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Of the twenty-five poems collected in this thesis
all but two have been written during the last fifteen
months. Most of these poems have been written in the
free verse tradition, which is to say that symmetry depends
more upon rhetorical sequence than rhyme. Other than
that, the aesthetic of any singular poem I hold to be self-
evident.

A CURE FOR SHAPES

by

Rodney Glenn Jones

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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Approved by

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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THE BEGINNING AGAIN

Mornings, I welcome you to my
house. Chairs, with their emptiness,
their histories of oppression, paper
cups, used twice, good for nothings,
thimbles & manuscripts, their dead,
even weights: I put them aside.
The ocean & the odors of oil &
smoke, I sweep them into the next
room with the lake & the odor of
blood. Now I am discarding my
sighs, I am clearing the table
of my breath, I am mailing away
my hands. There is nothing left
of what brought me here. I wipe
the last features from my face.
You do not know me. I do not know
you. This is never said.

A

It is the first day of school.
I am having trouble
listening to the teacher's story.

The elephant, and the dog,
the two little girls, and the
boy, Tom,

are not making much sense.
Now she gives up altogether.
I am looking out the window

through the trees to the fence
and the men who live in
the future like breasts.

A sneeze goes down the first row like a list.
The teacher holds up a sign
bearing a single letter.

FIRST SUNDAY IN APRIL

1.

Chickens cough,
dogs murmur unintelligibly,

ahead,
just to the right,
the cracked pot-
bellied
stove
glows
around the dark lip
of the weld.

2.

In a picture on the wall
the Saviour has trapped
in his hands
a little portion
of the night,
of God,

in whom Raymond
labors with his wheel-
chair,
moving
over the mad,
loud
boards
to the altar
to be blessed.

WINTER IN THE CAPITAL OF SADNESS

In the parking lots
Before dawn
You can almost catch
The feral bombast

Cast on blank seas,
A moon gone flat
And the mountains shedding
Avalanche on avalanche.

Such a spare grass
For the snow to feed on:
Black city, the sky
Is a dead man's stomach

With no compassion
Or guilt in its dark
Glass eyes. You would laugh
At the distance

Between here and Idaho
The miles where men rise
From their puffed-up wives
To tromp through pig-lots

Carrying their telegrams
Of corn, their correspondences
Of protein, but when they
Are inside again and the fire

Is easing the needles
From their cold fingers
What message for you
Who hope pointlessly, as if

For a woman who never comes.
You cringe. You bury
Your head in your arms
Like a huge bullet.

You gaze through esplanades
Naked as stone mountains.
You take issue with the
Issue that is you.

LIFE INSURANCE

For Sam Maisel

When he has gone down a few
thousand
feet into the great
yawn of Kansas and the parachute,

like the book he might write
of surviving, has not
opened,
not once of the seventy or so odd

times he has pulled the cord and longed
for it to become a bus
or simply an itch on his left shoulder:
life insurance.

*

Or if you are a working
 man, a smallbusinessman
 interested in fast cars
 or a baker encapsuled in
 the grief with no name

recall the convalescent,
 think of the singular focus
 shining like a lure
 when the river is thrown
 at your feet, but you aren't,

can't be actually falling
 in love with death:
 life insurance.

*

Look, all a person can do is creep
around, lonely. Interior monologues
with a void named Wanda, and then
you are off for nowhere
in a rented car.

You are a lecher with your head down
dragging the sidewalk
for patent leather shoes.

Oh at the office
the droll paladin palming the deuce
the male nurse who faints at the sight of blood
will have to wait
with the telephone pole sitter
the woman about to be shot from the cannon.

The doctor is smoking a bone,
or as I was saying to myself the other day,
"outside jail, the danger
is that one may be disemboweled by a wrong-
shaped credit card:" life insurance.

*

Leukemia, cirrhosis, renal calculus,

Warren G. Harding,

Isadora Duncan:

life insurance.

Alexander the Great,

a teaspoon of water,

a man asleep in an aircraft factory,

a pencil in a shirt pocket:

life insurance.

