



5-2006

What is Left

Andrew Michael Najberg
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Recommended Citation

Najberg, Andrew Michael, "What is Left. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2006.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/4458

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Andrew Michael Najberg entitled "What is Left." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Art Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet, Heather Hirschfeld

Accepted for the Council:

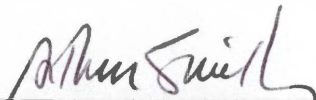
Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

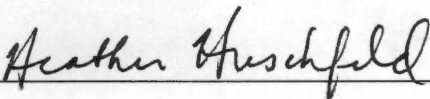
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Andrew Michael Najberg entitled "What is Left." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



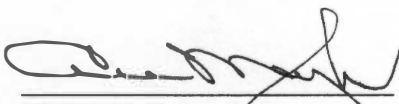
Art Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:



Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Thesis
2006
.N25

WHAT IS LEFT

A thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts in English
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Andrew Michael Najberg
May 2006

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all those who helped me complete my Master of Arts degree in English. I would like to thank Dr. Art Smith for his constant assistance, guidance, and encouragement, introducing me to the poets who I read most dearly, and for inspiring me to pursue poetry. I would like to thank Dr. Marilyn Kallet for reminding me of the art behind the way things are said and the importance of enough confidence to say them. I would like to thank Dr. Heather Hirschfeld for introducing me to the interweaving of theory and literature and helping me find ways to consider the classics of literature from my contemporary theoretical foundation. I would like to thank Allen Wier whose honest and insightful advice on my fiction made the most sense to me when I applied it to my poetry.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and my friends, whose love and encouragement made this work possible.

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to create a collection of poetry that examines the self as a muted element in foreign environments. When placed in a foreign culture, our roles as observers are enhanced due to our limited inclusion within the perceptual frame of references of the cultures and people we observe. Ultimately, the foreigner becomes a parallel sub-system of the dominant foreign culture until such time that he or she makes a direct intrusion into that culture. This level of mutability allows the observer access to cultural elements and interactions inaccessible from within the cultural identity.

This principle extends well beyond the role of observers in foreign environments. Observers are also placed into alienated relationships with the immediate environment. Despite the ability of medical and celestial sciences to observe the worlds within and beyond our immediate sphere of experience, human beings rarely interact with the cellular and celestial levels of reality on a sensory level. Furthermore, the poet is perpetually muted from the inner workings of the subjective self. Our imaginations create worlds that enter the neural programming of our brains and exist in parallel as junction points in the constantly changing electro-chemical map of our cognition.

Drawing from experiences in international travel, alienating silence, childhood fears, and the relationships of people with the galaxy and cellular functions, this poetry attempts to illustrate the connections between the self and the universe beyond human experience using the poetry of Jack Gilbert, Ruth Stone, Stan Rice, James Wright, and Yusef Komunyakaa as models.

The Odd Man Out	1
View of the Lesser Things	24
Centipede with a broken leg	25
Lifelong Anger	26
Necessity	27
When the scarecrows discovered fire	28
Vessel	29
Thirstless	31
Loophole in Learning	32
Motherless Wombs	33
Synaptic Gaps	34
Genetics	35
Billiard Rack	36
Freeze-Dried Angel	37
Diastolic Inversion	38
Freezing Softly	39
Gullet	40
Domumirovljenika	41
The Predestination of Free Will	42
The Bends	43
A Murder of Eels	44
The innermost electron orbit	45
Digestion	46
Fish Decoys	47
The Etiquette of English Translation	48
Fever break in form of scuttled plane on Pacific Reef	49
The fullness of nothing	50
When the Scarecrows went to war	51
The Last Note	52
Games of Choice	53
Standing Water	54
Mars Sunrise	55
Why would you sing?	57
Reverence	58
Nature of the Phantasm	61
On my porch.	72
What is left	74
Slipping off	76
Reception	77
Moving in Winter	78
Invasion	79
What evaporation left behind	80
Alive until death	81
The importance of the day before	82
On a bus in Texas	84

Respite	85
When the scarecrows built the city	86
Feng Shui	88
Blank Page	89
Walking under my apartment landing	90
Keeping secrets	91
No self, no other	92
Village of Ist	93
The New Death	94
List of References	96
Vita	98

The Odd Man Out

Shuffled into the narrow seat of an intercontinental airplane, elbows jammed between immovable armrests, the window to my right gave view to a black oval of unlit clouds. My brother slept next to me with his head stacked on top of both our pillows. My mother watched a movie on the TV built into the back of my seat sipping complementary red wine that tasted like cheap Merlot, Shiraz, and Chardonnay all mixed together. The flight attendants walked up and down the aisle, looked at me, but never saw me unless I pressed the call button. The passengers looked at the flight attendants but didn't see them unless they pressed their own call buttons. The notebook open on my lap provided the only reason I 'saw' the flight attendants.

Jotting down a description of the lights of a drilling platform blazing from an endless blackness below, self-consciousness crept over me. Whenever one of my writer friends traveled overseas, nothing irritated me more than the flood of travel writing that soon followed and the non-stop talk for weeks about all the new things they experienced. Fixations on novelty crawled deep under my skin. I always wanted to say, "Of course your trip was novel and unique. You're novel and unique. Therefore, anything you experience is going to be novel and unique. That aluminum can on that table? That can should be novel and unique." Boiled to the bones, my real gripe concerned the implication that such an excitement over experience cannot exist without novelty and, of course, a case of mild jealousy that I never knew if I'd be able to afford a similar trip. Naturally, I proved wrong on both accounts.

After our arrival in Zagreb and a brief calamity at the airport when my Mother's cousin failed to meet us at the gate, we checked into Hotel Dubrovnik. My brother immediately went to sleep, so my Mother and I wandered the streets as she got her bearings. We bought bread sticks for six Kuna from a tiny bakery and stopped at a restaurant patio where we ordered cappuccinos after a futile attempt to explain the concept of a regular cup of coffee. My mother did the talking. She hadn't been to Croatia for thirty years, but her fluency rapidly returned after landing and no one we'd run into since the hotel spoke a word of English. Furthermore, she carried our conversation, telling me about what still was and what used to be in the store fronts up and down the narrow, cobblestone street.

As I sat and sipped my cappuccino to the cloth rustle of the table umbrella and the cadence of my mother's voice amid the steady pedestrian traffic, I noticed that no one paid us the least bit of attention. As an American interested in foreign cultures, I have long been aware of how badly Americans stick out among the crowds of other nations. Maybe it's our blue jeans, our insistence on trying to order a 'regular' cup of coffee, or the fact that we often speak in English before we attempt the native tongue. Either way, I held the impression that even if no one might care that we were American, everyone would notice, particularly in a city not necessarily at the top of the average Tennessean's tourism destinations. We're supposed to always be the odd man out. Instead, the pedestrians seemed to notice and converse with damn near everyone else on the street.

While my mother described an enormous church two blocks over with a blue, white and red tiled roof depicting one of the national crests, I dismissed the possibility that we were being consciously ignored. I couldn't entertain the delusion of self-

importance necessary for everyone to intentionally avoid me or my country. I'd even heard that Americans are rather popular in Croatia as long as they don't vocally support President Bush. The moment my mother realized I was no longer listening, inspiration struck.

Although the novelty of experience certainly plays a role in the excitement and fervor travelers bestow their new memories, the relationship of the experience and the experienced works both ways. While I reveled at the expanse of what I had not seen before around me, that which I experienced couldn't care less that I experienced it that way. The buildings did not plan to get older or more beautiful because I was there. Furthermore, being as totally ignorant of Croatian culture, language, and history as I was, I could not interact with the passerbys and their ability to interact with me would butt against similar limitations. In many ways, my presence resembled more that of an object as obtrusive as a fire hydrant but as easily dismissed.

I recalled Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the pedagogical and performative space of cultural identity that I read while working on a paper about the ways in which cultures negotiate the "otherness" of peoples outside the central culture. The pedagogical space of cultural identity consists of the continuous sense of cultural self over a span of time such as what I believe makes an American an American. The performative identity consists of the present view of the pedagogical identity as well as all of the external minority identities that conflict with the pedagogical identity (Bhabha 145). America contains a multitude of minority voices such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans whose voices have gained increasing acceptance into the mainstream.

Adapted to the individual, one's identity exists in two parts: a sense of self over time that is intrinsically stable and an immediate self that consists of all the competing wants, needs and ideas that form experience. Our experiences enter into the form of our 'stable' identity over time. That pedagogical identity continually adapts to the information we take in just, like Bhabha's narrative of the dominant cultural identity slowly assimilates and adapts to the entrance of minority cultures.

I tried to explain this to my mother. She listened carefully, then lit a cigarette. She'd been through college. She studied nursing. Her grades were high. Given the proper background knowledge, she would have no difficulty understanding Bhabha. Hell, she could describe the physiological processes underlying the chambers of the heart and the anatomy of a neuron. Furthermore, whenever she explained some issue at work concerning her bosses, clinical policy, or federal regulations, I responded with a similar blankness. Realizing how totally alien everything that came out of my mouth must have sounded, I knew that even though she heard and considered every word I had spoken, she was not equipped to incorporate any of it into her system of thought.

The reason my mother could not respond was little different than the reason the flight attendant did not seem to register the identities of their passengers or the reason the pedestrians paid us so little notice. Without direct interjection and an interactive attempt to incorporate myself into their lives, I did not enter into their realm of cultural and personal experience. As I watched the sun slip down the sky through the smoke drifting from my mother's cigarette, I realized how mistaken I had been about my friends who had traveled overseas. The real inspiration comes from the fact that a foreign environment allows an observer to achieve a higher level of mutability. Simply put, we

can watch the behaviors of others and even if they notice the observation there is little to no reason for them to care.

Consider this: vivid childhood memory. I have a strong recollection of my brother's seventh birthday party. I was three, and my parents had given me a yellow toy dump truck in order to pacify me while my brother opened his gifts. I played with the dump truck on the wood floor underneath one of those half-circle tables meant to be set against a wall near an entryway. While I played, I counted to three hundred, but not quite properly. I whispered, "Two one hundreds and ninety eight, two one hundreds and ninety nine, three one hundreds." When my brother finished opening his gifts and eating cake, he came over to me wearing an uptilted Star Wars Stormtrooper mask, and I told him that I had just counted to three one hundreds. He didn't believe me.

The point of this recollection is not what I remember, but what I don't. I don't remember the presence of my parents or any of my brother's friends. I remember from later memories that right beside the half-circle table, a long, oval throw rug covered the floor of the foyer. That rug does not exist in the memory. The dining room that would have been immediately to my right does not belong in the house where I counted to three one hundreds. Even the wall that the table stood against recalls as a gray shadow. The only parts of the setting that lingered were those that either intruded into my cognition or with which I specifically interacted. This mutability of the observer and that which is not directly observed together form the first primary foundation for my approach to poetry over the last year.

Although I blame the trip to Croatia for these ideas, they reverberate in several poets, particularly Jack Gilbert, Stan Rice, James Wright, and Ruth Stone. The muted

observer is present throughout Gilbert's writing. Perhaps the most important and haunting example comes from "The Abandoned Valley" in Refusing Heaven. In the depths of overwhelming isolation, the speaker travels to an abandoned well in the middle of the night and lowers a bucket to the water to "feel something down there/ tug at the end of the rope" (25, lines 4-5). The "tug" forms the key to the poem because it is a moment of introductory connection that transcends barriers of language. Gilbert as a poet dwelled at a Greek island in the Mediterranean named Paros at the time, and while the duration of his stay prevents him from being considered truly foreign, his rustic and hermetic lifestyle supports the possibility that he kept his neighbors psychologically foreign.

