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Leftover Thought
& Other Poems

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
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Michael Volpi

The University of New Orleans, 2007
The University of New Orleans, 2012

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Preface: Terrible yet Alluring Disproportion

As a growing poet, my great challenge lies in developing my own, true voice, and creating poetry of genuine humor and sincerity. Within the past three years during which I have approached (my) poetry with greater purpose, I have grown to realize the importance of a poem's nuances and eschew the arbitrary for the meaningful. Ever striving to sheer my expressions down to concise and controlled components, I believe that I am just beginning to understand what I want to say, what I need to say, and how I need to say.

Much of what is said in this collection originates from a moral concern about man's sense of responsibility, or more particularly, for what/whom is he responsible? The satirical yet jocund nature of this collection expresses a desire for man to explore and grapple with his psychological and existential self. The selfhood that should be evident in these poems, is one comprised of apathy, lust, nostalgia, disappointment and yearning. Having borrowed and learned from—and owing a great debt to—the likes of John Wilmot, Jonathan Swift, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Charles Bukowski, I, as a poet, continue to work painstakingly towards realizing and echoing my response to man's tendencies and motivations.

The poems in this collection convey empathy, familial love and mystery, fetishism, and Catholic iconography, as well as disgust and cynicism directed towards a world gone awry. Life brims with beautiful people, places, and souls, but a muffled plea simmers beneath the surface: beneath lives a cringe, a set of gnashing teeth. “How can empathy cohabitate with cynicism?” one might ask. Empathy in the face of seemingly insuperable apathy breeds cynicism. My speaker's inability to repair a damaged world and his own warped conscience bespeaks his concerns and preoccupations in *Leftover Thought & Other Poems*.

If there are two definitive overarching themes to this collection they are Imbalance and Absurdity. Imbalance and Absurdity are more effusive in some of the poems rather than others, but in all of them I aim to convey the frustration caused by Imbalance, whether latent or self-evident, specifically, societal, metaphysical, and sexual imbalances and absurdities. In an attempt to discern his frustration and consternation, my speaker aims to exaggerate life's inequities and injustices so that they become monstrously ever-visible; to belittle death; to transform the beheld "other" into the ubiquitous, all-powerful, sexualized and fetishized ruler of the speaker's senses; and to examine the essence of familial love, bonds, sympathies and (dis)loyalties.

As I would have my reader see it, the speaker in these poems is frustrated because of an ugly, unfair world, and, at times, his frustration intensifies to despair. He also self-identifies with futility and diminution. The pieces about privilege compared to poverty ("Leftover Thought"), the careless erosion of the planet ("Souvenir in Orlando"), and the narcotization of the commercial-watching television viewer ("Product"), mean to voice the speaker's wrenching feelings of hopelessness which infect human society. In the end, I hope that the reader can identify how resignation and reluctant acceptance permeate the speaker's tone within "Leftover Thought & Other Poems." Additionally, I want my speaker's logic to convince the reader that, eventually, the dire conditions of human society will proliferate until we all finally come to terms with our corrosive effect on the world: with collapse comes the opportunity to re-edify and renew.

Despite my poems' fixations with disruption, decay and diminution, my collection is not intended to be exclusively moribund and negative; as a poet, I also experience moments of dream-like nostalgia and yearning for re-connectivity with loved ones who have passed or

become distant and estranged. Aside from the desire to delve deep into the bond of family, these other poems challenge the notion that familial love and devotion are unquestionable ipso facto: “Ashamed of his beloved,/Our grandmother with the hair/that will not gray, you drink and smoke,/While...she sits and reads the obituaries” (“Dorothy Still,” 11). Family are the people whom we love and hold in high esteem, but they are also those whom we are expected to understand and accept simply because they are family: “I can’t imagine my dad’s stories/of the old days, about what used to be/one of his favorites: Potted Meat” (“Used to Be,” 7). My speaker’s senses of repulsion, bemusement and sympathy towards his family members’ attitudes, habits and traditions, are what compel his imaginative engagement with them.