BLUES IN F MINOR 7th

He holds to the gray
haired negro who throws
up on the Greyhound bus.
She leads him around

the countryside dotted
with bleak roadhouses
and clandestine saloons
until one day it happens:

he loses all memory
of his childhood, of
the evil swamp that ran
like a wilted curtain

down to the urine-bubbled
river. Of his woman,
there is only contagion
and this has gnawed away

his smile but suffering
is a saleable commodity.
Poverty, famine and drought
are the wry businessmen

who sign his checks.
Somehow his blindness
seems prepared for. The people
are in love with his scarred
face and ill guitar
and when he begins to play
his arms are open faucets
pouring into gramophones.

METAMORPHOSIS WITHOUT CONSENT

Something unfortunate
is happening in the bushes.
The witch, the goblin,
and the troll all contrived

in one calamitous glance
as Junior lifts magnanimously
the shoe the little woman
was just now wearing like

a god examining an airplane.
Subsequent fat reveals blemishes,
the marks of the spider on the
dim legs, a garter wobbling

like a sequined navel. Not
that Martha objects to the
dwindling breath or the sour
fingers chanting on her neck,

it's just that we should step
back, close the bushes, see
what preposterous things the
clouds are doing to each other in the sky.

THE PRIMORDIAL OOZE

Is it possible we've been out of it
so long? Mesozoic, Paleozoic, Precambrian--
words dispensing time, catastrophes
and fur the way a two year old might
flip his mother's seconal to the birds.
Could it be that we are actually emerging
as higher creatures, that some day Plato's
Heaven will be more like a basement or wine cellar?
In my bedroom I have a painting.
I have Katie Bender lifting a sledgehammer.
I have the Buddha sniffing a mushroom,
and poor Noah being straddled by his daughter.
In that light I have several bones to pick with the mud.
The anthropologist zips up his sleeping bag.
A silver trailer backs up to the tar pits.
In history, says Campbell, time is overrated.
I look at my wristwatch, hairy, horny, and hungry.

THRENODY WITH KIDS

The mosquitoes stumble. They
fall. The place of my failures,
my disfigurements: a bottle,

a mausoleum for spiders, a soil
as parsimonious as a tub, out
over the dresser, its pins and

ribbons, among the broken ankles
of the frost. The smallest thing
the largest thing. I understand

nothing. How deeply the point
of it all is buried. Outside,
right now, funny children dressed

up like visiting preachers
wag suitcases of leaves
across the yard as if they

were stuffed with important
documents. The baggy spots
in their shirts are the ghosts

of whores. That doesn't matter.
Each is himself and another. In
every town they will be the ones

who break up the frost, running
around in stories older than comedy,
kicking around their comfortable

misunderstandings. They are the
baby gods who drag the lake of fire
for the bones of their lost fathers.

THE STEER THAT ATE THE MOON

She's the one. You lie
down and water curls up
around you like a tulip.

Whoever she was before
now she's another story.

When the two of you

exchange calendars
you are the one shortchanged.
You hold hands like diamonds

only to discover
your knuckles bruised
and pitiful. You never

guessed loving her would
prove so dangerous. Point
blank it is a lot

like extracting glass
from the genitals of a
tiger. She's the one

alright, sent you packing
dated stuff, and then off
to that godawful farm

by the lake. Notice how
she eats the babka from
your soul, leaving nothing

but wrappers, and how
there's no time to play
the upright. Look. The steer

in the lot is eating the moon.
Now you see it. How
could you have overlooked

the gremlin in her hair,
the microphone in her panties.
Loving you, loving you

she gives you roses and
water on the knee. For her
you hold out the soda

that doesn't fizz. You
bring her something fat
and intriguing. Someone

else is out of the question.

Too late to lie or give
off an odor, so you hold

her like a breath of smoke
and blow out misery
like laughter. You smile.

All your affairs are over.

