,  
  cold spaces.

My brothers and parents shrank  
  in the distance.  
Even my little sister, beside  
                                my mother, rose safely  
to the second floor where they all waved.  
My sneaker hovered  
                                above that perpetual first step,  
where I was stuck,  
                                languishing for the first time.

## Secret Passage

I saved the forgotten  
bicuspid with tooth fairy quarters  
in my copper toy treasure chest.

Maybe it was to remind me of my promise  
to *wiggle it out*, to get it over with  
*by the end of Sesame Street*.

Maybe I just wanted to salvage  
some permanent part of myself.

I didn't know about DNA,  
the fragments that fingerprint  
or make new life.

Now I know one blood molecule  
is enough to create or convict.  
My father wanted to pull my tooth  
with pliers  
or the doorknob and string  
his mother had used,

but I couldn't let him  
spill so much blood.  
I hid  
in the pine trees  
behind our house

and worked my tooth  
between my fingers.

I tasted my body's salt  
on the back of my tongue  
when my tooth

snapped free,  
leaving behind  
the throbbing space.

## Centralia

At the turn of the century  
miners stripped away pines, oaks, and earth,  
loaded coal into train cars  
for Philadelphia/Reading or Lehigh Valley.  
Millions of square tons of anthracite  
later, Centralians buried diapers,  
table scraps, old mail, broken shoes  
next to the vein.  
Trapped methane bulged and gurgled  
until the abandoned coal seam  
whiffed and snuffed with a heat  
too intense to be contained.

Smoke still creeps  
From the dusty cracked ground,  
buckling highways, swallowing homes,  
and melting the rubber soles of sneakers  
on Ashland teenagers who sneak  
into Centralia woods with stolen beer kegs,  
their dreams of escaping hidden  
like the parched condoms in their wallets.

## Echoes

The river's fluted music hushes.  
I descend the hill into the cavern  
on the land of the Susquehannocks.

After the harvest, Conestoga men returned  
from a hunt or silent war  
to lie beside their wives,  
women weary of pulling corn.

Enemy of the Five Nations,  
this secret tribe canoed the Swatara,  
stopping only to carve history  
into granite outcrops,  
bringing tan skin, pelts, and a tradition  
of community.

Not the Iroquois but smallpox  
and the Paxton boys left them  
extinct.

Now I kneel to study arrowheads  
and thirst for the water  
pooled deep in the cavern's darkness  
where they thought the devil himself lived.



## Good Sumacs

I drive past leaves grown like fingers  
and I wave back  
in my new awareness of the red fruit  
I read about in a borrowed field guide.

Old Appalachians make tea  
or a paprika spice to sprinkle  
over lamb or veal  
from the tart, red cones

my parents confused  
with “poison sumac,”  
an entirely different tree.

I'll dry and crush  
the berries  
over a roast  
of last season's venison,  
a side of garden wax beans in hand-churned butter  
and crabapple jelly.

## Meditation At the Mine

Only a rusted, bent railroad tie  
    juts from the shale collapse.  
My brothers' footprints have washed away,  
and jimsonweed and hemlock  
cover the muddy path I once loved  
to my great-grandfather's mine.

The safety of loneliness has left me  
kneeling among these shale fragments,  
staring at the close mountains,  
the trees that blossom  
around me, the grass  
that has no meaning in my visit.

I could have been a miner  
or a farmer, followed those  
footsteps until my own dissolved behind me.  
Instead, I went to land-grant school  
and "got the hell out"  
as my grandfather warned us all.

I will not linger  
at this grave of mine.

## Breaking Down

Sumacs bookend  
the mouth of hand-hewn wooden doors  
on makeshift pulleys  
of the crooked, yellow-orange brick cavern.  
Defunct on the dirt and shale floor,  
the flattened fur  
of a groundhog corpse  
disintegrates.  
My grandfather's thumbprints  
mark each mortar latitude line  
as square as he could measure with  
the heft of a plumb-bob on fishing line.

I salvage what's left:  
a plywood top pool table chewed by mice,  
two cracked helmets huddled together  
as though sharing family secrets,  
head gaskets from his old Nova ground flat  
into pale dirt,  
stubby bottles of Genesee  
he died before drinking,  
and a dry-rotted, monstrous corn planter,  
ancient  
as my grandparents'  
single wedding photo.

