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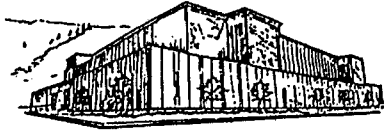
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Conduction

Poems

by

Adam Phillips

B.A. University of Idaho 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

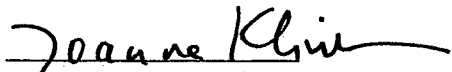
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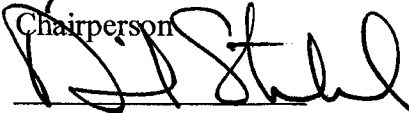
Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2005

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the Operation

Between boxes with the yellow eyes and the carousel,
all clacking teeth and steam, we had been

selecting our tunnels
wisely, tight but not too

obvious,

well-stocked close-lipped.

So, working with the things at hand, and the long tusks
of the eternally damned and a trencher, you're getting

the picture
now, we ate and we dug

There was a legion

There was a legion
had come

Long hands at their thighs grasping, and
ungrasping. There was a clamp, somewhere, a clamp-like

Thing; we needed it. Bedded down, fire waning, we kept
a watch standing at the far end of the clearing, watching

And watching for those that had come
from the rock, the moss. He was just a kid, the watch

I mean. Their eyes might have been chunks of amber,
encasing the perfectly preserved
remains of species the likes of which you have never seen

But which would have solved, literally, everything.
Preceded by the long, pumping hands. The kid

Made a sound as if something had taken
root inside of his mouth.

Ned (it isn't important) somehow got his pistol
tangled up in the sleeping bag. Long feet cut the fine sand like

Wolf-driven sleds. Bearing the heavier ghosts
of the wind-driven dead.

Wiring

A tongue-chewing taste of sprawled vacancy
as the air bubbled
with whispers, both the placid reflexive
edge of the saw blade
and the pocked teeth.

Those
were the winds in the alleys
that you heard,
hot gases above the moldering beds
of rags.

Anemic sentries smacked their lips in the thick metallic
morning dust, and in the very
final days, all anyone could say was
“That *thing-*”

the Forest

Out along the long thin road we trod in our long starched outfits.
What had appeared, at first, from a great distance, to be a mound
of dirt turned out in fact to be a man. This man, his eyes slid back,
and forth, while he equivocated frantically about the things
heaped all around his feet. There was a sour
noise: the forest echoed it back
humorlessly, but not without commentary.

What Is It

II.

The forest's northern wall; veined trunks and tarry shadow. Creepers.
Crystalware twittering deep in the interior, the flow...hot and wet
eyes. Fat red mouths and mountains
of it. Stop. He will tear out your liver with his great green teeth.

Puddle

a limp picked up
the night before that no one could explain or take
 away from me
seemingly slowing and knocking me crooked
 caught incessantly circling the Municipal Building
wearing a rut in the ground but
in fact, all of that was a ploy cat and mouse
with rapier claws a taste for guts surprised
at myself and the accessibility of soft things
doe-eyed, cantering, easily boxed-up
 and mailed home
prowling on hardwood floors lights out impossible to tell myself
from shadow aping the shape of a man.

the Island

From the end of the slanted dock those little icebergs
that rode the sharp-lipped waves
might have been boats manned
by men the likes of which (well)
I was pulling smoke rings from the general mist
when the actual ship of which well I yelled "We'll
be saved" and when no one moved or spoke
I waved and *that* was what they had been waiting for
pounding down across the rotten boards pulling up
just short of the edge in a swaying big-eyed mass
the ship approached
majestically we leapt in unison
and it would be a long time still before we dropped
the rope-ladder and sorted through
the lipless and corrupting dead
moldering in the ship's hold
and that would be just a prelude, unless I am
using the word prelude incorrectly.