In my poetry, "Village of Ist" illustrates the same principle. Set in the tableau of a bayside graveyard on the outskirts of Ist Village in Croatia where the speaker's grandfather is buried, the speaker's only direct connection to the location is dead and gone. Even the grandfather's epitaph is written in the native language and rendered further illegible because the imprint left on the speaker's back will be reversed if read in a mirror. In such a place, the only familiar point of reference becomes the stars, and the only thing we really know about the stars is how inaccessible they are. We've just gotten better at naming them. Furthermore, if the speaker learned all the names of the stars, those names are only useful in communicating on earth because humans cannot speak the languages of the stars. However, we do not need to read an epitaph, a gravestone, or the flash pattern of a beacon to connect with their emotional significance. This is just one way in which meaning is created through transcending fundamental differing.

The implications of the muted observer also apply to formations of identity as the identity of the observer is paramount in determining the nature of the observed. In “Reverence,” the speaker briefly observes a dead body being loaded onto an ambulance. Imagining the sequence of events that the corpse would undergo in preparation for burial, the speaker realizes that although perhaps no subject is more observable than a corpse that the objective nature of the data such observations yield lends little insight into the identity of the corpse. Instead, the speaker must import both personal history and imaginations about another corpse’s identity in order to fill the void necessarily created by such objectivity and ultimately substitutes himself for the initial dead body. Like Gilbert’s well, the speaker can only lower the bucket so far before feeling “something down there/ tug at the end of the rope.” In the end, we come to a necessity of direct and intentional interaction to bridge the alienation of objectivity. The risk, of course, lies in being pulled into the water.

If the muted observer is omitted from the daily paths of the indigenous people due to a lack of connection with their perceptual schemas, the reverse must be true as well. Important aspects of the environment around the muted observer must be muted to that observer. Thinking back to my trip to Croatia, I don’t remember a single sign though they were absolutely everywhere. I don’t remember the aspects of my childhood memory that did not have significance to me at the time. However, this does not mean that I was unaffected by these signs during the trip or the other interactions I engaged in during my brother’s birthday party. Because we are fundamentally unable to interpret these omissions in terms of our own experience, we must look to the metaphoric capabilities of poetry in order to understand the nature of that which we do not observe and how it

affects us. To create an illustrative analogy, I pose a question: before Europeans knew of the indigenous American cultures and vice versa, what is the impact of their parallel development on each other? This question addresses issues of a larger sense of the collective human psyche, a fundamental aspect at the heart of the larger agenda of poetry. The challenge remains to find a way to address what we could not have known.

Fortunately, these omissions become measurable at points of intersection such as Gilbert's well and my grandfather's gravestone. In The Great Fires, Gilbert includes a poem entitled "Respect" in which he writes, "This morning I found a baby scorpion,/ perfect, in the saucepan./ Killed it with a piece of marble" (86, lines 1-3). Although the action of the poem is clear and the connection between the scorpion's intrusion into the speaker's domain with the title leaves little superficial necessity for expansion in terms of plot, the poem expands immensely when the reader considers the mutual coexistence of the scorpions and man up until the instance of the poem. The title becomes the embodiment of a treaty concerning mutual domains. Similarly, one can posit that a tacit understanding existed between American civilizations and Europeans of mutual non-interference toward the improvement of the human condition before their intermingling. European assertions of superior 'civilization' in the colonial era reflects an assumption that the "lack" of native American progress constituted a violation of that agreement. Gilbert, in turn, smashes the scorpion.

But what if Europe arrived in the New World with pomp, horses, and muskets only to encounter Aztec nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles? My poem "Respite," a response to Gilbert's "Respect," intends to illustrate a similar chance interference of spheres where the retaliatory ability of the scorpion is greater than that of the man at the

moment of intersection. From the outset of the poem, the speaker and the scorpion, both mutually unaware of the other, enjoy a moment of rest until the speaker realizes that his hand has crept too close to the scorpion who has prepared to strike. This inherent tension underlies all unawareness and serves as a reminder that what often appears as chaotic disaster really illustrates a universally unconscious connectedness.

Gilbert's poem "Respect," my poem "Respite," and the annihilation of indigenous American culture by the Europeans all illustrate these introductions of independent spheres of identity as terminal. The relationship ends upon meeting in a fashion not necessarily in the best interest of one or both of the parties. Furthermore, the meetings are dependant upon an element of coincidence of time and place. James Wright indicates the importance of intentionality in his poem "Small Frogs Killed on the Highway." The speaker declares, "I would leap too/ into the [head]light,/ If I had the chance," emphasizing the meaningful nature of these interactions (196, lines 2-4). The speaker concludes the poem with a description of the tadpoles in a nearby pool, writing, "They can't see/ Not yet" although it is the speaker who cannot see the tadpoles (lines 18-19). Ultimately, these moments of intersection seem inevitable, and it is that appearance of inevitability that allows for their interpretation.

To bring this into the bounds of my poetry, I must explain the circumstances surrounding a frog I met. While in Croatia, my lease expired. I had made arrangements with friends to be moved into another apartment before my return. Two nights after my trip, a deluge of a storm front rolled into the city while I typed up my notes and drafts from the trip. A brilliant lightning flash blazed through my windows and the lights flashed out with a swoop of blackness. Blind and in a still foreign environment that

doubled as my home, I repeated the fragment of poem I had been in the midst of typing in my head, and stumbled from my computer desk across the half-unpacked living room to stand out on the landing where the emergency light over the rickety stairwell provided dim illumination.

The wind blown rain immediately drenched the piece of paper I had been working from which I still clenched in my left hand. The writing blurred and the sheet disintegrated as I tried to write down the fragment. Retrospectively, I should have gone back inside and written in the dark on whatever I could find. Instead, I vented my irritation into the night in the form of a few choice obscenities and a couple half starts of “why the hell.” At that moment, I noticed that a gray-green tree frog clung to the slats of the porch roof looking down at me. Then it chirped. And I answered back. Deprived of all normal venues of interpretation with my environment in a place where I had no integrated presence, I lowered my own bucket into the rain storm and felt the tug I sought. I had an anchor to the micro-culture of my apartment complex.

Even if the frog’s response was gibberish, I was suddenly aware that we had likely shared our close proximity throughout the course of the storm, and that spatial intersection of my life and the life of the frog reached an intersection that stemmed conversation. In Thieves of Paradise, Yusef Komunyakaa writes, “Green tree frogs & stars/ are good listeners, spreading out/ till human dust grows into one/ compendious anthem,” but I think frogs and the other creatures who keep night vigils share our lives on a more personal level (44, lines 16-19). Frogs and the sky are such good listeners because they rarely intrude upon our awareness. More often than not, we must turn our awareness to them. As a result, they are unknown witnesses to our most private moments.

Their languages of chirps, clicks, and buzzes accompanies the secrets, loves, and abuses we think about behind closed doors, and we are most of the time ignorant of their eavesdropping. In the case of my frog who came back six times in the next two months and I nicknamed “Archilochus,” I faced a meaningful exchange that transcended the language boundary of the stars outlined in “Village of Ist.”

The series of poems that followed is interspersed throughout the manuscript and consists of conversations with creatures smaller than a baseball and sometimes having more legs than a baseball team. “The Bends” hinges on the statement, “I’d rather/ spend my nights/ talking to spiders,” because the prior evening I spoke with a brown recluse on my porch resulting in “Freezing Softly.” Also including “Standing Water,” “Keeping Secrets,” “Centipede with a Broken Leg,” and “Why would you sing,” each piece revolves around the coinciding histories of prior experience made apparent by the immediate moment. From a centipede with an obvious history of pain to a frog that spent its tadpole years feeling the vibration of the same train I listen to every night, I knew the experiences were identical to the disassociation I felt in Croatia. The Croatian baker could have walked by my mother and I in the streets of Zagreb earlier in the evening, but neither of us remembered doing so when we bought our breadsticks. If we passed each other again after the transaction, there might be recognition because we had entered into each other’s sphere of consciousness through direct interaction. We might even nod because that is a language we would both understand.

However, if the next day I met a waitress who happened to be friends with the baker and spent the day with her, I could potentially alter the relationship between the waitress and the baker, even if in a way as subtle as altering the course of their next

conversation with the inclusion of “I met this bumbling American.” At the same time, a parallel acquaintance would be created between myself and the baker mutually unknown to us. If we were to meet yet again and discover our mutual acquaintance, the nature of our relationship would be again different. Even if we didn’t discover the mutual acquaintance, overlaps in conversations of interest between both of us and the third party would alter the course of our own conversation. Thinking about this in the rain with Archilochus looking down on me, I conceptualized another series of poems based on this principle of mediated interaction, still building on the examination of the mutability of the foreign observer as broken by conscious action.

The speaker of my introductory poem “View of the Lesser Things” extends a bridge to the moon through personification. However, the poem is not concerned with the relationship between the speaker and the moon per se, but rather the relationship of the personified moon and that which it cannot directly observe, namely deep marine life, subterranean treasures, and the images burned into the retinas of the frozen deceased. In turn, the speaker instills those relationships with his own emotional weights and therefore projects a parallel expression of an internalized agenda. The relationship between relationships provides the metaphorical core of the poem, and those relationships are mutually inaccessible to each other.

Similarly, “The Last Note” and “A Murder of Eels” establish interactive connections between the speaker and Croatian characters, but the meaning of those connections and the driving metaphors of the poems derive from the indirect connections between all the characters and the influence of the unseen aquatic life: the fish looking for the absent bait and the submerged eels respectively. The submerged eels become

mournful because of the sound of the tide observed by the speaker. The fish reflect the speaker's sense of isolation because the connection they are looking for in the form of hook and line is not there. Although this relationship is one way, the speaker is able to bridge the distance created by experiential inaccessibility. As I write in "The Last Note," "The breeze [is] a brush/ that cannot be brushed back."

In the poem "Sorrow" from In the Next Galaxy, Ruth Stone creates a similar relationship, but adapts it into the intriguing tangibility of her own body. Stone creates an image of her relationship with her late husband through a description of her feet while laying in bed. She describes her shoes as "lined up like caskets/ in which they [her feet] lie all day/ dead from one another" (80, lines 7-9). Her feet illustrate the time in which husband and wife are apart from each other. The metaphor derives from the spatio-sensory isolation of each foot by the shoes and the prevention of immediate tactile contact. When the lives of the spouses intersect, "In the night/ each foot has nothing to love/ but the other foot" (lines 10-12). Due to the language distinguishing day and night, the tenderness of the last three lines becomes both devotion and division, indicating their mutual dedication at night while underscored by the implication that during the day they pursue subjectively more important loves. The reader is left to wonder whether the sorrow in the title refers to the loss of the spouse or life with the spouse.

