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Exile by design

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EXILE BY DESIGN

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Julie Bauer Lewis

December 2003

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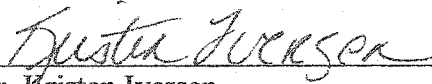
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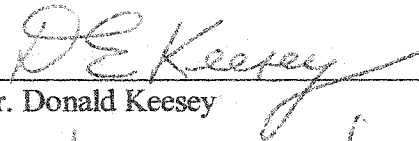
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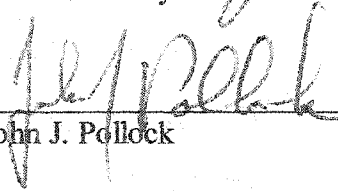
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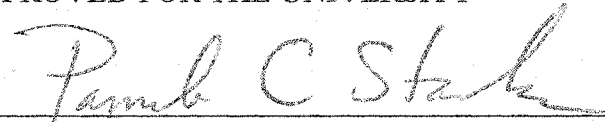


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ABSTRACT

EXILE BY DESIGN

By Julie Bauer Lewis

Exile by Design is a collection of thirty-four poems prefaced by a critical introduction and unified along the theme of the disenfranchisement of the post-radical feminist. The work also explores the validity of New Formalism as a vehicle for artistic expression in the twenty-first century.

The introduction discusses various influences on my poetry including the sounds and cadences of Jacobean language in the King James Bible, the metaphysical conceits of John Donne's poetry, and the resurgence of formalism as a component of poetry in Dana Gioia's work. The poems that follow are organized into three sections that examine the phases of maturation in the life and work of a contemporary woman.

Affectionately dedicated to
my family members for their endless support
and my *Enchanted April* ladies for their generous encouragement.

With sincere thanks to

Kristen Iversen

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of the poems in this collection were published (two in slightly different form) as follows:

Reed: “Ambush,” and “Freeform”

The Formalist: “Rambler”

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Introduction

My journey as a poet began relatively late in life. After a twenty-year break in my college education, I went back to school to finish a degree, any degree, and chose English under the naïve impression that it would be easy and that I might actually have the fortitude to finish. I have had the fortitude to finish, but certainly not because it has been easy; rather, it has been fascinating. In the last semesters of my undergraduate program, I took my first creative writing classes, again looking for an easy finish. Once more, what I found was deeply fascinating. So here I am: a wife, a mother, a career woman, a student, and finally, a poet. That this road has been winding is hardly surprising since, at its start, I had no idea where the end might be. My goals were always immediate and accidental, dependant upon whatever circumstance opened or blocked my progress, and only in retrospect, by virtue of arriving at this point, can I see that my experience was leading here. Retrospect, however, is a wonderful gift, and a necessary one for a poet. Looking back, I recognize stylistic elements, writers, and cultural influences that helped form my foundation as a writer.

For better or for worse, my poetry is a mix of formalism and post-radical feminism. It is an odd combination, and I have suffered for it. Writers I respect have called my work “dreadful garbage,” “suffocating,” and “a fraud.” And I have, by turns, believed them and hated myself, and believed myself and hated them. Now in a fleeting moment of maturity that could be replaced at any time by crippling self-doubt, I say so be it. My poetry is what it is, reflecting the unique influences and experiences of my life.

As I began to consciously look back over the formative process of my work, I asked myself what writing, for heaven's sake, gave me such an internal appreciation of form. And in asking the question, I found the answer: writing for heaven's sake. I was weaned on the King James Bible, learning the content, of course, but also internalizing the rhythms, the cadence, the sounds of the words. For gold stars in Sunday school and treasure in heaven, I memorized verse after verse of King James English: "Study to shew thyself approved, a workman needing not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

What words were more lovely than those in the Psalms or the Song of Solomon? What meaning was more potently offered than that of the New Testament parables or early Christian church letters? What depths of emotion were more thoroughly plumbed than those expressed in the prayers?

A portion of the passage from The Song of Solomon, Chapter 2 reads as follows:
I am a rose of Sharon,
 a lily of the valley.
As a lily among brambles,
 so is my love among maidens.
As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
 so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
 and his banner over me is love.
Sustain me with raisins,
 refresh me with apples;
 for I am sick with love.

