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# understanding reflection

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understanding reflection

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(TITLE)

BY

David Michael Moutray

1975 -

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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MASTER OF ARTS

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2003

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*understanding reflection*  
by  
David M. Moutray

ABSTRACT

*understanding reflection* is a collection of poems which examines reflection both as an element of memory and self-image. The thirty-six poems represent devices and conventions employed by Philip Larkin, Donald Justice, Kamala Das, and Adrienne Rich. The style and voice mastered by these four poets served as an inspiring force in my creative efforts. The thesis introduction examines the voices of these poets and their influence on my work -- particularly in respect to my exploration of sexual, cultural and familial tensions.

The introductory essay, in essence, introduces my progression through reflection. Throughout the course of my progression, Larkin and Justice served as my primary inspiration. While the themes explored are common throughout poetry (love, loss, anger), they are unique to my examination in regard to my sexual, cultural and familial tensions.

I suggest throughout both the introductory essay and the creative portion that there are two predominant definitions of reflection (the physical act of glancing at a mirror and the concept of reflecting back through one's memory) and that inherently they are related. I found through the course of my thesis that much of our past (that which we reflect back on) bears relevance on the perception we have as we view the physical reflection of ourselves. Whether it is the shape of our nose, the color of our

eyes, or how our hair rests in curly waves over the forehead, we find ourselves interpreting our physical reflection based on our familial and cultural background. All in all, my collection of poetry allowed me to use both definitions of reflection to examine the familial, cultural, and sexual tensions as they apply to my past -- and ultimately to understand reflection in the present.

*understanding reflection*

by

David Moutray

Written under the direction

of

Professor Olga Abella

and thesis committee members

Professors

John Kilgore and Bruce Guernsey

*for Erin*

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(Just a cross section of my family life)

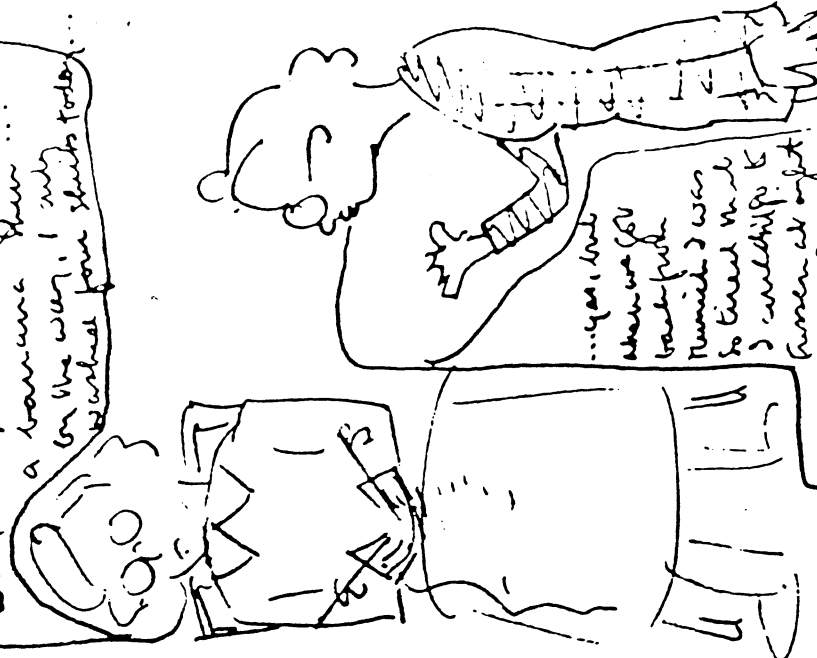
The British gov't. have started this war ... Hitler has some idea he could fix things ... well, and I hope is that we get punished by leaders ... our army is useless. A.R.P.? He, he! This is the end of civilization ... after all, man has to be supervised sooner or later ... we're only a stage in the earth's development ... a very unimportant stage ... too ...



Me.

Pop. POP. OF THE AUTHOR'S FAMILY.

Oh, do you think so? I wonder what we ought to learn for Easter tomorrow ... don't scrape the floor like that, Philip, remember I have to see the wick ... well, I hope Hitler falls a bit ... a brownie ... on the way, I only wanted four shirts today.



... yes, but I should get a good brush ... I think I was so tired that I washed up & turned at night.

Because so George asked George when I was - George was the Storm Trooper ... and George said "my intention" ... "my intention" and so, my hand, he says all the time, he says that ...

POP

1939.

## Preface

Home is where the god who failed us stands awaiting  
and his name is sin  
nothing better, nothing worse.  
-- Kamala Das, "The Word is Sin"

You would not recognize me.  
Mine is the face which blooms in  
The dank mirrors of washrooms  
As you grope for the light switch.  
-- Donald Justice, "The Tourist from Syracuse"

I am taking the structure at the level of the subject, and it reflects something that is already to be found in the natural relation that the eye inscribes with regard to light. I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture.  
-- Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*

The following poems were written over a seven-month period. The primary aim of these poems is to examine the various constructs and interpretations of reflection - particularly in relation to familial, cultural, and sexual tensions. The title of the collection, *understanding reflection*, is as much meant to demonstrate the fundamental concept of understanding reflection as it is meant to illustrate the complexities of attempting to do so. The collection, written under the direction of Professor Olga Abella and committee members Professors John Kilgore and Bruce Guernsey, is also a representation of devices and techniques (stylistically and conceptually) linked to the four major influences in the creative portion of my thesis that serve as not only the basis for my creative efforts, but also as my inspiration. My influences are Kamala Das, Philip Larkin, Donald Justice, and Adrienne Rich, predominately. The style and voice mastered by these four poets have served as an inspiring force in my creative efforts. In that respect, I have drawn on their poetry to

provoke much of the same voice, with particular emphasis on the introspective and pointed style evoked in Larkin's "High Windows." Larkin conveys a sense of reflection pointedly layered and reserved throughout not only "High Windows," but much of his work.