Reading Stone's In the Next Galaxy over the weeks following my trip to Croatia during one of Archilochus's longer absences, I realized an enormous shortcoming of scope in the vision of my collection. Up until that point, all of the poems concerned the immediate experiential world, the world interpreted through the senses. Stone's poem "Marbles" highlights the macroscopic view of life that parallels our immediate

experiences. A marble contains an entire universe and for all we know our universe could look like a marble from sufficient distance (35, lines 1-9). In “As it is,” we get the microscopic view as well. Stone’s speaker observes, “In this squat body,/ the most delicate things;/ host of ravishing flagella,” reminding us of those high school biology book close-up photos of the alien planets of our skin cells (28, lines 1-3). Stone’s incorporation of the micro and macroscopic views of immediate reality opened up a gateway to expand the exploration of relationships between mutually unaware parallel experiences and incorporate my vocabulary of astronomy, technology, cellular biology and physiology, and particle physics.

This vocabulary holds particular significance to me. When I was a child, I was terrified of disease. I owe this in most part to parents who coddled me during every illness and the worldwide hype of the AIDS epidemic. Not that I was afraid of AIDS specifically, but I was made prematurely aware of the potential fatality of illness. I catastrophized the slightest of sneezes. I held my breath as much as I could in public places and broke into a sweat if someone coughed in the same room. For a time, I even refused to swallow my own saliva whenever possible. I remember driving to the grocery store with my mother, cheeks swollen with a mouthful of spit. Up until then, I had concealed my habit from her, but the moment my door opened, I let out enough liquid that anyone who saw would have thought I was vomiting. What really bothered me was that I had no way of knowing what exactly I swallowed. The invasiveness of disease terrified me.

My mother bought me a book about the basics of microbes, and we read it together. Although reading about the protein capsids of viruses and the pathology of

bacterium did erase my irrational behaviors, the new knowledge did little to assuage my fears. My eyes were opened to a world swimming with the ciliated amoebas I saw in the photographs of microscope slides, and I could do nothing to protect myself from it. If I opened a car door, I knew my skin scooped up a myriad of infections that could strike me down if they slipped between the cell membranes. Public restrooms sounded more like eating death on a stick. Everything became alive and invisibly wriggling. Even my blood stream was a perpetual battleground of T cell armies beset by viruses and bacterium. Every day, something that could kill me did not.

Similarly, a planet is born every day, and every day a star dies. Oh boy, did the death of stars scare me as a kid. Even worse than the fear of disease. My parents were both huge science fiction fans, and ever since I can remember, I have watched every manner of space-based horror film and galactic disaster epic ever made. I saw the earth blown up in eighty different ways. My family watched Aliens on Easter and The Blob, The Thing, and It! The Terror from Beyond Space on a monthly basis. Every manner of interplanetary menace with an ambiguous name either lived in my closet, under my bed, or waited to crash through my window throughout the entirety of my childhood. I used to wrap myself in blankets and sentry the stuffed animals to watch The Black Hole and wonder if the sun would collapse while I slept, ending existence as I knew it. The heavens were out to get everyone.

Intermingling the cellular and the celestial as a means of interpreting the languages of immediacy forms the second major foundation for the theoretical basis of this collection. All of the 'characters' under the initial examination of mutability are separated temporally or geographically and the interactions derive from chance

intersections between these two elements. Conversely, the macroscopic and the microscopic perpetually coexist in the same locus of four dimensional space even though experiences within each sphere are fundamentally separated. Retrospectively, it is no surprise that my childhood fears inclined me to Stone's poetry of molecular compounds and the cosmos. Furthermore, it wasn't until reading Stone that I came to an understanding of the ways to identify the connecting points between these seemingly incompatible levels of existence.

What struck me is that these processes are symptomatic. Ms. Stone's failing vision illuminates the drama within the bounds of her body particularly vividly as she writes in In the Dark, "Half-blind, it is always twilight./ The dusk of my time and the nights/ are so long" (3, lines 1-3). Even the title of the book itself places a stress on symptomology. In the poem "Am I," Stone's speaker describes interactions with her analyst from Boston Psychopathic. In a phone interview after the speaker reveals the suicide of her husband, the analyst responds cruelly, and it is left to his wife to explain, "that it is his arthritis/ that makes him so irritable" (lines 8-9). This symptomological causality leads the speaker to assert that, "his suicide had nothing to do with international crisis./ His death came between wars" and that the doctor's ultimate answer of "I don't know'...was a hard fact"(21, lines 10-11, lines 40-41).

Although the interpretations of the analyst's wife and the speaker fail to reach solid conclusions, both offer an opening for internalized connection that makes sense out of experientially inaccessible behavior. It is as difficult to fathom the reason a spouse might commit suicide as it is to understand the meaning of the fact that comets frequently miss collision with our atmosphere based upon a fraction of a degree in their trajectories.

However, occasionally astronomers sometimes glimpse tail torches fading off into the ether shortly after they whiz past providing an interpretable image of an observer viewing an event with a deducible history. Similarly, with a virus comes a fever, a flush of complexion, and sweat from the temples. Blindness usually begins with a process of dims and fades as Stone elucidates.

Unlike the relationships of the unseen, the relationship between the macro, micro, and experiential worlds is not one way. We launch rockets to the fringes of the solar system. We swallow antibiotics that cause bacterial genocides. We write poems that describe what is not there. As ineffectual and futile as these actions might seem such as the failure to create a drug that effectively combats AIDS, our lack of interstellar odysseys, and the necessity of the use of metaphor to describe what language cannot say, our attempts to ebb away at the boundaries of the unknown appear to be as innate as they are important. Although we cannot observe events on the microscopic and the macroscopic level, we are aware of their impacts, and these impacts are not much different than the intersecting moments in the three dimensional plane in that they open conversations to those willing to engage.

Numerous poems in this collection attempt to engage in those conversations, including “Lifelong Anger,” “On a bus in Texas,” “Synaptic Gaps,” “Invasion” and “The innermost electron orbit.” “No self/ No other” claims that not only are their symptomatic points of connection between macro and micro and processes that exist on different time scales, but that these processes are fundamental to our nature. We are born with an umbilical bridge between ourselves and our Mothers, and it is not until the cord is cut that we are left in isolation. As we are grown from the organic mass of our mothers, so are

cells grown from a singular cell traceable back to the original cell of the embryo, and so is the universe grown from the singularity of expanding matter created by the Big Bang.

However, once these moments of origination are passed, uncertainty and isolation results. All moments of unity demand the price of a period of increasing separation that both precedes and follows the connection. A poem begins with a moment of biochemical connections in the brain to a singular point followed by a process of ebbing as the neural mapping approaches the fringes of the newly formed associative cluster. Whether we consider this a process of resolution or dissolution, the poet is left with the process of picking up the pieces. We must make sense of the fragments on the edges because the edges will lead us to the deeper and less traveled highways of the psyche. As such, we find in James Wright's poem "Northern Pike" the realization that everybody in the world will die in desperate loneliness followed by the statement "We had/ to go on living. We/ Untangled the net/ We ate the fish" (217, lines 8-11).

Similarly, in "The Predestination of Free Will," I illustrate a moment of unity among those who look for 'answers' either by different means or not at all in the first four stanzas. Immediately following, the unity breaks down and everyone is left in "such happy, aimless wandering/ in all directions and none at once." The remainder of the poem identifies the uncertainty of identity in time through the grass along a sidewalk and the uncertainty of identity by physical boundary through a cluster of leaves in the wind. If one views a crowd from a distance, the faces blend together into a sea of skin and even a close friend becomes an undifferentiated organic mass. The last line, "The laboratory and cathedral/ fractal from mailbox to door" emphasizes the connective bridge, the moment of communication, as being the only identifiable truth.

These notions of the only certainty in identity lying in uncertainty closely resemble one of the most important maxims of watching the B-horror films I grew up on: the corpse ain't dead till the credits roll, and even then it's a toss-up. I watched movies about intelligent ants, toys that come to life and try to kill their little boy owners, sentient yogurt, and alien cupcakes that somehow choke their victims after they've been chewed and swallowed. Everything on earth seemed prone to duplicitous identity. Coupled with my obsession about the teeming cesspool of microbial life I saw on the surface of everything, I coped with these anxieties in what I believe to be a rather natural way: I personified everything. To an almost embarrassing extent.

It started simply with my stuffed animals and action figures. I developed histories for them full of intrigue and betrayal. Some characters would have multiple histories depending on what group of toys they were placed with at the time. Soon, I stared out my window thinking about how sad the street lamps looked because of the way they drooped their bulbs and how depressed the one dead bulb on the block must have felt. I knew for certain that every millimeter of their exterior was alive, and, like they say, "Trees have feelings too." Eventually, this developed to the point that I always cleaned my plate to the porcelain at dinner because the leftover peas would wonder why they weren't good enough to be eaten as they tumbled into the garbage disposal. This personification facilitated me engagement in active conversations with amphibians, arachnids, and insects. More importantly, it helped me develop an understanding that all experience functions in parallels.

While these ideas seemed suitable to science-fiction and horror movies, it was not until I read Stan Rice that I realized the literary potential for these devices. In the

opening poem of Red to the Rind, the speaker declares, “Behold the door./ The lock’s alive” in order to illustrate our lack of control over our own minds (3, lines 10-11). Even though the poem “The Trains” seemingly focuses on the inability of trains to act on their own, we get the curious statement near the end that “Trains don’t go anywhere unless they are told,” suggesting a degree of complicity on their part (32, line 11). In some ways, this statement reflects back to Gilbert’s “Respect” and the notion of unspoken agreements between coexisting entities. What I ultimately realized is that extreme personification allows an enormous depth of emotional expression because the poet possesses control over not only the details of the world the poem creates but the fundamental operating rules as well. Since personification projects the personifier onto the personified, every description becomes emotionally loaded.

Although I had seen the creation of alternate worlds executed by poets such as Poe and Browning, Rice’s “The Snowmen Go to Sea” from The Radiance of Pigs provided an example I felt not only thoroughly elucidated an imagined world in a concise fashion but created a resonate emotional core identifiable through parallel rather than allegorical undertones. Rice describes a boatload of snowmen who travel across the ocean to die with dignity in a manner of their choosing “Instead of on lawns as rotted clowns/ in black top hats” (8, lines 31-32). Although their journey and the process of melting could be described as allegorical for the process of ageing, the decay of the snowmen follows its own process. Carrot noses fall into the waves. Corn cob pipes tumble to the deck. Most importantly, these snowmen have gone to sea to melt into the water, so they “sail/ Without fear or sorrow” breaking a direct parallel with human death because we have no such fortune of clarity (lines 19-20).

My collection contains three immediate responses to “The Snowmen go to Sea” in “When the scarecrows built the city,” “When the scarecrows discovered fire,” and “When the scarecrows went to war.” I chose scarecrows particularly, because unlike snowmen, scarecrows possess a distinct functionality that snowmen don’t. Following the same reasoning that engages my interest in symptomology, scarecrows possess the ability to act even if it is in an apparently passive fashion if they succeed in scaring the crows. Scarecrows cross boundaries between spheres. What I find most important about this mode of expression is that it still relies on the mutability of opposing worlds much like we find in foreign environments and the interrelation of experiential layers of reality. As a result, the use of parallel rather than allegorical worlds provides the third and final major foundation of this collection.

As excited as I was by “The Snowmen Go to Sea,” I quickly stumbled upon an important limitation of this approach. In order to maintain the integrity of the worlds created, the speaker cannot be an active participant without violating perspective and disrupting the sense of removal. Interactive emotional intrusion into such worlds on the part of the speaker butted against the walls of reality and threatened suspension of disbelief. I was dismayed. The muting of worlds beyond our frame of reference created a tantalizing poetic morsel that appeared to offer only a limited access to emotional depth.