Catholic mythos compels my speaker’s poetic voice too. In one particular case, “Avuncular Jesus,” I try to bring themes of Catholicism and family to intertwine and correspond with each other. In “Avuncular Jesus,” my speaker’s insecurities and guilt as a Catholic cause him to grapple with religious rituals, icons and symbols. Jesus on a rosary dangles in front of my speaker’s face. He inherits his uncle’s—a drunk’s—car but treats it irresponsibly: he drinks and drives, wondering if he has inherited his uncle’s addictive personality more than anything else, and if Jesus is the moral judge, there on the rosary: “The ghost of my Catholic god-/father ends each/Hail Mary with: ‘Profane’”. In another case, such as “Evangelical,” I question, even repudiate, Catholicism as a sacred system of presumed virtues, as I pray to Christ to take his overzealous followers back home to heaven, where they can experience their divine bliss and leave the non-devout alone here on Earth.

Another target of the speaker’s satire is Death as the feared vanquisher of life. The speaker is preoccupied with death and decay, not necessarily disrespectful of it, but certainly he displays disdain and dismissiveness: “Death, your boasting/is like a blind boy wading/through a

pitch dark garage,” (“Content Shadow,” 31). Resolved to ridicule and deprecate the daunting shadow of death, the speaker knows that there is not victory in death in the Byronic sense, but at least death can be made fun of, if not overcome.

An indomitable sense of angst, to me, rests on the speaker’s mordant tongue. He cannot—at least by himself—save starving children, so he chooses to mock his predilection for waste, in “Leftover Thought,” but I would have him mock the situation itself, the very idea that there are those of us who are fortunate enough to have enough to eat and live and that there are others who continually suffer while the complacent express their “sympathies” by watching infomercials. Consumerism and its promotion of material products disgust my speaker, but they also motivate him to amplify his satirical tongue. The degree to which people are enamored by and “in love” with household products, which are deified to absurd forms, troubles my speaker, and, when he is troubled or disconcerted he infuses his scenes with an outraged, comic tone.

I do not wish for my voice to solely be an incensed rabble rouser; it should also echo a longing to understand the loss and influence of close family members and how they shaped my perspective on the human experience. Perseverance despite physical deterioration, blind loyalty to tradition and childhood preferences, and unfinished relationships with the dead are central to the speaker’s concept of family. The more melancholic, family related poems present exemplify Imbalance and Absurdity as the products of irreconcilability: The godfather-uncle’s spirit remains in the car. The grandfather’s stories are his undoing. The grandmother is disabled and lonely but must press on. The great-grandmother’s descent into Alzheimer’s permeates my dreams of her and her troubling symptoms. The cousin’s apparent lack of concern for our grandmother and her affected devotion to her dead grandfather, via a tattoo, earns my speaker’s reproach.

At a far lesser frequency appear the relationship between my speaker and animals, specifically his pet cat and dog, but these poems too echo my speaker's themes of imbalance, frustration and absurdity. The cat bathes herself with ease and finesse and sees herself as a beautiful creation. My speaker, conversely, in a pointed moment of existential awareness, regards his grooming routine as cumbersome practices done merely for the sake of physical appearance, even vanity: "while in the mirror/ across from me, the/steam enshrouds/my vanity, like fog" ("The Elegant Bather" 16). My speaker seems to feel out of touch with his conception of selfhood: his routine demonstrates his alienation from his otherwise true self: "Nude and dripping with soap/I must look like/a drowned cat" (The Elegant Bather" 16) The cat, though, more "in touch" with herself, recognizes herself as rightfully proud, for she *is* "in touch" with her feline-hood. Jack the dog is an innocent lover and a "prick-eared prancer" who wants to court a potential mate, in "Jack Hurt Over." The speaker then cautions him that love can *and will* hurt, and that the ultimate outcome of love leads to drunken misery, cynical and bleak as that outcome may seem.