RUINING OUR LIVES

meant ignoring our own faces for years
the attributes of dead skin dead hair
that would have fallen anyway
had we not forgotten gravity

we were floating about twenty feet
above the room
when the question assailed us from below
who would rise to the occasion

the bondage was getting stifling
then we stopped fooling around with the stuff
it was time we were getting down
to genuine interests

the moon for example
the moon was so surrounded by meaningfulness
we could hardly see it
you must understand we were much older

withdrawing our voices from balloons
to invest in a still sounder silence
then for a moment looking in a mirror
our faces had not changed were not our own

II.

THE HISTORY OF THE

... of the ...
... the ...
... the ...

... the ...
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... the ...

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... the ...
... the ...

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A PROPHET OF THE ICE AGE

Every night in June
a man lies down with the big rocks
at the edge of the Tallapoosa River.

He knows the air won't last forever.
The late news frightens him
and the people who pass

above think of him like a sack,
but the river is a nice old cleaning woman.
She carries on. She always carries

on, and he brings her something like belief.
He brings it like a gift, lowers

himself quietly, whispering
the gray names of the rocks, the blue names of the stars,
and the white name of the river's daughter.

THE PINES

The kisses of the elderly
are inflated with helium.
Their blind genitals are like rabbits

waiting to be born.
They go to the window looking.
Collage of trees, asthma of motion.

The nurse comes to turn off the lights,
her biscuit chin,
her twittering,

and there are the ambulances.
Often there are the ambulances,
the drivers gin-weary, cursing,
a noise just inside the ear,
hollowness,
death's hearing aid.

SENTIMENT

Geneva, I cannot recover
The cumbersome ballast
Of my sister's virginity,
And I cannot reclaim
The geranium and sandals,

Your gifts that I lost
While I learned this:

Take more than the minimal.
The assumption is never enough.
Your religion, your risk,
Is a windmill. Today

You are 54
And the incumbent planets
Whittle at your cheeks
Like dead sparks
Off a love

You have never known.
I will hand this
To your father
Who is over ninety,
Spry enough to pinch Jacqueline,

Yet too elderly to tell
You that your children
Are tireless for being
So unborn. They
Are no longer possibilities,

Serving an unwanted time,
And they will
Not recognize you
Now that it is beginning
To be night. Walk
To your little chicken-house,

And reach into a gourd
Half-filled with straw
For one egg of praise.
If it exists, thank you

For your suffering.

When you fall

Our hearts will recoil,

And the moon on our hands

The width of an eyelash

Will mumble something

Of how lonely

The stones are.

AT NOTHING'S UP

The general's chipped blind
by ignorant woodpeckers.
The sun's the hottest act in town.
Cigarettes doze under anemic moustaches.

Ladies flirt with parking meters.
Nothing's up. Magnolias sleep,
and the pawky streets unwind
toad frogs, snake-doctors, milk-

barns. Something seemed possible
once, at the end of the war,
when the women's arms opened like grocery stores.
Something actually happened here:

murders, electrocutions...who knows?
All day we are what we are: events
with torn shirtsleeves, shy pederasts,
repetitionists who pop up accumbent

to watermelons in the photographs
the girls from Washington take north.
At night, way out in the country,
we turn into dark houses.

FOR MY FRIEND SHOT SIX TIMES BY AN IRATE HUSBAND

Glenn got shot.

Six times in the half dark

While the sun was locked

In another time zone

The dull bullets

Jammed through his neck

Like tiny kamikazes

And his hair exploded

Like a bag. That was all.

By the time I got

The call it was light.

I sat in the kitchen, musing

Scorching my hands,

Watching the morning

Open its umbrellas of blood.

When reporters came

Turning the body over and over
Like a scrumptious invitation
I said nothing.
Dead men don't do

Unearthly things,
Certainly almost never
The remarkable buck and roll,
The sexy, epical fidgeting

You see sometimes
In the old westerns.
Death has no sides:
When men die

They die inward
And their knees crackle and pop
Like bad connections.
When Glenn got shot

He fell simply
And heard
In near wiregrass
The last obsidian rustle

Of the splintered wings
Of dead june bugs
The children had left to rot.
Not that it shocked

Us; he drank
Straight whiskey
And drove a truck
But we were distressed

To carry the cumbersome
Baggage of emptiness
Step by step
Through the town's voices

Turning, turned all
The way up on the googol-
Gospeled jukebox of grief
And mental pain. Glenn,

I am going to put you down here.
There is nowhere to carry you.
Souls or systems
We are conveyed by absences

To actions impossible
For others to comprehend.
Now old men stand around
And talk of your going. They nod

Like drugged shetland ponies.
They are as disheartened
As strikebreakers.
They fear you, your settlement,

Or worse:
Under the closed roads
Invisible dust trucks
Are picking up the universe.

