

ANTIGRAVITY

Ashley Hamilton Bowen, B.A., M.A., M.F.A.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2012

APPROVED:

Corey Marks, Major Professor

Bruce Bond, Committee Member

B.H. Fairchild, Committee Member

David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of
English

Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate
School

Bowen, Ashley Hamilton, *Antigravity*. Doctor of Philosophy (English), August 2012, 66 pp., works cited, 5 titles.

This dissertation contains two parts: Part I, which discusses the elegy of possessive intent, a subgenre of the contemporary American elegy; and Part II, *Antigravity*, a collection of poems.

English elegies have been closely rooted to a specific grief, making the poems closer to occasional poems. The poet—or at least the poet's speaker—seeks some kind of public consolation for (often) a private loss.

The Americanized form does stray from the traditional elegy yet retains some of its characteristics. Some American elegies memorialize failed romantic relationships rather than the dead. In their memorials, these speakers seek a completion for the lack the broken relationship has created in the speakers' lives. What they can't replace, they substitute with something personal.

As the contemporary poem becomes further removed from tradition, it's no surprise that the elegy has evolved as well. Discussions of elegies have never ventured into the type of elegy that concerns itself with the sort of *unacknowledged* loss found in some contemporary American poems of unrequited love. These poems all have speakers who willfully refuse to acknowledge the loss of their love-objects and strive to maintain control/ownership of their beloveds even in the face of rejection.

Copyright 2012

by

Ashley Hamilton Bowen

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Poems in this collection have appeared or will appear (sometimes in a different form or under a different title) in the following journals and anthologies:

<i>32 Poems</i>	“My Love is for the Weatherman”
<i>Blackbird</i>	“All My Grudges I’ve Given Your Name”
<i>Black Warrior Review</i>	“Using the Earth as Blunt-Force Object”
<i>Crab Orchard Review</i>	“Falling in Love with Flash Gordon”
<i>Cream City Review</i>	“Whatever Monster”
<i>Diner</i>	“With Enormous Wings”
<i>diode</i>	“There Was No Funeral”
<i>Lo.Ball</i>	“Missing My Sister Missing the War,” “Space Age Love Song,” “Easy”
<i>Melic Review</i>	“Twenty-Year Marriage”
<i>New England Review</i>	“Collect Call,” “The Physics Professor Pens His Autobiography”
<i>Nimrod</i>	“Mexico’s Waters are Only for Newlyweds”
<i>Open Windows (2006)</i>	“Divorce, An Elegy”
<i>PebbleLakeReview</i>	“Post-Dated Love Note on the Doomsday Planetary Alignment,” “Brief Notes on Helio-Galactic Lullabies,” “Ultrasound”
<i>The Pedestal</i>	“Weather Report”
<i>Quarterly West</i>	“Rustic Poem for My Mother,” “What Cancer Said”
<i>Rattle</i>	“Sterile,” “The Astronaut Explains Divorce to Me”
<i>Stickman Review</i>	“Through the Back Windshield,” “My Sister Always Loved to Skip”

“Through the Back Windshield” was reprinted in the *Rhysling Anthology of Best Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Poetry* (2005).

“How Gravity Hated Us” appeared in *Best New Poets 2011*.

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
PART I APART/TOGETHER: POSSESSIVE INTENT AND UNACKNOWLEDGED LOSS IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY ELEGIES	1
Works Cited	16
PART II <i>ANTIGRAVITY</i>	17
At the Speed of Light	18
Watching an Esther Williams Film after My Wife's Affair	19
Twenty-Year Marriage	20
The Physics Professor Pens His Autobiography	21
The Crossing	22
Using the Earth as a Blunt-Force Object	23
The Physics Professor Writes a Love Note	24
Mexico's Waters Are Only for Newlyweds	25
Tenure Review: The Physics Professor Reads His Wife's Dissenting Vote	26
All My Grudges I've Given Your Name	27
Collect Call	28
Divorce, an Elegy	29
Through the Back Windshield	30
Yearbook Photo of My Parents, 1950	31
My Sister Always Loved to Skip	32
Rustic Poem for My Mother	33
Ahh, Honey Honey	34
The Astronaut Explains Divorce to Me	35
Falling in Love with Flash Gordon	36
Plan 9 Sonnenizio from Outer Space	37
Asterism	38
How Gravity Hated Us	39
Sterile	40
Missing My Sister Missing the War	41

Easy.....	42
Meth Pregnancy	43
Meth Lycanthropy.....	44
Letter from a Mistress.....	45
Legalese at the Dinner Party.....	46
Deep End.....	47
What Cancer Said	48
My Love is For the Weatherman	49
Weather Report	50
There Was No Funeral	51
I Wonder What's in a Church Woman's Purse.....	52
With Enormous Wings.....	53
The Physics Professor to His Student in Lab 101.....	54
Listening to His Rock 'N' Roll Records, the Physics Professor Sends His Student an Erotic Email	55
The Physics Professor Reads His Student's Evaluation	56
Stories I Know	57
Space Age Love Song: Buck Rogers' Ray Gun Would've Been Nothing Compared to My Love.....	58
Brief Notes on Helio-Galactic Lullabies.....	59
The Physics Professor in Marriage Counseling.....	60
Ultrasound.....	61
Whatever Monster.....	62
To the Double Helix.....	63
Divorce Papers for a Rocket Man.....	64
Post-Dated Love Note on the Doomsday Planetary Alignment: 5 May 2000.....	65
Post-Divorce Postcard from the Atomic Test Site Museum.....	66

PART I

APART/TOGETHER: POSSESSIVE INTENT AND UNACKNOWLEDGED LOSS

IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY ELEGIES

Historically, English elegies have been closely rooted to a specific grief, making the poems closer to occasional poems. The poet—or at least the poet’s speaker—seeks some kind of public consolation for (often) a private loss. In doing so, the poem’s composition becomes a kind of mourning ritual, a metaphorical continuation of the broken union. Larry Levis’ poem, “Elegy with a Thimbleful of Water in the Cage,” offers an astute definition of what we think of when we try to explain the elegy: “It’s a list of what [one] cannot touch.” The soul, the departed, emotions—even memory—are all things we cannot touch. And the great English elegies seek to bridge the gap between the living and what has been rendered untouchable by loss so that we might have direct communion with what we can no longer physically encounter.

