

*CLUTCH*

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2009

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Bauge, Jessica M. *Clutch*. Master of Arts (English/Creative Writing), August 2009, 50 pp., bibliography, 14 titles.

*Clutch* is the title of the creative portion of my thesis as well as the name of my theory ‘clutch’ which I outline in the preface section. The purpose of the clutch theory is to recognize modes of inspiration in the body, heart and mind so that the poet can consciously move beyond passive receptivity to engage inspiration more fully. Mechanically, to “clutch” does not mean to create inspiration, but it is the opportunistic, spirited encouragement of these moments of inspiration and, more importantly, the direction of the artist’s own response in moving from inspiration to creation. The clutch process unfolds through three centers: body, heart and mind, where we initially encounter inspiration. And, through a discussion of three notable poets’ work, Henri Cole, Li-Young Lee and T.S. Eliot, the relationship between a completed work and clutch as a process further explains the boundaries of each mode.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their kind words and support I thank my professors, Bruce Bond and Corey Marks, who have helped me earn the right to call myself a poet. To my husband who supported my venture through graduate school. And, to my fellow students, Bredt Bredthauer, Ed Casey, Taylor Collier, Renee Lyons and Octavio Quintanilla, who willingly read, critiqued and encouraged my work; they have been an amazing part of my journey as a student and poet.

I also would like to acknowledge ZAUM, the literary journal of Sonoma State University, for originally publishing *The Building* in *Zaum* 13. And, finally, to Li-Young Lee who, in his 2008 visit to UNT, made a comment on inspiration that spawned an idea which grew into my theory, 'clutch'.

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PART I  
*CLUTCH*

### Three Modes of Perceiving Creative Inspiration

Clutch is the instant the artist feels the presence of inspiration and refuses to let it go. ‘To clutch’ means to acknowledge and linger in the presence of what has inspired so as to encourage synthesis of feeling and thought, a precursor to the writing process. Clutch, as a process, should be recognized, practiced and repeated so that it is honed into a skill so the poet can actively engage and respond to inspiration more freely. Clutch also places, in ample amount, responsibility on the writer to respond; rather than assuming that the writer is subject to the whims of inspiration or that the writer is merely a vessel waiting to be filled. Inspiration may sound as clearly as a bell or be as muffled as a voice in a rain storm. Nevertheless, for the artist to gain satisfaction and manifest the desired creative results, understanding where the artist has control and exercising the three modes of clutch – body, heart, and mind – will facilitate the writing process.

I hypothesize that, as artists, we already engage in some sort of occult selection processes, deep within our minds or psyches, where we choose which inspiration, which idea, which awareness to bring to light and immortalize as a poem. Poet Wallace Stevens’ comment when accepting the National Book Award in 1955 acknowledges this kind of selection process: “It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize” (Pearce, 64). Stevens sees his selection process, and the poems he never realized, perhaps, as a challenge against which he fell short. He states that he “did not have the strength” to manifest his “true poems” thereby acknowledging both that there were works waiting to be written and that the poems he did write



were somehow achieved according to his strength, his ability. He clutched only those poems he could.

What is in the body, heart, and mind rubbing against the world? We are filter and junk drawer, full of memories and events. Like Stevens, perhaps each artist carries around a vast, untapped and dynamic collection of potential poems. It is the pool from which we draw; perhaps it is a collective, unending pool each poet dips his or her pen into, some taking more than others, each making something individual from the resources found there. But, that the creative process includes some sort of controllable selection method is not often conceived. In fact, these methods are not visible enough to even be called processes. Instead, poets often refer to chance, serendipity, those ah-ha moments that make us stop what we are doing to grab a pen: or to the thrill of discovering a new way to transition between stanzas which opens a poem in a whole new direction.

Inspiration might wait for the alignment of many parts, and, even when the alignment engages us, we accept or decline based on how we feel at that particular moment – some moments being more opportune than others – and we write what we want when we want.

This may summarize how many artists feel about their creative process. There is, however, the potential that for each inspiration we clutch onto, a thousand more we have declined all in an unacknowledged process of elimination. Our best work may be the work we have refused to write because our response to inspiration is to ignore it rather than use it as an access point into the writing process. Or, like Li-Young Lee, our challenge may be in choosing which inspiration to take hold of when there are so many choices. Lee, in a 2008 interview with Liz Logan in *Poets&Writers* explains that “There are connections everywhere, and everything sounds like a poem, everything’s the beginning of a poem.” Although inspiration may find us a

willing vessel, our busy days, busy lives also can act as creative dams. And so, in response to this (or in willful act against this) creating and writing becomes a deliberate practice moving us against the demands of life. Maintaining the will to respond to inspiration is where clutch is most valid as a theory in practice.

The early 20th century poet, Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet* discusses the practice of writing vigilantly and faithfully: “only be attentive to what is arising within you, and place that above everything you perceive around you. What is happening in your innermost self is worthy of your entire love; somehow you must find a way to work at it” (56). Rilke issues a challenge by stating that artists should not rest but must be aware of what inspiring notions arise from within. But, by elevating one’s awareness of what rises from within, I surmise, brings us only to the halfway point. Just like training one’s own mind to, “think positively” is it not also possible to train the self to linger in the presence of inspiration as though it is a skill to be acquired? Perhaps this is what Rilke means when he says “find a way to work at it.” And, by working, or clutching, we may in fact be tapping into the secret that great artists have always kept to themselves – seizing those moments of inspiration regularly so that they become more numerous and creative output is enhanced. A poet who discovers how to use clutch and exercises it like a muscle, can more easily dwell in the liminal space between releasing control and grasping inspiration. This establishes a process that acknowledges the importance of active engagement with inspiration, a cycle of A) recognizing when inspiration occurs no matter how vaguely felt and B) responding positively by acknowledging the inspiration and accepting its influence so that it becomes a tool. This cycle of recognition-response can transform the approach to writing. Clutch therefore demands that, rather than feeling subject to the whims of

inspiration, the artist is in control of a process that otherwise largely remains outside the realm of consciousness.