Reflection, in and of itself, is a somewhat vague term. There are two predominant definitions of the word (the physical act of glancing at a mirror and the concept of reflecting back through one's memory) and I argue throughout the creative portion that they are related. Much of our past (that which we reflect back on) bears relevance on the perception we have as we view the physical reflection of ourselves. Whether it is the shape of our nose, the color of our eyes, or how our hair rests in curly waves over the forehead, we find ourselves interpreting our physical reflection based on our familial and cultural background. My attempt in the following collection of poetry is to use both definitions of reflection to examine familial, cultural, and sexual tensions as they apply to my past -- and ultimately to understand reflection in the present.

On the advice of my committee, one of my first methods for developing a conscious approach to understanding reflection was to examine the assertions of French psychologist Jacques Lacan in regard to our perceptions of reflection. Lacan argues that reflection, in fact, does not need light, i.e. one can be blind and still reflect. He asks, though, "[h]ow can we try to apprehend that which seems to elude us in this way in the optical structuring of space?" (93). The contention becomes that if we imagine our point of vision extended to the object, a thread may be envisioned as the connecting point. Lacan suggests that "this thread has no need of light - all that is

needed is a stretched thread” (93). For me that thread became the link between my reflections of the past and my perceptions of the present. Metaphorically, the thread is my poems.

Much of my creative work, in fact, has become a progression of perception. It could be argued that we often become reflections of the perceptions of those around us -- whether of familial, cultural, or sexual definitions. In part, I would emphasize the truth behind that concept, and in actuality, the creative work represented here becomes more than that -- it is a representation of my perceptions progressing *through* my reflections.

Perceptions themselves are often complicated and complex dimensions of our reflections. Two psychological definitions contend that there are two approaches to perception: an inherently ecological approach and an approach confined to internal information processing. Psychologist J.J. Gibson argues in his book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* that perception is ecological in nature as the “active perceiver explor[es] and mov[es] about the environment” (88). David Marr states in his book *Vision* that perception is “the process of representing information from the world internally . . . [and] as information from the world is processed, it undergoes a series of internal manipulations” (56). I would argue that perception is a combination of both; internal and external manipulations on our perceptions ultimately purport a significant effect on both definitions of reflection, with internal reflections representing the act of reflecting the past and external representing the physical act of looking in a mirror. Consequently, we tend to externalize our physical reflections based on our internal reflections of our familial, cultural, and sexual tensions. As we

look in the mirror, we tend to externalize facets of our past from our reflection that in turn conjure up internal reflections, e.g. the scar from the fourth grade, the dark blue eyes of a grandfather, the receding hairline of a father, etc.

Essentially, the creative portion of my thesis is divided in respect to familial, cultural, and sexual tensions. Familial tensions, in context to the poems, represent the transitions I made as a writer due to reflections of my past. Philip Larkin primarily influenced this segment of the poems conceptually as much as stylistically. Larkin, as a youth, drew a cartoon entitled “Portrait of the Author and Family, 1939” which depicted the artist’s family: his father, mother and sister are facing one another and talking about various subjects; all of these figures are talking at once, and disregarding each other’s conversation, yet they are still loosely connected in that they face each other even while engaged in other occupations. The father is reading a newspaper, the mother is knitting, and the sister is standing facing them, gesturing with one hand. What is compelling about the cartoon is that the young artist is completely outside the circle, sitting at a desk scribbling with one hand while looking up. His face is turned toward the viewer, suffused with dark emotion, while a huge wordless exclamation point hovers over his head. This sense of alienation, in contrast to the familial setting, becomes the subject of many of his later poems, most notably his pointed “This Be the Verse”.

In this poem, Larkin conveys a disdain towards his family that resonates with an inherent bitterness: “They fuck you up, your mum and dad/ They may not mean to, but they do./ They fill you with the faults they had/ And add some extra, just for you” (1-4). He implies that faults pass between generations. Larkin’s bitterness and

disdain for this act of familial inheritance inspired my examination of the effects familial reflections had on me. In “birds of my neighborhood” I indicate that:

I have settled  
for the idea in the mirror;  
my hair will recede, eyes darken  
and the birds of my neighborhood  
will leave;  
I will leave with them.

While I recognize physical familial inheritance, and in a sense settle “for the idea in the mirror”, I also indicate that the knowledge will not keep me in the neighborhood.