I have spent my life being taught to decipher the meaning of writings like this in respect to their significance in the ethos of Christianity, to recognize their foreshadowing of

grace, to find importance in their relation to doctrine, but what invariably resonates in me is the musicality of the words themselves, taken out of their religious context. These are words of love, and, according to novelist Richard Bausch, love is the only thing worth writing about. But more than merely words of love, they are poetry, and while liberties were no doubt taken with their translation, the verses are beautiful. Highly imagistic and metaphoric, the old words, from an even older text, remain fresh and evocative.

A New Testament passage, 1 Corinthians 13, is by no means a love poem. The letter is instead admonitory, warning the new followers to behave in a charitable fashion:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.
Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,
doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in truth;
beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Though there are some good examples of imagery in the passage, the message here depends less on image than on rhetorical parallelism. The letter is a veritable goldmine of anaphora, epistrophe, antithesis, simile, metaphor, and personification. Did I know all these terms as a child? Of course not. But the internalized rhythms and stylistic nuances found a permanent home in my thinking and an outlet in my later expression.

In this collection, several poems contain Biblical or religious references. Perhaps the strongest reflection of influence is in "Meditation" in which the speaker tries to reconcile faith with perception. Other poems, "Legacy," "Rambler," "Eviction," and "Twentieth Anniversary" for instance, make more subtle connections to my lifelong immersion in the church.

I am not such a Puritan, however, that the Bible has been the only influence on my writing. In 1981 I took English 1B in a night course, thinking that someday I might want to finish my BA, and the course might come in handy. I have long since forgotten the instructor, probably a part-time TA, but I clearly remember his interest in the poetry of John Donne. Relatively young and impressionable and predisposed to an appreciation of Jacobean language, I began an infatuation with Donne that persists to this day.

Donne discarded the tired existing model of self-deprecating Petrarchan love poetry with its conventional endless adulation of the mistress. Instead in his poems he expresses the many moods of love from whining dependence to sharp cynicism to powerful attraction to sacred devotion. Love, for Donne, could be playful, wicked, sensuous, self-serving, transcendent, and even holy. Many contemporary critics of Donne found his poems to be uninspiring. Ben Jonson began nearly two hundred years of negative criticism by faulting Donne's poetry for its profanity and its inconsistent meter. When John Dryden used the term "metaphysical" to describe Donne's poetry, he was disparaging the use of wit at the expense of artistry. Later, Samuel Johnson accused

Donne of constructing outlandish paradoxes that were pretentious, indecent, or both (Young 121).

In his rhetoric Donne draws illustrations from science, philosophy, and theology as well as from personal experience. Although he uses images of the cosmos like “the trepidation of the spheres” in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” (Washington 49, line 11) he is just as likely to use more mundane images, like the legs of a compass, in the same poem. Not all of Donne’s imagery is sublime. One could hardly make a sacred connection, after all, with a flea. Even the mature Donne, who shifted his focus from the sensual to the spiritual, continues to build his rhetoric around a mixture of the secular and the sacred. In “Batter my heart,” Donne compares his stubborn heart to a “usurpt town” that God must “o’erthrow...force...break, blowe, burn” (3-5). “Batter my heart” is an oddly violent poem with both a siege metaphor and the metaphor of the Divine Lover, and with a paradoxical freedom through ravishment (Sanders 129). Not surprisingly, critics felt that Donne had overstepped both stylistically and rhetorically. I find it ironic that now many readers find Donne’s poetry too metrical, too highly stylized, too constrained. Fortunately, his poems have withstood the crucible of critical disapproval and the test of time to continue influencing poets today.

I have constructed many of my poems around an extended, and I hope metaphysical, conceit. Look for the mundane standing for the profound in “Del Rio,” “Rambler,” “Tea,” “Poplars,” and others. And I have included my version of a complimentary verse to John Donne in “Dear John.”

If my ear was trained to appreciate formal, even archaic, language, my mind is unapologetically twenty-first century. I am a child of television and pop culture. My teen years were influenced by cold war politics and second-wave feminism. Throw in a Fundamentalist religion, Air Force jingoism, thirteen different schools, strong family ties, and finally, a liberal education, and the oddly fashioned shape of my literary foundation takes form. Bits of all these influences find their way into my poetry through a voice uniquely my own.

I have been influenced by contemporary poets as well. Although I resist the urge to write confessional poetry, I cannot deny the importance of poets like Sharon Olds and Anne Sexton, who open up to me the possibility that poetry can be deeply personal. Although I do not particularly like beat poetry, poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac teach me to recognize the value of socially conscious poetry. Although I do not appreciate language poetry, I recognize in it a playfulness that makes words accessible. And, of course, I *like* some modern and postmodern poetry and poets. The works of T.S. Eliot, Edna St. Vincent Millay, W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Theodore Roethke, Galway Kinnell, Adrienne Rich, Li-Young Lee, and Dana Gioia come to mind.

