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Alan Michael Parker: 10-27-2004

Alan Michael Parker

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Parker:

The work.

Which heart shall it be tonight; the fist or the little lettuce?

From a borrowed porch at dusk, the light retreats

and blurred arcs across a well-angled lawn.

Movement and stillness indistinguishable.

A kind of rhythm.

A squirrel hops toward its death next door under a deck, and the perfect watchful wrath

of Paco, chiropractor's earnest mutt.

Or a heart as full as over-ripe fruit, or smooth and pink, and inviolate as a little rubber ball.

It was raining earlier at the pier, too hard to stroll amidst the tang of sea salt and fish rot, among my dead.

A hatless customs officer in a yellow slicker had turned backwards into the horizontal rain,

ripped down the dock as if torn from a page.

I had tried to notice, to see everything in the one moment, dry through my windshield,

but I was left with the flat slaps of the weather, in constant,

indifferent to the pig's knuckle heart, the glass jar heart.

So now, later instead, work.

Is something missing [inaudible] to something unwanted?

Or does that count as two questions when I've only been given one?

There are voices [inaudible] dinners on the kitchen table,

wine and chicken and bread and peas.

Darkness slips into the laughter, a riptide.

The dog trots off with its [inaudible] dog heart, the meat heart.

In the laundry room, all our heavy-weather gear [inaudible] in a double sink.

Over there, away, the storm cell barrels up the coast, roll within roll of non-being, all form.

Exquisite and ordinary.

Yes, that's right.

The non-heart.

The exquisite heart.

The ordinary heart.

Black: Welcome to The Writers Forum. My name is Ralph Black, I'm the co-director of the forum. And we are here today to talk with Alan Michael Parker [inaudible] who is visiting Brockport. Joined also by Tom Metzger [inaudible] in the English department. Alan Michael Parker lives in North Carolina, has been there for four or five years now. *Days Like Prose* came out in 1997, *The Vandals* came out in 1999, and recently, *Love Song with Motor Vehicles* came out last year. He has edited or been involved in the edit process of a couple of anthologies for "Routledge Anthology of Cross-Gendered Verse" and "Who's Who in 20th Century World Poetry". His work has been widely anthologized and published in such journals as "The New Yorker", "The New Republic", "Paris Review", "Boulevard", and many others. He directs the creative writing program at Davidson College, and he also teaches at the low residency creative MFA program at Queens University in Charlotte. If that isn't enough, he has a novel coming out in a few months called "Cry Uncle".

Alan, welcome to the forum.

Parker: Thanks.

Black: Welcome to Brockport. It's good to have you here. You started with "The Work", and [inaudible], you said you think of it as a meditation. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the kind of meditation it is. To me, the poem, raises a lot of questions about writing, about the process of writing, about the way the imagination works. Particularly, imagination in your poems, which seems to play with disparity and fragmentation, but always looking for a way to bring things together to find a kind of wholeness. And there's a wonderful line about halfway through, "I had tried to notice, to see everything in the one moment dry through my windshield, but I was left with that flat slap of the weather."

Can you talk a little bit about "The Work"; the poem and the work of poetry that you're doing now?

Parker: Yeah. I'd be pleased to. The lines that you point to are the central lines in the poem. And the poem is in "Ars Poetica". I am exploring some of my own principles provisionally, because I write a lot of poems that think a lot about the nature of the work, the nature of the project. And my ideas about what poetry is tend to be somewhat situational. They're dependent upon the fact that the page is always blank the next time, so it's a new poem and it invents its own -- it has its own laws of gravity, and it is a cosmology onto itself. There's that [inaudible] line that's very important to me, that I am a little world made cunningly of elements. And I think of the poems as such. And so while this is for the duration of this particular poem and perhaps in this volume in "Ars Poetica", there are others that have other opinions about what poems do and how poems function. The modernist project of trying to wrestle with the linearity of language, of trying to get 800 pages into blooms life -- into one day of blooms life -- is a project that fascinates me. And so those lines do take on in a way the impossibility of simultaneous experience in a text because words necessarily are sequential, they follow one after the other. I can't get you to feel and smell at the same time by writing a poem. And yet, you can in a way -- and my work is very image-driven -- and you can in a way, I think, or I aspire to, evoke some of those sensations and experiences by creating an environment in which you as the reader might walk around. And the way I do that mostly in this book at least, the methods I'm using, have a lot to do with my sense of what a meditation is, of how we construct our bodies as a function of our thought, of how the text can be an extension of our bodies, of how thought itself becomes a kind of material idea in our lives. So here, the interplay of the questions about the heart, which one shall it be, the scene with which the poem begins and to which it returns, the dinner scene, the domestic scene that's interwoven with the scene that takes place earlier on the dock. The hope is that those apparently tangential moments might come together in a way that's in the mind as a function of the meditation kind of 3-D. That's the hope.