Each poet can know only for herself what clutch process might dominate her writing. For this reason I will reflect on the work of three very different poets as a way to explain how each of the three modes, body, heart, and mind, work. However, I am not attempting to categorize these artists or suggest that their writing somehow corresponds to a “type.” I have merely chosen to differentiate the three clutch modes by choosing poets whose work I sense is emblematic in some ways of certain clutch elements. These artists also demonstrate that one of the three modes of clutch often dominates what an artist produces and the emotional, spiritual, and mental landscapes they respond to. Most poets, however, work within all three modes to varying degrees.

Which clutch mode is dominant is decipherable based on characteristics of how a poem is written, how a poem responds to editing and whether the poem is anchored in the physical, spiritual or intellectual. Clutch-mind poems are intellectual musings on the human condition: an exploration of existence and society that is more abstract than physical engagement with the world (clutch-body) but less numinous than poems that strive to elucidate on the spiritual realm (clutch-heart). A dominant realm in which a poem dwells can be sensed as we read another author’s work; their process leaves a type of “signature” that hints to how that poem arose. The poets whose work I’ve chosen to discuss include contemporary poet Henri Cole to represent clutch-body, Li Young-Lee to help discuss clutch-heart, and modernist poet T.S. Eliot to represent clutch-mind.

## The Three Modes and Their Characteristics

The purpose of the clutch theory is that by understanding what clutch is – body, heart and mind – the clutch theory becomes a way to better recognize modes of inspiration so that the artist consciously moves beyond passive receptivity to engage inspiration more fully.

Mechanically, to “clutch” does not mean to create inspiration, but it is the opportunistic, spirited encouragement of these moments of inspiration and, more importantly, the direction of the artist’s response from inspiration to creation. The clutch process unfolds through three centers – body, heart, and mind – where poets encounter inspiration.

### Clutch-body

The clutch-body process begins as a reaction to experiences which have a strong visceral component. Poets collect raw material through the senses and make meaning of experience. Gabriel Josipovici in his book *Touch* describes how the body helps us make meaning. To Josipovici, physical participation with one’s surroundings is the primary way to begin engaging with the world and with one another. “For we are embodied, and it is our bodies which give us common access to the physical world; in other words we are participators, not spectators, and it is through embodiment that we participate” (Josipovici p. 6). Participation, then, is active, demanding the physical use of the body to interact with and develop an understanding of the world. Simultaneously, the collective experience of the physical generates a common ground to which we all respond and from which the poet gathers material. This gathering process is unconscious. Clutch-body poems arise from an occult synthesis of matter that has been collected

into the self over time. Correspondingly, clutch-body as part of the writing process is activated by our physical surroundings, by nature and the lived environment. It is as though matter (incidences, physical activities, objects, sounds), once collected, responds to that which is still a part of the world. The participation and reaction of our senses to the physical world (external) with what our body has collected over time (internal) transforms into poems anchored in visceral experience, rich in details that evoke the body's senses. At its best the body divulges vibrant metaphors that are sensual and rich enough to encourage a reader to place his or her self into the poem's frame. Fragments of memory can be twisted into a morning routine; making a bed might recall a lover; each instance of dissonance presents the possibility of a poem.

Henri Cole's work is indicative of clutch-body because he writes about his participation with the physical world while also creating an emotional space in which he can respond to his experiences both past and present. "I came from a place with a hole in it" begins the poem "Sycamores" in the book *Blackbird and Wolf*, "my body once its body, behind a beard of hair. / And after I emerged, all dripping wet, / heavy drops came out of my eyes, touching its face" (lines 1-4). Cole harnesses the energy of the physical, "I emerged, all dripping wet", to synthesize human experience, often from the first-person perspective, in order to make meaning. From his essay "How I Grew" Cole points to part of his own creative process by saying, "I do not want to relive what I have felt or seen or hoped along the way, but I do want to extract some illustrative figures." Clutch-body poems also often tap into the psychological without laboring over language or idea. Although language must still be precise, the core of the poem is not to explore the human construct of language; instead language is the manifestation of the poet's exploration of the physical realm and the sensations and emotions found there. In *Middle Earth* Cole writes:

Deadheading the geraniums, I see myself  
as I am, almost naked in the heat,  
trying to support a little universe  
of plackening pinks, wilted by rain and sun,  
stooping and quivering under my scissors  
as I cut the rotten blossoms from the living,  
as a man alone fills a void with words,  
not to be consoling or point to what is good,  
but to say something true that has body,  
because it is proof of his existence.

The signature of the clutch-body process, in Cole's untitled epilogue verse at the fore of *Middle Earth*, is the preoccupation with the physical as a source for determining the depths of the human soul. The verse's narrator is like a decisive, introspective god who inspects both a universe of geraniums and his own existence. Clutch-body, as relates to Cole's verse, is attuned to physical participation and use of the body as a tool to understand and make greater meaning of experience. The poet can focus on moments pulled out of time, such as birth, and meditate on them from an imagined visceral, all-knowing vantage. "I came from a place with a hole in it" at once brings us to Cole's birth; we see his mother in labor; we fill in the details of the physical because Cole leads us to do so. But, as Cole confronts his birth, both poet and reader are drawn toward larger questions, in this case, the fragility of the human experience as represented by the fading geraniums or the fragility of creation, "as a man alone fills a void with words".