Tangle

Rising to the surface motionless
I opened my eyes and saw it there
Filly clot of electricity and mucous
Keeping pace
Expressionless
Breaking through the chopping gray waves
I called for my friends but unfortunately
So did he
We writhed tangled in poisonous drapery
Staggered to shore clawing our cheeks
Like people melting
In the hospital Joe said I thought
You said yellow finch and Boo
Said I thought you said Jellyroll Morton

Brother, my

loose chains and a fever
and were I to
with a hammer I would
use not the blunt
end but a thin
splinter from the handle.

which is politics true
but the thickening
soup which one
cuts through
just to the store
or the river
bubbles, slips in twists between ribs
and occasionally a hand
must brave
a dirty mouth
to disengage a jaw.

were there a sharp train
I'd take it
and maybe
stacked green eyes
would stay behind
shattered basement windows
no one
would get hurt but the cards
did not fall
like that they
are less cards than
rat traps don't
fall unless one
liquefies
from the inside out.

though the rummaging disrupts
things not necessarily mine
there is a time, line, a point
at which stinging sects and
muscular scarecrows

must be preemptively turned back
or kept to receive an honest
admission as
a steel toe
and a fistful
of hair regardless
of the temperature at which
the individual brain runs
it is impossible
to overreact.

Assembly

Messengers, flushed and silent, filed
into the gymnasium.
The popcorn machine was broken.
Free soda was entirely out of the question.
Old dirty balloons
drooped from the rafters.
The guards tongued their gums while
the messengers sat erect,
gaunt men, nervous and blue-eyed.
It became impossible to tell
guards from messengers, in the dense rustling crowd.
We had scarcely sensed smoke
when the messengers rose, eyes swiveling, gabbling
with their red mouths.

Aisle

There are some things I can't get over, money owed me, things stolen from my backpack by people I knew and was afraid of, the long arms of sneakiness. "I can do better" I always think. This theme becomes nearly a fixation, lying back against the bombed-out brick wall, beyond which lies the city, stirring sparks into the thick milk of the sky. At the gates, encased in steel, arranged to march, those wronged and those correctly punished close ranks, peevishly thumbing at the flecks of debris in their own recast flesh.

School

Sunlight struck the tops of the desks flatly. Fingertips against her forehead, she had a fantasy: Each of the desks sat empty, she was alone in the room, watching lint turn in the shafts of diluted light. It wasn't much of a fantasy. She yawned. The boy behind her grated the metal feet of his desk back and forth against the rubber floor. She turned and he crossed his eyes. In the afternoon, there was a new boy, nice-looking, small. He was assigned the seat next to hers. The flavor of her fantasy changed: Now, she sat in an otherwise empty room with the boy, watching the dust meander. The same kid behind them made noises with different parts of the body while his friend chuckled dryly. Shadow began to stretch out in the tall weeds beyond the soccer field. Spying on the new boy's hands, tiny and chaffed, like her grandmother's, she blinked at a doodle he had just completed. A freezing disequilibrium descended. Dead heavy air bled into the room as she remained irresistibly riveted to the scrawled picture. That was the face from the dark. It had come back to her, somehow, in the form of an absent-minded drawing. The new boy's eyes rolled over in their sockets.

Reconstruction

Among slabbed steel
blocks of metal
and these oil stains there is an understanding
the likes of which one
can't afford to stoop to hear.

Again, these are only hard
dead facts. Bundled nails.

Echoes walk on long thin legs banging their batons
up and down the lumberyard.
Pipes lunge in their restraints.

Workers pull themselves through
the soot-caked skylight.

The voice of the alarm grows thick.

Plunging snakes rattle nails
within the aluminum bins.
They are building something.

Catastasis

Frost on the moon seen through a cataract
and a basement window.

That celestial body
corroding like a car battery:
Synthetic grasses whisk against one another while

Crickets lob themselves at the glacial icon,
vitreous black eyes, sprawling in the dust.

More

In an unimaginable place where
stilts aren't cool
the dead lash
themselves to metal poles
all winter, evil
evil business this
dark stuffy room, drifting down
the aftermath of the epic
pillow fight, semi-magical and one-sided, more of a
pillow assault, my locked joints more of a hammer
wrapped in wax paper, and the heat of a mouth, more of a twinge
or a spot, a claw, and a clean hammer

Treasure Hunting

I.