Black: I think in this poem, it comes together nicely at the end from the, "Over there, away, the storm cell barrels up the coast. And that to

me is sort of the place where these elements do come together." But there's a lot of room in the poem for the reader. I was teaching this book the last week and talking to my students about this quality of your work. And somebody pointed to the line, "Is something missing preferable to something unwanted," and it seems as though that's a question that you have in your work in lots of ways.

Parker: Yes. Lots of ways.

Black: What do I leave out? What's the role of a mission, and at what point do the gaps -- you use the word "gaps" a few times in your book I think.

What role does the silence -- the gap play? Is that a place for the reader to enter into the poem and play a more sort of active dynamic role in the work?

Parker: I hope so.

My sense of those gaps, the interstices between the words as well as between lines and images. And some of the switchbacks that happen in my poems -- because I tend to change direction very quickly, not quite surrealist changes of direction, not contiguous images that don't go together to spark the psyche, but switchbacks, some things that might look associative. My sense of some of those spaces between the words comes from probably what's horribly Orientalized because I don't speak Japanese, but study of Japanese poetry. I've paid a fair bit of attention to Kakinomoto Hitomaro to Basho, to some of the poets who just don't say -- and it's not as simple as show, don't tell -- but they just don't say. And so what is not said, to me, is really quite important -- the unsaid. I've actually given a talk about the unsaid. And it is in this book. It's in this poem in ways also. This poem is not as formally organized. It has the refrains, it has the questions that offer a kind of underlying architecture. But most of the poems in this book. Are much more formally organized. And so there are more spaces in different -- spaces of different sizes in this poem. And that was fun to play with. I liked that. I like trying to make myself do something I've never done before, and this poem was certainly like that.

Metzger: I'm wondering -- you mentioned the word "refrain." Many times through both the books, the most recent books, there's repeated chant-like, refrains, "In, out, in, out," or, "In, in, in, in." I noted quite a few of them. They were quite striking, and I'm wondering does that come from somewhere or can you identify where that might come from or what you think the function might be of these sort of chant-like --

Parker: Well, that's a great question. I think first it comes from the oral traditions of poetics. And that for me, despite the fact that I have -- or my formal poems notwithstanding -- the impetus that one of the engines of many of my poems tends to be sound. I'm a fanatic for it, and fanatical in my trying to get the sound right. What I like very much about refrains -- first of all, the great challenge is of course that the second time you hear the same words, they have to mean a little bit different from the first time, or all you're doing is repeating yourself. I think it's a King Crimson song where he says over, "I repeat myself when I'm under stress. I repeat myself when I'm under stress."

Black: Yeah.

Parker: Which I love. And it changes and it becomes funny because he's repeating it. But in a poem, if you get a refrain, and the villanelle tends to, I think, the bad villanelle tends to be subject to this. If you're merely repeating the same line and what has happened in the interim hasn't enlarged your understanding of those words, then it's merely a musical gesture. It doesn't have the kind of power that repetition offers. And so earlier in my work, especially in the first book, in *Days Like Prose* and in poems that I was writing around the time of that collection, I was very interested in how the repeated phrases would throw the reader back up into the poem, that you hear this one line and it makes you hear the same, and it makes you travel in a way as you're also traveling down through the poem, but travel into the earlier moments of the poem, because it's the same line. "Oh, I saw that there. Oh, there. Oh, here it comes." And that creates, of course, anticipation and expectation, and I really liked that. In *The Vandals* and in *Love Song*, my tack has been a little bit different, and maybe it's not working. But what I'm interested in in these two books and also in subsequent poems, with the use of the repetition has to do with a kind of rhythm section. I think that there are different ways to make sounds in poems, and I think that some of those sounds can co-exist. And so if you hear, "In, out, in, out, in, out. In, out, in, out, in, out," and you hear it four times in the poem, or six times in the poem, any other repetition plays over that sonic unit, plays over that line. And it becomes this kind of rhythm that underscores a melody. It's a very musical idea. It's very much thinking about how to write a song.