Towards the end of the collection resounds the speaker's booming note of prurient, voyeuristic obsession. The subject of these poems (the objectified "other") is not beloved; in fact there is no room for love in these grotesque portraits. The central images in the obsessed-over-other pieces try to convey an unsettling sense of disproportionate scale—physical imbalance—between the speaker and his object of lustful desire. In each of these poems, the object of desire is meant to be imaginatively inflated to grossly extreme dimensions, as seen in "Magellan's Nightmare" and "Tyrannosaur," which are two poems that might evoke fear and paranoia. On the one hand, the inflation of the other frightens and overwhelms the speaker. On the other hand, the other's extreme size attracts the speaker, as if he is sexually aroused by the notion of

domination. When the objectified other reaches (or is realized to have) untenable physical proportions, it maddens the speaker: “Terrified of your scale,/like an unlearned navigator/thrust into four oceans at once,” (Magellan’s Nightmare” 25), which can be seen as a sign of his own defeat, and therefore the effects of imbalance seems unbeatable. Yet the speaker also derives perverse sexual satisfaction from the other’s grotesque augmentation: it is a way for him to control and mold her as he pleases (which is appealing on its own) but a pronounced, physical sexual attraction fills the dramatic situations, such as the apparent case in “Tyrannosaur”: “I still cannot unearth/your hips, deeply/buried under the dunes’/seductive insulation,/like too much skin” (26). My speaker’s objectified other is inconceivably inaccessible and physically enormous, which both maddens and compels his sentiments for her.

Secure balance is rarely if at all attained in *Leftover Thought & Other Poems*. Due to an existence and a world which cannot stable itself, the speaker seeks to bring about such stability, but seemingly seeks in vain. It is important to realize that my speaker, in his quest for balance, means to push the undesirable, erroneous and ugly aspects of subjective reality to their limits so that resolution might—yet seemingly does not—prevail. In order for bearable conditions to exist, the unbearable conditions must break down, by one way or another.

*Pretty soon there'll be nothing left for everybody
Pretty soon there'll be nothing left for you and me
 Pretty soon there'll be no air to breathe
 Pretty soon there'll be no pretty sea to see
Pretty soon there'll be nothing left for everybody*

-Harry Nilsson

Part I

Take Parts of Supper

Leftover Thought

My trashcan has
not gone hungry,
at least. Its plastic
black bellies become
stretched, nearly
split, full of my
chewed pork
gristle. I tie and knot
bagged fat
and muscle,

take parts
of supper,
of bodies,
to the curb.

Meanwhile, on some insipid
infomercial, a distended, black
boy wriggles like a sun-dried night-
crawler in the dirt. *Take part
of my curb*, I think to myself,
*and you'll have a free breakfast
of eggshells and avocado pits.*

Breakfast time,
my trash bags are gone,
And the truck ride!
Well, next time it's on.

Product

In the paper towel ad,
the gleeful mother rips
a sheet, slaps it down on the lake
of chicken water. What joy
she absorbs from butchery!

The once white, blotless paper towel—
now wet as a blood-soaked chick—
bears in pink her impressed handprint.

A commercial motherhood
of rote wiping: *Viewer, watch
what happens to the bargain brand
deluding itself. It tears itself apart.*

*Once Mommy wipes up
her mess, our raw supper,
I'll eat like a lion tonight!*

Mommy plates each serving
over wrung out paper towels.
*Mommy, my chicken's still cold
and looks as pink as me!*

Let the Spinning Take

The room, dizzying, spins
her around, but she's drenched
as a mother by the centripetal love--
in and out the kids come and go--
of scented drops from her automatic
air-freshener. Her machine-pet

Like a bloodhound senses noisome
carcasses of smells,
spits and drips froth
all over the family
room, wrings the foul neck
of stink. Feet, fish, and fowl break

down to rot. Son and daughter
giggle in the whirling
of mommy's sprayed cyclone,
spinning room, artificial
odor of unpronounceable flowers.

As she sniffs, a smile mists
across her deadened face.
Son and daughter stop and wonder why
that smile's there, growing garish
teeth. Of course, only imaginary monsters
are known to eat their young.

Part II
In Worn Threads

The Buzzard

for my grandfather

I watched you writhe,
as, in my mind
the buzzard circled
over you, narrowing:
Bull's-eye.

My memory played
your old story, "Boy played
in the field, and up above
the buzzard flew 'round and down,
down and 'round, then he ate the boy up!"

A boy: skin, muscle,
bones for life,
apparent carrion
from such a height.