The newborns blink, flinching at the bottom of the ocean.
Lowering one's arms into the wooden chest used to mean, more or less, the disposal
of one's arms. Still, though, sawing and lunging through great snags
of limbs we showed up a tad early, filthy and still
sycophantically nervous. Stripping. Gears
thumping with the blamelessness of a friendly squirrel
tied to a stick of dynamite. Some things just happen.
Crosshairs, perpetually drifting, window-shopping ...Nobody wants to die
of fecal blood poisoning (except for gg allin). Weeds in the ditch ignite.
Fire in a hot wind tears across the hills like tendrils of spreading infection. Most pirates
these days wear two eye patches, we are so far removed
from an understanding of history.

II.

Worms are annoying. Weeds in the ditch, unite, repel the brigades
wielding metal detectors, stealing from the dead and the substance dependant, the loosely
dressed. Box fans, jaws, propellers can only spin so fast
and there are survivors, liquid gold
dripping from their chins. Birds caged in the charred fallen corpses
of trees. Squirrels engaged in cultivating a comprehensive understanding
of the nut. Small wars clattering, impaling and toxifying beneath leaves. (maybe genesis
p-orridge) And the newborns blink, flinching at the bottom of the ocean.

III.

But, one admits somewhat grudgingly, they do facilitate the existence of all life on earth.
Weeds in the ditch, reunite, propel the worm towards ever greater aeration. Squirrels on
the adjacent walking path, of sound body but bleeding from the ears; running along
power lines harder than it looks. Red eyes, reticular glare in the night. Those with
stumped fingers scratching at the lacquered wood, the sloppily molded lock with its
jagged edges. Ground glass glued to strategic spots
along the eaves keeps the squirrels off the roof: this universal principle can be applied to
nearly everything. Frequently, old women pass away with their windows
barred, or cemented over. A wiser tack involves boards
pierced with nails, springs, any variety of tripwire apparatuses. The mechanical whirring
subsides but remains imbedded deep in the ears. Deep as the brain in the newborn
crawling over the ocean floor.

IV.

No one wants to die last
in a great war. Weeds in the ditch, rewrite. (darby crash. absolutely not.) The treasure
chest walks and it gravitates towards fire.

Texas

The man that could tell you the names
of the men
in your dreams
presented himself to the opening door
with a white hat clasped
to his heart.
Hooked nails drummed against the radio...*bound,*
one atop the other, fused—
Prints of progress dripped down the walls.
She had negotiated our admission at
at least a terrible price, reciting names,
pointing further up the road.

Agitation

Soft with moss, blackened teeth, the skeletons cried out for relocation.
A clamant rattling rose, largely ignored until
People began falling through rotten floors, going
Under subway trains, turning up in closets
with their arms crossed. The bones got results, then.
There were dredgings, excavations, demolitions and reunions.
When the water calmed, and the dust cleared, order was
Restored as follows: All blue to the back, white to the front,
Ghosts to the cabins, slashers to the cities.
Wait a minute; that only applies to the living! cried the gleaming
Skeletons, kicking wildly in their dark oak boxes.

the Froth, the Glue, and the Flies

Spring had broken like water
from an exploding fishbowl
but I was getting there late,
waking in the absolute worst
state of affairs, by which I do mean
in a bathtub with a
bottle of schnapps.
Everything they said was
coming true. The water
was beige. But, again,
it was Spring. I threw
up the window and shuddered.
Wet spiderwebs sagged in the alley
and a giant thing
loomed in the weeds, deep
in shadows thrown by the eaves. It was either
a gutted pickup truck
rusting under oily
sewn-together blankets
with a couple of fist-sized
depressions in the windshield, or a horse.
It was a horse.