Lately, and this is subject to change at any moment, one of my favorite poets has been Elizabeth Bishop. Her poem "One Art" combines formalism with elements of confession and feminism in a villanelle in which the subtly decaying form reflects the content. From the light-hearted first stanza with its highly formal meter and rhyme:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
So many things seem filled with the intent
To be lost that their loss is no disaster.

to the aching despair of the last line with its looser meter and rhyme:

--Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
The art of losing's not too hard to master
Though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Bishop creates an environment in the poem that is free of cloying sentimentality while full of moving sentiment. Never does she weep and whine about her lost love. The reader learns the depth of her loss by interpreting the crumbling stoicism in the decay of the "art." Her poetry, in fact, succeeds in the most fundamental purpose of art: transcending the mundane with glimpses of the sublime.

The writing of Bishop's student and protégé, Dana Gioia, strongly influences my understanding of poetry's place in today's world. Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts, is a poet, critic, essayist, commentator, and educator but is perhaps best known for his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1991, in which he discusses the role of poetry in contemporary culture. If his essay questions the validity of post-modern poetry, his own work proves it. Gioia's brand of New Formalism bridges the gap between academic and subculture poetry.

In the 1991 article, Gioia states that "American poetry now belongs to a subculture [...] no longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life." Although poetry programs are proliferating at an astounding rate, and the specialist audience is expanding, general readership is declining. Mainstream magazines publish very little poetry, and "journals that address an insular audience of literary professionals" are reluctant to fairly evaluate and critique their submissions, diluting the quality of their

content. According to Gioia, “Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers. And in the process the integrity of the art has been betrayed.”

Detractors of Gioia’s views accuse him of declaring that poetry is dead. But they misunderstand Gioia’s point. “Poetry has vanished as a cultural force in America,” they correctly quote, stopping one sentence short of what Gioia sees as the future of poetry, “If poets venture outside their confined world, they can work to make it essential once more.” Gioia suggests regaining general readers by experimenting with oral forms, by mixing poetry with other arts, especially music, and by honestly critiquing poetry. He contends, “It is time to experiment, time to leave the well-ordered but stuffy classroom, time to restore a vulgar vitality to poetry and unleash the energy now trapped in the subculture.”

In “Notes Toward a New Bohemia” (1993), Gioia expands his views on the state of American poetry. He observes that a shift from print culture to oral culture necessitates the same shift in poetry. To that end, populist oral poetry—rap, cowboy poetry, performance poetry, and slam poetry—has emerged. Interestingly, most of this poetry is formal, using the formerly elitist art of rhyme and meter. New Formalism, suggests Gioia, “misleadingly portrayed as an academic literary movement, is actually of a piece with rap and cowboy poetry in recognizing the auditory nature of poetry.”

If something so seemingly mainstream as formalism can be perceived as avant-garde, where is *really* avant-garde work? Gioia contends that without a discernable,

definable mainstream, there can also be no avant-garde. The new bohemia exists in its very decentralization. It will continue to be “atomized, decentralized, interdisciplinary, computerized, and anti-institutional.” Far from being dead, poetry will continue to expand in ways impossible to predict as poets embrace the challenges of the post-postmodern world.

Gioia’s own work leans unapologetically toward New Formalism, often exhibiting engaging, but not overbearing, rhyme and meter. His writing is measured, his meaning carefully construed. Yet Gioia recognizes the limitations of words. “Words are imperfect,” he says in an interview with Maggie Paul of *Poetry Santa Cruz*, “but they are all we have as writers. And they work well enough in the right hands to do the job. Part of poetry’s job is to make language work better than it does in everyday conversation or writing.”

In my own poetry, I am learning to forego the relatively easy trap of sentimentality in favor of legitimate sentiment. I am also attempting to combine my love of formal verse and antiquated language with a contemporary voice. Most of my poems retain recognizable and consistent metrical patterns, and many are obviously formal. I have included several sonnets, “Morning sonnet,” “Adversary,” “Sonnet 101,” and “Venus Rising,” as well as “Exile by Design,” a poem that would scan as a sonnet if I had made the line breaks at the appropriate places. I have also included a blank verse, “Rambler;” two villanelles, “Exercise from Hell,” and “When All is Said and Done;” and a split couplet, “Freeform.”