I asked you,
"How come the buzzard
didn't stop when he knew
the boy was alive?"
You answered,
"Because he stood
still as a scarecrow,
a dead delicacy
from the sky."

You: bones,
skin, eaten
muscle, set simply
for death's appetite,

took too long
to stop thrashing.
I prayed to the buzzard
for a free-fall flight.

Used to Be

I can't imagine my dad's stories
of the old days, about what used to be
one of his favorites: Potted Meat.
I hold the can of granulated throwaway
parts and read the litany of ingredients,
bemused as a kindergartener. *Dad,*
Beef hearts? And what is 'tripe'?
You can't taste it so don't worry.
Grandma Teresa used to fry beef tripe
for me, Uncle David and Brian all the time.

I can't imagine why
he ate this. He
was never in a war.
It's a pink glob, Dad. Why
eat it? I can understand
headcheese and sardines,
but this looks like powdered
detergent and smells like dirty
fingers. Michael, you can't hold

This little can's story as truth. Taste
it and make it yours. All I taste
is salt, but I'm eating hearts
and stomachs? Neat, huh?
After all, I'm still alive (Alive
as walking beef, maybe.);
just don't eat it all the time.

We spread it on crackers, sometimes
with sardines and headcheese. That was
lunch for me and my brothers. Want a cracker?
Spreading the paste with a dull knife, I ask
for another story. *At grandma's, when we were*
kids, during the 4th, we'd stick live fire-
crackers in lizards' mouths, close them tight.

My heartbeat runs like scared prey.
My stomach becomes part zebra,
part lion, as Dad licks his fingers,
trying to recount other wistful atrocities.

Theresa

My Great Grandmother,
that lucid mummy,
she's woven
herself into my dreams as
intentionally
as she made her quilts.

It seems she doesn't
expect me to be
surprised when she arrives
at my eight-year-old
birthday party. But she
doesn't belong on that couch
anymore. She's as dead as

her memory had been when I was
her buried husband; her daughter,
an old childhood
friend; her son-in-law,
someone who could stand her.
She cuts from an old spool, tangles
me in worn threads.

Avuncular Jesus

Jesus hangs
on the rosary
cross wrapped
around the rearview
mirror. The ghost
of my catholic God-
father ends each
Hail Mary with: “Profane”
the vodka on
his breath, its own
apparition, lingering
like a vagrant, imbues
the heirloom:

This car, not
mine, passed
down like religion
from David to me.
Christ’s eyes,
set in stone, damn
mine, red-stoned.
He is risen
above the grave of
my crushed
Camel packs.

In whispered
anguish, hanged
Avuncular Jesus
mouths “Amen”
to the newly inspirited
driver. *Spirits, is this
ride my salvation?*

Once Simple Labor

For my grandmother

With your arm in the sling
from the fall, you still make
my muffaletta for me (*What was
that arm for, anyway?*). I tremble
as I watch you layer provolone,
olive salad and salami on soft
french bread. This is more
than a sandwich; I could sleep
in this little bed. You tell the story of
how I would always kick
the blanket off after you tucked me in,
and you would re-cover me during those
winter nights. But I never felt cold enough.

As you hand me the plate, crumbs
fall from your hand, trembling, flaccid.
I always wondered how you would
look “old.” My bread is not soggy
from olive oil.

Dorothy Still

That tattoo of your grandfather's initials,
etched into your wrist like gravestone
dates, honors him only because he's dead.
Engravings increase in value
while the graver sleeps
in his eternal groove. How proud you are,
Melissa, of your dead man's letters
but not of him who lives and fades
in your memory, like our old summers.

Ashamed of his beloved,
our grandmother with the hair
that will not gray, you drink and smoke,
while before the nightly newscast
she sits and reads the obituaries.
She's there now, Melissa, reading
the dates of gray-haired widows
throughout this deathless Mother's
Day. In her dreams, Melissa,
she still cooks his lunch for him.

Bellowed Free

Compressed like an accordion
bellows, we were bodies
of step-cousins, our hip-
bones mashed together
between the backseat doors.
I the thinnest fold, squeezed
out one pained note,
Lap-slammed by her, little step-
cousin, heavier though younger. I cried
the blues, but the two boys wanted polka,
she hard bop. With my mouth
Wide as a tuba bell, I swallowed
little cousin's harsh, German bottom,
scatted madder than Satchmo, made
the accordion flimsy, and then bellowed free.