Dragged halfway down  
by last year's snow  
that's long since melted into the shafts  
of the blackberries' white-blue stems,  
the garage leans into itself  
until I choke the sledgehammer,  
splintering bricks into trembling dust.

## My Grandmother

Widowed young, she walked  
through Brockway to the glass factory  
where she machined gobs of soda ash  
into smooth, cool jars. Her father  
had blown molten sand and potash  
into flasks, vases, and on good days, birds  
he gave to neighborhood children.

The town knew she was going to die  
when my grandmother coughed  
in front of the glass plant.  
How can you spit into the snow like that  
without being close?

Thirty years later, I tell myself the cold  
isn't so bitter I can't bundle myself warm  
in a brown leather coat like the one in my only good picture  
of her. In it, she's walking to the plant

wearing the horn rim glasses  
that are back in style.  
When I hear the tales of her

raising my father and uncle by herself,  
I want to be the people of my history.  
I want to find a way to enter  
the woods penniless, chop  
away pines or grunt into blowpipes  
and make something by the end of the day.

## Legacy

We can not open the box  
with her tureen from the old country  
for she died too quickly  
and it was boxed too carefully.  
But we know the story:

On the long boat ride  
between the ball that's always being kicked  
and Ellis Island, the island of hope  
where she didn't drop  
her vowels to fit in,  
she clutched only this ceramic weight we know  
is emblazoned in Arabian-Spanish  
organic design, from Caltagirone.

She ladled fish soup or groundhog stew  
into mismatched bowls in the thirties,  
a miner's family dinner in Wishaw, Pennsylvania.

After "The Big One," she put it away  
to make gnocchi from scratch.  
Spaghetti didn't fit, and smelts  
needed to lay flat.

After her funeral, her granddaughter, my wife,  
lifted only this duct-taped hat box  
from the labyrinth of canning jars  
and empty jewelry boxes on the floor  
of the apartment still spiced with anise and oregano.

## II

## Writing Nothing About Florida

In the mountains and shale  
of my beautiful Pennsylvania,  
I sat among generations of pines,  
among what we in my youth called “the bounty”  
of crisp blackberries, however slight  
the harvest.

How do I write my song  
for Kyle Lake,  
the frightening water drained every ten years,  
where my grandfather fished at midnight  
from his half oil drum boat,  
the illegal fishing line trailing from his beard  
in rings of mist?

Here, the dirt is sand  
and lakes teem with Aningas,  
feathered, winged fish,  
that do not sing  
like chickadees or cardinals  
but cry like feathered beasts  
breaking the darkness  
that hides nothing.

## La Florida Redux

A fish jumps  
into the alligator's mouth

and Spanish moss sways  
from scrubby oak trees

like an old man's beard.  
Palms drop blotches  
of acorns onto raspy grass.

The sun melts through  
my hair, scalp, and skull

even while gray-green trees sway  
in gentle sea breezes

in this country shaped like a penis.  
Black slime gathers into rainbows,  
the oil of the day gurgling

up through the sand my own family  
never knew, nor the wet-hot air

of citrus and spiny palmettos,  
or cockroaches the size of maple leaves.

The woods hide criminals  
who slosh through cedar knees,  
sink in muck.

Animals with harsh hides  
and glowing eyes distrust

these humans building  
another condo for retired widowers

who drive old, shiny Cadillacs  
away from early-bird platters

of snowbird specials every evening  
and return to empty trailers every season.



## Grass

St. Augustine grass bends  
in the shape of my bare foot  
then springs back new, creeping  
over sidewalks, across exposed  
tree roots, and up the fence.  
Planted in sparse patches, it scrambles  
to fill the sandy strips  
of yard, barren flats  
so dry that rain simply runs off.

The grass sculpts itself  
into a lawn chair  
forgotten in a corner  
by the fence.  
If I nap too long, the grass  
will form a second skin over my own,  
encase me in its delicate,  
strong arms, and if I'm not careful  
to mow it, root into my pores.

Tree

If only I had a chainsaw,  
the tree  
    would fall, no longer  
reaching around itself  
with its knotted, native fingers.