Thankfully, Rice must have encountered a similar dilemma, because “And I Started To Laugh” in Red to the Rind offered me a solution. While examining the images of a painting, the speaker of “And I started to laugh” begins to break down the barriers of reality that separate himself from the images on the canvas. The image is

endowed with symbolic notions of human history, and the abstraction on the canvas bleeds out into reality. At the end of the poem, the poet is laughing alongside the characters in the painting until concluding, “we laughed our heads off and/ Our heads started to laugh” (25, lines 35-36). Among the many themes in the poem, we are left with the question of how the rules would change if we were the paintings and the paintings were real life. Much like the coexistence of macro, micro, and sensory levels of reality, the real world and imagined worlds do not exist separately but in overlapping tandem like Bhabha’s dualistic cultural identity.

Therefore, this bleeding of imagination into reality demanded no large leap for me to start off the conceptualization of several poems with the question, “well, what if?” On a rainy night that I like to think of as “dark and stormy,” I cinched my trench coat at the waist and tilted step into the wind as I walked to the corner gas station for cigarettes muttering to myself about something or other all the way. As I trudged back with a damp filter trailing smoke tendrils squeezed between my thumb and forefinger, something about the quality of the light under the landing of my stairwell, the mist rising from the impacts of fat raindrops, and the tired ache all over my body made me think, “damn, this could be a scene in an old detective film. And it hit me: “What if this were film noir instead?”

The poem “Digestion” provides an ars poetica for this particular offshoot of my central theory and asks what would happen if I had a world contained within my stomach. The challenge in writing “Walking under my apartment landing” was not in adapting the real world images to film noir, but rather in adapting film noir into the real world. “Digestion” identifies the bound nature of imagined worlds and the discreet nature of

their rules. Although the maxim “the poem must teach the reader how to read it” is in no way secret, it is insufficient to establish formal and basic guidelines that create a contained internal world for the poem. In order to achieve lasting emotional resonance, the poem must appear boundless, as if it expands beyond imagination, inventiveness, and the objective reality. Otherwise, the constrictive nature of the rules that make it interpretable threatens to doom the poem to obscure specificity of occasion.

If I had to sum up this exploration of my poetic intentions in a single phrase, I would term it “The Odd Man Out” approach to poetry. Throughout our lives, we find ourselves as foreigners at unexpected times whether it be an alienation by location, by culture, introspection, or the overtly inaccessible face of the surreal. It is in these moments that the mutual mutability between the foreigner and the environment allows us to create the perspective of distance while maintaining the immediacy of experience without a reliance on the finite stock provided by memory. The world around us is always more unknown than it is known. We cannot see life in its entirety, only the symptoms of its interactions with us. In the mind of every human, there exists an infinite number of worlds. These aspects of our fundamental isolations cannot be accessed by language, and so it is the job of the poet to create metaphors that illustrate the spindle bridges of connection between the wondering, wandering lights of our minds in order to continue the infinite project of mapping the collective human psyche.

View of the Lesser Things

They say the last thing a human views
at death leaves an imprint on the retina.
When you, the moon, wane to a sliver,
I imagine you feel sad as a child dragging
a burst balloon on a string when you close
the lashes of the crater eye Tyco,
the vacuum blackness mixes celestial
with the earthen. Listening to our songs,
not the stars, makes you part of the heavens.
Resonate with lesser things who sing loudest
because they don't use voices. The mother
cat who licks the neck of her dead kitten
in the shadowed lip of a sewer pipe
because she still has milk in her teat.
Fish whose bodies resist the relentless
pressure in the deepest ocean trenches
fan tails through volcanic bedrock vents
creating bubbles that rise with a sound as
soft as your influence on the tides.
Rocks and trees grow mold and moss,
melt edges with bark and root. Unstrung
lyres that played songs written to your gaze
lie buried among the abandoned city
columns nearly impossible to separate
from dirt that encases their melodies.
At the bottom of an ice bank in the Siberian
artic, a pair of primitive lovers lie preserved
by an ancient avalanche, clasped hands
not quite touching because of a slight layer
of ice just above the skin. Their eyes
still swim the Sea of Ganymede.

Centipede with a broken leg

September is an exquisite month for pain
in movement. Branches relinquish first
surrenders to climate, drop yellow
medallions to the smooth tiles you came
so far across in this condition. Insects
still singing have little hope to mate.
Even centipedes must have sounds
for when no one hears them. Only
a matter of time before the cooling
fall nights numb nerves around breaks
in your exoskeleton. I don't know
how many hearts you have in there, but
they must be on the verge of exhaustion.
A chill will slow your circulation.
The first killing frost will turn
your suffering into a memory
of how alive you felt walking.

Lifelong Anger

Sometimes I am afraid
to reach my hand

down my throat to take
hold of all I've swallowed.

My lips locked
around my elbow,

when my palm curves
to stomach contours

my hand closes around
a lever rusted in place.

If I throw it, tracts will shift.
I'll find myself digging

among my alveoli.
Lungful of fist.

Years of watching abuse
Without saying a word.

Still trying to pull the words out
And finding nothing but air.

Necessity

I doomed my pepper plants to die. Uprooted them from the terra cotta with gentle cruelty and rested them in the shade of the privet under December clouds. In the house,

they might have survived a few weeks more though the leaves already wilted at the edges. Jalapenos do not last Tennessee winters. If I hadn't planted them so late in Spring,

They probably would have died by now and The harvest wouldn't have been so small. So I went inside and turned on the stove. Smear'd butter in the skillet. Tossed in

A slice of bread. Lay down cheese slices. Shredded ham. Sliced the last green jalapeno into the sizzle. Tasted the spice on the steam. It was lunchtime. I was hungry.

When the scarecrows discovered fire

Freud wrote about Fort Da.
That the world is there
even if we are not.

A mirror reflects self and other.
We learn that we are. Born.
Will die. Become earth.

In love, we become
scarecrows. Tentative.
Breathless. Knowing

if we get too close
we might burn to ashes
for the winds to scatter.

Vessel

Spent the afternoon wondering
what the hell “Tight Weave’s
infinite sums” are good for.

I found the term on a printout
mixed in with my own, jumped
from the text in the scansion

of realizing what I held did not
belong to me. Not much different
than my own life. Indecision

if Christ or Buddha had the right
of it doesn’t stop me from looking
for meaning in the odd angled

congregation of a grassy lawn
and making angels out of sheets
my mother hung on the clothesline.

Or interrogating a tree stump why
my father whirled such a terrible
temper, his barks like the bloody

ball of a mace bashing against
the eardrums of my childhood.
How this made me so afraid

of my own temper that anger
became every evil decried
from a pulpit. This is why

my pen writes so fast on late
late nights when I can’t make
my body lie down. The root

of chain smoking cigarettes
down to the nubs. An act
of expulsion. Compression

ventilation into the cold

windlessness of a February star
field because the only emptiness

should be in my chest. Not
because I want to be hollow.
For when my lungs fill.

Thirstless

Our eyes open
in each other's arms
from the curtained dawn.
On the windowsill,
the two orchids
yawn away from each other
like uncertain lovers
awakening,
the buds spread
in the shape
of a woman
primal and ready,
the white petals
smooth as the underside
of her thighs,
the stamen mass
red and swollen
at the center.

My finger rides down
her arched back
like the underside of a leaf.
The must of her hair
pours over my shoulder.
The flowers dim
as the sunlight slant
crawls up the wall
like the arms
on my clock,
and we lie
intermingled like roots.

Loophole in Learning

My saliva freezes
On the slat beside me
As I freeze my ass off.

The tobacco smolder
Of my cigarette sizzles
With an ember crawl burn.

Resting on the railing,
Trailing smoke tendrils,
The white paper vanishes

In the blow of my breath.
I've been out here an hour
And it is less than twenty degrees.

Trying to learn what it really
Means to have cold fingers.
Numbness should be absence

Of feeling, but it is a feeling too.
My mistake lies in naming it.

Motherless Wombs

We misunderstand
because God
let there be light,
and it was good.
Before we had light,
it was good too.

The reverse locusts
vomit the leaves
back onto the trees
on quiet March nights
to clear their throats
and sing.

We tend to think
the rubbing of wings
is an act of foreplay
and not a lament
for the comforts
of their chrysalises.

Synaptic Gaps

The moisture freezes in my nose
even as I think about what my body
tells me to write. The bench that edges

the deck sparkles with a layer of frost.
Metal wind chimes clink cold in slight
breeze stirs like I am imagining

being adrift in space. Looking at my skin
as it crystallizes and understands the vacuum
on a cellular level. Mitochondria know

better than my millions of neurons with all
their flashing electricities. What Sirius and
Cassiopeia are learning as I float

in the direction of Lyra, what even this pen
knows as the ink freezes within its body
while I try to write is that emptiness is layers

of absence. On the coldest nights,
leaves still do not break from branches
without a nudge from the wind.

Genetics

Scarecrows. Dolls. Dummies. Puppets. Mannequins. Celebrities.

One might be inclined to think we love to create in our own image.

Or that we want to create ideal images of ourselves.

The truth is that we just like to make copies.

Assembly lines. Fax machines. Photocopiers. Recordings.

We are ourselves but we act our memories.

Why parts are 'written for' actors.

Why bands 'are better live.'

Why we marry women like our mothers.

And act just like our fathers.

So many people hate what they grow up to be.

Not because of who they are.

Not because the copy is never as good as the original.

Because we are copies of a photograph of a memory.

What we call original sin.

Makes the smile in the photo a little bit dimmer.

The camera cropped our remembering.

Can't smell the sunshine in the picture.

Taste the tincture of apples too long on the ground.

Remember the weather when we lost our virginity in an orchard.

Billiard Rack

It's a question of triangles
and finding the right lie.
The best shots come
when my angle is obtuse.

Love really is about geometry,
the shape of things,
the sines and cosines
and the other signs

that can only be expressed
in their own language
like roses and "dear John"
or why it is we love someone.

Balls racked upon felt.
The stick slides between fingers,
the first white shot
the only certainty.

Freeze-Dried Angel

**It comes in three packs:
lesser, seraphim, and cherub,
a neopolitan of spirit.**

**The wrapper is foil,
smooth to the touch,
dimpled, not dented,
from fingertips,
the seal a mash crinkle,
almost jagged.**

**We know what it is
because the label
gives it a name,
the same stuff
the astronauts
bring into the heavens.**

**They say products
like this last forever,
shelf life ad infinitum.**

**The truth is that
once torn open,
the contents vanish
as fast as the mouth
can take them,
the taste gone
before the tongue
can fathom it.**

Diastolic Inversion

R. Ventricle L. Ventricle

She was shallow. Histrionic. As it rains, I still look for
dilettante, flirt, thrill-seeker, reason among the ruins.
Poison. If she was poison, from the sheltered vantage
there'd be evidence on this porch. Even if
in the bones. Flakes. Spidery, I can't carbon-date unstopped
black lines. Marrow rot. A heart to learn when the love
dried, flaking residue. Some kind died. Like an archeologist
of shadow, like an x-rayed cyst digging through what fell.
Malignant growth. Apart, I label to sort it out.
Put inside. Harbored. Fed. I will understand the past,
The same worm that ate this way, as much as if I
the core of the Forbidden Fruit study the order of numbers
after it fell from Adam in a phone book. Sort my
fingers to the voice of God. shirts by color. Describe
Misled by fingertips talking each pair of my socks.
in strokes down the skin to List my taste buds.
multiply improperly. Cutting objective data adds up
itself in two. Cutting itself To nothing plus nothing.
in two. Plus nothing.