The American elegy, though, is something else. While not wholly different, the Americanized form does stray from the traditional elegy yet retains some of its characteristics. Stanley Plumly has written that American poets have “generalized” the form, making it less rooted in tradition and more of “a way of processing [the speaker’s] emotion” than reconnecting with the thing that spurred the poem (Elegiac 32). Instead of an investment in the dead, the American elegy offers a direct encounter with the speaker’s emotional crisis in the aftermath of some loss, as Eric Smith notes in *By Mourning Tongues*. Lynn Emanuel’s poem, “Frying Trout While Drunk,” elegizes the speaker’s (metaphorical) loss of her mother due to a ruinous, alcohol-dependent romantic relationship, a circumstance that informs the speaker’s life to such a degree that she finds herself entrenched in the same situation as an adult. Stephen Orlen’s poem “In Praise of Beverly” blooms into a personal elegy that laments the loss of the speaker’s innocence, only to expand the scope of the self-elegy in the final stanza to include the poem’s initiation narrative as a cautionary tale.

In addition, some American elegies memorialize failed romantic relationships rather than the dead. In their memorials, these speakers seek a completion for the lack the broken relationship has created in the speakers' lives. What they can't replace, they substitute with something personal. Cleopatra Mathis' "Getting Out," with its trickling account of the final dissolution of a marriage, replaces her speaker's severed relationship, and its associated grief, first with hatred, then with confusion over the last tearful moments of the couple's marriage as it dissolves before their lawyers' eyes. Similarly, James Galvin's "Dear Miss Emily" substitutes resignation for his speaker's lack: "I knew the end would be gone before I got there," he states, replacing his grief with a kind of confirming acquiescence that life as he had known it before had only been a brief stay against an unavoidable and inevitable breakup. The poem becomes, then, a way to replace grief with something emotionally more manageable.

As the contemporary poem becomes further removed from tradition, it's no surprise that the elegy has evolved as well. Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning* offers a fine discussion on the development of the elegy, showing its movement toward a modern sensibility. Traditional elegies seek to transform grief into consolation: an untimely death is announced; friendship is recalled; (ir)responsible gods are blamed; and remorse is replaced by joy that the dead lives on in just reward (Ramazani 3). Contemporary elegies, though, prefer to go about "scorning recovery ... transcendence ... and closure" (Ramazani 4-5). While Ramazani's discussion never ventures into an investigation of the type of elegy that concerns itself with the sort of *unacknowledged* loss found in some contemporary American poems of unrequited love, I contend this type of poem is a contemporary subgenre of the elegy. These poems all have speakers who willfully refuse to acknowledge the loss of their love-objects and strive to maintain control/ownership of their beloveds even in the face of rejection. Such poems I have termed "elegies of possessive

intent and unacknowledged loss.” In the examples of these types of elegies, the speakers refuse to accept the loss in at least one of several ways: first, through the control of linear time; second, through the use of possessive personal pronouns to maintain “possession” of their loved ones and articulate a sense of perpetual ownership of the love-object despite the distance between the rebuffed speaker and the beloved; and by rendering or re-imagining the love-object into another object that might more readily be controlled.

The attachment theory of loss can throw light on the impetus behind elegies of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss. The theory suggests that some people hold onto their losses, and that even though two people may part, their relationship doesn’t necessarily end (Berman 6). Since the speakers fail to accept the loss, they deny a need for grief. The poem, therefore, becomes an act of refusal, a proxy extension of the speaker’s willful denial of the loss.

Such denial is part of the elegy’s wish to “to stamp out the temporal marker” of time (Baker 239). By removing time as a means of marking forward progress, the speaker eliminates the possibility of a future outside his/her control, as well as a future in which the suitor and the beloved are not together. Once the speaker can control time, he or she becomes a being of extraordinary power with the ability to conflate past and present time, thus allowing the speaker to govern the relationship. The act of writing becomes, therefore, not only an act of resistance but an ability to control—start, stop, rearrange—transient time that becomes another tool in the speaker’s ability to manipulate the relationship.

Several interesting facts reveal themselves about these elegies. First, the poems have adapted the form and dismissed certain characteristics of the traditional elegy, particularly apotheosis and consolation. Second, the poems display a certain level of aggression, a type of determined representation of, or need for, dominance that is coupled with a propensity for muted

violence. This occurs in one of two ways: the violence renders itself in illustrations of complete and abject dominance over the love-object; or through threats of physical violence that the speakers fail to see as acts of violence (these appear to be impassioned declarations of devotion but are violent in nature).

A violent death is the impetus behind Theodore Roethke's "Elegy for Jane," a poem integral to the discussion at hand. The poem enacts the tradition of the elegy in that its occasion is the death of the speaker's student. Jane's premature passing is announced in the epigraph, and the speaker elegizes the woman and her positive traits, particularly her gentle, birdlike characteristics that only intensify the injustice of her death. The poem further enforces the speaker's helplessness against cosmic design: Roethke can't raise the dead, can't "nudge" Jane from her sleep. Finally, an abiding affection for Jane is played out over the course of the poem that culminates in an acknowledgment on the part of the speaker that he has "no rights in this matter" as he occupies a confusing and socially unacknowledged space somewhere between father and lover.

But Roethke's poem stops short of being a traditional elegy, despite all of the aforementioned qualities it has in common with tradition. Roethke's speaker never reaches for the consolation of traditional elegies, and the speaker's emotional crisis never reaches a place of relief. Instead of the poem's focus pointing to the subject, "Elegy for Jane" articulates the speaker's personal dilemma in the face of an emotional crisis, a characteristic of the elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss. Instead of singing the virtues of the dead, as expected in a traditional elegy, Roethke's speaker—in a near-perfect example of anti-apotheosis—transforms Jane from a woman full of mystery into a creature described in a series of unflattering images: a melodramatic wren who, when sad, "cast herself down into such a ...

depth / ... Scraping her cheek against straw, / Stirring the clearest water.” A daydreamer who is “startled into talk,” she has a “side-long pickerel smile.” The paradox becomes that Roethke’s speaker actually humanizes Jane the more he describes her in such animalistic terms. Instead of missing her as a person of ethereal virtue as we would expect in an elegy, the speaker misses Jane because of her earthliness:

A wren, happy, tail into the wind,
Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.
The shade sang with her;
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing,
And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.

But Roethke’s re-imagining of Jane is not a means of control typical of elegies of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss. The rhetoric never reaches the level of opaque violence found in the poems in which the love-object is reduced in an effort to bend the beloved to the speaker’s will. Jane’s reduction from human to animal is a trope that other poets will employ in their elegies of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss, but here, the transformation is an attempt to discuss the subject in terms more readily understood by the speaker.