It will not  
die. I've whacked and whacked  
at the knees of this date palm  
cluster. I've cut it back and back and back.

But its green torso rises again  
    like feathers  
from the black, crumbling gut

and the half dozen trunks reach  
    like a scarred hand  
from rough, sandy flesh.

*Whack*—a cockroach—*whack*  
a scorpion—*whack*—a sow bug  
presses blunt shoulders  
into the forest of coarse grass.

## Birds

The grackles won't shut up.  
They screech,  
    a thousand or more  
it seems, poking their heads  
    from the kudzu.

    A sign  
at The Pelican Man Bird Sanctuary  
insists we need  
to hear birds in the morning, but  
all day? I just want  
a moment's silence.

    I trudge  
to the end of the yard,  
clap as though I've seen the best stage play ever,  
clap my coarse hands as fast and jumbled  
as possible,

and up they flee,  
    circle like a rising spirit  
above my tree, and settle  
into a jagged cypress  
    further away.

Mark-er

A dark stretch of the berm  
between speeding machines  
and alligator tree lines  
darkens with the secrets  
of a forgotten past.

Coke cans flat  
as paper, shards of glass and plastic  
from forgotten accidents crunch  
beneath my rapid steps  
along with purple, scentless wildflowers.

Red lights trail  
south against the gray shape  
of the mile marker I'll read  
into my cell phone,  
something the tow truck driver  
can measure.

One fading amber flash  
after another  
calls

My own failed car,  
a beacon to gauge  
my steps one amber flash  
after another,  
reminds me  
I can leave this all behind  
If I keep walking South  
or into the Everglades.

# III

## Meditation On a Drive

Where were we  
    going when we thought  
of each other the way  
lovers think  
    when they smile?

We were driving  
    through country roads  
that wound around hills  
north to the country  
    of our home

across miles of static,  
    quiet,  
humming engine,  
you, asleep, one hand on  
    your chin.

I blinked into the lanes of I-95  
    where, migrating south,  
we touched fingertips  
    three years ago.

Traveling with the fear,  
    and lust of passion  
that can tear people into shards,  
we crossed into a southern wilderness  
    we didn't know.

But we braved the passion  
    rode unbuckled and free  
    into the distance of summer,  
north on the highway of sparkling  
asphalt, glinting against sun,  
lighting our way back home  
    again  
to our country.

Blues at Kingston Mines

White Chicago tourists  
wait for the next cab.  
Byther Smith makes the faces  
he knows they want to see.

Tapping my own foot, I think  
maybe Baraka was right: art is  
a way to keep from killing:  
cut their throats & lose  
a poem, a song, a painting.

Tonight, Byther paints notes  
through the air, his pink-nails  
turning dark hands into wings  
that soar to the sunrise-  
    orange drop-ceiling tiles  
& back down, each note  
    slicing through us all.

## Retiring

When did we get so busy?  
Just ask Jim,  
his sailboat moored in the bay  
for one more term.  
Now, he drifts through cubicles  
marked “adjunct”—nonessential—  
and waits for his turn  
on the computer to check emails  
he thought he’d never read again.  
He thought he’d have more  
money, more time.

Maybe next summer  
he’ll scrape barnacles again,  
tool off from the harbor,  
and forget his legs are bowed,  
his back stooped a little more  
than last year.  
He’ll find his way back  
to where he can disappear,  
finally,  
drifting among catamarans and cruise ships  
through tranquil Gulf waves to Veracruz  
or Havana.



## Malcolm's Piano

Even as Malcolm no longer remembers  
his wife, daughter, or birthday,  
he plays piano.  
When he used to walk with his wife  
through the field  
to gaze down the rocky cliff into the sea,  
he caught field mice among the swaying weeds,  
scratched their ears,  
then turned them loose.  
Now his eyes no longer focus,  
and he draws further away from the window  
overlooking the field, further into a place only he sees.  
But sit him at a piano and he stops  
clasping and unclasping his hands.  
His fingers find their way  
to the soft sequence he can't otherwise manage—  
the melody easier than the words  
he can no longer find.