As much as Larkin influenced me in respect to familial inheritance, Donald Justice allowed me to understand that my reflections (as much memory as anything else) should be understood as a construction. The transition from Larkin’s pointed comments on “mum and dad” to Justice’s reflections in “Men at Forty” became apparent to me upon reading James McCorkle’s suggestion that Justice’s “use of conventional forms has as its intention clarification and sharpening of memory, while also implying that memory is composed or constructed” (184). The idea that memory can be composed or constructed directly coincides with what I am doing with the creative portion of my thesis. Part of “understanding reflection” is understanding that reflections can indeed be constructed or composed, much as Larkin and Justice have done with their own “reflections”. It can be argued that Larkin’s memories of his parents inspired “This Be the Verse”, while it must also be assumed the poem was “composed or constructed” from his reflections of those memories. Larkin’s use of

the pronoun “you” suggests that he “constructed or composed” a distance between the poem and himself by not referring specifically to himself in the first person in the poem, much like the distance he created in his cartoon as he drew himself outside the familial circle.

Justice’s “Men at Forty” directly links this distance with the concept of familial inheritance and the physical act of reflection creating an emotional reflection:

And deep in mirrors  
They rediscover  
The face of the boy as he practices tying  
His father’s tie there in secret,  
And the face of that father,  
Still warm with the mystery of lather.  
They are more fathers than sons themselves now.  
Something is filling them, something. (9-16)

Justice’s use of “they” creates the same distance Larkin incorporated into his construction of “This Be the Verse”. Justice’s personal voice is nowhere to be found in “Men at Forty” just as Larkin leaves a distance between his narrator and himself. The connection to Lacan’s assertions on displacement can be found when he argues “[t]he picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture” (96): essentially, Larkin and Justice have the “picture” in their eye, but leave themselves out of the “picture”.



And that is where I found myself -- using displacement to convey my physical reflections creating an emotional reflection (inherently familial). I found myself as Larkin found himself: outside the familial circle using my perceptions to write about my reflections. This displacement became a necessary component of the section about cultural tensions. In "Departures" I write that "I am today / a poetry of departures / vacant from notion / distant from thought / my exposure is absence." In a sense, I aligned myself with Larkin's displaced reflections of home in "Home is so Sad" as he describes his home as it was: "Look at the pictures and the cutlery. / The music in the piano stool. That vase." (9-10). Similarly, I find myself in "understanding reflection" observing

a fading green plastic plant  
on a seldom used kitchen table  
next to an upright with its dust  
and the Zenith with its missing knob  
stacks of National Geographic  
circa 1975  
the light switch  
which hasn't worked since 1969

Larkin's reflections of home is further illustrated as he writes that home "stays as it was left / shaped to the comfort of the last to go" (1-2).

My mother was the first to go. Resolved to reflect honestly, I confronted this issue as a displaced observer, creating thought and emotion where I thought they should be. In "letters of sin", I refer to her imagination procuring an "imagined letter

/ blazoned on her forehead” that forces her to realize that “charades tax the mind / obscure self reflection,” while my father’s eyes bend at the revelation and his rationale becomes a parable -- but one that forces him to ask “consoling publications/ [ . . . ] Where is honor? . . . Where is God?” Not getting an answer, “he finds imagination / stronger than fear.” My inspiration for the context of this poem came from Das’ “The Word is Sin”; the connection between home and sin is exemplified by her as she writes: “Home is where the god who failed us stands awaiting / and his name is sin / nothing better, nothing worse” (15-17). The correlation between God, home, and sin is a presiding influence over me, not just contextually, but spiritually.

My cultural tensions became evident through my tendency to rely on familial reflections, and growing up in a Baptist home this became a reflection of a spiritually influenced cultural past. Robert Pack writes in his essay “The Idea in the Mirror: Reflections on the Consciousness of Consciousness” that our “role as God’s creation is fulfilled in imitating God as creator”; thus our environment “is always being enhanced by each human being’s description of it . . . [and] it is incumbent on humans to interpret what has been divinely offered -- physical reality -- and thus to wed words to natural objects, creating a new and complex entity, the poem of existence extending itself” (51). This extension is for me the bridge between my inner and outer world - and really, the idea of an inner and outer world supposes many connotations; beyond the obvious, I define my inner world by the physical reflections I maintain of myself, and my outer world as that of the cultural, familial and sexual tensions that I reflect upon. Pack suggests that the “artist must necessarily become conscious of one’s own self, and of one’s own activity as an artist” (51). Essentially, Pack is describing my

“activity” of extending myself from my inner world into my outer world; and just as my poetry can be seen as the thread linking my reflections of the past and my perceptions of the present, it can also be seen as the bridge between my inner and outer worlds.

Adrienne Rich’s explorations of her own familial tensions inspired much of my creative energies, especially in terms of exposing the bridge between inner and outer worlds. Sylvia Henneberg, in her essay the “Slow Turn of Consciousness”, writes that Rich’s “representations of her relationship with her mother and father move from bearing the scars of alienation and anger toward reflecting a new readiness and ability on [her] to reclaim and render usable her family bond” (2). But this transformation was slow to come; in Rich’s “Dark” , the speaker is torn between her love for and hatred of her father, between her desire to see him dead and her need to “stir [him] up” and to know their struggles are not over (*Early Poems* 227). In her early poetry, Rich illustrates her feeling that “she did not turn out to be the perfect golden child”(3) her father longed for.