This collection is divided into three sections: Legacy, Exile by Design, and Sympathetic Echoes. The names are evocative of stages of a life journey in which the traveler learns from the past, struggles with its lessons, and ultimately forges a purpose for the future. I have written these poems as a wife, mother, career woman, and student seeking to maintain a personal identity in a world that often demands conformity. I do not attempt to alienate or vilify men; I simply write from the only perspective I know. In some of the poems a voice emerges heavy with cynicism and disappointment. While I would prefer not to wallow in these sentiments, they are nevertheless valid, and their expression in my poetry reflects sincere emotion. I hope the poems in this collection transcend my personal experience and find an intersection of resonance in the lives of their readers.

Part One

Legacy

Legacy

Mother taught me to clean the sink and toilet
and haul the brimming bucket around all day.
My tired back and aching hands become
a fitting testament to our martyrdom.

Work without ceasing; make everything ready.
Wait for the night with its promise of rest.
Tattered edges surround a shrinking center;
sharp little rats' teeth of responsibility gnaw.

Beautiful shapes slip through the shallows,
brightly colored beads on a plain cotton string.
In dreams I discard the smooth pearls
tossed before me, my unwanted inheritance.

Del Rio

I came to mom's sharp whistle
that pierced my play,
and called me home.
The quickening wind whipped stinging grit
against my skin, my teeth,
crusted my nostrils, the corners of my eyes,
stuck to my sweat
like the goat heads sticking to my socks,
as I cut across the vacant lot
behind the house.
Like a tumbleweed I blew into the yard
in a gust that dusted sheets
and socks and undershirts,
the still damp whites
mom was yanking from the line,
too late. And all for what?
The wind scoured the eaves,
scratched the windows,
insinuated itself into every crack,
but the anticipated rain never came.
The thunderheads, their monstrous anvils
flattening in the frozen heights
passed to the north,
left behind a spattering of heavy drops,
pockmarks in the dust,
a restless child,
a basket of ruined wash,
the taste of static in the air.

Rambler

When daddy got new orders we moved on.
Our boxes packed and labeled, quarters cleared,
with every tiny smudge of us erased,
to pass white-glove inspection when it came.
Checked out of school and said goodbye at church,
and never looking back, we hit the road.
We piled into the Packard or the Dodge,
or stuffed the little blue-green Rambler full:
the four in back too tight to sit at ease,
like penguins in a crowded rookery
they flapped and jostled, breeding discontent,
while I sat up in front with mom and dad,
my sneakered feet propped on the drive-train hump,
a world away from all back seat disputes.
We stopped beside the road to eat our lunch,
the tailgate down to hold our picnic meal
of soggy peanut-butter sandwiches,
grape jelly weeping through the soft white bread
into the dent made by some wayward fruit
that shifted from its place, unauthorized.
We drank from Dixie cups that we held out
beneath the spigot of the Thermos jug
before we packed it all away once more
and loaded back into the stuffy car,
not stopping then 'til in the growing gloom
the neon motel signs flicked into life
to beckon us with promised vacancy,
just as the sun slipped past the earth's dark lip
and gnawing, hungry shadows swallowed us,
five hundred miles from where the day began,
a hundred hundred faded days from here.

Tea

I have a box of things.
They smell, even now, of "Don't touch,"
the musty scent of damask rose
folded in the doilies,
the serviettes, the tea towels
cocooning old pots and cups,
enshrouding costly figurines.
The milkmaid and the shepherdess
stand hem to hem, pail to crook,
their ruddy cheeks a parody of health.
They smile, commiserate with me,
the other silent figure in the room,
conspirators in a grand charade.
I reach out to touch
the milkmaid's little white cap,
jerk back, startled by a shriek
from the kitchen, the sudden scream
of the kettle's escaping steam.

Eviction

I don't want you living in here anymore, mom.
You take too much room that ought to be mine.
It's not that you haven't been helpful;
I know that queens and princesses never fidget,
ladies do not shout, God loves a cheerful giver.
Trust me, I believe I'll be hurt
if I run with scissors, color outside the lines,
make eye contact with a stranger.
Don't worry, I could never forget
all you've done. But you have to go.
It's crowded in here, and it will just get worse
when I move into my daughter's skin.