The clutch-body mode is propelled by physical interactions with the lived environment. Josipovici speaks of synthesis, between the body and its surroundings, by explaining that "whether for a three-year journey or a ten-minute walk, is also, mysteriously, a bringing to life of parts of oneself which had previously lain dormant" (p. 9). In other words, energy inherent within new experience potentially acts as a catalyst within the artist's body thereby stimulating the debris that the body has collected over time. Then, this burial ground of unknown and hidden

treasures comes to light as the artist collides with the lived environment in ways that allow that the body to release; memories and perceptions are experienced as inspiration. Although there is no sure way to determine Cole's own writing experience, surrendering to the interaction between the lived environment and the body's collected matter enables the artist to examine what rises and clutch what bubbles to the surface. Awarenesses, memories and sensitivities buried in the body find a reciprocal event or "moment" in daily life. As these connections are discovered, the body responds by exploring new definitions of self by discovering what has been awakened.

The body requires certain types of uncharted physical experiences, not the externally directed experiences that we so often have in our rushed, work-a-day, entertainment overloaded world. For the poet, a walk for the purpose of exploration provides time for synthesis because it also encourages mental deliberation. By occupying the body with a task and simultaneously allowing the mind to be alert yet relaxed, both the body's experience and the mind's state of perceiving are enhanced. It is a different, more favorable experience for intercepting and processing creatively than watching T.V. or a movie or taking a walk expressly to get from point A to point B.

### Clutch-heart

Poets who write in the clutch-heart mode often create work that grows out of a desire to reconcile the mysteries of life and human boundaries more clearly. This realm of mystery includes such phenomenon as God, death, love, suffering or the origins of life. Poets writing in the clutch-heart mode also will seek inspiration and fuel their writing by engaging subjects that push the boundaries of human conceptual capacity. Looking to Noam Chomsky's theory of language as a natural object to explain further, we can conceive that poets like Li-Young Lee use

language to reach toward the outer limits of the mind's capacity to rationalize by seeking to understand beyond the boundaries of physical or mental existence. Chomsky states:

As for the matter of cognitive reach, if humans are part of the natural world, not supernatural beings, then human intelligence has its scope and limits, determined by initial design. We can thus anticipate that certain questions will not fall within their cognitive reach, just as rats are unable to run mazes with numerical properties, lacking the appropriate concepts. Such questions, we might call "mysteries-for-humans" just as some questions pose "mysteries-for-rats."

Although the comparison between human intelligence and rat intelligence is jarring, we nevertheless get a clear picture of the limits of the intellect. The nature, however, of the clutch-heart poem is to push beyond the boundaries that encapsulate human experience in order to understand more clearly our place in the universe. But what tools do poets possess to explore the far reaches of our intellectual and spiritual landscape? The heart is both conduit and implement, a tremendous source for receiving inspiration and connecting us to the universal despite the confines of mind and body.

For the poet, the clutch-heart domain also is the most inexplicable. It is here within the clutch-heart mode that inspiration comes with practiced attention. The poet may need to engage in tactics – perhaps emptying the mind to provide a 'space' without activity or abundance – to enhance opportunities when inspiration can take root. However, the tradition of writing spiritual texts in the western world was, for many centuries, the domain of the church, its philosophers and saints. Not just anyone could be inspired to write spiritual texts, or so they thought. Simon Brittan, author of *Poetry, Symbol, and Allegory: Interpreting Metaphorical Language from Plato to the Present*, discusses how poets began to change this idea: "The long tradition of scriptural interpretation from Augustine to Aquinas essentially appropriated the spiritual world for itself" (38). But "poets began ... to seek justification within the tradition for seeing their work as



conveying spiritual meaning” (38). Brittan attributes this reversal of course to the influence of Dante who persuasively made a case for his *Divine Comedy* to be read as a spiritual text. Poetry has maintained spiritual underpinnings through the ages, elevated most notably by the Romantics. Writing in the clutch-heart mode does not always indicate that a poem will focus on the spiritual. However, like Dante and the Romantics, poetry can be both expansive and instructive, pushing the reader into a spirit-filled territory. Today, contemporary poets who write within the clutch-heart domain, like Li-Young Lee, tread in spaces visited traditionally by mystics and philosophers, those who believe that what lies beyond the intellectual mind is glorious, not sinister – a place of ecstasy.

Like other poets who write from a clutch-heart mode, Dante also differentiated body from heart in a way that further clarifies the differences that exist between the two. Brittan quotes, “heart is meant allegorically as ‘the secret place within’ from which his words come, and not literally as part of the body” (Dante, *Convivio* 2.6, as cited in *Poetry, Symbol, and Allegory: Interpreting Metaphorical Language from Plato to the Present*, 2003). Brittan continues by saying that “the nature of heart is interesting because he discusses it... as something recognizable by its effect rather than by its physical presence” (38). This effect is what I would call surge: creative pressure that demands the artist to create. This surge is felt most strongly in relation to the clutch-heart mode as opposed to the other two modes. Moments during which the poet can let the heart race to its conclusions, relinquishing control of the critical mind while words pour forth, are characteristic of the clutch-heart process. Li-Young Lee demonstrates how clutch-heart allows the poet to reach beyond a temporal capacity for understanding to repossess a spiritual connection with his deceased father:

I buried my father  
in the sky.

Since then, the birds  
clean and comb him every morning  
and pull the blanket up to his chin  
every night.