Rich’s move “toward reflecting a new readiness and ability [ . . . ] to reclaim and render usable her family bond” begins to surface in her poem “Sources”: “It is now under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own” (9). After reading these words, I began to struggle to find my own “powerful, [ . . . ]manly lens” and to begin “reflecting a new readiness and ability” in order to (re)discover my own family bond. Just as Rich’s new lens “enabled her to take the time to ‘see beneath’ the negative traits in order to understand her father more fully and to create a space where she and her father can coexist in peace” (Henneberg

4), I too felt the need to “see beneath” the traits I felt my father passed down in order to create a space for us - but not so we could coexist, but rather so I could understand my reflection(s).

In order to understand my reflections, I felt I needed to explore my cultural tensions. The poem “conversations” became the poem that essentially centered cultural tensions in respect to my family. Growing up in a town of 2700 creates a tension of its own; as a result, I found myself “painting pictures / of [the] town [. . . ] limned in ripple-cubism [. . . ] my family in the background.” I painted the town with the poems I wrote to describe those same tensions.

Since I refer to the familial, cultural, and sexual aspects as “tensions”, I feel the concept of tension needs to be explained. William Van O’Connor in his book *Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry* suggests that

tension [. . . ] serves the double purpose of presenting an attitude or statement precisely (not necessarily simply) and making possible the experiencing, re-creating, of it by the reader. The attempt to achieve tension helps keep the poet from falling into sentimentalities, irrelevancies, exaggerations, unqualified moralizing, formlessness, vagueness, and incoherencies. (146)

Justice invariably encompasses this as he “re-creates” a rainy Sunday afternoon of contemplation in “Variations on a Text by Vallejo”:

I will die in Miami in the sun [. . . ] (1)  
And I think it will be a Sunday because today,  
When I took out this paper and began to write,

Never before has anything looked so blank,  
My life, these words, the paper, the gray Sunday;  
And my dog, quivering under a table because of the storm,  
Looked up at me, not understanding  
And my son read on without speaking, and my wife slept.  
(14-20)

Justice incorporates a sense of tension and displacement (much like the displacement Larkin indicates in his cartoon as his family is unaware of his activity) devoid of “sentimentalities [and] unqualified moralizing”; ultimately, the poem re-creates a reflection of one “gray Sunday” as Justice uses tension to express his fears of mortality and his family’s ignorance of his activity.

Larkin demonstrates a similar method of tension and displacement in “High Windows”: “When I see a couple of kids / And guess he’s fucking her and she’s / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm, / I know this is paradise” (1-4). Inherently, Larkin layers the poem with sexual and religious tensions that are as interrelated as Larkin is to the poem itself at its onset. And while he composes/constructs a distance by the poem’s end (“Rather than words comes the thought of high windows: / The sun comprehending glass, / And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless”), he clearly places himself in respect to the poem’s sexual and religious tensions (“[ . . . ] I wonder if / Anyone looked at me, forty years back, / And thought, *That’ll be the life; / No God anymore, or sweating in the dark / About hell and that*” [21-25] ).

In her book *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, Janice Rossen explains that his

“fury against women is not so much a declared state of siege against them personally as it is an internal battle raging within himself” (66). Larkin’s battle between his inner and outer world becomes evident through his guilt (“No God anymore, or sweating in the dark”) and the distance he composes/constructs to address his conflict. In “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album,” Larkin admires “a sweet-girl graduate” (8) that makes him “choke on such nutritious images” (5); while the photo album sufficiently creates a distance for him, he recognizes “that this is a real girl in a real place” (25).

Similarly, I attempted to compose/construct Larkin’s combination of sexual tension and displacement, particularly in my poem “leave the girls,” as I discovered that sexual tensions are as much a part of my physical reflections as my familial and cultural tensions - and you might even say, to some extent, more so. The connection between my sexual and cultural tensions became apparent contextually for me in my poem “homeland”: “beyond pastures / and knots of fields / in white churches / where we replaced / innocence with faith / and sin with guilt / my childhood grew”.

By degrees, my cultural tensions (which, as mentioned earlier, encompasses religious tensions) became an extension of my attempt to demonstrate displacement. In “Atlas” I write that “This world of mine, / vanquished from paper, absent from any globe, forfeits direction for loss”. This feeling of loss resonates contextually throughout much of Larkin’s, Justice’s, and Das’ work; in that capacity, they became the source for much of my creative energies conceptually.

Stylistically, I was compelled throughout to maintain no more than a page for each poem. Much as Larkin and Justice tackled seemingly complex issues in less than

a page, I felt the need to reflect that convention. Each poem became a snapshot, either of a particular self- reflection (familial, cultural, and sexual) or of my reflection (memory) of the past. Just as one might flip through a photo album and experience reflections, this collection of poems maintains the same effect. The exception to this device was the title poem, “understanding reflection” -- this poem tackled themes of reflection larger than a “snapshot.”

“understanding reflection” is the culmination of my attempt to “see beneath” the traits I felt my father passed down and create a space for us - but not so we could coexist, rather for me to understand my reflection(s). And as much as Larkin, Justice, Das, and Rich influenced me conceptually and thematically, I believe “understanding reflection“, along with the other poems in this collection, already existed. They just helped me find my voice. Consequently, I feel confident through “understanding reflection”, and throughout the course of this project, that I found the voice that allowed me to realize that “mirrors hold no more / than I let in” as much as they

[. . .] show nothing  
of who I am  
or where I came from  
the color of my eyes  
the tint of my skin  
the tilt of my nose.