Roethke closes the speaker’s graveside soliloquy by announcing that he remains uncertain about where he might comfortably exist in regard to his former student. Unlike traditional elegies, no clearly defined emotional relationship has been presented, and the irony becomes hard to wrestle: he claims for himself what he says he cannot claim. She is at once his “maimed darling” while he equally “has no rights” to her. The result is that Roethke builds a sense of anxiety on the part of the speaker that creates an emotional disorientation for both the

speaker and the reader, not consolation. There are no gods to blame. There are no assertions that Jane lives on in the blissful world beyond. The speaker is left only with confusion about the appropriate social space in he can grieve as he is “neither father, nor lover.”

In the end, the poem is as much about an ineffable relationship between the speaker and Jane as it is about her death. Roethke’s elegy presents the more contemporary American example that eschews unfettered praise. By mixing traditional elegiac components with unconventional elements, “Elegy for Jane” becomes a link between the traditional elegy and the elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss.

As the elegy moves farther into the contemporary period, elegies of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss often introduce a speaker whose emotional intensity blurs the line between affection and violence. In Leon Stokesbury’s poem, “Semi-Sentimental Thank You Note Sent Over a Long Distance” (henceforth referred to as “Semi-Sentimental Thank You Note”), the violence is spoken to the love-object, and we are direct witnesses to the threat. Affection becomes mingled with an overwhelming desire for ownership and control. Frustrated by a lack of participation that the speaker expects, the speaker reveals his propensity for violence.

In many of Stokesbury’s poems, readers encounter a speaker befuddled by life’s circumstances. In the poem, “The Lover Remembereth Such as He Sometimes Enjoyed and Showeth How He Would Like to Enjoy Her Again,” the speaker professes a lack of understanding as to how luck manifests itself in people’s daily lives, as he has spent an evening trying to perform a number of different activities to take his mind off of his love only to find, upon returning from the men’s room, his “love” waiting for him. But no such luck awaits the speaker in “Semi-Sentimental Thank You Note.”

Stokesbury's speaker opens the poem with a direct address to the love-object to inform her that he is "still trying / to cope with / the disappointment." The speaker explains that the Christmas gifts that he has received from her were not what he wanted.

... All
I wanted for Christmas
was a scratch-and-
sniff photo
of you amongst
some clover. Instead
this book of the fifty
worst movies
ever made. And a box
of pink erasers? Maybe
I'm slow but I
don't get it.

Indeed the speaker does not "get it." For the love-object, the book and erasers are symbolic statements of resistance to physical and romantic connection—something the speaker fails to see. For the speaker, the objects fill him with a drive to overcome resistance, to understand what he doesn't "get." Because of his belief in ownership, he will be "headed" her "way . . . sooner or later" to replace the platonic gifts he received with the highly sexualized gift that he craves and expects.

The traditional elegy moves toward acceptance and adjustment of the present condition of the speaker's world. The elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss, though, takes the

past and reassembles a new present that resides under the control of the rebuffed half of the couple. Stokesbury's speaker remains either blind or blindly optimistic to the state of the romance's status (or non-status). Even though the couple is "separated by that / enormously faded / and dirty spread-out / serape, that distinctive / state of mind / Oklahoma ..." he establishes his possessive intent when he says:

... what I am getting at,
 what I am trying
to say, *my* little
lotus blossom, *my* little
 dove of Canaan, *my*
 little garbanzo
bean, is thanks a lot
but I really must ask you
to get up off that
 divine rotundity, your
ass, and send that
clever clover photo
 right on down
 the line right
now. There exists
a definite need! (emphasis added)

What the "definite need" that the speaker mentions is never made exactly known. But Stokesbury's delusional speaker (and he is delusional; the haphazard linebreaks alone suggest

some kind of inability to think coherently) insists that he will be “headed / [her] way, and when / [he gets] back to Arkansas, / [...] to pick / [her] up or stay” that the two of them should “work hard at” seeing “eye to eye” and “thigh to thigh” and “toe to toe.” Here, sexual lust is wrapped up in the speaker’s willful ignorance of his loss. To him, the love-object remains his “lotus blossom,” “little dove of Canaan,” and “little garbanzo bean.” The speaker refuses to relinquish the love-object, and his insistence on reuniting with her speaks to the narcissistic attachment which spares the ego from the realization that the love between them has ended—or never existed in the first place. Bringing the possessive quality of the speaker into greater relief, he expects the love-object to bow to his desires. Although he becomes very coy in his demands by the time the poem closes—his voice stumbles and stutters through a series of “ahs” and “O’s”—the speaker still insists on his love-object satisfying his lusty demands. First is the matter of “seeing eye-to-eye” before the couple will get “thigh-to-thigh” and “toe-to-toe.”

The quest for romantic connection is a common theme in poetry, with speakers seeking to woo their love-objects, typically with promises of never-ending affection and romance. In the case of Paul Zimmer’s “Wanda and Zimmer,” the speaker’s quest for emotional connection fails, leaving the speaker, like Stokesbury’s, to resort to exertions of physical dominance in order to secure a beloved.

“Wanda and Zimmer” begins, “Wanda, my pussy willow, cupcake, / My chinchilla red rabbit” In addition to articulating a space of ownership through the repetition of “my,” the speaker holds dominion over Wanda through a kind of wizardry in which he manages to shape-shift his beloved through a number of forms until he finally reduces her to a fearful, exotic rabbit. These two gestures showcase two of the primary components of the elegy of possessive

intent and unacknowledged loss—reliance on possessive pronouns to denote ownership and the rendering of a love-object into a form that is easily controlled and manipulated.

The exoticism of the red rabbit itself serves double duty in the poem. First and foremost, such exoticism is a self-soothing mechanization on the part of the speaker. Being a red rabbit increases the strangeness of Wanda, giving Zimmer an excuse, albeit a flimsy one, to help explain away why she fails to see his charms as a suitor. Whereas a common white rabbit might fall captive to his advances, Wanda's strangeness aids her in resisting his overtures of affection. Despite all his reassurances, she still fails to appreciate that all Zimmer wants to do is "love," "pet," and "make [her] breathe easily." The speaker's loving gestures are unrequited as Wanda responds to Zimmer's emotional chase with physical revulsion: she "ran like hell . . . / flicked up [her] fine, hind legs" / "... and pissed / On [his] pants leg" "when [he] came near."