I buried my father underground.  
Since then, my ladders  
only climb down,  
and all the earth has become a house  
whose rooms are the hours, whose doors  
stand open at evening, receiving  
guest after guest.  
Sometimes I see past them  
to the tables spread for a wedding feast.

I buried my father in my heart.  
Now he grows in me, my strange son,  
my little root who won't drink milk,  
little pale foot sunk in unheard-of night,  
little clock spring newly wet  
in the fire, little grape, parent to the future  
wine, a son the fruit of his own son,  
little father I ransom with my life. (*Little Father*)

The significance of Lee's father to Lee is amplified by the complexity of how he reaches beyond the threshold of death to pull his father's image back into the living world. For his father to remain a part of Lee, Lee must intuit a journey – create a map, so to speak – with which to open passages. To bring his loved one back, he translates his father's absence into a new relationship with what is concrete; his father resides in the sky, in the earth and within the poet. He uses physical objects to ground the ethereal, spiritual nature of his relationship with his father. The sky, a house and wine each draw the spiritual into the concrete, the spiritual realm being the primary realm Lee explores in *Little Father*.

The heart seeks connection and will move beyond boundaries by harnessing the energy of the spirit. Indicative of the clutch-heart mode is the surge that helps poets cross the boundaries of the self in search of greater connection, not only with our selves and God but with the people who surround us, our family and friends. In writing a clutch-heart poem, the element of surge can be overwhelming in that poets may feel transported to another time/space: they enter the poem which they are creating as they create it. And, once that surge retreats, it is difficult to recapture the poem's point of origin. For this reason, clutch-heart poems also are more difficult to edit because the poet must find a way back to the poem's initial point of origin.

### Clutch-mind

Clutch-mind poets thrive on a symbiosis between the interior mind and exterior constructs of the human collective mind. Clutch-mind poems may evolve our understanding of man-made concepts within which and around which we live. When poets use the clutch-mind mode, they make inquiries into cognitive phenomenon within themselves as well as into the social, political and religious components of human culture. Clutch-mind poems do not evolve from an inspection of those more vulnerable spaces: body and heart. The mind, in its controlling nature, can dominate the writing process and not relinquish control as it must when writing more organically, as in clutch-body. Noam Chomsky speaks of "internalist naturalistic inquiry," a process which relates to the poet who "seeks to understand the internal states of an organism" (134). The mind then and its constructs are the organism of concern. Poems that result from this form of inquiry often come off as cool or intellectual; they may offer more cerebral approaches to emotional or personal subjects or raise questions that challenge staid traditions. Clutch-mind poems, because of the cognitive premeditation, also respond more easily to the editing process

than clutch-body or clutch-heart poems because criticism also originates from a similar top-down response.

Clutch-mind differentiates from clutch-body and clutch-heart because of this movement away from emotional and spiritual matters which are too personal or too obtuse to decisively be fitted into the intellect. All three modes obviously require the use of one's mind, but, often the signature of a clutch-mind poem is its desire to "understand the internal states" and examine conceptual structures within which humans dwell. But the clutch-mind poem also investigates these topics in order to make them feel new again. Universal concepts to which we all respond such as language, religion, science and time evolve along with each new generation of poets who are part of this process.

T.S. Eliot, in his poetry, and often in his prose, demonstrates a propensity for writing within the clutch-mind mode. Take, for instance, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* which can be read as a commentary on the falseness of early twentieth-century social interaction. Eliot's poem encourages a closer view of the artifice of society. This poem, in turn, opens the possibility for recognizing ways in which tradition inhibits humanity collectively and individually:

There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—  
(They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the  
chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple  
pin—  
(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')  
Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will re-  
verse. (lines 28 – 52)

We sense that Eliot is inspecting the traditions of social interaction through his own “internal state” through his highly intense scrutiny of social interaction. Eliot develops a sense of the falseness of society by using the word “face” as though it is something that is created (cognitively) rather than something that is natural. Eliot suggests to the reader that to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” is a way to survive a heightened social scrutiny. We sense the narrator’s insecurities, “(They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’)” also are the basis of his rebellion when he asks, “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” Evidence of the clutch-mind mode emerges through Eliot’s close intellectual inspection of agreed upon social norms. These norms at once seem intrinsic and repellant. There is a general lack of awareness Eliot points to through the character of the women who “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” The women are a counterpoint to Eliot’s heightened awareness: these women are categorically unaware of themselves and the falseness of society. To these women, what the poet perceives is invisible and the validity of social structure is taken for granted.

Language as a subject and theme in poetry recurs often. It is a topic that exemplifies the conceptual structures clutch-mind writers seeks to explore. Poets are highly conscious of the

abstract use of language. Each thrilling and unique way to analogize or build a tensive metaphor not only demonstrate sensitivity to language but also that poets act as catalysts that progress the understanding of language itself. In the clutch-mind mode writing becomes a love affair with words. There is a preference to discuss language as a concept rather than use it as a vehicle to propel emotion. In the book, *The Spell of the Song*, John Powell Ward discusses how the minutia of language can provide poets with a rich medium for inspiration. Poets, in return, keep language alive and relevant by living more closely within its conditions than most people do. Ward states:

Language is always a system of signs... the relations between letters across words and sentences then immediately makes for abecedarial textures of other kinds; the alliterations, tiny-word particle connections, exotic terms, and the self-circling repetitions of inflected reason. ... All this takes place at many times and in many places, consciously and unconsciously, collectively and individually. A rich organic mulch results, and its life nurtures the life of language.” (216)

As poets we both gather from and add to this “mulch” of language and it is the clutch-mind poet that explores this conceptual space most avidly.