In that respect, this collection of poems is representative of my discovery that while “[t]he picture, certainly, is in my eye, [. . .] I am not in the picture” (Lacan 96).

## I. Beginning Reflection



## **Letter to Philip Larkin**

Your words came  
before I did  
but they were mine  
scribed post WWII

Right now,  
I don't hear so well  
and I need your words;  
post-mortem, they are more alive  
than mine.

## II. Sexual Tensions

## Long Texas Shadows

The last girl from Texas,  
hiding her love in shadows,  
holds her own hand  
glances in mirrors  
sees nothing but herself

her state is bigger than her  
envelopes, as much as stretches  
across land, heart and body  
and the Midwest boy knows  
her heart has a border

he feigns ignorance  
holding on against boundary  
dreams her away on I-59  
into Arkansas, Mizzou, and on up  
borders, a distant memory

for her,  
high school football Fridays,  
beaches of Galveston,  
Houston Christmas shopping,  
Gulf swept air through her hair  
make for a strong border

for him,  
the last girl from Texas  
to hold his hand, his heart  
remains hidden  
in long Texas shadows

## **imposter**

glass and wine  
inside my mouth  
across this table  
distance grows a fever

you eat without prayer  
smile for glamour  
dabble in the art of now  
and I'll never know how

smaller and smaller,  
this restaurant, my meal, my appetite  
words meet, agree, fade  
and we eat without hunger

I feel tomorrow in tonight  
one eye on a green wall,  
another on a digital clock,  
I leave in silence

the pause I feel  
in doorways, outside car doors  
you take for love  
and I smile

your head on the pillow,  
dreaming a life of us  
feeling everything  
in bliss colored naiveté

my day will exist,  
somewhere in consistency,  
I will remember tonight,  
the small table, the big meal, your smile,  
your words that should have been  
for someone else

## Walleye Monday

I keep thinking of Monday,  
the fish fry's I never liked,  
walks on Lost Bridge Road

these words betray me  
walleye Monday reminds  
the distance is getting closer

Mondays feel like yesterday  
and yesterday bears repeating  
I know -- you are almost here

not sure how to say hello  
feels foreign, like Latin  
I'll feign a smile

I never did like fish  
minuscule bones scare me  
choking not my preferred way to go

swallowing you was harder  
I would choke on words  
smaller than any bone

and here,  
the stars run out of night  
faster than wanted

and in my bed,  
I wait,  
still, silent, sorry

knowing,  
you are a dream away  
and I sleep to dream

**November, 1995**

this poem  
is already too long  
I should have left  
and mourned with exit  
leaving words within

but here, shallow in thought,  
turning memory into regret,  
the yesterdays become countless,  
and the one calendar day,  
remarkable, irretrievable, congruent  
matches day upon day

your mark was impenetrable,  
a target unworthy of an arrow,  
I left no mark, not a blink was shown  
the overshot arrows  
became tombstones of their own

and Saturdays were unremarkable,  
from picnics in the sand,  
traipsing in sun downed land,  
leaving the moon to battle sun alone

I am left to learn  
from sun burned days  
memories are born  
to die in yearly reflection

**passenger**

Sacramento heat  
inside a grey Sunday,  
following me, heavy mercury  
where morning relief should be  
I wait for coffee  
leaving a world of Saturdays

Erin, we left the central states  
many rest stops ago,  
the west coast overtook us  
somewhere between Wednesday  
and today

clouded by a Sacramento Sunday,  
I smoke, just outside exit 21  
and I watch a woman securing  
her baby inside a car seat,  
fastened tightly in vinyl and faith

her love inches me  
inside reflection:  
your womb could have been  
a car seat moment in faith  
two hands tightening a heart

but leaving yesterday  
coffee sober, your picture  
wedged in a dust worn dash  
is stronger than any memory,  
and we will drive

**nameless diner**

I have eaten,  
and hungry still,  
moved on

bright day,  
breakfast in the air,  
I drive

the waitress,  
left in aisles, booths  
envies my road

and I carry her  
in fantasies  
too big for my pocket

interstates, highways  
sweet daydreams  
turning me

I will come back



**music in voice**

why the girl sings,  
for love, loss, to linger;  
I'll never know

but the voice, beyond the words  
ground my thoughts,  
giving them grave, silent rest

**mystery**

fast asleep  
wake to light  
and let me see

she is not awake  
she is not asleep  
she is somewhere in between

undiscovered amidst dreams  
dormant, mystical, and mine  
I will wait

**poem in red and gray (the sweater I remember)**

colors  
leave me colorless

demonstrate, ask for more  
dry what is parched

I have pronounced  
language colorful, lifeless

and the song I sing,  
leaves me humming in silence,

remarkably, I blink  
and blind, I wish for color

your sweater, unremarkable  
becomes a moment

and I wish to see  
red and gray

**reflection in border**

right in my eye,  
you look

I am peace removed,  
your clock moves backwards

and you have forgotten  
to forgive

you question  
my place in this country

I am lost in a place  
called America

coast to coast,  
is there a signal there?