ADVERTISING

The breath is predatory
 and the miners
 go down between the teeth.

Near night
 they emerge with a cloud
 which they impatiently

hoist to the typist's desk
 who writes on it,

"Smile a lot
 and won't you please try
 our Broken Home Bread."

THE MICRO JOURNEY FROM THE HOUSE OF RELIGION

It is like walking
On the skin of a banjo
Walking with you
This early in the green season.
I can hear our steps

In the pinpoint eardrums
Of tiny insects
Who clutch each other
In a world of tall wires.
Complexity envelops them

And seeing everything
A thousand ways
Drives the green blood
To a frenzy. But
They have their own faith

And their own genius.
Consider the bee.
Think of living in a house
The size of a sundial.
No room for

Extra furniture. A love commode,
If you insist. But nothing extra-
Ordinary. At the base of your being
There will always be innocents
Alive in your own knees. Come
We will keep a bible
In a fuse box
And wait for love
To wake the creeping,
Electric ivy in our skin

EXTENSIONS OF WATTS BAR DAM

Here where bass flip and stagger
To a dazzle of slow blue water
Carp dive to fondle the courtesies
Of rich alluvial floors; logs sidle
And shake to splinter against the wall.
Across the evening the dam rises;
Rock against the river's softer idiom.
Through the turbines, in speed's multiple
Snow, the thrumming song, the giant's
Voice in chains, the housewife hears
When the faucets whisper, something
About how the water spills everything--
Obscenities, threnodies, or no, how
The current catches fires, races through
Vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, mixers,
Or it is all in dreaming. At night
When the water goes down on the knees
Of its shoals. Oak Ridge burns
In the cobalt distances.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

When stagecoach wheels
sounded like a party
in Kansas the fold out
in our family bible was
the angel of death:
at night, almost certainly,
molasses, cornbread,
a glass of milk
and an honest prayer
for John Wilkes Booth.
But the last of the avengers
has gone now: Uncle Adlai
who went mad, rattling
the glimmering hobo rails
with a blue heat

at the base of his tongue,
preaching the secret deal
that sold the South

down the river,
Uncle Adlai, who lived
in nigger town a year,

hating it like a swamp
oozing into his boots,
returned to make it good

selling burial plots,
gave all to cerebral palsy
and died in bed.

PERSPECTIVES

A photograph of a man.

A photograph of a man
taking a photograph of a man.

A photograph of a man
taking a photograph of a man
taking a photograph of a woman.

A photograph of a man
taking a photograph of a woman
taking a photograph of a man.

A photograph of a woman
taking a photograph of a man
taking a photograph of a photograph.

A photograph of a photograph
containing a man a woman
another photograph of a photograph.

III.

-- If the power were yours
 to make me a man of
 your own mind
 I would be glad to
 have you as my
 friend and ally
 in all my
 struggles
 for the
 betterment
 of my
 race
 and
 the
 world
 at
 large
 I
 am
 sure
 that
 you
 will
 be
 glad
 to
 do
 so
 for
 the
 sake
 of
 the
 human
 race
 and
 the
 world
 at
 large
 I
 am
 sure
 that
 you
 will
 be
 glad
 to
 do
 so
 for
 the
 sake
 of
 the
 human
 race
 and
 the
 world
 at
 large