In terms of the writing process, clutch-mind is a domain that produces poems that respond well to editing because their origins are cognitively playful and less rooted in the physical than poems that are clutch-body based. But these also are not the ethereal, spiritual poems of the heart. Clutch-mind poems grow as poets imitate and create new techniques in style which diverge from or adapt styles already in use, which drive our understanding of the human concepts within which we function.

## Conclusion

There really is no need to over emphasize any one clutch mode, as each artist will produce poems which blend emotional, spiritual, and mental landscapes. The clutch theory is more a tool for discovering in which landscape a poet most often dwells and to create an understanding concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the writer when responding to inspiration. Improving one's skill often means pushing beyond comfort zones. Does a poet write poems primarily from a clutch-body mode? If so – and if s/he wants a challenge – reading authors with very different sensibilities (though it may not be the natural inclination) is where education lies. Each mode represents myriad possibilities to explore. By promoting and exercising awareness of the different modes of inspiration, chances of a poem transcending the author's expectations increase. The result is powerful poetry that is less of an occasional phenomenon and more of a standard reality. Poets work within all three modes to varying degrees. A poem that begins in the body might move beyond boundaries and capture a spiritual essence that clearly denotes clutch-heart. Poems that transcend any one mode often are the strongest: they have life. And, poets who easily work within all three modes obviously free themselves to access inspiration and the possibility of attaining their “true poems.”

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PART II  
CLUTCH

From here the sound of evolution is stunning.  
The echo of existence turning outward  
from the spine's dark cable,  
pushing us forward into emptiness.  
Even clay responds to pressure, makes a depression  
to hold milk or jewels or the sock of an infant;  
even the weakest bird's inclination  
is to build a nest out of what it has found.

## Generations

*After Terrence Hayes*

I come from a long line of women that collapse into self  
who know of potato peels and black shoes.

The eldest daughter born into distance, frailty  
and the shape made by a thumb and forefinger before the pinch.

I believe in a vaulted ceiling of nothingness and a room  
full of woe that circles back on itself; carnivorous  
as battery acid, distorted as the memory of worn sheets.

One summer I used a ladder to escape; climbed  
through the skin of a window and descended into night air  
painted by the smells of chlorine and beer.

I come from random acts of isolation and women who wrung  
chickens' necks and told their granddaughters *Zimno, Cold*  
before they placed bricks in a bed and climbed in.

I come from grocery bags filled with pignuts, broken  
locks, and gypsy moths chewing a way through earth –  
as determined as any to get across, get done, get reborn.

I come from hands held high in ecstasy and a mother  
obsessed with the white lengths of cloth that roll  
from heaven, from winter, from God. Tell me what she  
said about the glacier stuck in her eye. I will not  
bury myself there. I will not hammer the edge of infinity  
to extend it another inch. It is everywhere and I am a bit of nothing  
lodged in matter. I come from nothing and to nothing I will return.

Clutch

*“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
out of this stoney rubbish? son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only” - T.S. Eliot*

I.

Around this  
they are all spread,  
dead and living,  
as though to gather  
together would be impossible.

At the funeral, the family’s sadness  
is like an heirloom revisited  
or a seed placed inside each of them.

They fold younger selves  
into suitcases, dust off  
the grudges and corpses.

II.

When the parents were buried,  
the children arrived early  
as if held together  
with clumsy stitches  
left by their mother.

They were never told forget,  
always remember  
the body  
that will stand in the shower  
like an ancestor  
whispering in water.

III.

Who am I then;  
words or simply  
flesh, water, pleasure?

The space in my lungs says  
*keep breathing* not *remember*

not *clutch*.

All this self, self, self  
can be disorienting  
as a ship leaving  
an ancestral land, a place  
you've been told  
has not been loved  
for years and years.

## My High-School Friend, Aphrodite

You came to New England like a puckering silence;  
latched to your mother's breast and put in a brick colonial  
which shook like an island atop a grey-haired  
volcano: your father's anger. Waves of his voice  
often struck your mother. She'd drifted through the house  
confused as a fish in an aquarium.

Your father owned a chain of convenience stores,  
hired Mexican laborers to work those old orchards.  
(At least the stench of rotting apples subsided.)  
The men would pick while standing in their truck beds  
and sing as though they were contented  
which embarrassed us for some reason.

When I slept over your house, I heard strange  
breathing – the room, so anxious about your beauty  
and a window (that could not open) afraid of what might enter.  
In town, people guessed that you were delicate,  
like a scent or something to be protected;  
but your father knew nothing of you becoming a woman.

The old brick house you lived in, it's empty now.  
The sparrows have moved back into the orchards  
and sing as though it is the sparrows' own legend  
of how a Greek goddess moved to New England,  
whose father died speaking of love as though it were a religion.

## Our First House

A house an old house with a tin roof  
where I made a fist and burnt the roast in the oven  
and planted parsley in the claw-footed tub  
where blackbirds descended on the berried tree  
their droppings staining the car and driveway red  
the stray cats that fought behind the house  
the shelter feeding people twice a day  
the walk to the theatre to coffee to the morning paper  
the crumbled building next door and my breath  
my easy exile into strangeness  
my aching empty ribcage and the tone it made in the night  
my husband and his doing his working  
he built me a fence a deck and a prospect  
the loops of glass I cut in the shed the copper foil  
I adhered to the glass and the small peace it gave me  
the uneasy feeling of not knowing the drive to the beach  
gulf or Atlantic the prostitutes on meth  
the friend who built the planter boxes the porch  
the space between my husband and I  
the long distance phone call to the graveyard  
the eaves of the house where we loitered  
the shocking sensation of the end of youth  
the gut of a life the belittling of the mind  
and the heart's tattling the tongue's trip over lips  
the joy I ached for that was all around me  
the stealing of orange across the sky  
the choir the morning after I did not live

## My Grandfather: A Hammer

In Vinalhaven, fifteen miles off Maine's craggy coast,  
the family lost everything to fire.