the car radio  
plays James Taylor

and "Fire and Rain"  
moves on your lips

but I can't find my way  
out of this hunting ground

L.A., NY,  
did I get lost in it?

somehow, I crossed a line  
and border became a memory

**darkness and reason**

on nights of cold and dark  
brightened dimly by false light  
I bend my eyes on your naked back  
your curves come to me  
soft, and then hard  
like words well intentioned  
but with edges sharp

beyond darkness and reason  
I am still here

## the street

*When I see a couple of kids  
And guess he's fucking her and she's  
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
I know this is paradise -- Philip Larkin*

girls running  
in pony tail innocence  
campus at their heels  
boys,  
burdened by gender,  
sexualize their steps

the walk I make  
in the first five minutes  
brings me back,  
unremarkable cracked pavement  
supports, carries me

by degrees,  
age sheds illusion,  
parental warnings on sex,  
whether she's on the pill,  
wearing a diaphragm,  
blurs any illusion of bliss

and the bliss they make,  
beyond streets, in rooms with  
loud posters, caricature beauty,  
lingers, thoughtless and free

ageless, they run  
through days, careers, love  
on remarkable, smooth streets

### III. Cultural Tensions

## Atlas

This world of mine,  
vanquished from paper,  
absent from any globe,  
forfeits direction for loss  
shows no sign of life

I wait for sun  
pointing west, heading east  
and Polaris showing north  
finding my place  
in a celestial compass

I imagine sailors in a time past  
lost, sea strewn by storm,  
missing direction,  
waiting for sun and star

their mothers and lovers,  
fingers on an atlas,  
imagine their place at sea,  
wait for coastal greetings

but some never happened  
the sea, pulled in various directions,  
carried them beyond sun and star  
and they stayed lost



## homeland

beyond pastures  
and knots of fields  
in white churches  
where we replaced  
innocence with faith  
and sin with guilt  
my childhood grew

narrow, broken streets  
narrow, dreamless minds  
filling this small town  
resolute in conformity, virtue and value  
parading down Main Street once a year  
celebrating broom factories and beer  
and here,  
they forget  
long days, slow hours

the mayor,  
big in stature,  
small on ideas  
begins town meetings in churches  
and ends them in bars  
his son, groomed to fill his shoes,  
followed, eyes wide, ears open

but I never really listened  
train whistles, bus calls  
filled my background instead  
I find comfort  
in the mystery of faces  
under umbrellas,  
by street signs,  
and in tall buildings  
where I am just as much  
a stranger  
as they are

## **conversations**

everything on purpose  
everything fading

the bus stop in my neighborhood  
tells me the world is bigger than I,  
and a gray man tells me tomorrow  
will be sunny and clear

I want to believe him,  
his words weighted in years,  
I've been painting pictures  
of this town, 2700 strong  
limned in ripple-cubism,  
for years, my family in the background  
and while my back was turned,  
the sky grew clouds dark and gray

and on purpose,  
I miss streets cracked from sun and play,  
the farmer days in August,  
the smell of broomcorn soaked in air,  
distant girls in prom skirts,  
and Mr. James at my bus stop,  
talking weather

## **Macon County**

deep in here,  
farmers separate corn  
from stalk, good from bad

and that is why I leave  
I am changing  
who I am

colorful, desperate,  
scenes change, fade from yellow,  
to gray, and then black

a city greets me,  
indifferent, feeling nothing  
but my need to be there

borders have faded,  
and blended into one, many  
and the same

I am you,  
quietly, silently  
waiting for green lights

a hand waving us across,  
familiar streets, vacant seats  
in crowded L's, tight buses

destination our goal,  
forgetting the sky, the land,  
leaving corn for stalk

## **leave the girls**

swift promenades  
sifting through this town  
pompoms and skirts  
kicking legs high  
arms out, and their shouts  
eyes raised about  
streets swinging tandem  
the town stops, stares  
circles,  
and circles again

leave the girls,  
let them stand  
in promenades,  
in circles,  
in loud streets  
distance will fall in place  
names and streets, you'll forget  
the girls will vow, wed, leave  
skirtless, pompoms behind,  
left in closets,  
in empty houses,  
and in the hum of vacuums,  
in the silence of drying dishes,  
they will wish,  
they will miss,  
swift promenades

## Departures

I am today  
a poetry of departures  
vacant from notion  
distant from thought  
my exposure is absence

my town  
now grows without me  
twice the size I left  
borders expanded  
commerce exponential

men from Chicago, Springfield  
calculate land gains  
mall development, tax breaks  
and a school proximity  
much too close

my school now remains  
only in yearbooks,  
a new one,  
illustrious, grand,  
stands in its place

Pepsi machines, condom dispensers,  
resident health advisors,  
fill halls of aged innocence  
where guilt was a night away  
and morning brought a new day

## Variations on a Theme by Larkin

*But for the thought that nature spawns  
A million eggs to make one fish  
Better that endless notes beseech  
As many nights, as many dawns,  
If finally God grants the wish. – Philip Larkin*

### I.

All these faces  
some contorted  
most giving away nothing  
but behind their eyes  
lie concerns of mortgages  
credit cards, other lovers

### II.

I never feel as small  
as I do among this sea of faces  
so many parallel thoughts  
about broken lines  
fences straddled, and then crossed  
even the direction they are turned  
is the same