Part III

See the Litter

Jack Hurt Over

Jack, be careful,
you prick-eared prancer:
this road to love
has many cut paws before her.

Littered by a drunk's
smashed gin bottle
of tears, this is the road
each bitch drives her man

down. Pick a prickled
diamond for, maybe, a peck
on your wet nose. Your itch
for her will scratch,

not cure, your stretched neck,
taught as a tug-o-war rope. As you
walk on liquored glass, I finish
my bottle of tears, too. Now
I must be careful too.

Importunity

As I do every morning, I walk Jack
alongside the rusted cemetery fence
where the overgrowth of weeds
swallows the nameless headstones.
No one cares to cut the grass.
No one wants to see the litter,

anyway. On a raised utility
box sit some crusties—kids
my age, only in tatters, enjoying
fresh cans of beer. They ask

for a train. We can't help. 6 am
is too early to beg for fortune.
Jack ignores their cans, but I can't.
So I offer a penny's worth
of solidarity, murmuring:
Buy the dead a drink for me.

The Elegant Bather

Nude and dripping with soap
I must look like
a drowned cat.

Chemicals wash
my skin, rubbed and rinsed,
cucumber-scented, so

human: my breath smells
like bad milk, or eggs,
after a late breakfast.
Through the curtain,

the elegant bather
pokes her head
as she follows
the suds as they plummet down
from my tangled hair,
plop.

But then she turns from me
to lick with her tongue
her coat and skin and

cleans it with pride, as
the image of Eve
shines back at her
from her water bowl,
while in the mirror
across from me, the
steam enshrouds
my vanity, like fog.

Part IV

The Infancy of The Sun

Souvenir in Orlando

The state of Alaska seems incorruptible
in this gift shop postcard, gleams
with innocence, like pearl. A toddler,
bored with nothing to disfigure,
crumples the picture, throws
it like a snowball at daddy's feet.
Daddy unfolds the ruin, snickers
and says, *That's right, boy—*
If you've seen one glacier,
you've seen 'em all!

Then, daddy lights a cigar,
ashes in Alaska's creases,
until the sprinklers
drool tepid spit.
Reeking of soiled bath
water, he walks outside
and basks in the infancy
of the sun (just learning how
to melt, like crawling).
"Alaska should have Summer, like Orlando!"

One More Deluge

Sunrays shatter the glass
skies like shot bullets.
*But, you, innocent friend, say, glass
breaks in the summer—
It's only natural.*

And then you promulgate, *If the angels'
tears were boiling raindrops,
a prayer to God would cool
our skin no matter
If Earth's skin scalds. Let Heaven
hail shards of glass.*

The sun, you don't know, is a deaf atheist
and will erase Noah's deliverance
from the Old Testament. I rebut: *There's one
flood left from that burning, golden god.
Picture us all as fire ants drowning
in the melt-water of an ice cube.*

The World Is Ours

What of this rock
we build but live
on? It's a heavenly
parking lot. Maybe Mercury
and Venus should pay
a "Work Zone" fee.
How convenient
when you think of it,
that our planet
is no sociopath,
no murderer of cities.

Steel bones crunch
like dead leaves,
under each tower
of Babel, eternal
memorial of human
creatures. We have a world
vision: to dwarf skyscrapers
by antennae abrading heaven.
Our complex minds judge success
by the sound of toppling monoliths.

Parentage

Gaia, mother, as your children
we repulse you: turn off the water,
we're not bathing in seas of blooming
algae. We will play "mad scientist,"
and you'll be patient, before
we all must go to bed. Now,
drink this tar-and-plastics potion.

Anyway, were you ever pretty?
Your flora, cretinous body hair;
your fauna, craven bacteria;
and your sour breath, Spring.
It is a child's right to be free
to experiment on his mother,
to have her atrophy.

But, our game is *just* pretend,
so why must there be rules?
What do you mean, we can be
free but not free *without* you?
C'mon, how hard can paying
credit cards be? We know how to drive
and pay for our own gas: swipe, then leave.