Family Album

We never were romantic types;
you never saw the value
in saving up our memories
to savor later on.
I didn't store them carefully,
preserve them intact
with crisp corners and clever captions
to dust off someday
and impress the kids.
It would be nice
to remember, unsmudged,
our first kiss, some pretty words,
but the colors have faded.
I vividly recall the silent years
when saying anything was a mistake,
when the babies were our only joy,
their sticky hands
our family's only glue.
Now here I am and there you are,
but I find I can't picture
the way it used to be.

Twentieth Anniversary

Turn out the light,
I'll put down my book.
But don't tell me now
about tire rotation,
worn shocks and struts.
Not a word about
buying seamless gutters,
renting a pressure washer,
replacing the windows,
the tile, the carpeting,
the cracked linoleum,
the spongy caulk.
Don't talk to me
of peach-leaf curl,
Bermuda grass, dandelions.

I promise not to mention
PTA or progress reports,
the band boosters fund raiser,
I won't discuss
drama practice, Sunday school,
piano lessons, overbites.
I won't dredge up
unpaid debts, things we've lost
and never found,
aching scars of old regrets.
Let's talk instead of love,
the kind that has lasted
twenty years and shows every sign,
like the mildew in the grout,
of never going away.

Valediction

Think of me when you go.
Pack me in your bag,
stack me with your cd's.
toss me among your things,
remember me with your toothbrush,
carry me in your make-up bag.

You are ready to leave.
I want you to; I do.
But I will find a long hair
caught on the shower door,
I will find a mateless sock
of yours and cry.

How pathetic, obsessive,
unhinged—I know—
none of the things I want for you.
But from time to time,
if it might do you good,
think of me thinking of you.

Titania's Advice to Snow White

Look hon, I'm not saying this can't be fun.
All I'm saying is be realistic.
Look at you, all dreamy.
You think Prince Charming is coming
to sweep you off your feet.
Well, wake up and smell the coffee, Princess,
he's more likely to be some half-ass clown
in a cheap suit, making promises he can't keep.
Trust me, I know;
princes are few and far between.
I'll admit the pickin's have been slim
out here in the sticks.
But let's face it, you're a pushover.
It's always the same.
One minute it's all fun and games,
the next thing you know,
you're doing the laundry.
Classic self esteem issues.
Someday your prince will come.
Yeah, right. Let's look at your track record:
Frumpy, Dumpy, Stumpy, Sleazy,
Cheater, Doper, and Gay.
Can you spell Loser?
Of course, it's up to you,
but I'd think twice about some guy
who's never done a day's work in his life
as my choice for a shot
at happily ever after.
Sure, he looks good now,
but after he gets you off in that castle,
where does the story go from there, hmm?
Those tights don't hide all that much, you know.
Think long and hard
before you make up your mind.
Maybe even sleep on it.

Sister

I miss you now before you're even gone,
a maudlin waste of time, trying on
this hair shirt of loneliness.

I smooth cream across your paper skin,
along your chilled bird-bone fingers,
murmur old memories, storing them
like preserves set up for a hard winter.

Remember making snow angels on the car
in the pristine powder there?

It was your idea. It always was.

Mom was mad because you soaked your mittens.

And I was mad because you went first,
out of turn, leaving me wanting
to trade places, to be you, flat on my back,
an angel with cold hands.

Encroachment

We laid the brickwork ourselves:
measured, leveled, graded for run-off,
used good redwood two-by-fours,
filled the strong partitions
with clean masonry sand,
butted each brick flush with the next.
But rich black earth now fills the cracks
in our fine handiwork.
Moss and grass and ants have found
a foothold in our path,
and Saturdays are spent
evicting squatters from their homes.

The moss takes hold between the bricks
and given half a chance,
the grass springs up as well.
Its delicate shoots belie tenacious roots
that spread along the cracks,
force runners under the blocks.
Ants, too, have crept beneath the walk;
telltale piles of sand ring tiny holes,
entrances to a subterranean city.
How many times will they move their nests
from the flood of a garden hose,
only to return and set up house again?

Part Two

Exile by Design

Exile by Design

I don't remember anymore the way to you.
The road not taken overgrows eventually,
until there comes a day when nothing's left of it,
and no one knows where things began
but only where they ended.

I am lost by conscious choice, an exile by design.
I wouldn't care except I hear a nagging critic's voice
that endlessly reminds me of my place behind you
in the ruts that you have worn.

I know it would be easier to pace along in step
with you, and I am torn between your way and mine.
But I will go since this path is the only one I know.

Poplars

Something killed the poplars by the road.
They turned, in time, to silver ghosts,
and then were gone.