A CURE FOR SHAPES

--If the power were granted you
to break out of your cells

Stanley Kunitz

In that second my life
plummeted into a boat
rolling on a sea of fat
I kept thinking of myself
on the shore
waving goodbye
then walking back
through the rectangles
throwing off
the fashions of my shapes
as I was getting smaller
smaller than I had ever
remembered being
when I was a boy for so long
in the brute absolute hour
on the flange
of the red horizon
eaten by dry fires
as I heard myself asking
is this not the ship
of the heart's impurities
ash-hulled

enviored with stars

and mud

is this not the hour

when the child

crawls back

inside his navel

disappears in gills

or is implicated

in clocks

in that second

when I plummeted

into the boat

I kept thinking of myself

waiting

then walking back

through the circles

on the other side

WHAT I'M LIKE

The dogs, my neighbors, all
 come from the best families
to touch my cool hands, my cool brow
with their warm, miraculous paws.
 Since this is the dream where I'm
the huffing saviour, wrestling the souls
of a whole state of non-survivors
 into the moist barn like bales
of lespedeza to feed the dreamy cattle,
no one may sleep. The angels never
 show up, but here is the rain,
a mild poison, a fly on my blistered back,
and I squeeze it from my underwear.

 The wind, like a grim and unappreciated
schoolmaster, begins to go over my footprints,

and justice, that vast and dismembered eye,
hangs over the city where I live like
a blimp full of hatchets. Is it time now

for the screwy chemist to turn over the culture?

A mysterious disease yokes the doctor
to my breastbone: he hears a burglar walking

on his mother's flowers with very heavy boots.

This is a very healthy sign. He guesses
I am going to be alright. In a day,

possibly two, I will be like a new man,

or a butterfly rising from a moulding shoe
into April. Dear Reader, I wonder, what are you like?

THE MEANING OF HISTORY

John Wilkes Booth took fate

by the balls,

but something was awry.

They rushed him from the dank barn.

The execution was clean.

Elsewhere it was otherwise--

rags and donkeys.

Two days a week

the poor gathered their heaps

of misfortune.

By morning in history it was light.

The edge of the sun over the mountains
sustained us.

I stood in the valley like a man

on the floor of a stadium.

I thought that the trees

were watching me.

OBSCURITY

It is an invitation to the light dance.
A sample of the star's seed.
The interrogation of the blue tick's moon song.
The mailman carrying the black envelopes
containing the sheets of salt.
He lays aside his obscure bag at dark.
With his hair he writes his name in the sink.

Another man opens his eyes in a white room.
There is a woman in a white gown.
There is a white light swimming in the bulb.
Then the light drowns.
It swallows every kernel of his conversation.

The greasy window carries it like a bad radio station.
It is a water-sight, the unbelievable
fortune. Now it is diving under a glass-
bottomed boat full of middle-aged
teachers in mini-skirts. They will never
understand. The deaf know the songs
of forgetfulness. They must study sound
under a microscope, accepting what they see.

The dark shapes elude themselves.
Nothing of the night rhymes;
only the quail wing and the dog shaking off water,
only the dilations of the cat's eye and the possibilities
are endless. Nevertheless

the generalities are still less
than comforting. The possibilities are endless.
Trash or palace, shed or frozen dinner.
Come to the museum of the light heart

where the random image may take
you home with it. It may be a cigar
squiggling in a lens or a bottle
of very rare old eggwine.

There have been experiments
and stories of imminent capitulation
where the deer dances hopscotch
before the gun. The revival
leaves an elephant's footprint.

And the people you know
are lighter than imitation mandolins.
Dead psalms make nothing happen.
Take the command:

and on the road to Ankara
 stop at Istanbul
 to deal with the General
 problems of the poor.

Call it returning to tradition.
 The guard at the gate will question you.
 Show him your pass of darkness.
 Take a cave to wrap yourself in.

THE THOUGHT OF DOORS

If we tend slowly
to the flooding aisle
our minds are dead
with the gentleness
of leaving.

Outside the door
there is room for the ocean.

But the film is over,
the screen's eye shut.
This is after THE END.
Like oil-clouds
on white water
we must rise together
bone to bone.

And on your feet
you may turn or toss
like a stubborn shuttlecock
disturbed or lost
in your one thought
of being mixed and poured.

The door is an hourglass
eye. It is a funnel's cellar.
Seep through to the dark
The stars will beam you home.