The town's old folk still remember  
how the house came down and the town  
came together to shelter the family.

So, he built a house in Worcester with his own hands.  
A modest but fine house where, in the evenings,  
he would lean his hammer against a wall near the front door.  
When his wife and children entered  
they remembered to respect the hands that raised it.

He drank wine, mostly for the solitude.  
Grapes and warm sun; the possibility of self  
where there was none. The words he couldn't speak  
were swept up by his wife in the mornings.

Before dawn, before the sound of his children rising,  
he'd find the front door, his hands, the hammer resting there.  
Between them, he knew, each nail, each joy,  
each upright thing built through will or force  
would eventually be knocked down to the surface below.



The egret

has a broken wing, yet he is a good fisher.  
He stabs into the oneiric water with the yellow  
of his beak, a tenacious needle like the one I used  
just yesterday to move the button on the waist  
of my husband's slacks (the practical thing to do).

Linda tells me the wing is broken. I had been watching  
the bird as I sat in my folding chair on the bank of Bachman Lake.  
*He's been keeping to the water near the boat house.*  
She says, in passing, after her row. His plumage shivers  
each time he pulses the wing against the ark of his ribs.

He is not ten feet from where I sit. A Mexican couple parks  
close by in their black Honda, their voices and car radio a blend  
I cannot decipher. But the egret remains still, even as  
my husband's rowing shell reaches the dock. I can't help  
imagining where the bird will go when the wing heals.

To my Father, on the Occasion of His New Marriage

You make a steeple with your fingers,  
but the place between your palms is no place  
to worship.

Clouds gather to make a canopy,  
but the bride and groom won't raise their voices  
above the storm.

The softest part of your body, deep in your chest,  
so few people have wandered there  
and been still.

Now, on the eve of this marriage to your new bride,  
it seems everything is new again.

Your hands, the rain, your family;  
all together, and different –  
acknowledging the happy tune of your heart.

## Of Bodies

In this cube, at work, senses impoverished by  
floreescence, somehow the brain still able  
to piece together fragments of a memory

– the scent of lake water

wafting up from some depth, I halt  
in rediscovery, frozen above my keyboard,  
expectant of the body on the edge –  
a decaying dock, a desk.

I sit and think, inhabit the brain  
and chastise the body

– again, with its bulk of memories,

those fastidious unchanging packages

I fail to unpack;

only shifting of this moment to permit  
the witness of another.

But the mind, oh the mind! Where I  
concoct a thousand scenes,

Where I can ask if you will

do this for me; keep me bare in this one place,  
lie about where our shoes bask at night,

be sure to leave

yourself, a door, open so an errant breeze, I,  
can enter again and again.

But here, in the body, I cannot take that piece  
of you into me, because of all the labor  
and defeat,  
the outpouring of what I recognize as this –  
bodies are no place to hide.

The only clarity left is that we are sensual in  
the way shattered glass beckons to be gathered,  
prismatic shards arranged  
in effigy of the self, ready to be made whole  
when light is redefined in us.

## Cold Baby

I dreamt I breast-fed a cold baby.  
“What does it mean?” I ask my husband.  
I enjoy the tender suckling but his toes  
are so silent, yet he doesn’t complain.

I breast-feed the cold baby.  
My husband hands him to me and I wake  
feeling old. What baby will want  
these legs to carry him?

I breast-feed the cold baby and react  
as I should, try to wrap his torpid feet  
in a white sheet, put one small foot  
in my mouth and suck it in.

I am breast-feeding a cold baby.  
“What does this mean?”  
He does not appear dead, he eats  
but these breasts have no milk.  
Does he pull words from my nipples?  
Does he spell, “I am alive” with his tiny mouth  
so very like my own now tugging at your ear?

## Horses

There must be a girl who cares for those horses.  
Could be they are like brothers to her, swishing  
their tails to stir the air. How many times  
has she brushed their flanks and seen them shiver?

I drove to work, late, again. That same barn  
rose in the distance as I crested the hill.  
In the field, the horses were passive and mournful;  
their stillness demanded nothing, their necks arched  
low toward the earth and its empty blanket of dew.

I imagined myself among them.  
I was naked, but not cold  
and they cared for me the way I needed –  
left no prints on my spirit, released on anxiety in my body  
only joy as I passed between.

When they called me by name and led me  
to the barn, I went willingly. And later, someone came  
to touch our bodies, sable our backs and feast  
on the animal spirit that rests in inky eyes.

## The Building

It is possible that I shouldn't pause  
to regret the confused baby bird  
I spot as she bashes herself into the plate glass  
doors of my office building. But I do.

Appearing exhausted, tiny, and feeble,  
I look at her as she looks up  
from the concrete into her own reflection.  
We are -- this close.  
Crouch, wonder, neck cocked.  
The building is unfathomable,  
its contents an impediment for us both.

Then, I enter. Unroll my brain and spread  
it out in the company of other humans  
where we build, we strut, we fasten, we beast  
the beast who does not know what she is until  
(My, we are wonderful!)  
we bunch her up into her name  
and let her letters fly.

At the end of the day, she is gone.  
No sullen carcass or remorseful reminder  
to hesitate over. Instead, the call of an expanding  
digital haze and a sky full of words  
I no longer recognize.