I used to watch them every fall,
extravagantly flaunting all their gold,
like pagan brides who wore their worth
in sparkling bangles on their arms.
They waved their wealth seductively
among the evergreens, the drab old maids
who waited year to year along the wall,
never squandering their lot
in wasteful, vain display.
Perhaps their way is best,
those somber evergreens;
they stand there still beside the road.
And yet, I miss the poplars' dance.

Morning Sonnet

I lie awake, wide-eyed, alert, deprive
myself of sleep. It is an old routine;
my nasty little demons seem to thrive
on too much stress and afternoon caffeine.
In retrospect I know it is the case
that night distorts and shifts reality.
My worry and my weariness erase
the boundaries of triviality
while every gnawing doubt intensifies
until grotesque inventions supercede
my logic, infiltrate my head with lies,
scenarios of ruin guaranteed.
But morning always washes clean the slate.
The terrors of the night evaporate.

Ambush

There should have been some warning:
a lipstick smear on his collar,
yellow credit card slips in his breast pocket
from the Airport Hotel,
a teasing tendril of cologne
clinging to him like some night creeper,
not letting go even in the bright, hard morning,
the stale, brown smell of cigarettes,
the ones he quit a year ago,
catching him at least in that lie.
Or maybe he could have said something:
dropped some casual, cutting remark
about crows' feet or cellulite,
or the way she clacked her nails
against her coffee cup,
or ground her teeth in her sleep,
or a dozen other deadly sins.
But there was nothing so concrete.
Elbow deep in a diaper change,
her mind, of necessity, on other things,
she never saw it coming.
He leaned against the doorframe,
surprised them both by saying
I don't love you anymore.

Santa Ana

Last night the wind came from the east,
all wrong, hot and dry,
subsumed the gentle westerlies,
prowled through every gap,
bullied every branch,
broke the ones that wouldn't bow,
tossed them at my window pane,
woke me from a restless dream.

You walked through my woods,
rustled through the underbrush,
always out of sight,
teased me with almost silent sighs.
I nearly found my way to you,
but startled at a howl,
a scratch against my window,
reached out and you were gone,
the room all wrong, hot and dry.

Forbidden Fruit

You can't take what I won't yield,
fill your head and feed your pride
by plucking what is mine.
I won't strip my own grove bare
for your out-of-season harvest.
You can't reap what you don't sow.
Almost everything is gone,
and I'll hoard what I can glean
in meager stores until the sweet ferments.
Did you think that I would fall again
for sugared words and honeyed charm?
Take your empty hands and go.
Leave me with my hard, green culls.
I'll eat until I sicken, but will not,
will not share a taste with you.

Constant Reminder

The clock ticks much too loudly in this room,
this clock that never once has kept good time,
that needs a daily winding with a key,
that runs too fast at first and then too slow.

*I like this clock, you said. Just count on me
to keep it wound. And for a while you did.
But over time the clock became my job.
Now I'm the one who keeps it running.*

A little inconvenience—only a minute of my day,
a simple concession to keep things working
as they should. The chimes mark the hours
passing unsteadily as the gears wind down.

The Way of Things

If in the evening a rabbit screams,
the coyote moonlight shifting coyly
through leaf clutter,
shattering in the frost prism of a cobweb,
is no less lovely than before.

And if in the night a dove coos,
fingerlings of starlight darting slyly
through calm shallows,
resting at last in deep still pools,
are no less cold than before.

And if in the morning a woman sings
to the salamander sun rising steadily
through fogdown blankets,
burning away the promises of the night,
she is no less wise than before.

Missing Link

You stupid boy, what earthly use is there
in all your strutting like a rutting stag
and locking horns with any male who comes
between you and some estrus trail you're on?

Hardheaded boy, last time I looked at you
your head was bare, no rack of antlers there,
the place where they would be so usefully
converted to the lobes of higher thought.

Dimwitted boy, does comprehension dawn?
Just try and follow me; I'll make you see
the logical progression—horns to head
as more than just a place to hang your hat.

Poor backward boy, it's really not your fault
you're such a mess. I'd have to say I guess
you're just a nature-nurture cocktail of
testosterone induced misogyny.

Pathetic boy, you're almost up to speed,
and pumping hard I know, but still too slow.
I'll bet your spinning head begins to ache
there at the stubs of your vestigial horns.

You stubborn boy, you're never going to change,
invested as you are in some bizarre
conspiracy with Papa Hemingway,
both antler sharp but hollow as a skull.