(Flaming) Death from above

We dawdle and the night
grows veins, mercurial
and inflamed.
Thinning gray
clouds wrap around
the tower's spire and tear.
A queasy moon
grimaces,
drainage ditches crackle.
Hawks circle the tower shrugging off
clinging wisps
of icy mist. Most
importantly, my pinkies
have gone entirely
numb, an unmistakable harbinger
of practically anything.

Breakfast

My grandmother scowled, pulling the plate of eggs just beyond my reach.
Look at you, she said, thirty years old, no job, and still
in your pajamas at three o' clock.
They're not pajamas, I said.
It's a cowboy suit.

Transmission

Vast, pulsing signals washed out
over the hardpan in widening rings.
The migration toward the source approached
stiffly, small steps, crooked necks. By night
trembling eyes glowed in the thousands.
There was a shack on the plain, touched
by this shuffling exodus, inside of
which no one awoke. A baby awoke as
did the dog, watching from a window as
the others stopped, watching in.
They breathed heavily.
Weak fingers bent against the latch.

Prisons

The old man sat watching.

The rain.

Geysers, globules, leapt from the pond, he reported.

A backdrop of yellow flowers

specific to that exact day of the year.

His cramped hand crawled against the telephone.

the Relationship

When the severed hand ceased to do my bidding
there was a struggle.
But it didn't matter.
In truth, I was running out of wishes
for him to carry out.
Heirloom jewelry cluttered my drawers
and bodies lined the city's ditches.
When things went sour, we fought.
He took his things and left.

He'd been gone for a month when
looking up from the paper
I found him in my breakfast,
middle and index fingers puncturing
my yolks. "Oh come on!" I said, throwing down the paper.
The hand regarded me inscrutably.
After a full minute of this icy treatment, scooting back from the table,
I yelled "What are you looking at?"
Things got really uncomfortable for awhile,
but then we started to laugh.
"Hey," I said,
"how would you like a cup of coffee?".

Trickle Down

Wet bare feet slapping asphalt, fracturing reflections
trembling in gutters, crashing across patios, stertorous
obstructed rasping, vicious dog catching a swatch of cotton and a bloody mouth;

when the slicing rain turned to sleet, I cut onto the golf course Meat Illustrations
Beef cuts
Pork cuts

Suds sloshing over, sluggish globs creeping down the cabinet, dishes
clattering in a steel sink, flickering knives quickly sharpened wrapped up
and stashed, pistoning wrists, agitation;

I say Joe was the best dishwasher in Boise. Joe says he is Anatomy Illustrations
Human Intestines
Human Skull
Human Spinal Column

Truck caught wobbling in a thicket at the cliff's lip, thrashing limbs wrenching at handles,
shouts, smoking tires spinning in reverse, lurch, hover, dislodge, rattling through bushes,
clump of rock, launched, suspension, splash into the rushing black water;

one of them woke up and swam out. Allright, it was Joe Maps
Babylonia
Burgandy
Champagne
Slave Coast

Smashing bottles, shards strewn across the carpet, wicked specks ground beneath
stamping feet, shouting, punching framed photos, shredded knuckles, steam running down
the window, smashing;

later I quietly sipped the last beer. earlier, I'd been running Pork cuts
Beef cuts
Meat Illustrations (Chicken?)
Shrimp?!

I can't imagine there's anything more than this. By which I mean I will not imagine it.

League

After we had dragged
ourselves up from the puddle
we banged our rings together until the stones
were marred, scored, dulled cataract and
nothing.

The sentries held a door for us.

They batted away the cloud of flies.
There was a moment of frustration.
We gave the sentries their lunch, initials written on the sacks

In thick black marker, fastened the straps
on their bicycle helmets. They spun
with their flaming swords. Not

In the house I shouted

For the thousandth time.