In the traditional elegy, the speaker engages in apotheosis. The love-object is deified, but in Zimmer's narrative (and typical of elegies of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss), Wanda is reduced through the power of his narrative, which invents a type of mythology for itself. The romantic pursuit takes on dimensions greater than a simple tale of failed romantic conquest and turns into something more epic in scope and dilemma. Ultimately, Zimmer's love contains such enormity that Wanda fears its power. His affection is simply too much for her, causing her to become, as he says, "frightened / of my fingers . . . and groin // . . . Certain that if I held you / Your small bones would bend / And crack off one another." Zimmer's language in this passage is the language of perceived violence on the part of Wanda that Zimmer eventually fulfills by the poem's close where she is smothered by Zimmer's affection.

Zimmer's poem manages to accomplish what an elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss achieves: it controls time. In this case, the poem conflates the past with

the present. The poem's conclusion announces that Wanda's "organs crush together / In the agony of [his] affection." The sudden move to present tense reveals a shift in the operational machinery of the poem. Over the trajectory of the poem, Wanda has eluded Zimmer but in the end, Zimmer has managed, at last, to capture her, an action that "crushes" her with the "agony" of his love for her. In effect, he has scooped her into his arms to hold her despite her protests. The speaker has not only re-imagined his chase as being successful but reaffirms his dominion over Wanda. Despite Wanda's attempts to leave Zimmer behind, she remains his "cupcake" and "pussy willow." The poem itself becomes a mirror of the speaker's intentions and becomes a poetic act itself that fulfills Zimmer's desire.

Like Stokesbury, Zimmer never shows us the postscript to his romantic pursuit. But Cate Marvin's poem, "The Pet," begins where Zimmer's poem ends, with the speaker triumphant in her romantic conquest and the love-object successfully thwarted in its attempt to flee from her (for simplicity's sake, I'll present a heteronormative reading of this poem's speaker and subject). While the poem doesn't show unacknowledged loss, we must assume a struggle existed between the suitor and beloved; otherwise, the speaker wouldn't have resorted to violence to retain the love-object in her life.

"The Pet," like Zimmer's "Wanda and Zimmer," shows a love-object described as an animal. The love-object is "rein[ed]" to the speaker "as a pet" that she rides smilingly "through the village." "Distressed" by this turn of event, the love-object tosses his mane to protest his new "vehicle" status. Reduced to a trophy to show off to the villagers, the pet is powerless in the face of this violence, the same type of violence viewed in the other elegies of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss.

While the violence is the same, Marvin's speaker enjoys a power beyond those seen in the Zimmer and Stokesbury poems. While all three have the power to reshape their love-objects as they wish (Zimmer's rabbit, Stokesbury's "little dove of Canaan"), Marvin's speaker has the power to reinvent the narrative of her love-object, to tell "the tale of" him and define him in a version that solely reflects her own reality: the poem begins with the love-object having been subdued, but in the last stanza, the love-object has been "taken in," denoting a sense of charity on the part of the speaker. Nevertheless, her narrative induces "the fattening moon, the yewey trees, the sharp-toothed / stars" to laugh. In addition to transforming her love-object into a beast, she now exposes him to ridicule on an earthly and celestial level. But the speaker's power over him is so absolute that she fears no reprisal from him. Nothing scares her, "not even the ghoulish tales that twist[] out of his mouth."

Marvin's poem offers a unique difference from the other poems presented here. Nestled alongside the violence is a caregiver's sense of responsibility missing in the Zimmer and Stokesbury poems. Once the love-object becomes wholly possessed, Marvin's speaker bemoans the responsibility of such ownership:

He was vehicle and, as such, responsibility.
He was deadening, tiresome, and necessary.
I made ourselves a home and kept him gently
as a pet. Visitors often wonder aloud,
How do you manage to keep such a creature
inside? The floors are stained with his keep.

The caregiver responsibility is what seemingly drives Marvin's poem to be the most possessive and violent of the poems under consideration. Such ownership is "dreadening" and "tiresome."

The burden of responsibility requires that she “manage . . . such a creature.” Despite her efforts, he remains unmanageable and unhousebroken as “the floors are stained with his keep.”

The poem closes with a mixture of possessiveness, generosity and restrained impulses toward brutality. She makes “a home” for both of them where she “gently” cares for him.

When others question her dedication to the care of such an animal, the speaker says:

I tell them my heart is huge and its doors
are small. Once I took him in he grew. Now
I cannot remove him without killing him,
which, frankly, I have never wanted to do.

The speaker’s ample heart has room for the love-object, and having taken him in and cared for him, he has grown too large. With doors too small to exit, he is confined against his will—caged inside her heart and thus a prisoner of her love. His only means of escape is through his death at her hand. The speaker’s possessive intent is clear: having subdued him at the poem’s beginning, his freedom is dependent upon her letting him go, something she has “never wanted to do.”

Taken as a whole, the four poems presented here share a common trait in that they are all poems of a kind of unrequited love, a subtype under the larger umbrella of the elegy. These poems function as acts of refusal but also as poetic acts wherein the wills of the speakers become manifested. They further display a type of power over the speakers’ love-objects. Roethke’s poem links the traditional elegy and the elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss to marry the traditional to the unconventional elements of the elegy. Although Roethke’s speaker cannot enact the same type of control as the other speakers, the poem is a prototype for the elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss. The speaker eschews tradition by reinventing the poem’s subject as a presence in a nonhuman form and wrestles with the speaker’s own emotional

angst in the face of an untimely death instead of engaging in apotheosis and consolation. Stokesbury's speaker lays out his clear plan for dominance of his love-object. Driven by lust, he promises sexual conquest once he returns for her. Zimmer's poem begins in weakness but ends in omnipotence. His rebuffed affections replaced by rage, he traps and assumes literal possession of his love-object in a final, sweeping act of terroristic violence—a type of violence that Marvin makes even more malignant in her work.

Individually, these poems all serve as acts of refusal to acknowledge the romantic disproportion between the speakers and their beloveds and the lengths to which they are willing to go in order to bring their romantic agendas to fruition. David Baker's essay "To Think of Time" argues that lyric poetry creates its own world that allows the speaker to manipulate time so as to "delay," "remind" and "create a companion world where the reader may linger before the inevitable end" (243). But the speakers in these elegies believe in their own powers to manipulate time, shape-shift their beloveds, and hold dominion over their love-objects. Ultimately, the power of the elegy of possessive intent and unacknowledged loss becomes the power of the spurned would-be lover to create a world in which he or she is omnipotent. That world becomes a poetic act—an act of refusal to relinquish ownership, to relinquish the bonds of love, and to relinquish control.