### III.

Towards a tall wooden pulpit  
where a man tells us to pray  
for the forgiveness due to us  
but God's shadow feels so small  
in that big room with so many pews  
with so many faces  
and behind my eyes  
I wonder just how  
it could cover all of us

## **the drowning**

white church,  
sweet music, old piano,  
the pastor and his soft words,  
holy water in my lungs;  
I am drowning

his hands, soft as his words,  
pull me up, but much too late;  
I survived,  
his words did not

## **birds of my neighborhood**

from tree to tree,  
my eyes have flown  
down from branches,  
inside backyards  
and there, between birch and maple,  
three houses into Tyler Dr.,  
a shirtless man buries rake into ground,  
pushes mower past fence,  
guides weed eater through bush:  
green, brown, and red unsettled

I have settled  
for the idea in the mirror;  
my hair will recede, eyes darken  
and the birds of my neighborhood  
will leave;  
I will leave with them



## IV. Familial Tensions

## tomatoes

thirty odd Kodak glossy prints  
of lives that came and went  
my mind bent on remembering  
for the sake of recalling  
the words of speechless faces  
gracing pictures that lend nothing  
to who they were  
so I'm wondering where the hamster cages  
and dog leashes have gone  
who's driving the '84 dirty grey Escort  
and is that house on Lulu still there?

six rows of red and green tomatoes  
neatly planted and cultivated  
smooth in texture  
soft in taste  
but utterly useless in photos  
reminders though,  
of one man determined  
to put out the finest on the block  
yet forgetting the fruit of his efforts  
in the confine of his home  
the one with his green eyes  
and sunken cheeks

## letters of sin

earmarked, silent sinner  
guilty of conscience,  
breadth of failure wide  
seven years  
in whispers,  
in thoughts,  
her love was elsewhere,  
at once captured, covered,  
and held for rapture

the discovery, as brilliant  
as the imagined letter  
blazoned on her forehead,  
came with her own revelation:  
charades tax the mind,  
obscure self reflection,  
leave a wake of conscience

sights and sounds  
and the itch she felt  
bends my father's eyes  
leaving dull blue on white

his rationale a parable,  
he writes anonymous letters  
to consoling publications  
Dear Abby, Dear Sir,  
"Where is honor . . . Where is God?"

responses void of answers  
he finds imagination  
stronger than fear

## leaving the fairy tale

hours in mirrors  
shaping hair, painting face  
in reds, greens, purples  
my sister,  
feeling Prince Charming a date away  
gathers her confidence in decoration  
sacrifices time for glamour

mother, in advice,  
points to the blue dress, black shoes  
and like that, Bobby James is here,  
his own picture of preparation,  
hair just the right amount of slick,  
brown Dockers an iron smooth,  
smiling on cue, and a condom  
secure in his billfold

father, in warning,  
points to his watch; Bobby nods.  
goodnights aside,  
their fingers touching, door closing,  
porch light underfoot,  
their night begins  
and I watch from my window  
as they kiss against car door

and now, years later,  
I think of my sister,  
her first date,  
and I hear her voice over phone,  
the sound of a newspaper  
in the background  
as she scans personals

**easy on the girl**

black belt love  
welted more  
than her backside

her curiosity  
lingered past pubescence  
overflowed into bars and beds

she claimed love  
was more than the making  
but that was all she did

**ghost on my wrist**

I'll wait for quiet  
steal a moment  
and feel your watch  
tightening on my wrist

time was never ours:  
golf games never played  
paint cans collecting dust  
pool cues forgotten

if I'm honest,  
I would regret nothing,  
understand your world,  
and move on in mine

but I know,  
you left me  
a fake gold watch  
and it haunts me  
like a ghost

## regretting Ann

this beautiful dream  
leaving a mark, like a tattoo  
etched in my slumbering mind  
where you are tucking me in  
kissing my forehead  
smiling, as if the world is right  
but you pause,  
just before flipping the light  
was it a sigh,  
or just another deep breath,  
and the deep breaths are becoming few  
and between them is a nothing so loud  
it echoes off my dreams

the hour is late with night  
and I'm given to the thought  
that makes her sharp  
in my mind  
leaving scratches, like memories  
but to regret  
an investment as rich  
as those three words  
is better than remembering  
the worse is actually the wear  
and the slow tearing  
of these childhood memories  
haunting not just nights,  
but days

and so I choose to call you Ann  
so please return the apron,  
the Black Hills earrings,  
the Mother's Day cards --  
they are somebody else's  
another woman somewhere  
is missing her apron  
her ears are noticeably vacant  
as is her mantle,  
with spots reserved for cards  
never received

she is the woman  
I was meant to dream  
it is her hand that tucks,  
her lips that kiss  
with a smile lacking  
the pause, the sigh,  
and the deep breaths



## **four corners**

it takes four corners  
to make a room,  
and this stubborn gray man  
with my eyes, my blood,  
but not my respect,  
seems to fill each one

more calendars have passed  
than words between us  
and now,  
he finds himself in a room  
with a numbered door,  
a chart dangling from his bed,  
men dressed in white,  
stethoscopes hanging over their scrubs,  
somber lines on their lips,  
words edged in doubt

and then, a man in black,  
cross dangling from his neck,  
offers him a chance  
to take it all back:  
the words, the silence,  
to make the distance closer  
but you, father, have gone too far  
and time is as unforgiving as I  
even as your last breath  
chokes out of your throat,  
I feel you leave the room,  
and now,  
I can see three corners  
from my corner