You're the Best

Ooh baby, you're by far the very best—
I've never met a more accomplished jerk.
With arrogance beyond compare, you smirk
your way through countless enemies. The test
you fail, of course, is if you're ever blessed
with friends. Oh never! That would be a quirk
of fate you'd rectify. You'd have to work
too hard, behave yourself, be less obsessed
with number one. Do you reflect on times
(in mirrors?) maybe when you could have been
a little self-absorbed and probably
a tad obtuse, oblivious of crimes
committed? Certainly you don't, since then
you'd have to probe what you don't want to see.

Adversary

Don't sidle up to me, your hat in hand,
with glib apologies I can't accept.
You know the social rules—you're so adept—
to all your friends, your merry little band
of misfits and inebriates, you'll say
"See how she is?" I'll have to bear the brunt
of censure from your gang of sycophants
when I decide to turn and walk away.
If you could even find the missing part
of us, the little, hidden spring or peg
that used to make two pieces one, I'd beg
you not to let me know. My foolish heart
would rashly jump right back into the fight,
my intellect defenseless but dead right.

When All is Said and Done

I wait impatiently in silence, still
remembering the careless things I said.
And you are angry; you have had your fill

of all my caustic words. If looks could kill,
then surely I would join the restless dead
who wait impatiently in silence, still,

eternally atoning for the chill,
the frost that crept into our marriage bed
and made you angry. You have had your fill.

Ignoring me you turn and face the sill
to snatch the book there you had left unread.
I wait impatiently in silence. Still

my lips have always thawed the ice until
tonight. I kiss your hand, your heart, your head,
but you are angry; you have had your fill

of me. Tomorrow at some point I will
apologize, but not just now. Instead
I wait impatiently, in silence still,
since I am angry; I have had my fill.

Meditation

I wake anxious and look for you,
the night filled with formless worry,
dimly mirrored visions of the day
where every thread that holds
is stretched too taut.

I look to you who lets the lily bloom
and fade, who knows each sparrow
that falls to earth—and still it falls.
Where can I rest my hope,
find comfort in your constant indifference?

I wait to hear your voice and hear instead
the clamor of unnumbered tongues
who claim your ear and call your name,
their causes righteous or just
as righteous as the next petition
that falls back unanswered to their lips.
Their fragile faith can move a mountain
but only if you want it moved.
Here at last I stand on solid ground,
find comfort in your indifferent constancy.

Part Three
Sympathetic Echoes

Freeform

She doesn't like my work at all
and tends to call
a verse with meter, iamb, rhyme
a waste of time.
She says that form confines, that it's
a straitjacket
that suffocates a poem 'til dead.
I should instead
let human nature take its course,
howl myself hoarse
with honest feeling from my core—
no metaphor.
Discard conventional antique
ideas that seek
to stifle creativity
and still the beat
that pulses from the heart within.
And only then,
without conformity, I might
begin to write.
And yet, I know she doesn't see,
for me, form frees.
Released from words' frenetic rush,
there in the hush
beyond abstract, indignant noise
I find my voice
where sympathetic echoes fall
in timeworn halls.

Dear John
A letter to John Donne

Why did you wait so long, John?
Were you content to rest in the shadows,
or did you despair there in the stacks?
Did T.S. need to coax you out,
or did you jump, like a flea,
into his open palm, ready to suck
new life into your dormant words?
You woke me up, you know,
a lazy student, sleeping on the job,
battered my heart, one person caught
behind the pale of suburban sameness.
You broke the rules, John,
beat gold to airy thinness,
stirred the sacred and profane,
mixed compounds and complexes,
a metaphysical concoction that
confounded critics in its non-conformity.
Who cares? Well I do.
This is all your fault.
I might have been content to sleep,
but you were not.
Now restlessly I count and rhyme and
pace along your metered steps,
scanning your footfalls, following you.

Le Tome Beau

Le ton beau
de Marot,
Qu'est-ce que c'est,
Julie Raye?
Do you know
le bon mot
left unsaid
in his head?
Simple word;
quite absurd
to think we
ever see
open-eyed
what he tried,
in his way,
not to say.
This is sure:
words endure
crystal clear,
more than mere
strokes and dots.
Complex thoughts,
not revealed
nor concealed
by the pen,
lie within
and below
le tombeau

Sonnet 101

Potential poet, if you are astute,
you will have noticed that from time to time,
your sentence order you must convolute
successfully to perpetrate a rhyme.
Concerned about annoying articles?
Your prepositions never squishing in?
Don't fret; you'll fit those pesky syllables.
I' th' meter o' th' sonnet, syncope is our friend.
And, finally, if nothing comes to mind,
coherence seems to slip right from your hand,
just call yourself post-modernist; you'll find
that no one, then, expects to understand.
If this be offal, well, 'twas my intent
to sonnetize it to my heart's content.