Works Cited

- Baker, David. "To Think of Time." 235-246. *The Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry*. David Baker and Ann Townsend, eds. St. Paul: Gray Wolf, 2007. Print.
- Berman, Jeffrey. *Companionship in Grief: Love and Loss in the Memoirs of C.S. Lewis, John Bayley, Donald Hall, Joan Didion, and Calvin Trillin*. Amherst: UP of Massachusetts, 2010. Print.
- Plumly, Stanley. "Elegaic." 31-38. *The Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry*. David Baker and Ann Townsend, eds. St. Paul: Gray Wolf, 2007. Print.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1994. Print.
- Smith, Eric. *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegies*. Totowa, New Jersey: The Boydell Press, 1977. Print.

PART II
ANTIGRAVITY

At the Speed of Light

At 8, the space race was on and all our aerial
could gather were bits of PBS—Professor Science
in snowy black and white. Back then, something

was always going wrong at mission control—
Mother scrawling love notes, Father tearing them up.
It's a wonder they ever landed on the moon.

Professor Science made sure everyone knew the danger
of two bodies missing the mark in matrimony: the kids
roll off the cosmos when satellites don't move in sync.

But all couples experience technical difficulties.
Audiences laughed when Jackie Gleason wanted Alice
on the moon—his bus driver's cap knocked back,

his belly bigger than any planet. But I was grown
by then, watching reruns, learning how observing a particle now
can change what happened to another in the past—

a genuine physics fact. Tonight I snap the TV off
and watch it swallow all the sitcom's light.
Somewhere my wife's a cruising photon emission.

She says she's coming back fast as the speed of light.
But some things travel faster than the speed of light
and light doesn't always travel very fast.

Watching an Esther Williams Film
after My Wife's Affair

In this film, there's a metaphor: love
as the intercostal waterways, and somewhere
Esther has jackknifed from the plank of a pirate ship

and surfaced wearing only
her favorite bathing suit. It's a sequence
in a dream because the plot doesn't need

any more danger. She's doing underwater aerobics
and swimmy kicks like a skinny Shelly Winters
in that film about escape where everybody dies.

It's my kind of flick—the type critics
line up to love after the fact. Eventually a villain must come
in. A white whale killer. Some badass

of aquatic mischief I can't predict. Maybe
they'll race a cigarette boat halfway to Haiti
or marry along the underwater line of the equator.

Whatever happens, it must've been hard
to keep the boom mike out of the frame
and get this down on film.

Or maybe it was all just *lights*,
camera, *action*, some serious splish-splash,
the director telling Esther to paddle deeper in.

Twenty-Year Marriage

Beside me in bed her arm
crosses the arch of her nose,
and I think: Radishes,
She is the color of radishes.

Once we hovered above our bed.
A kiss like a paper cut
brought us back.

Now, I slip from sleep
and tie her to balloons.

Her weight is unimaginable.

I lean out the window and watch
the red dots climb and falter
then finally disappear.

The Physics Professor Pens His Autobiography

Inspired by actual events
are the blueberries, the bird

I folded into origami and willed
to fly

Also true:
I've spun the light and made a magic show
of the planets

while stars collapsed
through the atmosphere

They threw their light between us
as I made a wish for you
to love me and you did

not My calendar's circled with dates
where my lips and heart have simultaneously moved
but said different things

And now I have worked an iron lung into a song about love

The flowers on the sill still lean toward sunlight
when you walk by
rocking your hips all through Arkansas
ringing phones

just so you can say goodbye

The Crossing

Under winter's deck of stars,
my neighbor advances onto the pond, careful
as ever, each step a test
of the uneasy ice.

On the bank behind him, his wife.
Before him, the lover he cannot get over.

All winter I've watched his nightly back-and-forth.
But tonight my wife pulls the curtains closed.

She unbuttons by the lamp, tumbles
her braid down her back.

Her true love stands in the shut dark
of her eyes—waiting
beneath the thinnest strip of moon.

In our bed, there's only
a sudden collapse of ice.

Els Van Doren fell 13,000 feet to her death after her parachute and emergency parachute both failed to open. A fellow female skydiver is suspected of tampering with the chutes after learning Van Doren was having an affair with her boyfriend.

Using the Earth as a Blunt-Force Object

takes no aim or timing. The physics are unconscionable yet simple: the object of your beloved's wayward affections freefalls at 9.8 meters per second squared, the rate at which gravity becomes the greatest accomplice.

The sky is full of surprises, and down here, we're constantly watching. These days something is always falling—meteors and probes, the occasional lover.

Each week, Professor Science makes it clear on TV: Hell hath no fury like the Earth. Consider the orbs it has scorned and pulled into the burning clutch of its atmosphere.

Before burnout, they too plunged, convinced the air was enough to catch them.

The Physics Professor Writes a Love Note

Your body's my lone astronomy.
Your hair is where the daylight hides.

Ah, you who are brilliant,
I was clumsy with your light.

Beyond the shore, the ships are lost at sea.
All the sky is steering west.

My telescopes have the saddest eyes.
They see these arms from which you've fled.

Mexico's Waters Are Only for Newlyweds

No one welcomes our bodies in Puerto Vallarta.
They fear we witch its waters with marital failure.

An affair every even year of marriage and this is another
makeshift reconciliation—mojitos and a week of beach

we've charged to our credit card: penance
of the easiest order. Each morning, your footprints lead

from the beach to me where you love my body
against the grit we've shaken off in sleep. Sand everywhere,

we've given up on trying to stay clean. Twenty years of marriage—
my lust's no longer monstrous, your sarong has little left

to hide. The wave-wet sand won't welcome us
the way it did the night you took my family's name.

The sky was honey-mooned that night, its light golden
across your shoulders. Today is only sun-blast in our eyes

as we stare beachward toward the shimmering newlyweds
shining like the wished-on dimes I've wasted in the hotel fountain.

Tenure Review: The Physics Professor Reads His Wife's Dissenting Vote

When I thought of us immersed in physics,
I imagined us nestled among the pictures
of history's rickety reactors, our arms

around famous physicists, Geiger counters
ticking in our hands. We'd meet
in the middle of our hazmat suits, making

love in the aftermath of some nuclear disaster,
sending up secret satellites to blink our names
to the distant planets.

Instead you hulked around the house
like an incorrigible professor, ignoring me
for weeks, being a bore.

When I was falling in love those years ago,
my heart did somersaults at the thought
of your discussions—acceleration,

velocity, the definition of a vector. Now
I wish I'd learned the way to make a human
escape system from a household stove and vacuum.