R. Atrium L. Atrium

Incinerated Nerves sear
snowflakes, through
burn the tongue - the bones,
not cold always
enough for bones,
anything but never the
nerves - run incinerated
through snowflakes
the bones not cold
until the sun enough
no longer heats to burn
the clouds. the tongue.

Aorta

And a single blade of grass that catches
the last drop of rain mediates happiness.

Freezing Softly

Onto the newspaper, fella.
I'll set you in the garden soil
in the shelter of a fallen leaf.

You're dying. I know you are.
Eight legs and only two work
to the nudge of a yardstick.

Cool nights now, the aphids gone.
It feels like I'm helping you, but I'm
letting you die by a dandelion stalk.

Gullet

Get this:

Some people break open
Shotgun shells
And pour the gunpowder
Into dog food
To make the animals
More vicious.

Something I did:

As a little kid,
I mixed gasoline
And sugar and poured it
All over the lawn
In the hopes of making
Flammable ants.
Super ants,
Like the human torch.

It took a few seconds:

Spasmodic scrambling,
Dirt grains tumbling
Down conical slopes
From six times sixty
Kicking feet
Before the ants
Convulsed into crumpled
Balls of exoskeleton.

It is different for those dogs:

It takes years of indigestion,
Forceful retching and biting
At their own tongues,
clawing at their own stomachs
With their back legs.
And even then they depend
Upon those same owners
To put them down.

Domumirovljenika

This name means “Those Who Are Waiting to Die,”
and as I steer my grandfather’s wheelchair
out of his apartment and down the hallway
linoleum colored like light through mildewed curtains,
I think that ‘Those’ are waiting to live as they shuffle
their soles close to the walls because they can’t lift
their feet. And must touch one palm to the plaster.
And the yellow flakes of their nails. My grandfather
sips a cup of watered down coffee because decaf
costs a few pennies more, and he says it tastes
just enough to know what he thinks it was like.
After a choked chuckle, tells me he is about to forget
everything he is about to remember. I wheel him
to the street, point out the fresh paint on the jetties,
the new bridge over the bay kissing the city wall,
salt winds that emanate beyond the water, promised
cleansing of erosion. He will laugh and smile and
show me the pier they built where he used to anchor
his fishing boat, guide me to guide him to where
he carved his name into a rock as a child,
the letters worn down beyond recognition.

The Predestination of Free Will

Those who look to science
for answers are lost.

Those who look to religion
for answers are lost.

Those who look for answers
are lost.

Those who don't,
they are lost too.

Such happy, aimless wandering
in all directions and none at once.

If we're looking for reason,
the truth is uncertainty.

The blur of grassblades
along sidewalk slabs.

The undifferentiated identity
of leaf clusters in a strong wind.

The chaotic cicada song
stained glass window of sound.

The laboratory and cathedral
fractal of mailbox to door.

The Bends

It would be easy
To lose my hours
Fretting over all
The things I've been
Told are important,
But I'd rather
spend my nights
talking to spiders
born to spin webs
from nothing,
to water burbles
that well up between
sidewalk cracks
and wash away the beetles,
or to fish who dive so deep
that the pressure
would destroy anything
humans ever made
and to open my mouth
would mean everything rushes in
without the chance
to ask any questions.

A Murder of Eels

The night fisherman takes the eel by the tail,
swings its writhing body overarm like a hammer
and beats its skull against the concrete. Everything is
closed at this hour, so he holds its limp length up at me.
Needing to show someone. For there to be evidence.

Beneath the nightblack water, more eels
undulate against the nudges of the current.
Their slick sides grip the friction of motion
even though the fisherman gripped his catch
so tight bones snapped like kicked gravel.

The undertow murmurs elegies until light winds
strum the bay into a tricklesplash of waves.
There is no way to hold the night still so late
because we only know what is by what comes,
the breeze a brush that cannot be brushed back.

The innermost electron orbit

**Amazing how much the entire universe
follows the same principles as falling in love.
Billions of sub-atomic particles hurtle
through a nebula beyond the body of Sirius.**

**At tachyon speeds, inertia becomes
so great momentum no longer exists.
Collision at such speeds does not cause
impact, but merging and intertwining**

**like our laced fingers in this mossy field
in the orbits we hold around each other.**

Digestion

If there was a world inside my stomach
Things would be different for me.
I'd need to watch what I ate. No spicy
foods. Too much stomach acid and this
Poem wouldn't be inside me anymore.

Naturally, I'd see the outside differently.
It would be smaller, bound, manageable.
Something I could swallow. None of this
nervous churning belly over relationships,
jobs, all the latest wars on the news.

Because the world inside would be different too.
Bound by esophageal birth and intestinal
departure, my denizens would have physical
Measures of life and death. No reason to
Believe in anything because it all turns to shit.

No reason, then, either, neither meaning nor motive.
Nothing to add up if everything is going to break down.
That's where deconstruction got it wrong. A severed
Connection never was a connection. It was ephemeral.
Nothing like a poem isn't before we write it out of us.

Fish Decoys

They lower them
into frigid waters
far up North
when ice fishing.
White clouds rise
from a round hole
like the ghost of heat.
Men huddle
shoulder to shoulder
and share warmth
through fleece,
through flannel.

I've never ice fished,
but I used to skate
on Old Maid's Pond
in New Hampshire,
edgy on my blades
about hearing
an unforgiving crack
and crushing through

below the surface
where the fish drift
scale to scale and share
the not-quite-so-cold
amid floating, frozen chunks.
To them, I'd be inferno,
swiftly quenched in that world.
They'd cluster to me anyway,
the same promise as the decoy.
What a horrible lie.

The Etiquette of English Translation

All animal noise could be obscenity.
Sparrows sing about cocksuckers
and cats meow *motherfucker*.
That fenced pitbull barks threats –
I'll rip out your throat
And hump your neck
Like a tree stump.

That's why we should listen to nature.
Without knowing what is meant
And not what is said, we find
Ourselves thrown by a child
or a lost immigrant who asks
directions and thanks us with
fuck you. Fuck you very much.

Fever break in form of scuttled plane on Pacific Reef

So rare
to become
fuselage
without wings.

Or ailerons.

Ocean bottom,
current
armed cold,
and oh! so blue.

The fullness of nothing

Before we die, we will watch
the death of everyone we love
or inflict that horror on those
who live after. Easy to eat
the sweet fillets of the fish
on the riverside, but we must
make life of scales and guts.
Stubby teeth that break lines
if we jerk too eager. Sand
that grits in our teeth when
we cook too rough. Tastes
we don't want that survive
the suppression of spices.
Unravel it all down to atoms
and the pulse of electrons
around the nucleus. To revel
in the empty space between.
Spaces no matter can fill.
The ability to embrace
things that never were there.

When the Scarecrows went to war

All early reports indicate that the scarecrow war against the snowmen was a colossal success. The straw army trampled deep into the ice plains in late December and set themselves down to siege.

The snowmen fought back bravely with slingshots. Used their own eyes as missiles when the ammo ran out. The young and the strong remolded the old and the sick into packed bricks to stop up the breaches in the outer wall.

As the days lengthened, the snowmen grew haggard. Scarves fell from shoulders too thin to hold them. Dead grass poked through the snow blanket littered with spindly branches and rotting carrots.

A great puddle spread outward from the snow city, soaked into the attackers tattered pant legs and straw stuffing. When spring came, the scarecrows returned to their fields bearing baskets of the first flowers for the scarewives.

Together, the scarewives and the scarehusbands built scarebabies from their second hand clothing and exchanged them like presents. The scarehusbands hobbled alongside their youngsters as they played "crows in the field" and "guard the corn."

The Last Note

The water's not murky at night here though
the heart might be. The whistler at the pier's
edge sets tune to the whine of fishing rods
flinging line. Stars cry out their secrets
to the galaxy. Languages of flashes
and fades whisper of distance and vacuum.
We would not think the stars were so constant
if they were always there. When winter slides in
on a south wind, the white sands shift under
blue waters, the colors of peace and ice,
the coldness of space. Under the surface,
jellyfish drift tentacles that caress
the squid meat off hooks with stinger barbs
and rising bubbles. Once the whistling stops
and the village lights blow out,
red snappers will swarm the posts
of the pier following the scent of bait.

Games of Choice

Dead grasshoppers
tumble from the
broomhead like
thrown dice though
there is no chance
left for them. Easy
to think that this
is always the case.
Happiness becomes
mystery. I'll just
sweep, then. When
I'm done, I'll dust.
Maybe repot the ficus.

Standing Water

Don't hop away now,
it's just you and me
and that whistling train.
I also learned to swim
young. My mother was
terrified of drowning
and my father always
brought the storm
with him through
the door. You probably
learned locomotives
as bass rumbles and shrill
whistles. Cogs spray
oil into the stream
by the tracks. Maybe
you remember as a tadpole
how you used to look
up through the rainbow slick
and wonder what it's like
to have a head above water.

Mars Sunrise

Carbon dioxide
crystals
 waft
at high altitudes.

Livio from NASA let me watch.
on his laptop. Not video,

but time-lapsed
 still frames.

When I was a child
 growing up
in New Hampshire
I watched
 my neighbor's son
 make snowballs sizzling
 with fireworks in the middle
 to throw at his dog because the dog
 never stopped barking at the moon.
 He'd laugh so hard he spit on himself,
 on the front of that puffy winter coat he wore,
 wet streaks turning to frost bite on his chin causing skin
 to redden and blister and crack just like it was when I saw him
 eight years later on the Internet in his mugshot after a cocaine bender
 when he tied up his ex-girlfriend and jolted her to death with a stun gun

to the neck
 until the flesh
smoked and shed

seared flakes.
 Not the snow
 we know.

That burnt dog whined while it tried
 to chew
 the burns
 off its own back.

Can't see the accumulation

because the distance is too great.
The substance
too ephemeral.
The screen
too small.

Then
Mother Nature inverted.
Blue sunrise.

Why would you sing?

**It's okay. You don't need to answer.
Not much to say with no mouth
and a life that lasts a week
after you crawl from the ground
except don't live or die fast.
Out of chrysalis pockets
among the earthworm labyrinth,
you writhed with frantic legs
into a morning mist among
cedar chips and leaf bits.
Seventeen years of hibernation,
gestation, preparation to become
a vestal flare of spring sound
on the underside of that burnt out bulb.
A flurry of translucent wings
in a world of consumption.
An exoskeleton that collapses
in the mouth of every other thing.**

Reverence

When the van slows alongside
the concrete underpass pylons,
paramedics hoist the frost dusted
homeless man's corpse onto a gurney
to cruise it to the county morgue.

He will be split pelvis to sternum,
abdomen unfurled like moth wings.
Organs removed, labeled, weighed.
Their identification and diagnosis
more identity than a former name

for the otherwise known as *a* John Doe,
the most recent exposure victim.
The mortician will speak the standard
autopsy walkthrough at an audience
of posterity that doesn't exist.

Just like the voice of the UTK professor
who performed my tour of the Body Farm
when I was seventeen. A monotone forensic
monologue described a year of extensive
examination and documentation.