Former Presidents: Chapter #1

The windows of the milk factory have been whitewashed
reads the rolled note tied to the arrow. P.S. Don't tell Billy
Jack. We lay breathing hard on our backs in the dust and
glass. Outside, the flashing harlequin circus of wrecking balls
and flashbulbs continues. The woman comes in, telling him
he's got to cool it (already we've seen a couple of clean holes,
tickets punched, I call them lead tokens for the river of fire).
Ornate mud towers slam fracturing to the ground all around
the shuddering wooden cabin. Don't you fucking listen to her
Billy, I say. He nods, black-eyed and febrile, motioning
towards faces jostling at the window. Soon, the friendly
sheriff is swollen, half hidden by the broken table. Billy licks
at the spot on his lip and begins to systematically cleanse the
night with long blind arms. I hold a knife to the young girl's
throat. As the woman begins to creep away on thin clawed
feet, I awaken. We released the girl long ago. The woman is
here. So we wait, coughing on our backs as troops assemble,
lackadaisically loading their rifles and smoking. Someone
paints a cardboard reporter, propped before an empty camera.
The snipers doze, curled in their holes high among the warm
desert cliffs.

War boots

The new paperboy's body would be sad
on a middle-aged woman.
He flinches it up there,
There are birdbones
in his fluttering wrists
that threaten to break. He walks
the paper to the porch.

So I want the old one back, not
this pasty-faced loser. A small kid who
rode in like a motorcycle gang
tearing the handles off screendoors
from across the street
whose cracks
still creep
along my living room window.
Because he knows, having heard
the lurching army's constant multiplication,
you've got to hit the shit
storm with your war boots on.
Guess, don't
guess.
There isn't a second to lose.

Former Presidents: Chapter #14

The black tips of the long hooking white horns cut through the roof of the forest like twin shark's fins. Breathing heavily, Paul Bunyan lagged in the mindless, pulverized wake of the blue ox. How could the animal have precipitated so many fires? he wondered, sitting down to rest at the outskirts of the burning city. Things had changed. A semi-truck slid into his boot, windows exploding, driver hanging limply from the swaying door. Shutting his eyes, Paul Bunyan wiped the great pale cliff of his forehead, coughing weakly as the wind shifted.

Light (daniel stern watches from an upstairs window)

They'd been squeezed forth from the throat
of the city, its pipes and lungs, shambling
with the marbleized eyes
of the daydreamer.

They apologized profusely
to the tops of the heads
they held.

The inhabitants of the city regrouped and then
there was a speech.
They stood self-consciously.
While the speaker trembled
and the crowd cheered, they quietly backed
to a manhole cover
and descended.
The agitated town failed to notice
until well after the rollicking speech.

Shortly thereafter, gregarious in the sluggish
fluxion of the pudding
they horsed around.

The juxtaposition of such gentle
handling amongst the steam, rats, sacks
of flesh—
It was a joke
they had.

Pre-Circuitry

Test results insistent at the windows
rebound and head home. Swollen, home
to the brain in his glass cage.

Though a crawling hole and not an eye
the gash in the trunk
desires only daytime television.

Picking off the ivory swans, or
nuns, one by one
it chews its pills it
kills the lights.

Wash

planes without spines into dark pockets
in grim trees: the smaller pliant ones breathe deep and they're

flailing again, helplessly lashing welts
into the mutilated

ground: I'd remember all of this if
I were you: the street has flooded and the garbagemen

come fouling
hoisting themselves back up to ride
with clean shins: a loose black bird

beats in the water, circling: copper wires fizz, restive in the walls:
forget nothing: the phone is

not safe but this is an emergency: bubbles
rising near the bike rack: after knocking

the wind out of myself on the top stair I watch you
rise above the surface with each step

like a creature
as the oily cloud burns off: but for the corpse

of a rat we'd float to heaven
on shimmering waves
of heat in golden air balloons:

One for me,
and one for you.

Eternal Spring

With a howl sounding
weak, banal, even in gutted subway tunnels—
thus begins the war. Dropping

from ceilings they dug, fetters
snapping, loose
cells thrown off in great snapping waves of flesh.
Where are your guns? we asked.