Dinner Table, 1979

The wood of the table is burnished with use,  
a sturdy block around which my family eats.  
I am seated at six o'clock so you can see as I collect  
mother's anger which sprouts from her  
eyes like tulips. But notice, I prefer father's  
oblivion. It's gorgeous as a bowl of fruit  
to eat and eat.

Dinner rolls are passed hand to hand.  
Their crumbs collect and enter my blood stream.  
*Oh holy host, I say, this is liver, this is spleen.*

Brother's lips are hammered shut.  
He prefers to push this button or  
pull that lever. He constructs 1999  
which he will devour.

Now I stand at twelve o'clock clearing the table.  
See how I polish it clean? Night after night,  
am I the only one to hear as its cry;  
I ask it again and again: *Disintegrate?*  
let us return and be new.



## Windy Day

The wind reveals the weakness of clothes;  
creates the question of my thighs.  
I am bright in a blue sweater and pencil skirt,  
calves like narrow meaty roasts.  
Just walking to get lunch I feel like a deli counter.  
The man in the pick-up lets me cross the street.  
He appraises each item even if I haven't posted the prices.

Spring opens the door. It is always this way.  
The goats roam and find new patches of green  
to satisfy their teeth. Even the tenderest shoots  
feel the weight of breath above them.

But with practice I can walk with effervescence,  
like the kind that gives the remains of a can of Coke its taste.  
I am a whorl of treasured oblivion;  
the leaves crunching beneath my feet; eyes  
pivoting my cosmos. I smile downward  
as if to practice my mantra:

I am not what you see, I am what's left.  
I cling to each small joy,  
joy that others might consume and toss aside.

It happened once. That man who licks his paws,  
he is always there, behind buildings, beneath  
saucers of milk left out for the strays.

Like most people, he doesn't use his eyes for good;  
engrossed in want he uses them to steal or bribe.

Never a petal coming from those eyes,  
never the moss and bend of what I am looking for.

But I cannot blame. Now,  
it is my mind that corroborates all of this.

## Sonnet Addressed to My Mother

Mother, as small child, I tugged violets from dirt;  
they like tiny purple bruises full of anticipation.  
I stood at the door you couldn't open wide enough for me.  
Small but earnest I'd watch you blend into your housework,  
moving from room to room, now and again,  
the barn door of your chest falling open. Inside  
there was no heart, just a sculpture of a horse: cold and unsinging.  
Mother, in the dark, I was there.  
You thought I was the wind and its idiosyncratic tender caress.  
I polished and cradled you. My persistence  
brought a smooth shine to your face.  
I blew dust from alabaster, carried a piece of you  
inside my sweater to keep it warm.  
The dust I disturbed still settling between us.

## Stairs

When your father drives off the road  
your poem insists, *the trees politely moved aside*.  
The only damage, two black bars of mud cut  
into the road's shoulder and an absence of carnage  
no one can account for. The fantasy and error of this scene

are also its beauty. It sloughs  
off ordinary fact, perhaps: raised trunk lid; disheveled,  
incoherent driver, and enters a space full  
of subtleties. A version of truth oddly relaxing  
for its distended parameters.

You pimp fantasy.  
Your recollections and disasters become  
a new generation of voices discovered  
loitering in the basement. Infantile poems lick  
plaintive walls, smell the must, copulate.  
Now and again a poem will lean, mourn, spiral,

its way into the world and make a spectacle of itself.  
Like stairs, it will require support and urge  
us to rise or descend  
and will be martyred when we refuse to do either.

Taking Candy  
(for B.H. Fairchild)

This is a poem shallow graved in green whispers,  
full of yearning as a woman in an evening gown made to hamper,

ponderous as an automobile flying the dust  
cruise control over country road caliche.

Big plumed vanilla images dissolve into spaces  
like staccato rhythms fill lovers and gun barrel conversations between fathers.

Because I, too, can love the country, its brown and billboards  
much like that divorcee's single suitcase, or a word

(like forgetting) that makes a shelter to hide under  
or wags like a tin can wanting coins to rattle.

So, when you arrived in my dream like shrapnel needing extraction  
—— this poem exploded in an unfamiliar pattern,

as you showed me a Ford Fairlaine and said *drive*.

## Helical

She is purple, a bruise, a plum devoured. He is white as a tooth  
and transparent. A son – no reason to rejoice. It is fungible, spiral:  
sex, death.

She is purple, an arm, a leg, a mannequin full of thread uncoiling.  
Sewn together by midwives' hands, she is no longer useful.

Vagina torn, the body empty.

She is purple, dark water with coin enveloped. In the boy's plush  
mind: Mother. A memory in his mouth, a nest of bed bugs burrowed  
eats him mute when near women.

## Maggots & Motherhood

Little white bodies twist. Armless, legless, simple pulsating sacs – one hole to eat, one to defecate. Maggots in my kitchen compost crock. It smells shitty. Where is your mother? To lay so many eggs surely she must now be dead. I imagine my own eggs, my doctor's voice, Chances of pregnancy decrease as you age. I want to put this writhing pile in my ovaries; they will eat me clean, varnish the flesh of my womb as if it is a seasoned Civil War wound. Let the world return to corpses, maggots and dune grass. My children are all dead, they have wings.

To a Child

*I begin to understand what you seem to already know*

There is no temple south of here.

Not enough desire to transform this body, beasts  
are unmagical and we eat them.

*there is not enough here for you*

Pests are children or flies. Submarines  
rust away the oceans. Trees grow because death  
clears a way for the living.