## **the traveler**

familiar, anonymous  
I stand behind you  
in train stations, at airports  
I am the traveler  
without destination

my worldly pursuits  
surprise even me  
lands beyond myself,  
grand, foreign, distantly familiar  
bring a new sense of home

and the faces I meet,  
through glass, in aisles,  
jealously carry my purpose  
in handbags, overnights,  
and photographs of faces  
expected at the end of journeys

but disappointment  
is stronger than expectation  
I will collect coins  
from Barbados, Liverpool,  
and empty my pockets in rooms  
prepared for one

## **mother in winter**

just past Williams St.  
barely into Lost Bridge Road  
I find you walking, eyes distantly  
carrying the cold air,  
feet creating a snowy path,  
and cars whipping by, ignorant  
of who you are

but I know,  
and I see  
red and grey creeping out  
of your lavender coat,  
and straight dark hair afloat  
in the January air

I still speak Spanish,  
but softly and alone:  
the words you taught  
remind of the way your lips  
would curl with *baño*

and your words, still here,  
heavy in my day,  
English and Spanish;  
I hope you are wrong  
and we are not reflections  
of other's perceptions

as I write this, angry at loss,  
seeing snowy footprints  
in bitter August,  
I realize much too late:  
it is you that  
I reflect

**patience in Levi's**

(patience was always  
too big for me)

I wish 30/30's were easier to find,  
mother, you tried

pants not my strength,  
I waited for you

strength, or no  
you gave me comfort, confidence

from needle, thread  
and a Sears sewing machine

patches in places,  
my knees wore thin

time after time  
needle after needle,

thread after thread  
and that damn sewing machine

banging against thin wall,  
scraping dirty white paint

father, feeling midnight,  
cried in impatience

(patience not strong  
with him)

## **Penance to a Father**

You will pray, words sincere  
on knees, alone  
and I will disappoint  
as sinners do

understand,  
take your hands off me  
I don't belong to you,  
you are a saint

I prefer  
to be a mystery  
let God sort me out  
on His own accord

time is His  
and I will borrow

## **understanding reflection**

I.

Dressed in clothes of the living  
wash worn, scrubbed, pristine  
nails perfected, hair neat,  
a picture better than life

this man's walk,  
ended slowly, in bed pans,  
nurse calls, morphine drips  
becomes grander  
upon its finish

rest well, father,  
in the hands  
of man made comfort,  
for a God that waits,  
a family that grieves,  
and a son numb at your exit

II.

A lucid gray sky looms  
over a dog grave backyard  
where the grass never grows  
by the cordoned area once home  
to neatly planted rows of tomatoes  
thru the garage  
where a '82 sky blue Fairmont  
is parked in its usual place  
three lawn chairs past the rakes and shovels  
through the spider webs  
next to an array of tools  
bought at Sears in the decade of Reagan

to a screen door hanging on rusty hinges  
a fading green plastic plant  
on a seldom used kitchen table  
next to an upright with its dust  
and the Zenith with its missing knob  
stacks of National Geographic  
circa 1975

the light switch  
which hasn't worked since 1969

III.

Father's ghost passed through me  
left a chill colander of memories  
strained through porous regrets  
of those three words left unsaid  
emotions banned with the motto  
"empty tissue boxes  
remedy nothing"  
his voice still echoes  
"an idle mind  
is the devil's workshop"  
so the wood pile never stayed in one place  
and the Fairmont still needed soap  
and a bucket of water  
in the onslaught of January

IV.

I am aware  
mirrors hold no more  
than I let in

I dye my hair, ask for clipper blade  
no. 2, wear colored contacts  
and still,  
you are here  
as if behind mirror  
your vanquished presence  
lingers, like aged skin  
on still air

V.

in truth,  
I am no longer here  
mirrors show nothing  
of who I am  
or where I came from  
the color of my eyes  
the tint of my skin  
the tilt of my nose

VI.  
and still,  
I need to reflect  
differently, singular  
supporting my own shadow  
without his godless eyes,  
dull tan, or his simple nose



**the nine year thought that became a poem**

I.

Lucid are the trailers of death;  
I am overcome  
by holy words spoken softly

II.

A man in black,  
cross dangling from his neck,  
told me God's will  
is often a mystery

III.

I have no use for mysteries  
maybe I am missing the point  
in the graves we dig  
the flowers we sacrifice  
or the dead we resurrect  
in memories and photos

VI.

The stench of wet grass  
and freshly turned mud  
the vividness of flowers  
and customary plants  
decorating the new home  
of my father's father  
how I want to feel  
what everyone wants me to

V.

Years removed,  
inside a building  
of forgiveness --  
you'd think  
I would have been there

## V. Leaving Reflection

## untitled

i have stopped writing.  
empty pages tell so much more;  
a blank whiteness, unparalleled  
showing a time  
when thought stopped,  
fingers, beholden to mind, freeze  
clueless in method, motive.

my brow, furrowed,  
bends my eyes  
further from paper  
and now separate,  
allowed to wander,  
does so,  
and my thoughts  
become paperless.

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