All My Grudges I've Given Your Name

How little shame I have, considering the many pities
of our feud.

For instance, the sympathetic stress
of our myna bird, the one that learned to replicate

my voice.

Morning after morning
we saw its cage sagged with the weight of feathers
it had plucked and spat about itself. The morning

we found it dead beneath its perch, I knew
there was no one left to hear my pleas

for harmony. That you had given it my name—that black
irony—was inescapable. So

all my grudges I've given your name,
which means *noble*, which means *truth*.

My left and bony hand coming back tonight, clawing deep
in the dirt where you laid that bird to rest . . . well,

how you'll tremble in the morning

when you see it at the end
of my boot trail, its hollow body positioned just so

beneath the smeary prints
I've left on your window.

Collect Call

Somewhere out there, an operator plugged in
the wire of your voice to the switchboard

of Arkansas where I am
happy to accept the charges—an act so antique
I think of *Sputnik* beeping

overhead, lovers petting in Buicks
and glowing with the green of radium dials.

But what you've called to say is lost
in the line's wreckage of crackle and static.

The night you went away
the interstate glowed red beneath the flaring
fins of your father's Cadillac.

Now this collect call
from outer space & what you've called to say
is clear at last: Among stars

lovers come and go easy as you please. It's the gravity
of Earth that makes letting go so hard.

Divorce, an Elegy

That night the sky shivered and she floated
to the moon. From below I watched
her liftoff—the whole neighborhood,
one by one, opening doors and peering up
and up from the shrinking mounds
of our lives. For weeks I arched my feet and waited

for gravity to grow itself into a myth.
But I never left the Earth, wheeling
my way to weightlessness. Each night
I blasted Bowie: *Ground control to Major Tom*.
She pantomimed a woman straining to understand
but I knew she heard everything
over the buzzing telegraph of stars.

The neighbors borrowed her tools, stuffed
their closets with clothes she couldn't wear;
someone took over for her at the school. Eventually,
we found we didn't even speak
of her, except at night, when floating
in our pools, when we saw the moon
beam her body all over Arkansas.

Through the Back Windshield

the world looks
like any other small town. This 1959 fin-fixed
Cadillac is a space ship. We're blasting

the radio. The last transmission came
from Little Rock. *Darling, I know you send me.*
Mother, I have a problem.

Try to hold it.
There's a milk jug if you can't.

The motel is the moon
parked on the back of a parking lot. The astronaut we've come to meet
is not my father.

In Texas, the waitress called me
Cutie Pie and put down two creamers and a spoon
she shined on her thigh. The astronaut counted down
5-4-3-2-1 the bites I had left
of my hot fudgey. Last time he gave me

a half-pack of Wrigley's. I chewed until they came
out of the room, my mother's face red as an apple, his smile
like one on TV.

We're lifting off from the last part of the highway.
We're heading for home where Father's filing saws
for wood they'll never use on the moon.

Yearbook Photo of My Parents, 1950

In the picture, Mother's not my mother yet.
Lithe and barely 20, she leans into the frame

of the sorority kissing booth, eager
to meet his lips.

He's counted out his love, professed it
dime by dime.

They've kissed like this for 60 years
inside the camera-snap,

their ardor unchanged by time.
But the camera's caught more than that:

Barely there in the flash

of history, my father's face inches
forward from the photo's lower corner, watching

the footballer whose kiss shuts my mother's eyes
like rapture.

In the picture, it's nearly 1951.
My parents' faces young, unworried

with the future. Soon they'd graduate
to a life they never imagined, not knowing

how often this kiss would be remembered—
all the times my father wanted to fight.

My Sister Always Loved to Skip

She did so to the field where the flyer
crashed into the silo, spilling
oats everywhere in the wilderness
below. Blood slackened the limbs
of the pilot, whose eyes were still
alive, rolling side to side. His tongue
plead with itself to say something
about getting up for help.
My sister stepped into weeds
between her and the pilot, careful
not touch him though it seemed
he needed it. His fingers clawed
at what he thought were crows
coming to peck among the oats.
My father said he'd seen something
like it in the war, that clawing.
But mother wouldn't hear of it
at the table. She carried our plates
to the porch. Families had gathered
at the steps. They wanted to know
what my sister had seen, to hear her
tell it slow, for her not to skip a thing.

Rustic Poem for My Mother

Buckeye and birch, your body
was a glow of hardwood trees
no logger could resist. The worst
sawed the night with bunkhouse dreams

of walking your perimeter
and carving terror in the beauty
of your interior. He courted the elm
and oak of your desire, swore

he loved you before the polished
mahogany of a church. Walnut
and alder, sweet gum and spruce,
he felled you on your wedding night

with a honeymoon of skidders.
Years later, you looked at him
like scrub pine, drove away, leaving him
like cordwood you'd cut and piled for somebody else.

Ahh, Honey Honey

I tried to hide from my stepfather's fingers, his hands
constantly caressing, his pressing
my mother into corners, her returning
his sickening kisses.

The boy down the street saved us
from these displays, taking my sister and me in
his basement where we watched him smoke and lay down
the needle on the latest AM hits—

Ahh, honey honey

His hands were always touching
my sister's softest curls, blowing smoky O's, showing us
the French inhale. But the day
my sister turned old, Mother drove her to the pharmacy

and he and I listened to the Archies alone.
Dizzy with nicotine, I looked down
at the prize of his zipper. The room spun
like a record when he filled me up with kisses.

Tonight there's too much for me to remember, my wife
in the kitchen, packing what won't
remind her of me. But jumping curbs
on the bike ride home that afternoon

there was little I could forget—the sound of the needle
scraping the end of the album, his soft clutches
along my shoulders, his lips so close and
Ahh, honey honey floating on his smoky tongue of notes.

The Astronaut Explains Divorce to Me

Your father's like a far-flung rocket, a G-force orbiter
funneling through the stratosphere. Each day

he screens the perimeter of our atmosphere
to keep us safe from ray guns

aimed from outer space, leaves us
notes he's written with his vapor trails.

But at night, the frequency
of your grief keeps him homing through

our house. He meets your mother glowing
in her latest wedding gown, her hand heavy

with the bloom of stars I've laid up her finger.
The gentle thing's to leave your father to the memory

of the spheres. Lonely but bobbing in his armor,
nothing can hurt his heart up there.

Falling in Love with Flash Gordon

Of all of us falling in love
with Flash Gordon & Dale Arden

in the theater that night, could any others have known
the soundtrack masked the sounds of two boys

& their first tentative kisses? No,
not until the usher's sudden flashlight
exposed us for what we were.