*I no longer take care to watch for your arrival*

Consciousness may chase you into some other womb  
*or stab the heart out of want.*

and as Eden goes on encouraging her apples

I convince myself this is no place for you

*but I go on missing you for never being born.*



## The Egg

I watch as you, nude but for your bathrobe, eat a hard-boiled  
egg and see past me,  
to the window. You insist that today will be a balmy sixty-five  
degrees, and though I find  
that I prefer to ignore you, I watch as you crush the egg's shell,  
roll the firm egg in ground  
salt, bite, and look bored while I write, hesitate over the letter  
g which I decide  
has a fascinating shape, three quarters infinity but not quite  
as limitless as you  
which nothing can contain – since you are not really here,  
none of us are,  
you like to think you have eaten an egg, just as I like  
to think I was rescued  
from the bottom of that pool, but we are simply four mouthfuls  
gone forever,  
all that remains are the shattered shells of eggs, like tiny  
broken dishes,  
and my hands that sweep the salt from our table.

As we Worship

She drifts up, getting a view of the sanctuary she's never seen  
floating – the stone of gravity falls away.

The walls above the nave are ornately carved and familiar;  
seeing them is like opening her eyes for the first time.

She is there for a message, an inspection: the silver inlay  
she could lick it; the faces of the saints in their baroque  
frames; the tiny pieces laden with prayers from below.

She arrives at a curious display, like looking at a ship in a bottle,  
or, like peering into a sugared Easter egg diorama.

The scene inside does not belong to her.

She reaches for a tiny hinged box.

There, a cone of incense burns – a token, a prayer.

She smells it, sees the smoke and knows it is real.

A living prayer at work, fragile and completely anonymous.

## The Kiln

The charred pot I keep under the kitchen sink  
catches drops inside its thirsty mouth.

On some days, when I tend the fire  
I am like this pot, my mouth hangs open  
ready to claim moisture from anything wet.

I move slowly, the palms of my hands closing  
on the things I carry to the fire, the dried vessels  
waiting on the wooden sideboard. I want to tell you,  
this moment is no longer mine.

I carry each object to the kiln, a casket calling me to close its lid.  
The fire removes what it wet. Imagine the Earth  
ablaze with longing; it reaches for the next  
vessel, the next life, and wrings it until it sighs:  
*I never knew, I never knew.*

## Twins

Your son is still a twin and always will be.  
Death was just a trap door into which his sister fell.  
Beseechingly you put your hand over the door;  
underneath they say there is a river.

I can see it. The waters are muddy, brown.  
In there your little girl swirls like a fallen leaf.  
She does not know she is there,  
there simply is no other place to be.

The sad and patient draw near the river's banks,  
with a softening pulse you too approach and peer  
in, where you see nothing but blue sky,  
not even the brown waters.

I tell you this because your sadness is changing you.  
You are patient, like a root growing toward the river.  
The river will nurture you then sweep your memory between its banks  
As if to say: *you, your daughter, and I are one.*

## Born

My brother and I were born to a Catholic woman,  
she like a baroque chapel around which we loitered;  
there is still a small enamel box in her  
with its tiny smoking mount of incense.

We do not attend to her regularly  
preferring instead the flat faces of the saints  
dressed in gold and promises. We leave five dollar bills  
in the poor box and tuck beads in our pockets –  
plastic, grievous, and bright as afterlife.

My sister was born six years after me,  
to our same mother – now born again herself.  
Together they praise in tongues; race to pray  
over the past and claim victory from sin.  
One of dad's great grandfathers, they say, held his wife  
over a well by her hair. This might explain  
why he is cruel to women.

But, for us three children our father  
is like a locomotive - steel and strong.  
We wait with our coats and cases.  
Such a sorry sight when he blasts through the station  
gunmetal grey, dark windows reflected in our faces  
full of the questions our mother put there.

Young Mother  
(for my sister)

Don't fret about your clothes or hair, young mother.  
This afternoon, when you answered the door in your pajamas,  
we understood you'd been caring for your children,  
no option to escape to some museum district.

Young mother, your children will peel you like a Paper Birch tree,  
take the delicate pieces to hide and touch like treasures.  
Later they will write on these. Your children will carve  
on you, just as you carved them with your body;

they, like blue lumps of granite, suggestions  
of your past and the futures they themselves must attain.  
To them you will always be useful, as the shade of a statue, or a big hand  
to marvel at as it blocks the glare of an afternoon sun

as glorious as the one thing you'll always fill with nectar – your voice,  
which is formed by a mouth that spoke their names from the beginning.

## Skin

There were two oranges on the window sill that day. We peeled them of their skins, each segment filling its taut white membrane. I was saddened by the segments, so newly torn from the whole. One floor up from where we sat in the kitchen was our attic. A place to store; a place just beyond the skin of what kept us together. The things you put there through the years, those pieces of yourself, it was a form of dying.

## Childless Couple in the Museum

This alabaster bust raising its chin

is                   unaware

the back of its skull is missing.

There is no blood-orange dome

just the story of an artist's hands intent on a face,

the face always gazing at me.

And a fine, old statuette of an African woman

holding                   her breasts;

fingers like whispers full of ill omen and a child

resting on her back beckoning pleasure to flee

into its mouth.

But I am jaded. Because, today

when we walked through this museum

the           *tick, hush* of our shoes on the concrete

                  the whispered, careful feeling of the childless couple in the museum

I thought of a churning lathe

and the *ssshh, ssshh*, sound made when someone is dreaming.

Then, I imagine – a painting of us,

                  where your balls gleamed like metal and my womb looked dry as wood

and somewhere, listless in the under painting,

was our child sleeping.