Metzger: Do you think in terms of visually too, because the "In, out, in, out," for instance, it's actually strung out on the page, and then you can see there's a black line, it's thick.

Parker: Yeah. There's a lot of visual play in *The Vandals*, very much so. I was really trying to play with the materiality of that text. There are poems that take place before the poem takes place. Before this poem, the vandals do this; after the poem, who knows what the vandals will do. There's all sorts of conversation in and around the materiality of the text. And certainly the visual impact, what Stevens calls typographical queerness, is of interest to me as well. Of course, the "In, out, in, out, in, out", I mean, much of my stuff, of course, is borrowed. We say borrowed. But that's right out of "Clockwork Orange". And I want the implication of the violence of that film especially, the Kubrick version.

Black: Before we get further launched into the poems, I want to back up and ask you, because this is your first time here. Tell us sort of how you got here. And I know somebody drove you. But you know, tell us about where poetry came from in your life, how you came to poems.

Parker: I was always a reader. I was a reader early. I was incorrigible in school in a way because I wanted to read everything and wanted to participate so much that I think the way to teach me best, as it turned out through elementary school, was to send me to the library. Get me out of the classroom or put me in a corner with a stack of books and say,

"OK, you know, here's your afternoon." And I think that -- I mean, maybe my parents would dispute this -- but I think that the various moods and fights that I -- not fights, but quarrels -- that I might have actively pursued as a child were productive for me because they'd always let me be sent to my room with my books. So you know, in that way, it was kind of sneaky. And it was always the books. It was always, always the books. I started writing poems -- I have them -- when I was eight. They're horrible. I won't recite one.

Black: Maybe later.

Parker: Maybe. Maybe much later. And maybe not. And so it's always been the most available of media for me. I love fine art, I love sculpture. I thought about it for a while. I was acting for a while. But it really is how I make my meanings best. And it's the hardest thing I know how to do well sometimes. I don't know always know how to do it well, but it's the hardest thing for me.

Black: So when did you start reading poems and who were early influences?

Parker: It comes from in part my mom is a great reader. And I have her copies of Sandberg and Dickinson, and Langston Hughes early on, Frost. I have her copy of Frost, which has the figure of poem mix, that really important essay is in the edition that she had. The great books were in my house. Pardon me. And then there were teachers. There were teachers in junior high school and there were teachers in high school. And I went to college specifically to study with writers. And I've really pretty much always been aware of its role in my life. And took a year between undergrad and grad and did my graduate work at Columbia. Was very fortunate in the teachers with whom I had the opportunity to work. Which is true also on the undergraduate level. I've had tremendous teachers.

Black: Well, talk a little bit who they were and what doors they opened for you.

Parker: Well, on the undergraduate level, I worked with Donald Finkel, who was a marvelous, marvelous teacher; Mona Van Duyn, also a really interesting fabulous writer; William Gass; Howard Nemerov. Those were my teachers at undergraduate. I can see in some ways probably the persistence of their memories in my work. Certainly Bill Gass's work has persisted. I see Donald Finkel's influence. He was Iowa train [assumed spelling] in my first collection. I see my pushing off of it in *The Vandals*, which was conscious in many ways. And I was asked to, as an undergraduate, my junior year, I was invited to enter the graduate workshop at Washington University. Don said, "OK. You know, I'd like you to come audit." I wasn't allowed to show my work for the first semester. I was allowed to critique, and I'm kind of a brat sometimes. And I was more of a brat then. And so I would participate, but they wouldn't get a chance to talk about my work.

Black: Right.

Parker: It was very uncomfortable. But eventually, Don took a sabbatical and Mona Van Duyn came and taught. And so my senior year, I was in the

graduate workshop and a full participant. And I was preparing a collection of my work as an honors thesis. And learning to read really, which was the most important I think part of my undergraduate education. It's one thing to say that you love to write and you have some expressive abilities and/or linguistic agility. But it's another to say that you are beginning to work in an art form that has a longstanding tradition, and that you know how to parse its meaning-making systems in ways that will be productive for yourself as an artist. And so when I say I had great teachers, mostly it's because I learned how to read, I think, in their capable hands.