I had never seen a corpse before.
I was braced for awe. Not formaldehyde.
Not for rows of silver pins with white labels
too stiff to flutter in re-circulation drafts.
Not for breasts slit open and peeled back

from a chest split open and peeled back
to expose the rib cage, sawed open.
Sternum bay doors as if to allow lungs
to breathe. Layer upon layer of deep
exposure. Blood in vials, not veins.

Emaciation that raised tendons
into tent wire to house her face,
A shadow of a face in shadows.
Studied anonymity: scalpel slits
under the eye sockets and hair line.

Sinus cavities and tooth sockets open
for dust, microbe, and penlight floods.
A little box next to a pan holding her brain
with teeth sealed in numbered plastic bags.
Slides of skin, tissue, hair samples.

Same for the fingernails, the toenails.
Like unopened jigsaws of pure blue skies.
Too many pieces missing, those present
too similar. No trick of matching edges
could reassemble the real picture.

And so the tour ended in questions to our group
about who *we* were. Getting to know us around
the slab like a dinner with a Jane Doe centerpiece.
The life taken out of death. Height. Weight.
Age. And the type of shoes she wore when found.

Once her identity became statistic,
even if her liver said she was a drinker,
lungs, a smoker, no one would know
or ask her favorite blend. Or why
she drank so fast, lived, died so fast.

While the other students reached out in stutters
to touch her kidneys, spleen, gallbladder,
and register the rubbery texture of the walls
that divide us internally, I tried to wrap the skin back
over her stomach. To reattach her retinas

and imagine through her eyes a woman
who watched lazy Tennessee breezes
and trudging feet through browned leaves.
She walked the night riverbank to love the brush
of grass blades over the soles of her sandals.

Her name could have been Adell. Shelley.
Or maybe it really was Jane. Jane Donn.
Perhaps the withered white scar streak
on her temple came from a branch swipe
while trotting through the woods with the lover

she did her best drinking with. They plopped to dirt
between green reeds, tossed smoldering filters

into the current ripple trickle over the rocks,
brushing the backs of each others' hands
with their fingertips. There must have been

a last feel of that lover's touch. The press
of calloused thumbs over pebbled areoles.
Splash of breaths on parting lips. Warmth,
wet left behind as faces pull away. Glow
of skin just touched. When they found her

lying, washed up, still gazing up at a frozen moon,
they brushed her eyes shut. They always do.
A sign of respect, that cutting off. Close the mouth.
As if to seal the body from the spirit. Let it drift
in and out of the ether at will. Without temptation.

Maybe I will be sewn up at my morgue.
Kidneys, stomach and spleen returned.
Ready to be given any home other than struts
and alley walls. My remains could be shipped
to that university. Professors in white coats

will lay me out in a field to decompose. No one
will know who I was or what I did, but my eyes
will be reopened to simulate proper conditions.
I will build a new identity of maggot bites,
rot patterns, and the leeching of bone marrow.

Kissed by bits of soil blown between my lips.
Back on the cold packed dirt. Frost will settle
in the folds of my clothes. Half-covered
by next winter's fallen leaves and wind
broken branches. I will gape up at cold

December stars and watch a woman's inverse
shadow drift towards me from a nebula
beyond Orion. Strands of hair will blow
from my shriveled scalp, tangle in withered
dandelion stems. A smell of frost and clover.

A wind ballad hum in the hollows of my eyes.
Joined with tree trunk creaks. Spattering
rain of a clear sky on dried grass blades.
Motionless, I will reach out a song.
My ceaseless carol as John Doe.

Nature of the Phantasm

The first time I sat down to read the essay “Images” by Robert Hass, I was already running a fever of 102. Fully dressed from teaching and wearing a bathrobe over it all, I lay on my bed in the roar of my space heater and watched the red digital thermostat increase by degrees until sweat ran down my ribcage and the backs of my knees. The television played a loop of DVD menu theme music for Ray Bradbury’s “Something Wicked This Way Comes” because the DVD remote rested on the right side end table and the TV remote rested on the left side end table. If I turned my head to either side or attempted to physically reach out for them, the nausea swept back into my stomach and my head spun with dizziness. Furthermore, any disruption of the integrity of my blankets would release the careful stock of body heat I cultivated over the last half hour and the shaking would start again. Ultimately, I remained perfectly still for the next hour, about to start reading, about to turn the TV off, about to play the DVD, ready to slip into sleep, ready to get up and go to work, and too hot and too cold all at once.

Retrospectively, I doubt I could have read and understood the back of a cereal box in that state. After all, it took me a full hour and a half to eat a single cup of microwave ramen. I spent most of the time with the spine of Twentieth Century Pleasures propped against the divot in my sternum. I read individual words and occasional sentences, unable to interpret any extended ideas. Perhaps largely as a result of my delirium, I became determined to emerge from the evening with at least enough of an understanding of Hass’ definition of images that even if I didn’t understand the essay, I would be able to produce some descriptions that matched his definition. I found quickly that Hass did not

come out and directly define 'images,' but rather illustrated them by interweaving a profound experience he had during an allergic reaction with a discussion of the haiku masters Basho, Issa, and Buson bolstered by additional contemporary examples. This proved far too complicated for me to grasp.

Instead, hoping for something short enough to remember so I could focus on it without having to focus on the page, I latched onto what initially seemed like the simplest important statement in the essay: "Images haunt" (Hass 275). Immediately, I went to work mentally breaking down this two word phrase, misinterpreting it from the get go. I thought about what it meant to be haunted by something, almost immediately dead-ending against the 'well, duh' statement that images stick with you. They linger, resonate, reverberate, echo. None of these words got me anywhere with their connotations, so I figured that if I was going to read the essay incorrectly, I might as well do it in the most idiotic way possible by assuming a literal interpretation: ghosts. Chinese hopping zombies, to be exact.

In the nightstand drawer, I still have a little rubber key chain in the shape of a Chinese Hopping Zombie given to me by my first girlfriend. I don't remember anything the package said about Chinese hopping zombies, but the little trinket was essentially Casper the ghost in an eighteenth-century Chinese military uniform. At this point, I finally gained enough motivation to reach for the end table and grab both my Chinese Hopping Zombie and the DVD remote. I hoped that if I could silence the TV, the increased concentration would allow me to make some real progress, but I worried that if I altered my environment that I would risk derailing the strange sort of process I already made. Things came to a crisis.

Fever is a funny thing. Two or three minutes ticked away and the thermostat increased two or three degrees as I held the Hopping Zombie in my left hand and the DVD remote in my right before it occurred to me that the real problem was that I was staring at concrete representations of both halves of my dilemma. The hold-up in the decision making process resulted from looking back and forth between them and the mental mud that resulted from the movement. At this point, I realized that somehow my situation evolved itself into an image. I had become an image, and therefore could finally deduce exactly what it meant that “images haunt.” My mistake had been asking what it meant to be haunted by an image, not what it meant for an image TO haunt.

The act of haunting MUST involve the traversing of boundaries. Of course, traditional haunting crosses the boundary of life and death from the metaphysical to the physical, much like my little Hopping Zombie friend in my left hand. Haunting also crosses from the external physical world to the internal world of the experiential mind. However, just as Hass’s syntax of “images haunt” doesn’t limit images to only haunting, an image must do more than traverse boundaries.

An image must ultimately break boundaries down and reinterpret them in a way that creates a simultaneity of states. Images are liminal figures. They aren’t boundaries or what defines the boundaries. Images straddle boundaries, passing back and forth across them. When Basho described his own poetry, he wrote, “My poetry is like a stove in summer or a fan in winter.” In this way, Basho’s images of the stove and fan not only cross temporal boundaries and create a glib irony, they also cause notions of summer and winter to simultaneously co-exist and feedback onto each other, much like my fever left me shivering with cold but burning with sweat simultaneously, and much like the

moment when the background of the DVD and the foreground of the essay bled together as I brought a concrete emblem of each into my focus simultaneously.

An image can also bridge spatial boundaries and the perceptual boundaries between two individuals as Hass exemplifies with Buson's Kite image:

Apprentice's holiday:

hops over kite string

keeps going.

According to Hass, the poem doesn't 'open up' until we start to picture "the kite tugging in the wind" and the flier laughing and smiling because "when a thing is seen clearly, there is a sense of absence about it" (Hass 274). Certainly, the literal kite string serves as a distinctly liminal item, connecting the flier with the soaring kite yet describing neither. However, Hass overlooks another important aspect of the kite string as the point of intersection in two perspectives. This is a poem of two characters who hold perpendicular purposes to the liminal image of the kite string, literally represented by their spatial configuration.

In this way, we get a much more important image, which is the complex interrelationship between these two characters. They both serve the same purpose, namely enjoying the Apprentice's holiday, but they simultaneously observe cross purposes. Obviously, the kite string becomes an obstruction that must be hopped over, but the apprentice hopping over the kite string also becomes an obstruction in the experience of the kite flier. In this way, the experiences of both characters become mutual at a moment of intersection because not one, but multiple boundaries have been crossed. As Hass puts it when describing an image by Wallace Stevens, "It is the

crossing of paths that the image seems to reconcile” (Hass 276). In an image, the experience of the speaker becomes the experience of the observed, just like the moment I held the hopping zombie and the remote and realized that in order to understand what it means for an image to haunt that I had to become an image.

An images create a unity of simultaneous states, whether it be the life and death of that which haunts, or the obfuscation of boundaries in being experienced as a haunter. Perhaps one of the most striking and frequently examined examples of the liminal image is found in William Carlos William’s “The Red Wheelbarrow”:

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens

The first liminal aspect of the image we notice is the physical structure of the first four lines. William’s gives us a textual picture in the arrangement of words with so much depending “upon,” or directly over, the red wheelbarrow. In this way, the image bridges a physical boundary between the wheelbarrow and that which depends on it, crossing the

boundary between image and text. The act of reading the poem becomes the act of seeing the poem, which also becomes the act of experiencing a great amount of weight on a red wheelbarrow.

We get an intersection of equal complexity in the lines “glazed/with rain water.” For the wheelbarrow to be glazed with rain water, the storm must be over and the sun cannot have been out long enough for the moisture to dry. We know the sun is out because light is required for the wheelbarrow to provide the type of reflection suggested by “glazed.” We are left with an image of the entirety of the storm that has passed coexisting simultaneously with the duration of the dry and sunny period to follow encapsulated within the form of the glaze of rain water.

This image continues to complicate if we consider the composition of the light involved in “glazed.” Glazed suggests that the patterns of light reflection on the surface of the wheelbarrow are changing and that those reflections form a coating or a boundary. At any given point, different parts of the rain water are experienced as solid white light reflecting back at the viewer. Those same spots also do not reflect light at other times, allowing the viewer to simply see the water. However, since the water is transparent, the image of viewing the glaze of water also involves viewing the wheelbarrow itself as if it is glazed. In this way, the light that is reflected takes on a state of constantly fluxuating identity and we are constantly drawn back to the wheelbarrow during the storm, to what the wheelbarrow was and is no longer. To call back to Hass’ description of the image, “when a thing is seen clearly, there is an absence about it.”