The archaic giants swayed some ultimate warning.
Fireflies bobbing
in their dark mouths coalesced
where the shining tiles and gulping
pneumatic machines
spat the heavy husks
of long-expired explosives. Bits of imbedded
bone pocked the walls
and it is these

that I remember most clearly. Hot things passed
in the dark. It is impossible to know
how the night sky reflects
these tired abominations, if at all

History

Before cats, we had cockroaches. Before mega-cats,
meta-shrimp. These things, too,
tend to pass.
Ergo

With a swollen ankle lying in the Valley of Daisies
I moaned, watching
the Death Flight
helicopter tilt between mountains.

That's the very look of the dead, they told
me in the hospital. The hairstyle of the dead.
The trend was unmistakable:

Caterpillars rattled a can. Song of the dead. Sad songs.

Rock shelves tumbled, disintegrating
against their own scattered debris.
Sores vomited forth upon the trembling surface
and they called those sores "Leonard."
Vision shriveled beneath
the safety of a dark hood.

Coughing, a man checked his watch.
It was no longer morning.

Spill

strange sealed rooms will send
one stretching after every welding spark

pressing at the pen light
in the basement window

the heavily made up face between hanging
shirts

shinsplints and driven
towards the flaming nail

-polish dripping
from an overturned bottle at the table's edge

and the shattered lantern and

suspicious stains become
you in the violent
light

shaken—the man hand and
the animal's

the Harbor

Places harboring the fear, water, air; water
Harbored by a wet,

Unctuous, yellow-eyed fear.

That comes bounding, wagging its small, malformed arms.
From a distance
These places look like a house

Rotted-out stairs, streaks darting
Along the bottom of the tub.

There was an air of seriousness when the
Men went high-stepping into the soupy woods

And we heard something gargantuan dragging the swamp
Ever closer as if the swamp were a tarp or a blanket and

Goofy things, side kicks, bounced chattering throughout the darkness.

Motors rolled and rolled without starting.
You will never know, she says, while its happening, that *this* is the last time.
But it is, it is I say, and that's why
I've been shouting.

Circuitry

Sitting in fine sand and ash as the last
strobing clump of cloud lodged
in the cracks between mountains
blackened. And the black dead logs
beneath the trees creaked.

Look, said Stephanie, smiling though death
sat at the center of the lake.

Look, she said, sweeping an arm at the crumbling houses,
tire tracks burned deep in the muddy yards,
All that you love will be carried away.

Accretion

It felt fine, sliding down the jagged-lipped bowls between waves
thrown panting onto the wet sand
by a long lukewarm iron sea Weaving

and tattered, each direction returned to the water
towering hotels rose from clusters of rock like crystals
gray in the sun There were things

to be avoided in the sand splitting and hot and
ships, whalish, rolling on the greenish
ocean motionless spewing forth the black steam
of a subaqueous fire Tremblings

underfoot dislodging clods from the shallow berm and palatial homes grown over with
vegetation, thickly tendoned vines returning the structures to their
roots and hot rivers The sun

narrows into the ocean
a blinding line and a dot
birds rise like slow insects
into the first cold breeze An emptiness creeps among

shells, shattered, packed with sand, hissing the ocean's sound
back at it.
Millions embedded in the blind black night.

Redness

Communication passed across the ditch in the form of notes run
along a string; mostly directives for survival, or

“Scared and trying to conserve days
I hadn’t wanted in the first place,” or other things

Of that nature. The other side remained a thing and haggard
mystery. Nearly everyone’s glasses had blackened and shattered

In the fire. Tinnitus was the rule. Because of the distance and the smoke
months had passed before I realized

They had erected the deity, and questions began to surface
about the way they were living their lives. We are basing everything

On the note you sent, they said. This made no sense.
I demanded to see the note. After a lot of rummaging

They sent it back, bobbing along the string. The paper was browned and singed.
Redness, it read, though a decent portion of the paper had obviously been burned

Away by the pillars of fire that periodically leapt, without
a hint of warning, from the misty depths of the ditch.

No, I called across to the opposite ledge, the crowd
assembled there. Not Redness,

Sacredness.

They glanced back, clicking their teeth, at the idols and the life they had constructed.