Metzger: You mentioned some of the high fine end-of-the-spectrum poetry, but I notice -- sorry, I'm going to talk about one of the poems.

Black: No, go.

Metzger: I'm curious. You mentioned "Highlights", the children's magazine. And I particularly was pleased to see the reference to "Go, Dog, Go!" And I even called the public library to find out -- It's P.D. Eastman -- I had forgotten P.D.'s.

Parker: It is P.D. Eastman.

Black: Yeah, that's right.

Metzger: So I wonder -- you talk about your parents having high-end literary work in the house. Can you say a little bit about your relationship with the more popular or trash culture that you seemed to have some fun with in some of the poems?

Parker: Well, I'm kind of omnivorous when it comes to culture. And I think if I'm going to have whopping opinion today, it's that artists need to be, that if you're isolating yourself within any tower or dungeon, then you're really not living the full life that your art demands of you, as a reader and a moviegoer, and as someone who eats a hotdog or whatever it might be. And one of the things that happened between my first and my second book, between *Days Like Prose* and *The Vandals* is that I began to come to terms with this and to realize that, you know, I've been writing a kind of peculiar version of an American poem. And in the first book, that peculiar version has to do with sincerity, it has to do with Anglo-Saxon language, no Latin words, no comedy, no low art. And it just felt like it was using about a quarter of my brain in terms of my experiences. Maybe not in terms of the demands upon my talent, but in terms of my experiences. And so it became a kind of vow. And the fact that the book is *The Vandals* and that there are vandals running around, helped empower me to open up that vandalism in my own aesthetics, to use everything, to steal from everything -- borrow from everything -- and not to be afraid of being an artist who's more holistic in his approach to culture. And for whom -- if I go bowling and I see somebody and it's a 16-year old, and the kid is having a good game, that that can be a poem that's as productive of certain kinds of the sublime if I get it right -- I'm not sure I got it right -- but of the sublime. Just as easily as taking a walk at [inaudible] would be for me, or maybe with just as much difficulty. And so I want to find my material everywhere. And after *The*

Vandals, that's been easier to do. Even though I don't tend to read a lot of crappy poetry on purpose. That's kind of the one area, and I think that's -- to me -- that's sort of interesting that I'll see crappy films and I'll read crappy thrillers and kids' books, and everything, crappy music, and listen to the radio; but the one place where the walls of Jericho are still up is having to do with I just want to read the best poems, and I want to read them all the time.

Black: One of the things that I noticed particularly -- I'm thinking about the swing of a pendulum. And it seems like with *The Vandals* that you made a very conscious decision to move away from the voice of *Days Like Prose*, to use *The Vandals* as a way to really fling open some doors. And I wonder whether you see a pendulum as sort of swinging back to more of a middle ground in *Love Song*. Because even like "My Read Flute, My Grass Sack", which is this wonderful conversation with Du Fu, and in the middle of this meditation conversation is contemporary suburban America: Weber grills and U-Hauls, and Goodwill. And the book seems full of those moments where [inaudible] and Vichtenstein [assumed spelling] co-exist with the neighbors out at their barbeques, flipping burgers and drinking beer out of a paper bag.

Parker: Certainly the pendulum swing, it is there. My model for myself as an artist book to book, there are a number of them. One of them is Picasso and the sense of reinvention that happens at so many periods. I mean, there are six major periods in Picasso's career. And it seems to me that that's the bomb. I mean, I would do that in a second. I would have another major period, if I had one, I'd have two. I mean, wouldn't that be totally cool? And not be known as the person who rewrites himself. And so I want to flatter myself and say that each of the books is distinct. In truth, the first and second books are most distinct, and the third book is a kind of fusion of the first and the second. Nevertheless, the poems that are in *Love Song* couldn't not be in *Days Like Prose*, and I'm sure of that. For all of the aesthetic similarities particularly of the POV, those poems are not poems that I was capable of writing, nor are they poems that -- they don't end where the poems end in *Days Like Prose*. What is true about *Love Song* and the point of view and this melding of earlier projects in a way, is that I really set myself a task of trying to think about it -- and it's explicit in the title, and it's implicit in a lot of the poems -- trying to think about how to sing a song in poetic terms, in this context, a love song, mixed within and against -- with all of the friction of that that implies. Something that I think of as American -- commerce, suburbia, American culture, American low art as it were. So there is a project here that's very different from *Days Like Prose*. *Days Like Prose* is the project in a way of identity, which I think is probably true of many first books. I mean, you're trying to figure out who you are, even if the work is or is not autobiographical in its origins. But this book has a project that's I think larger than my head -- *Love Song* does. And in that regard, I think of it as, you know, you like to convince yourself that you're getting better, but I think of it at least as advancing my own ambitions, even if it's not advancing my own successes.