Maybe that's why I play guitar:  
so when I'm losing control,  
when I forget my wife or my son or how to eat,  
my fingers will wrap themselves  
around the frets and remember  
distant chords I can play before my family  
decides where I should die.  
As I slip away from myself,  
babbling and slapping at nurses  
while they watch me descend,  
I can play one last familiar tune.

## Memorial for Three Alumni

Across the twisted scrap  
of Pittsburgh steel, mounted  
on a gravel tomb, spreads  
    the moss of dark rust.  
A bronze plaque to the left  
marks the spot:

Found in New York and transported to  
this university in western Pennsylvania.  
We'll never know which floor  
    it came from, how  
it would fit back  
into place, or how long it would  
    have stood,  
but we'll feel the scratchy truths  
a long time.

The plaque says there was a vigil here,  
and candles lit the courtyard.  
Moments of silences spread  
    across campuses, parks, and offices  
fortunate for the safety of distance.

One student reaches into the grave's secret spaces,  
once filled with bones, papers, or desks.  
Without crying, he looks into the clean creases  
of his orange palm. His future forever touched  
by this death

is now clear among the whorls of chaos  
that stand here, gathered into angles  
most people walk past.

## Conflict Resolution

Lost in metaphors  
of our own long workdays,  
our students' papers languishing  
on the sofa like retired generals  
where we dropped our bookbags,  
we still can't help but grade each other:  
*Unclear thesis. Insufficient support.*  
*Verb agreement.*

We hiss thick and acrid Marlboro skirmishes,  
smoke purified by our lungs  
obscured from tar.  
Our egos  
climb through the cooling night,  
in eddies of venom  
and roiling stings.

We just want to command  
the glory of our own discourses,  
so we fall in on each side  
of the line of demarcation: eleven soldiers  
of empty Miller Lite bottles on the back porch,  
with one unfallen left between us.

When the last beer is martyred  
we stumble to bed dizzy. I retreat to the couch,  
the cliché of a man who has lost.

In the morning, except for the teakettle,  
toothbrushes rasping venom from our stained teeth,  
and the muted morning news  
reporting disasters elsewhere, all is quiet.

# IV

## Organ Donor

To achieve immortality  
Ancient Egyptians required  
the body be intact.  
All must be gathered,  
entombed together  
for afterlife  
inspection.

Death is an accident  
waiting  
to take from us  
working parts  
that can be lifted out  
by careful or quick hands  
and planted  
like moist lilies  
into new bodies.

Life brought back in  
the new  
body matures into  
two souls, one  
trapped,  
the other alive. Does the old soul  
remember? Does  
it cry out silently  
inside, wait  
for an exhalation  
to rejoin  
the the missing frac-  
tion that like Osiris  
wanders outside  
the gate? Does it  
look  
with borrowed corneas  
for a  
liver, a heart?  
Could they be bartered  
outside The Gates  
when the borrower finally fails?

Skin blushes  
pink

from ash-blue death,  
or yellow infection.  
Blood swells  
the new organ with the breath of a new owner  
who will spend the rest of his life  
rejecting it.

"Every day is a gift"  
and the gift of  
this meat-colored organ,  
this soul-particle,  
swims  
in the wet cavity  
of a new body,  
tries to escape-  
to find its way back  
home,  
now buried or burned  
to ashes.

## Improvised Ash

God im-  
pressed  
on your forehead  
his thumbful  
of soot  
to wash away

sins

while you give up smoking, drinking  
or swearing  
for a few days  
before you fall  
from grace

again.

All day your sooty head  
claims you as  
you claim

your own name

and the black priest-thumb  
washes oil  
into gray paste  
on the heads of  
saved-  
from-sin-again

lambs

## Eucharist

He melts the flesh of Christ  
onto forgiven tongues  
dry with calling. Last in line, one old woman  
mutters at the ground,  
seeking through her cloudy eyes  
the old, soft priest who married off  
her young girl pregnant with his own dark son.

In the old country,  
her daughter would have become a novice  
then a nun, hidden  
the scraped, bruised fetus  
behind loose stones in the convent wall,  
and spent the rest of her life  
praying.

Today, the old woman  
with a cracked tongue  
waits for the dry wafer  
to cleanse her again.