Yet, it would be amiss to ignore those white chickens. To reflect on the surface level and make a bad pun, the chickens would also reflect off the surface of the

wheelbarrow. If the coating of rain water reflects the white chickens, there will also be moments at which the same spot reflecting the white chickens will also reflect the white sunlight. At these moments, the boundary of identity between the chickens and the light is disrupted. If one were simply observing the wheelbarrow with absolute tunnel vision, that observer would no longer be able to distinguish between the chicken and the light. The dissonance between the reality of what is reflecting the light as well as what is reflected bridges the boundary between the speaker and the wheelbarrow because the speaker has become caught in the same inability to differentiate experience possessed by an inanimate object such as the wheelbarrow.

Clearly, however, this is not the point I was brought to by my fever. At the moment I came to understand Hass's use of the verb "to haunt," a particularly intense spell of dizziness struck me. I vaulted from the bed straight onto the bathroom linoleum without ever touching the carpet and proceeded to fail at purging the microwave ramen that had in fact taken me so long to eat that the bulk of it digested before I was done. Had I performed my analysis of "The Red Wheelbarrow" before this point, I might have thought about the spatial change of the leap and the simultaneity of states of the Ramen as I consumed it.

Instead, I washed my face, pulled my shirt off, and proceeded to splash water over my shoulder and down the channel of my spine. When I straightened, my fever seemed to have broken, and I was struck by the following fragment which I immediately titled "Fever break as scuttled plane":

So rare

to become

fuselage

without wings.

Immediately, the dizziness and fever returned since the relief was only the temporary clarity of externally cooling the body. I dragged myself back to bed, grabbing my notebook and a pen from off my floor, and I wrote down the fragment. At first, I was convinced that the real key to the poem rested within the abstract leap of comparing the break in a fever to the feeling of plunging the fuselage of a plane would experience if it were to suddenly find itself without wings. As Hass writes, “the terror of facts is the purity of their arbitrariness,” and the effect I was interested in was the total lack of control in the plunge caused by something so random as jettisoning the wings (Hass 276).

However, much like my initial attempt to interpret Hass’s phrase, “images haunt,” I realized that I was misinterpreting my own inspiration. It occurred to me that the most important part of the image towards opening up the poem was neither the speaker nor the semi-literal plummeting fuselage, but the wings that weren’t there. Suddenly, I had a picture of two wings soaring parallel to each other through the clouds like Buson’s kite, glad to be rid of the burden of the fuselage. I also knew that this was a freedom that came with a price: the loss of a pilot to control the ailerons. As such, I added a line:

So rare

to become

fuselage

without wings.

Or ailerons.

In doing so, I hoped the physical space between the wings and the ailerons would help indicate the lack of fuselage that normally linked the two as a functional unit.

Now that I was playing with form, the next impulse I had was to reverse the graduated indentation in order to create a text-based illustration of an airplane. Even now, I see that option as a perfectly valid direction for the poem to have taken, but I feel that creating the image of a plane WITH wings would have betrayed my own end intent. Instead, because both a fuselage without wings and wings without fuselage or ailerons are destined to end up at the bottom of the ocean, I decided to create a visual metaphor for the break and return of a fever to place my literal objects into the same experiential state, so I added the final stanza:

Ocean bottom,

Current

Armed cold,

And oh! So blue.

In this way, the reader gets the literal plane at ocean's bottom, and that plane also takes the figurative place of the speaker's mental state during the sudden (and arbitrarily timed) abatement of fever. These states then imply the imagined simultaneous state of existing as wings flying through the clouds without ailerons, but the knowledge that those same wings also lie submerged at ocean's bottom. Those same wings in turn imagine themselves soaring through the clouds without ailerons. The phrase "Current/Armed cold" is intended to indicate that all these states are unified in state by the singular direction of the current, which is felt in the form of a cold pressure.

The last line, however, is what I feel is the clincher, the moment that really holds this poem together as a single interwoven image like Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow." The 'oh!' intended to indicate the sweeping return of the fever indicates that all of these images have existed in an identical state all along, that even the fever break itself was merely a manifestation of the continuation of the fever. Ultimately, the fever break, the plane, the wings, the guidance, the cooling and current, become an image of what is not there in the speaker. Instead, the entire poem becomes a simultaneous release and frustration, the 'oh!' an exclamation and a curse while maintaining an objective distance due to the extreme and ambiguous subjectiveness of such an exclamation.

At this point, I altered the title to "Fever Break in form of scuttled plane on Pacific Reef." I added the "in form" to indicate the removal of the experience from the reality, that we are merely looking at the appearance of the events and not the events themselves. Finally, the poem gains the setting of the "Pacific Reef" because ultimately the poem is about the dissolution of self identity into a composite self derived simultaneous states. The Pacific Ocean, of course, is a vast enough body that anything can be lost within it, and the colorfulness of the reef is meant to suggest that no matter how vibrant and colorful the self might seem it is merely a speck against an equally busy and complex landscape.

In the end, I can't help being reminded of the words of Ten'in Ryutaku: "Outside of poetry there is no Zen, outside of Zen there is no poetry." Like the impossible and four dimensional curves of a Klein bottle, poetry becomes all exterior and all interior, nothing but boundary and with no boundary at all. Robert Hass tell us that "the poem

does not record sickness, yearning, unsatisfied hunger. Nor is it exactly objective or detached. It sits just in between, not detached but not attached either” (Hass 278).

Perhaps the most important thing for us to take from an examination of Hass’s attempts to define the image is the memory that no matter how much this all sounds like paradox, the ultimate nature of the image is the breakdown of paradox.

On my porch.

Hands in my pockets
to erase the cold
feeling of touching
things in a hospital,
nightbirds call
from the darkness
beyond the light
of the street lamps.
Tree shadows
droop over rough
ground, drape over
the curb drop
with a contoured
Sadness.

My grandfather's been
fading for ten years,
his face under
the hospital lights
a pitted dirt field.
Wrinkles so deep
and splotched
I couldn't tell what
was surface, breath
so ragged I couldn't
tell what was gasp
and what was word.

In the beginning,
I could only picture
his deterioration up to
a certain point.
Everyone pictures
a loss of color.
Hair. Weight.
It's the gains that
got me. The irregular
swelling. The sores
that open and close
like slow blinking
eyes. The bleed of

his iris gray into
the whites. A new
vocabulary of depression
that drowned out
all other conversation.

Now that is gone too,
and still no one says it.
No matter how much
you love someone,
there comes a point
when you want them
to die. When the image
of them suffering
exceeds your capacity
to imagine pain.
When you catch
yourself thinking
that it is cruel of them
to keep on living
because of how much
it hurts your mother.

What is left

Wind carves a channel in the ice pack on my hood. Blows powder clouds up my windshield with a clatter like scattering gravel. Melt beads on the clear coat sun reflection wobble and divide to the sides of the groove like a biblical parting, wash me back to Sunday lunches at my father's. Forced to field questions about whether I understood the parable of the two men with the basket of salted fish in the desert. He made the heat of Jerusalem sun sound so cold that I shrugged at questions I could answer.

He never sat down during dinner. I perched on one of the tall stools on my side of the kitchen island counter at the breakfast bar and he set his plate at the edge of the sink where I'd expect to find a cutting board. My mother took the round table during divorce divisions, and at first I assumed he stood out of his normal tight-fisted stubbornness. It takes a religious man not to see God's will in the miracle of absolving that sacrament, and his railings against her made him as pious as Saint Peter, black and white as an archangel.

The drunken phone calls lasted the better part of the first two years, burning my ear with cell-heat because my brother refused to take his calls. My parents fought nightly, but he and my brother combated. Gladiators of voices. Enough fire in their mutual venom to kindle a flame for Nero and kiss Cleopatra goodnight. The doorway of our father's home reads "house of pain" in my brother's vernacular, and even now he interjects "she was a goddamn saint to put up with him so long" whenever he talks about paying his annual visit.

Neither brother nor I acknowledges our guilt in the matter, that she endured so much, that she endured at all, because she wouldn't leave until we were gone. The sermon of the last mass I mucked my mind through left my face burning cold as the priest urged the congregation to consider the children in matters of divorce. That the greatest destruction always fell upon the children. I trembled fingertips against the pew, urging to leap to my feet and tell him straight out that when my mother told me she was divorcing my father, the only thing I wanted to know

was "why did you wait this long?" With my engine hot enough for the ice sheet to slip off into compacted fragments alongside my door handles, my phone still blinks with the light of my father's incoming call. If I answer, he will ask a similar question, the third call I've ignored this drive. Instead, I roll down the window and slip my palm into the last of the powder stream. Close

crystals in my fingers and bring wet knuckles to my mouth. A raptor
circles a dead thing by the median already picked over by crowded crows.
Morning sun sparkles off a blood oval that froze overnight.

Slipping off

One day, heaven will be condemned. I will hang a sign on rusted pearly gates, carry a clipboard, wear copper wire-framed glasses. Under "reasons for closure," I will write, "neglected and overused," and wonder "who thought eternity could be so mundane."

Jesus in white robes will be first to leave. He will lug a tattered suitcase stuffed with Eucharists and crucifixes. Lower his knee and sag his shoulders. Dip his fingers into the cool of the clouds looking for currents.

Behind him, angels will carry cardboard boxes with dented corners packed with mothballed haloes and unstrung harps. They will kiss the cheeks of the cherubs before they slip into holes between the clouds.

Lazarus will wish he'd waited to be raised. Matthew, Mark, James, and John will wash each other's feet, uncertain where to go with their gospels after witnessing the closure of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Maybe Mother Mary will write her memoirs by St. Peter's podium and then lay her head in the lap of the holy ghost. A low burnt candle with wax on the wick, his light will diminish, and he will run his fingers through her hair while she weeps.

Reception

Hard to find a table with one chair, one napkin
folded four ways into a triangle, a single fork,
spoon, and knife arranged on top, the roll warm
as well as the butter, the smell of garlic. Tall wine glass
by flowers, petals in the vent breeze. Place set
facing the window, not along it. Mounted floodlights
isolate pools in the darkness between the windows
and the lake. Across the water, nothing
but horizontal blackness meeting edges
with vertical blackness. This vantage
has no partner shore, but just past an elbow bend
in the near tree line is the throb of the beam
of an ornamental lighthouse built by a fisherman.
Somewhere from the vanishing must be coming
A transport, a little white boat to glow blue
In the starlight, tiny people on the deck
Steering towards a beacon and a lit window
In the darkness, a face looking out to meet them.

Moving in Winter

Ice slick steps – rotten timbers,
creaks, groans, cries –
the wind chills my ankles
blowing between them.

Box edges – dull cardboard,
enough weight, makes it sharp –
press into my forearms,
lower back protest knee pops.

Clouded breath – white puffs,
deep, fast, ragged –
the color I want my heart,
Forgot nothing, enough lost already.

New room emptiness – bare carpet
threadbare, fresh paint blank –
heaviness makes me sit
but not from cold or carrying.

Invasion

Must be a rough life
for that hummingbird feeder.
Those flutter spots flit
about as fast as bullets
or pressure bubbles
with beaks invasive
as any injection.
I'm afraid of needles,
though I couldn't say
what started that.

I do know when I knew
I was afraid. Age five.
In my shorts, sitting
on the crinkly paper
that is supposed to
intervene between skin
and the cold metal table.
The doctor prepared
the vaccine, popped
a drop at the needle
hole like nectar.

Filled with fluid,
I don't remember pain,
but when the plunger
depressed there was
a blur in my body
that didn't *feel*
in sync with the rest.
Now I know that blur
to be a flock
of hummingbirds
among the muscle
cells and sinew,
alien molecules
set adrift,
not feeding on,
feeding in.