Black: Is that one of the things that creates room in your poems for so many questions? You know, there's a series of poems in here that seem to

take a pretty strong -- I maybe would even say political stance -- critiquing some kind of contemporary suburban spiritual void. And pointing this out and asking questions about who are these people in their lives, standing on the edge of the dock or out in the backyard, mowing the lawn, you know, whatever it is that they're doing; who are they and what are they about. But is there an answer? There are lots of questions that you ask over and over again in your poems, which I like a lot.

Parker: Thanks. I think [inaudible] the right answer, I would stop asking the questions.

Black: Right. Which is what, the end of the poems?

Parker: Yeah, maybe. What has become apparent to me in retrospect, not in the writing of the book, was that many of those rhetorical moves in specifically the questions, are places in the poems where I get to -- -- implicate myself in my own scrutiny, where that moment happens and the speaker says -- and whether or not you want to believe this is historical Alan Michael Parker or a speaker or autobiographical or not -- but the speaker asks, "What hurry is my hurry?" And so the turning in of the question -- and sometimes the question isn't as explicitly about the speaker or the self, and sometimes it's about the other character or otherwise -- but that turning in of the question to me is in a way the goal. And that particular rhetorical move within the poems has at least in this book given me -- and again, it's in retrospect -- I'm thinking, "Oh, look. That's what I did. Huh. Did I do it all away? Oh, maybe." But it's given me some insight into how the speaker is complicit within the kinds of cultural and commercial conspiracies that are being critiqued within the work, within the poems. In the poem, "Driving Past My Exit", the song on the radio was for me. The speaker is completely subject to the commerce, the jingle, the driving, the strip mall. And that poem has a kind of gates of heaven mythological implication. You can't quite know if the yes, my captain, if the apostrophe is to Saint Peter or it's a post-death kind of declaration. But yeah, I was in it. Yeah, I was guilty. Yes, my captain, I was there. I didn't know those questions pertained to me. I didn't think about acceptable losses. Yeah, I was there. I'm part of this.

Black: Right.

Parker: And even though I'm trying to stand up here on Cooper Hill and tell you why London is falling apart, I wouldn't know if I weren't part of London.

Black: I mean, the questions of consciousness that you bring to a lot of these characters in your poems, especially that soldier in that poem, I kept thinking of that wonderful scene in "White Noise" where -- I forgot -- the professor -- I've forgotten his name.

Parker: Dr. Hitler. Professor Hitler.

Black: Yeah, the Hitler studies guy. Where he's at the ATM machine and he puts in his card and he gets out his money. And there's this long riff on

how sort of perfect the world is. Everything works. You know, here I am with my card and I put it in this machine, and it reads my number and it knows who I am, and the identity is there. And it gives me money, and I drive off into my world, and everything is beautiful. I get that sense from this guy hitting the buttons on the radio and just feeling completely tuned in.

Parker: But without that static -- sorry, I couldn't [inaudible] further -- that again is the project of *Love Song with Motor Vehicles*, of finding some sense of self that has as part of its meaning-making expressions, solace and joy within what we consider to be a 21st century that perhaps is [inaudible] us, that perhaps is challenging us at every turn politically that we are associated with, that we don't want to necessarily own up to because we don't agree, or because we turn out to be individuals after all.

Metzger: You mentioned the word "American" a number of times already today. And I was thinking about the motor vehicle imagery and El Caminos in '89, Camaros, and 4x4s, and I'm wondering if that Americanness that you keep referring to and certainly motor vehicles as a profoundly American contribution, if you want to use that word. If you have something to say or some thoughts on how the motor vehicles work in the poem's title, the title of the poem has got that word in it, that phrase obviously.

Parker: Well, I thought I was being kind of shifty. I thought, "A-ha. Why don't I give myself a technical challenge? Why don't I see how many different kinds of motor vehicles I can put in different poems in this book?" Once I had the title poem, I thought, "OK. Let's see how that works."