What will she think  
at that instant the wafer ceases to be  
a wafer, becoming flesh,  
absolved  
by years of rosaries and novenas,  
counting days until Sundays,  
until confirmation, counting weekly sins  
against herself and God to the priest?

With the safety of the pulpit behind him,  
the new Father lays the wafer  
quickly into her mouth,  
where she holds it,  
then she swigs a violent swallow  
of sweet wine until the flesh  
is a pink diluted mass.



## Back to Dust

What's left of me  
gathers into whorls  
and sticks in the bathtub drain.  
Each morning I lift the dripping spider  
of hair from the tub and fling it  
into the plastic trash bucket.  
Should I save it  
somewhere—comb the soap scum  
away, condition it as smooth as  
what's left on my head,  
fill zip-lock and grocery bags,  
lawn and leaf bags—  
to donate to myself  
as if before surgery?

Dust is mostly dead skin cells,  
so every time I wipe the floor clean  
to the corners or vacuum behind the couch,  
I'm my own coroner,  
wiping up the evidence  
of dust I'll return to.  
I shake myself free  
from the area rugs,  
    and the wind sweeps me  
into the dry leaves  
    swirling on the back porch.  
    I scatter, carried upward,  
speeding toward some destiny I can't know.

The dust of me washes away at the beach,  
bobbing forever with sea froth that drifts like laundry foam.  
Will I be scavenged by the seagulls,  
forever wandering,  
combing the beaches clean  
of sand fleas and shellfish?  
Every evening they glide  
into sunset, folding the sea beneath their wings,  
and I return home  
to shower off sand and hair,  
then dry  
off in the dust of evening.

*Memento Mori*

I want to find the man  
strong enough to carve  
the commandment my life  
in scripted letters--bits of granite falling  
to the ground. But what if he should  
scrape together those shavings to form words  
my mouth can't say, the words  
"I am happy to live, but not here?"  
Those bits of dull, blackish stone would know  
how I love to gaze at the stars  
my grandfather gazed into.

As the letters of my life dive into the stone,  
what will be unwritten about me?  
Maybe "only in another life  
could I like the sad, Spanish trees  
drooping into slow waters  
or study the threads of veins  
that run through the wings of a giant cockroach."

While I watch the stone carver  
chiseling my future, my eternity away,  
I read not the stone, but the blackened scraps  
like tea leaves or the spidery  
creases of my palm, and realize I'm reading  
what I choose.

Maybe like the Etch-A-Sketch  
that leaves a palimpsest of random design,  
my stone would say more by its absences  
of letters not there.

## A Poetics

We build shelters  
    where we can hide.  
We balance 2x4s and shingles,  
bite the 16 penny nails  
    in our teeth,  
our hammer poised.

We keep our saw,  
    hammer,  
and the little antifreeze bubble  
that straightens it all out  
in some shed of cobwebs  
    and dust.

Its joists will be crooked  
    when we look back,  
drywall seams  
    showing like a slit  
in what is otherwise smooth  
    or orange peel.

## Vita

Jeff Grieneisen was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and received his B.A. from Penn State University and his M.A. from Clarion University of Pennsylvania. He teaches English, literature, and creative writing full-time in the language and literature department at Manatee Community College in Bradenton, Florida and writing studio, creative writing, and advanced writing at Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida.

At Manatee Community College, Grieneisen has served as chair of the honors program cross functional team, department representative to the Institutional Technology Advisory Council, faculty advisor to *Pentangle*, the student literary magazine, faculty advisor to the Rho Gamma chapter of Sigma Kappa Delta, the English Honor Society for Two Year Colleges, and is currently the Bradenton representative of faculty senate.

Grieneisen has published work in *The Sylvan Review*, a western Pennsylvania literary anthology, *Pennsylvania English*, and is contributing editor to *Edgar Allan Poe* in Harold Bloom's Biocritiques series. His poetry was published and translated into Portuguese in the Brazilian journal *Revista Espaço Acadêmico*. He co-edited the literary journal *Red Raven Review*, and co-founded and currently co-edits the literary journal *Florida English*. A manuscript is in the process of publication with MAMMOTH Books. He has just been appointed to the Board of Advisors for Calusan, a Sarasota literary arts council.