Faggots, he said
as he dragged
our mothers' numbers around the rotary dial.

How my mother could've known
what the usher named me or why
she repeated it when our car doors closed

I couldn't say. Nor explain how the name
found me the following Monday at school.

But once it did, all the love notes
I dropped in his locker went unanswered
except one

that read: Your love is like a slow-motion death ray
from outer space,
like the one Flash stopped
just seconds before Earth would've been scattered into atoms.

Plan 9 Sonnenizio from Outer Space

“Not even if you were the last man on Earth.”

If I should learn, in some quite casual way,
that horrors roared their way from outer space
to paralyze the living sum of Earth
and somehow resurrect the resting dead

and I, as Chief of Saucer Operations,
had learned the ghouls I'd seen atop some graveyard
plots were part of fuzzy plans to keep
some doomsday scheme from going off—

you best believe you'd find me acting casual.
I'd call and chit-chat this and chit-chat that.
Eventually you'd learn we were the world's
sole occupants and strut your stuff my way.

Like primitive props someone strung from above,
we'd wobble like a saucer when we made love.

Asterism

They say my mother could've passed
for the young Gabor in *Queen of Outer Space*
but for her eyes. But her eyes are my concern.

They once were telescopes she aimed from Earth.
Glaucoma fogs her lenses now. Tonight
she says the stars have finally fallen off

their hooks. I take her hand and trace her error—
first Ursa Minor, then Ursa Major, the whole
of her grade school astronomy.

I wonder what will uncloud inside her eye
when she leans into the glass tonight,
its cylindrical time machine, her memory

turning like an arcade Mutoscope.
Sometimes my father lands in the convex lens,
his ax aloft to whittle the timber of her heart,

sometimes Stepfather in his astronaut apparel,
teaching her body weightlessness in suburban
wedded bliss. My sister's rarely seen up there

in the distant cloud cover—if ever. Mother turns
the knob to tune the night sky's static, gathering
a floating family of disconnected stars

she'll say we resemble. She looks for us up there.
Down here, we burned like the horrible Earth. Up there,
we shine, glisten, glimmer and glister.

How Gravity Hated Us

“A Cimarron, New Mexico, man was arraigned on charges of child abuse after Child Protective Services learned that he was using his children in experiments in human flight.”

--Santa Fe New Mexican.com

My sister was the first to learn how gravity hated
our family—a spinning plunge into the gorge

of echoy quartz when she failed to cling
to air like Father imagined. Her hollow bones

made him certain she'd been born
for flight so he'd splayed her among the tools of his shop

and stripped the rivets from her body,
took her inside his shower and shaved her

nose into a beak. Her talons scratched
for balance as she crept across her perch,

eyes rolling over the canyons as she stumbled
into free-fall and Earth climbed up to meet her.

She rose, coughing teeth into her palms,
shivering impact-rubble from her shoulders,

trembling in the feathery shadow of our father
whose fingers were already fitting me with wings.

Sterile

My sister can't stop hurting when she sees children.
They coil in her dreams, knees raised
to their stomachs, feet stamping their rhythms.

She's reminded of high school, how she pulled up
her dress in loneliness and a man laughed at her.
But never mind that. Her husband has his gun

collection out. He can't stop pointing and clicking
the trigger at the open window. But the birds
won't die. They flutter away, startled by the swing

of his aim. They land on the fence
of the city swimming pool. There the children run
off the diving board, ducking invisible bullets.

Missing My Sister Missing the War

You've danced too far into the war, move closer.
I can't see your pirouettes, your desert foxtrot

anymore. Each night the News 6 anchor team beams
every face but yours from battlefields I can't name.

But you roam my dreams on dancer's toes, your arms hooped
as big as a Baghdad moon. Your spit-shined boots glide

us from room to room. But days are different. Your steps
all missteps, you seem unrehearsed for your return.

I've left our table and chairs in the kitchen's corner
the way they were the night that you deployed. Our steps

still *one-two* in the heavy wax across the floor.
I want to send you letters that tell you not to die.

No one sambas in the clubs these days. You're needed here.
Put down your gun, your hand to the small of my back.

Easy

--after Stephen Orlen

Mothers had their names for girls like me.
Fifteen and already the town pump, I'd lie
in bed and count the boys, their faces

like beads on a rosary of ruin. My whoredom—
old news by high school. By 20,
the name of an unlucky town

men were always passing through. Trollop,
tramp. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd
tried to save me. But I knew

they could never make me
into a Mary Magdalene—a whore
that even Catholics could love. College.

Law school. I left my panties on
therugs of my professors' floors. I walked
like I didn't owe myself a thing, a law

of diminishing returns. I hated
my clothes so I took them off. Jezebel. Strumpet.
Mothers had their names for girls like me.

Meth Pregnancy

My DNA was a backbone
of drugstore ephedrine.

I raced transmission towers
blinking music into the distance.

My body was a song alive on the radio
coming through on crystal
megahertz.

I was amazed by morning.
I had a baby growing.

I snorted lines from the nice part of his body.
He said I love you.

He choked me till spiders spun
webs over my eyes.

Day in and day out, our daughter climbed the smokestacks
of my womb. She bobbed
like cotton in the bell of a spoon.

She was the single pure thing
in the pollution
of my amnion, the prey

of my own private genocide.

Meth Lycanthropy

I've sweated through the panting night.

Wolfen, I prowl the hills above the house
where you've hidden our daughter
from $C_{10}H_{15}N$ —the fangs

of my DNA, the chemistry
firing this bloodstream.

Black satellites signal me
to skulk the pasture with the soft paw
of the body, to snap the hasp
and climb inside the kitchen window.

A wolf's no scavenger.

Hunger licks its tongue
across the danger of my teeth.

I snuffle after our daughter's scent
rising like a light below a door
in a darkened hallway.

I've sharpened my claws on the black night
of the kitchen. The moon's burning out
in the bottom of my bowl.

Our daughter's so little,
I could swallow her whole.

Letter from a Mistress

I was a bird when you wanted a wife.
So I flew, collecting what I knew of wives—
hotel keys to unlock
the lace they lay across their down-
less bodies, champagne
corks to keep their mouths
from buzzing all the flowers.

You made me a hummingbird. Blur
of desire. One word, sir. Finish
what you started. Here is where
you hung your promises. Hear them
hiss across my body.