And so that I thought was kind of shifty. And then I've had people come through and say, "Wow, golf cart. Wow, bus. Wow, look, bicycle." And so people have collected them. And I thought, "Oh, I guess that wasn't being so shifty." What is at the center of the impulse, I think, is to reconfigure -- again, this is an ambition and I'm not claiming its success -- but to reconfigure the truism of literature that every journey is a journey into the self. That when you're out in Pilgrim's Progress or when Gahlin [assumed spelling] takes his hike into the woods, or when we're on the road, or wherever it might be, that those are journeys into the self. And we tend to be driven into the self these days in America, rather than walk. And so part of my hope was that -- and there's been some great reaction to the books and a number of reviews, and some really thoughtful people have responded to the book. And alas, no one has gotten there yet. This is the first time I've said it at all.

Metzger: The journey to self?

Parker: That being driven into the self is one of the tropes of the book.

Metzger: But I'm wondering perhaps, because the motor vehicle imagery is so spectacle. My favorite image in the book is the Erwin Rommel on the golf cart. And I wonder how many people even know that famous picture of Rommel pointing in the back of the Jeep. And it's particularly funny

because it's a golf cart and it's an old golfer. But that's a strong visual. Spectacular is too strong a word, but it's --

Parker: Spectacle is the right word.

Metzger: And I'm wondering if we're more likely to just see the spectacle, this great image of the vandals in their 4x4 driving, committing one of their atrocities. And it's going to be harder for us to see that as an internal.

Parker: Oh, absolutely. And I'm with Frost on these grounds. I mean, I have no complaints about the work being read carefully and even appreciated and then misread, because I think if it's in you, it'll do its job. Words tend to write us in their way. And Frost was thrilled. Was it two or three Pulitzer Prizes, and all of this other stuff. And he was thoroughly thrilled with being the cracker barrel philosopher of New Hampshire. And he wasn't from New Hampshire. Even the implied Frost doesn't say good fences make good neighbors. The neighbor says it. That's part of my schooling, various Robert Frosts. I also get it from people like Borges of course, but the various constructions of the identity that we project within our work. And my sense is that if you walk away chuckling about the El Camino or struck by the Rommel image and the golf cart, and if the next line, "They stop, they swing, they leave," doesn't remind you of Phil Levine's poem, which to me it's a riff upon, "They feed, they lie in," you're getting what I want, which is to have an experience, is to be inside the text, have an experience, be changed in some fashion because you have thought about what you're reading. And then I hope it lingers. And sometimes the way I hope it lingers, my mechanism is comedy. Sometimes it's the striking image. Sometimes it's both. I read a lot of elegies. Sometimes it's the apprehension with all of those puns implied of our mortality.

Black: But I mean, a lot of those things, to me, the comedy, the voice, the formality in the poems, there's so much juxtaposition, there's so much sort of slamming together of these things that we wouldn't normally sort of put in a row. And I think a lot of the energy in the poems comes from those juxtapositions. And I think of "The Librarian Song" as kind of quintessential to this. And before I read the poem in the book, I heard you read it at AWP last year I think. And I was sitting in the back and I was listening to it and sort of following it. And suddenly, all of those R's at the end of these lines start ringing. And I wanted to sort of jump up and applaud because it was funny. I mean, just that formal trait in the poem I thought was kind of wonderful. Buried but not buried. A lot of it is very quiet. And then there's this kinetic energy in the poem -- switchbacks, right -- this turning and turning back, looking for Updike, check the computers, she called the main branch, put in for a transfer, her husband has run off with a jogger. On and on and on, it's kind of this wonderful wildness. But I think a lot of the wildness -- a lot of the power in the poem -- I think the success has to do with all kinds of juxtaposition, images, sonic kinds of juxtaposition, the sounds of the poem held up next to the subject of the poem.

Parker: Well, disparate elements yoked by violence together, right? That's Elliott's misreading or misquoting of Dr. Johnson talking about the metaphysicals. And it's a very important idea for me. Some of the poets whom I love most are poets I read as a 20-year old and they're Polish poets.