What evaporation leaves behind

Just like a relationship, as I squeeze
the wet roller under the hose water,
white latex paint spills to the dirt,
picks up black flecks, stem bits,
and a kicklegging beetle.

Alive until death

Really think about it. What if the world
were overrun by flesh eating zombies?
Sure the survivors would need to worry
about defenses. That the best way to kill
them was to aim for the head. Everyone
in a constant state of vigilance. Startled
by a falling leaf clattering off a branch
Against a tree trunk. Alert enough to hear
The thread escape the spinneret on the thorax
of a spider. Grasping shotguns on our porch,
four shots in the barrel, one in the chamber,
we'd watch the sunset glimmer reds off
the web. I'd wrap my arm around your waist
with the tenderness of knowing that if you are
bitten, I will have to shoot you tomorrow.

The importance of the day before

Give this a shot: replace every word
I've written with its closest opposite.

Beauty the morning after.
Mutual breakfast,
Blush of exposure
like this winter
wind on cheeks,
the rasp of shoelace
friction, bracing
for a shut door
and an engine rev,
the December sun
beaming promises,
the change of seasons.

If not that, then
Maybe a definition.

Cold is a process
of departure-
apartment walls whitest
when the furniture
has been moved out,
a woman who didn't
need to close her eyes
before she said she
no longer loved me.

Right here I keep wanting
To write about warmth.

Connect beauty and love.
A sense of permanence.
Writing this, it seems at
its most complete the instant
before I realize that the sky
has begun to darken,
that bug song replaced
bird song, that I the day
I knew I was in love

Became totally useless
Because I turned it into
Page after page crumpled
On the floor by my desk.

On a bus in Texas

I imagine I am on a spaceship
nine months out like a fetus
in the comfort of vacuum
about to be born into the horror
of light. In the cosmos, a sun
Is always rising on a planet.
Another is setting, another noon,
midday, night, and nightlessness.
Like the petals of the bluebonnets
on the highway median, an
infinite tessellation of patterns
raveling surrounds. Next to me,
A woman I won't ever meet again
Says hello. I nod. Sleight a slight
Smile. Somewhere that will never
exist to me, we become lovers,
partners, my stranger. Beyond
a nebula, a star death births
a black hole and an entire
dimension beyond the event
horizon. Embodied by
a singularity. Like building
an exit ramp, a path made
to follow. Bound to break
into chaos or jerk inward.
Collapse the whole damn mess.
Dirt snakes blown the bus bottom
underdraft writhe in the road,
unable to keep up.

Respite

Sitting still under an ocean
of cerulean blue sky,
at the sapphire bay's edge
in mountain shadow,
locusts chirp from the palms
while hermit crabs run errands
over submerged sand.
Scorpions on rocks
arch their tails,
and click their pincers
like stretching,
waking up,
or falling asleep.
A milky cool drop
of venom beads
at the tip of a stinger,
my hand
almost too close.

When the scarecrows built the city

When the scarecrows built the city,
they meant it for themselves
as they carefully accumulated
lumber, mortar, and masonry
from the scraps discarded
by closing construction sites.

Out in the hay fields, it was easy
for the workers to stay concealed
by stripping naked among the stalks.
The houses, market, bulldozers, and tools
were assumed as the normal evidence
of building any new human place.

They also built their army in secret,
Collecting flintlock pistols, muskets,
and the rusted knives of famous wars
from antique shops with shopkeepers
squinting eyes too aged to notice straw
blades jutting from stuffed shirts.

The buildings were simple affairs, beams
holding together woven thatches and mats.
They filled the market with soft apples,
molded berries ridden with ants from grocery
store trash bins, a fashion trend defined
by what charity couldn't give away.

Everything else went to the wall
which went up last. Fifteen feet high
all around, cinder block, brick, plate
steel bolted to I-beam braces, gravel,
sand, and ground glass poured
in to fill all the extra places.

The city governors placed sentinels
every ten feet along the ramparts
armored in layer after layer
of second hand leather, weapons
crooked into bent shirt elbows
or shoulder slung, all dud loaded.

It wasn't the crows that they minded,
Or even the people who quickly came
In curiosity of such a strange ghost town
and walked among the market stands
and into the most intimate rooms
without so much as a knock.

The scarecrows quickly grew to like
The marvel of the men as they wove
In an out of the guards on the wall.
Women cooed at cuteness, quaintness,
children frolicked through the doorways,
and birds pecked the fruit and flew off.

Those they minded followed after the crowd,
swatted the crows from the fruit stands.
They built their own gate across the gate,
Their own stands at the mouth of the market
and nailed shut the houses of the poor citizens
Who didn't build up to second-hand code.

There was nothing the city could do
To stop these new guests from charging
Admission or cutting the power at night.
From putting their own guards on the walls.
From draining the wonder and novelty
by selling it until the visitors dwindled.

Eventually, the interlopers left on their own.
When no one else would come. Fuming and
impotent, the governors argued with each other,
with themselves, uncertain which was worse:
that they couldn't keep anything out
or that someone else found a way they could.

Feng Shui

**It's been this way before,
but it's never felt newer.
I brush the blond hairs
from the cushion,
push the black chair
between the bookcase
and the keyboard,
the paisley couch
against the far wall,
dust your fingerprints
from the coffee table
and no matter how
I rearrange the furniture,
you'll never sit
in that chair again.**

Blank Page

Everything that is,
could be,
or ever was
written.

Right in front of me.

A History:

First Colony on Mars.

Complete works

of Archilochus

with pronunciations.

All the angel's secrets

not hymnsung.

Words are acts

of destruction,

epitaphs

of unspokens.

Slightmarks,

blastwave epicenters

snowballing walls

obliterate

possibilities, maybes,

and all of blankfinitly

to leave

a trifle.

Limited.

fundamentally self-involved.

Walking under my apartment landing

What if this were film noir instead? Dank alley dumpster puddles, flat soles splashing, thumb in belt as if to clear the coat from the holster? My tiredness would be unshaven – grit voiced from cigarettes and whiskey sour slugs. I half expect Lauren Bacall to join my gray footsteps with the click of her high heels from around the corner of M53. She walks up beside me on the gray stairsteps, the sway of her ass jostling my hips, tincture of department store perfume. On the tenth step, she asks me for a cigarette under the rusted chain hung light that rocks in the wind. Waits until my hands are out of my pockets, fingers numb and tender from fumbling. Asks *You gonna light it or do I need to rub two sticks together?* Her in her little white gloves. Thank God Lauren Bacall doesn't exist. At least not the one we know. Not now, not noir. Instead, I watch the faster times cruise the highway past the tree line. Beyond the dumpster garden paper cup blossoms. Shrub of mildewed ottoman. Copper casing colored street lamp darkness eddies. Over white lined lanes. Tail light reds. Somewhere, further, there lies a real world of sepia and grays where color is formless jazz with a steady beat. In this film noir, silence is always just a tension. Waiting for that horn to cry in. Ah, that horn.

Keeping secrets

Move along grasshopper.
The shed's a place for machines and gasoline.

I might be able to close you in,
But I can't do anything to keep the centipedes out.

You don't want to be locked in the dark
standing sideways on that tractor tire.

I've been kept in the dark before,
Told lies by people I thought loved me.

We like to think that padlocks are meant to protect
but when you try to fly, your wings blur like feathers.

Like any love that tries so hard to save itself,
The truth has too much weight to take off.

No self, no other

The Rocky Mountains
diminished in the winds
even as they rose
in eruptive mending,
sutures for one of Earth's
great continental scars.
Before our own neural
engine fire-up, we break
boundaries of self
umbilically. Even now,
something withers
in my chest, my heart,
lungs, veins, cellular
and organic. Walls thin
as an electron microscope
slide cross section
disintegrate towards
one original mass.

Village of Ist

They buried my grandfather here.
Old bricks crumble, roofs slough tile,
mortar dust drifts lazy on the wind.
Sitting against his grave at night, the star
clouds of the Milky Way and the village
night lights shimmer on tourmaline bay
ripples. Skin against stone, the letters
trace an epitaph on my back in a language
I can't understand. Moored mastlights
and distant island beacons blink codes
on the horizons. Like they're talking
to the stars. Until recent centuries,
the world thought heaven loomed
beyond the solar system. That souls
drifted up on the lift of angel hands
and divine breath, past Mars and Saturn.
Wars were fought on the basis of celestial
interpretations. Star charts plotted the course
of human history. Maybe we've learned
since then. If I watch the stars long enough
I'll learn a whole new vocabulary. Just not
The one that they are speaking.

The New Death

I.

Waiting for his punishment to begin.
Pours over the mirror in the locker
room while the other new deaths rustle

in their robes among the metal doors
and benches. They all wait for their
punishments to begin. Printless bone

thumb smears the shower steam from
New Death's hollowed cheek reflections.
Pupils replaced with gold coins. Lips

still shriveling, pulling back from teeth.
Bone beneath the gums. No blood.
The tatters of his once cherubic cheeks

peel in little parchment rolls that
curl to where he once had a hairline.
The change initiated the moment

he signed the contract – from Seraphim
to sallow in an eternity's instant. His
wings shed feather to the frame.

The frame crumbled link by link at
the joints until nothing but the outcropped
sockets off his shoulder blades extended

from his back like two great horns that
humped the back of his robes. When first
raised from the sword clasping ranks

of lesser angels, New Death remembers
he fingered the rim of his halo and spread
his arms at the top of the highest mountain

in heaven to revel in the proximity
of God. Like Morning Star in the days
before the New Kingdom below.

II.

Thus all the new deaths sharpen their scythes.
As does the New Death. A grim circle of
reapers. Dreading the Harvest.

As does the New Death, all the new deaths
draw names for their lists. The names that they
guarded, the souls that they loved from above.

All the new deaths draw closed their hoods. As does
the New Death. Humans are wheat that screams
when sheared at the stalk. And they are legion.

As does the New Death, all the new deaths
pray their penance is fast. Pray that when born
onto earth to pay the price for their prides

*that we will die infants
growing no roots to resist*

*that we will die infants
unsowed in our loves*

*that we will die infants
unbloomed in our hopes*

*that we will die infants
with no will to live.
Amen.*

Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London: Routledge, 1994.

Gilbert, Jack. Great Fires, The. New York: Knopf, 1994.

Gilbert, Jack. Refusing Heaven. New York: Knopf, 2005.

Hass, Robert. Twentieth Century Pleasures. New York: Harper Collins, 1984.

Komunyakaa, Yusef. Thieves of Paradise. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Rice, Stan. Radiance of Pigs, The. New York: Knopf, 1999.

Rice, Stan. Red to the Rind. New York: Knopf, 2002.

Stone, Ruth. In the Dark. Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2004.

Stone, Ruth. In the Next Galaxy. Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2002.

Wright, James. Above the River. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990.

Vita

Andrew Michael Najberg was born in Montreal, Quebec on May 3, 1979. He was raised in Richardson, TX, Plano, TX, Nashua, NH, and Knoxville, TN and finished graduated from Farragut High School in 1997. From there, he attended Baylor University in Waco, Texas before transferring to University of Tennessee at Knoxville where he received a B.A. in English with a creative writing emphasis in 2001 and an M.A. in English in the spring of 2006.

Andrew is currently pursuing the publication of a full length book of poetry. His work will appear in upcoming issues of New Millenium Writings and Bat City Review.

4503 4347 13
07/20/06 MFB