Part V
The Manhole Queen

The Manhole Queen

I breathe her
in as far as
I can, but her
buttocks block

my nostrils
like a clog in
my plumbing.
Meanwhile, her imperial hips,
like Drano,
sluice my eyes.

My blood marches
through the sewers of
my prurience, has me
as sore as a busted
canal duct. Her kingdom
grows big as a half-moon, and

I'm relegated as the custodian of
wasted ditch streams. Her lunar pull storms
inside of me; I breathe in paroxysms.
With a gravity that titillates as it
captivates, my Manhole Queen
rules my underground seas.

Dried Fruit

You, a 4'11'' burgundy grape,
flaunt a plum above your haunches,
a gross 2'6'' around. Your walk,
a cute struggle, as an orchard of ripples,
grows slower, overripe with a proliferation
of purple, like a Red Giant bruised by the sun.

You hoard Wild Indigo nectar
underneath your hilled skin. A drone,
I need to sense early Spring unfurling
so that I too may eat. All of those sweet
flower drops cycle within you and
you alone, leaving me with withered petals,
and Dionysus with brittle raisins.

Magellan's Nightmare

Only part of you
can be studied,
My awfully orbed
Titan. Every other voyager
shrinks away from each
of your colossal globes, afraid
of your unrealized shape, distance.

Scrolls and scrolls
of my maps lie
about you still rolled.
Terrified of your scale,
like an unlearned navigator
thrust into four oceans at once,
I re-read your name
to tickle my terror:
“Magellan's Nightmare.”

Tyrannosaur

I still cannot unearth
your terrible hips, deeply
buried under the dunes'
seductive insulation,
like too much skin.
Slopes of caked sand
cover your bones
in this gorgeous, heavy desert.

After all, with merely soft brush strokes,
how far down until I can touch you?
Maybe I never wanted to exhume
your bones, even though I dig
still with my Mammoth's tusk.

Part VI
The Moral

Evangelical

Christ, won't you come down and take
the life-bereft home to their monochrome

heaven? Some of us want to hang
behind as sinners and see your father's

green, brown, blue and white whimsies
boil down to hot-blood red as our bodies

burn, cry, laugh, and perish in the color
of souls damned, that devil-red splendor: Sunrise.

The Moral

The songs of great God
and his narcissistic son
they sing in the wooden

harmony of the saved. The pews
creak as squeaked joints sit,
but there's an afterward to the fairytale

this Sunday morning: Father
tells a joke in his homily, though
I nod off right after "Why did Jesus

cross the road?" Then Dad wakes
me up in time for the woodchip
wafer. I tell him I am

no damned beaver. As hoped for,
we exit after communion, and
Dad sprints toward a dead tree

as if his life depended
on bitter bark. Back home,
I swear to god as I brush my teeth.

The Last Chore of Sunday

Death likely sounds
Like when you
plug your ears up
as with a bathtub drain,

or maybe how the din
that blares through the den
when you've turned the vacuum
off might foretell

that commodious *hush*,
the one that succeeds
the last chore of Sunday.
We clean our house-

hold noise as this coital push
lifts the plug to open
the drain, so all dirty
water can leave, and leave us

alone in silence. Our duty,
dear, is to a bed left
unmade; our stink the sheets
that cover us when we sleep.

Content Shadow

Death, your boasting
is like a blind boy wading
through a pitch dark garage,
fumbling for his keys.

You are as remarkable
as a seven-year-old's discovery
of how to write his name in cursive;
his initial pride wanes like the dusk sun
each time he humps the "M",
connects it to the other oblong,
six letters. What other pretended

intrigues do you advertise? That blind boy
was a content shadow of nothing before being
enwombed. Let him return to you
on his own when he finally stumbles
in the dark, onto a nail gun with only one nail left,
no more pointed than that final "l" of his generic name.

Vita

The author was born in Metairie, LA, December 3, 1984. He obtained a Bachelor of Art's degree in English Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans, December, 2007. In August, 2009 he began graduate studies at the University of New Orleans, and pursued an M.F.A. degree in Creative Writing, with a concentration in Poetry.