Reading in translation. They're Calvino's prose work, they're people who not only let the imagination rip, but also are working with kinds of -- whether it's in a surrealist or a neo-surrealist tradition -- but what I consider to be a 20th century metaphysical tradition. I'm a great fan of the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski. And I read him next to John Dunn really happily. I think that he's a profoundly metaphysical poet. And if Elliott is right even in that idea that he misattributes, then metaphysical poetry allows us to yoke by violence these disparate ideas, to yoke them together to make a metaphor that becomes one plus one equals three. And that's the mathematical analog to my aesthetic when it comes to metaphor. I hope.

Metzger: I think it's interesting that you keep repeating the word "yoke by violence" and you're quoting the misquoting. But rather than the metaphor being fusing or merging or an erotic connection, but yoke by violence implies something that is not implied by these images of fusion. And that might have something to do with this kinetic kind of clashing flavor that you're reading or hearing in the poem.

Parker: Some of the violence in the work, and there's certainly violence, I think there's terror in violence in *The Vandals*. A little less so in *Love Song*, it's a little better behaved in a way, maybe because there are no vandals. But the Penates, the god poems have their violences. But some of the violence has to do with -- and I don't know why this particular psychological state is fascinating to me -- but a fair number of my characters, I mean, certainly not all, I would say a percentage, but in a way that to me is noticeable -- tend to be people who are about an inch shy of losing it. And there is a psychological tension, not hysteria, but they're on our side of hysterical. But there is something that's pushing them toward the prospect of losing it. And this happens in the photographer who's in the off-season poem, it's happens in "The Librarian Song", certainly in the Penates, those characters, a fair number of them are getting to that edge. It happens early. It happens in "The Ticket", which is a poem about a drunk driver that's in my first book. And I've only recently become aware of this trend, and of course as a result, now that I've said it, I'm trying to mediate, I'm trying not to do it as much, but it's long been a psychological state that interests me. Not the rage that becomes a political poem, but the exploration of who we are before that happens. And so maybe also that lies consonant [sic] with the question of the friction between the disparate elements or switchbacks or the changes and tonalities from [inaudible] to Doggerel, which certainly *The Vandals* is full of. Or with the rhyme. There's so much rhyme in my work.

Black: Or the Penates poems at the end of *Love Song*, do you see them as a kind of continuation of *The Vandals* or some sort of close cousins to *The Vandals*?

Parker: Yeah. In truth, they were written pretty much -- after I wrote *The Vandals*, I went on a kind of bender in terms of poems. And I say bender by -- and want to imply that I wasn't as conscious as I could have been. And I ended up throwing out about 14 months of material. And the way I came back to it was by writing the Penates. And so they were the next project. And I do see them -- Joseph Brodsky, who was my teacher once, said that you should never apologize for your earlier work. I do see the Penates -- they were written before everything else in this volume -- as forming a bridge. They're not transitional, but they're forming a bridge between *The Vandals* and the discreet lyrics that will occupy most of the book, and that are occupying most of the next book. They're in couplets. The comedy is akin if not quite as high or low. They are more meditative. They do have the pop culture stuff happening. On the whole, I thought of them as set in Europe at first. I thought, "OK. Why don't I see what happens there?" And there are many more of those poems that were not included in the volume, including quite horribly a poem I published about a Lebanese chanteuse who blows herself up in a café. And this was before the intifada encouraged women to do that. And the poem is perfectly reasonable, but I couldn't bear to publish it again. I couldn't include it. It's just too horrible. I didn't feel prescient in particular, but the coincidence of history and the art there was just too horrible, which is a side comment. But yeah, they do form a [inaudible] link between the kinds of moves that I make in *The Vandals* and what happens in the discreet lyrics later. Yeah, absolutely.

Metzger: I'm wondering about particularly in *The Vandals*, but in the later poems too, there's a lot of imageries of macho, lot of imageries of male power. Some of it ludicrous male power, some of horrifying or scarifying. But you've also got some silly images of male power, people playing air guitar and that kind of thing. And I'm wondering -- two questions -- one is I'm wondering if there's any thoughts about macho power and poetry because those don't often get talked about in the same breath. Well, actually, let's just leave it at that one. Or do you have something to say on that?

Parker: Yeah, I have a lot to say about that. And you know, they are the vandals, I mean, they're a group of guys. There aren't really any women in that crowd. They have vandal homes, and one assumes that in vandal homes there are vandal women. And even though I don't quite always gender them, they're pretty male.

Metzger: Right.