Exercise From Hell

I cannot write a decent villanelle.
It is a chore to me I must confess,
a writing student's exercise from hell.

A subtle, higher tone would start to swell,
and lead the reader ever toward some crest,
if I could write a decent villanelle.

Here inspiration should kick in and tell
me what to do to finish off the rest
of this writing student's exercise from hell.

But proper words won't come. I know full well
that crest and rest aren't perfect rhymes of fess,
and I can't write a decent villanelle.

Philosophy's a bust, transcendence failed,
and Roethke's climbing worm is just a pest
in this writing student's exercise from hell.

Perhaps some more allusions here would help.
But no, relax, I sense your groaned protest.
I cannot write a decent villanelle,
a writing student's exercise from hell.

Touché

You cut me
with your well-honed words
and I bleed from every jab.
It's for my good you say,
this public exhibition
of your swordsmanship.
You think my skin is thick,
the quick much deeper than it is.
I hide my hurt, just smile
and say I get the point,
and wait until I'm home
to analyze my injury,
answer every stroke.
You cut me and I bleed,
But as I sharpen my own blade,
master, the question is:
what will happen
when yours grows dull?

Venus Rising

They're wrong; the ones who say "Don't hold your breath."
They have forgotten what it is to wait
impatiently, suspended in a state
devoid of everything but consciousness
of elemental need, a keen distress
alleviated only by a great
release. They never stop to contemplate
their own mortality this side of death.
To drown is easy; so they say who've tried
and failed. You simply make yourself submit,
inhale the numb oblivion, and then
the rest of it comes naturally—you've died.
But who would really know the truth of it?
The ones who tell the tale can breathe again.

Wish List

I wish I had a house in the hills
with acreage and a barn,
a studio, a solarium, a pool,
a guest cottage, a grand view.

I wish I had a '73 Jensen Healy ragtop,
midnight blue, chrome bumpers,
leather buckets, burl wood panel,
original radio, four on the floor,
zero to sixty in six seconds.

I wish I had a private jet
and time and money to burn,
traveling wherever and whenever I pleased
to Sydney or Rio or Paris or Beijing.

I wish I didn't want.

I wish my children were the best
and brightest, cleanest, most talented,
well-behaved, straight-A, responsible
reflections of flawless genes
and perfect parenting.

I wish they were witty and charming,
with style and understated flair,
their ideas intelligent, their words facile.

I wish they would grow up
to be brilliant and philanthropic,
master cold fusion, cure the common cold,
find life outside the universe,
end world hunger, facilitate global peace.

I wish I didn't wish

Suburban Lullaby

It is almost quiet here,
a stillness marred by traffic noise,
a muffled murmur of truck tires
along the distant freeway ramp.
I have grown accustomed to the hum,
and to dogs that bark and whine
from time to time beyond the fence.
In spring, I have a mockingbird
to share the night before the gray false dawn.
Surely it would get the worm,
rewarded for its early song,
a widely varied repertoire of shrills
in endless repetition, sets of four.
At dusk I hear the frogs:
the tiny creek behind the yard
resounds with their cacophony,
their love song raucous,
beautiful to other ears.
In summertime, a cricket
sings beneath my sill,
a counterpoint in almost perfect time
to someone's salsa music down the block.
I make myself an uninvited guest,
dancing to the rhythm
of a borrowed melody.
At autumn's decrescendo
a final caravan of wild geese
hurries along, horns honking in the rush,
to find a place to settle before dark,
like the truckers on the road below.
Tonight the winter chill has stilled
the thrum of cricket, bird and frog,
and I am left with just the freeway's song.

Reading Between the Lines

Gentle Writer:

Insignificant Drone

Please forgive the impersonal nature of this reply.

Another form letter for your growing collection

The truth is that

your poem stinks

we have very little space

for sophomoric drivel

and must return the vast majority of pieces,

entirely unread

including some admirable and interesting work.

unlike yours

Do not let this temporary setback

fail to

undermine your confidence.

if you have any left

Give my regards to the Muse.

should you get within shouting distance

Best wishes,

on your career change

Poetry Editor

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