Parker: My first published book was a book in the field of gender studies. It was a book of cross-gendered verse, which you mentioned earlier, in which women write in the voice of men; men write in the voice of women the collections and anthology with a critical apparatus, and it's from Chaucer to the present. And I'm really kind of interested in male power. And sexism is maybe because of the intellectual work, maybe because of my own feelings, but I feel particularly sensitive to it. It's one of the things that just really bothers me. And it's up there with like, sanctimoniousness and a few others, but it's there. And certainly there's a long tradition of guyness in poems, of the guy going out for

the walk, of the guy being able to do this, and of a kind of -- I think sometimes the poem of the "American Lyric," and particularly the poem, "The American Lyric Set in Nature" tends to be a poem about conquest and tends to be written by men. And I'm not talking about Robert Bly, I mean, that's a whole nother poem of conquest. "Iron John" and all of that stuff, that's an argument, that's not really even the subtext to a residence. And so I was interested in trying to see what I could do with peopling the poems with the kinds of folks who don't usually get into poems.

Metzger: Right.

Parker: Not because I think those people are going to read the poems and feel changed. I try not to deceive myself about the audience for poetry in this country today. I don't think someone who would call himself a vandal is going to pick up the book, and it's certainly not available in ways that would -- And I'm not trying to sound like an elitist snoot about this, I just think it's a fact of commerce at this time. But that really very much was a conscious goal and it remains such. There are certainly poems about maleness. I mean, the poem I mentioned earlier, the bowling poem, "Paradise", is about a 16-year old and about what he feels as a guy. And a lot of it is about masculinity.

Metzger: It's interesting that you would have what sounds to me a fairly if not conflicted, at least complicated thoughts about the question of masculinity because in some places in *The Vandals*, it seemed to me that the writer was taking great delight in the vandals' activities.

Parker: Oh, yeah. Oh, I loved it.

Metzger: The energy and the craziness.

Parker: Oh, I play team sports, you know, and I'm a guy. And what goes into my own masculinities -- and I see them as plural and complicated -- is not as easily resolved as, "Oh my gosh, this is the wrong way for a guy to be." It's a complicated idea and facet of identity. And you know, I'm not coming at it to say the history of sexism is responsible for this or guys can't be like that. I'm trying to figure out what it means to me. And so it's really more exploratory, and that means that I don't have an argument, I have some lessons that I've learned.

Black: Can you leave us with a poem to take us out with?

Parker: I can.

Black: Great.

Parker: I'd be pleased to. And thanks for amazing questions. Really fun.

Black: We didn't talk about the Red Sox.

Parker: We didn't. Go Sox.

Black: Yeah.

Parker: Just one more night.

Black: Let's get that in there.

Parker: For the ages.

Black: Right.

Parker: I should also say that the last lunar eclipse will happen at 9:17 or 9:14 tonight, the last lunar eclipse -- full lunar eclipse -- until the year 2007.

Metzger: Really?

Parker: Yeah.

Black: At 9:15?

Parker: Yeah. We might actually see it.

Black: Wow. OK.

Parker: The poem is the last poem in *Love Song*, it's titled "Wheel, O Wheel". And it takes its title from a Hebrew spiritual of the same title. And it is Ezekiel's wheel that is in the spiritual. It becomes a little something else here.

Wheel, O Wheel.

Ground to a powder by the wheel of the sun, I brush myself off.

There are revolutions to regret, bills to save like snapshots, tasks to invent, to forget.

If I were the oak outside the living room, I would dream of birds, breeze,

a flash of orange just before the buses rumble.

Style. If I were the floor, I would dream of more.

The tide, the pull, the history of everything, the sea alive with movement, somehow still.

If I were the wall, I would picture myself let loose in a field, a slant toward the trees, one plate full.

The house shrugs.

The moon snags on a telephone pole.

The clock collects me in its arms.

There are meetings to ruin, crimes to enjoy, years to rewrite, too much what I am.

If I were the closet, I would open in a dream of fingers interwoven, water cupped to drink.

Out on the lawn, the grass is tucked in.

The street runs to the corner and stops and turns and runs.

Clouds shoulder each other across the sky.

There are cans to empty, resolutions to ignore,

a bird to shoo with a broom through the dining room.

If I were the hall, I would go to the door and step out and be gone.

Metzger: Thanks. Lovely poem.

Black: Thank you. Thanks for coming. Thanks, Tom.

Parker: You're welcome.