Legalese at the Dinner Party

The cocktail hour come and gone, I'm tipsy
on secrecy, the drink I've invented
with vodka and vermouth. For months,
I've kept the terms of the infidelity contract,

the quit claim to respectability
at the firm where I'm called *Legal Ease*
by the other attorneys. My heels
would have me stagger into the communal property

of your arms were it not for the statute
of limitations—to wit: your wife.
Wide hips, blouse puckered at the buttons,
she keeps an inexplicable hold on your affections.

I am the sole adulteress at this party,
malum in se in a room full of couples,
the eminent domain of the state's
attorney general. I wait like an entry

on the docket of the unfaithful
for our discovery: the touch, the glance, the thing
your wife will recognize as the subtle legalese
of lovers going through their motions.

Deep End

We used the pool for its deep cover.
Off the diving board,
out of our clothes, we claimed
the chlorine made us blind. Eyes closed,
we groped all summer toward the secrets
our bodies kept. For months
we stayed in our waterlogged world
where discovery waited and restraint couldn't
reach us.

These days I see my daughter submerged
in the sheen of backyard pool water, two boys
sinking on either side, their waving
hair like anemones of lusty adolescence.
I recall those boys
of my youth. Summer after summer,
no dead man's float. The slow trickle
of tumescence, the tap of manhood
slowly turned on.

What Cancer Said

If pain weren't already your husband,
I would gladly be. We'd hold hands and smile
in ambulance rides, our faces bathed
beneath the red wail and splash
of rescue lights.

Our hospital bed would move by electric power.
Breathless and connected
to switches, we'd need oxygen
when we'd made love right.

And when you went down
under the knife, I'd travel that rope
of anesthesia with you. Sympathetic
surgery. Identical sutures.

We'd laugh in post-op about the altar,
how wrecked by lust, we'd rushed the priest
through his litany of vows. With this pain,
I thee wed. I do, I do, I do.

Drunk on punch, you'd wobble to the limo.
You knew when the honeymoon was over,
I'd carry you across the threshold.

My Love is For the Weatherman

My love is for the weatherman, his secret
code of cumulus. Nights, revved up,
I call him up at the darkened studio

of my mind, his body bent over
a radar aimed at tomorrow. I'm on my knees each time
the humidity reaches a hundred, my blood

a barometer and all the needles spinning.
On the couch, playful kisses, we make
love through a high pressure system, my breasts

mismatched clouds over the field of his body.
My family wonders at the attraction but I've fallen
for his assurance of the future—that I'll be here

to witness what the weather changes. Each night
I'm waiting when he turns on destiny,
ready to hear what rain can't even know.

Weather Report

Tonight the weather report says tornadoes
won't throw our homes moonward.
But I keep driving. Two blocks over

I hear the train they say comes
only to rip up real estate. If at home,
I'd open a window, lie

in the tub, hold onto myself. Here, I have nothing
to keep me from spinning two miles south.
Once my sister, having beaten cancer,

did pirouettes through the city park
saying, *I'm a leaf blown by a twister.*
Years later, she boarded a train

with a man who turned her head
six times against the edge of a knife.
That day was supposed to be sunny

but rain came for eight days straight.
Tonight, too, the forecast is wrong.
Tornadoes are swinging homes

from the swirled horizon, unstaking fences
that keep the earth pinned,
mark the road I'm driving.

There Was No Funeral

because death doesn't stagger, it walks
on arched toes, hangs sheets
over mirrors,

because soon the house will fill with no one
who saw you lift your skirt and wade
into the ether,

because I will undress the bed, thread
by thread,

because I still have business
in this world.

I Wonder What's in a Church Woman's Purse

I wonder what's in a church woman's purse
that makes her heart rattle
for the love of God, that makes her free
of this blasphemy I feel.

I hear the singing voices of Sunday mornings
roar toward the Lord in the bleached white
light of salvation and I lift my hands
to mimic surrender. My mind's the devil's

devoted son—sex and sin
more interesting than any epistle. Nights,
I take a shaky razor from the side of the shower
and scrape my fleece and feel renewed.

I'm old by morning. Each Sabbath
I see girls in cotton dresses, their knees covered
with little nicks. Their faith is in their blood.
They're lining up for whole immersion.

With Enormous Wings

*"For the characters who wished to see it, Marquez's Old Man was proof of God's existence."
--Sam Winters, PhD*

Tonight I am looking for you.
In the market, several women confess

they have seen you defenseless
against the children there. They tear

fistfuls of your feathers as you limp,
nearly bald, back into flight.

Tonight I am looking for you
to reclaim your fine down, to break

the windows of sleeping men
hoarding your plumes in their pillows.

Your ghost is circling the city. I am
looking for you, an expectant falconer,

my arm raised against the sky.

The Physics Professor to His Student in Lab 101

--after Miller Williams

Twenty years and tenure and suddenly I'm bored
by particle acceleration. Every Monday,
Wednesday, Friday, I trace your body's parabolas, plot

love behind my office door, measure the equal
and opposite reactions of a professor in free-fall
for one of his students. Sometimes your eyes

wander into some kind of mathless dreaming
and I pause inside my lecture to imagine our bodies
perfecting simple harmonic motion, the pendulum swing

of us beneath the sheets. Under this coat,
my heart's a lonely motor, and you, my joule,
you wind the tiniest machines inside of it. The hours

I've labored inside my lab can't answer physics'
oldest question: what happens late at night
when an object so immovable meets a force so irresistible.

Listening to His Rock 'N' Roll Records,
the Physics Professor Sends His Student an Erotic Email

I'd make your hair from the longest LP cuts,
glossy black with an unnamable sheen. Your back
I'd fashion from a gatefold cover

with musicians smiling on the sleeve.
I'd keep you separate from my other records, protected
in noncorrosive plastic

to keep your face pristine. I'd feel your fat,
round body between my fingers and you'd turn
at the touch of my current. I'd lay you

under the sting of my stylus, dropping
the tip in the middle of your fuzz box
guitar solo. Such a pouring of notes,

Frampton would come alive. Your breasts
would be the radio hits. Your legs,
"I Can See for Miles"

and "Fat-Bottomed Girls" for your derriere.
My electric lady, I'd make a mix tape of your body
and rock it all night in my car. Laid out

on backseat vinyl, not a sound of silence would come
between the songs, just the *ahhhhs* of a heavenly prayer,
a Led Zeppelin wail, a whole lot of love.

The Physics Professor Reads His Student's Evaluation

You've lectured all semester: *Love's the single subject
resistant to physics*. But $F=MA$, where F
is force and M is me attracted.

I'd like to simulate the impulse of an engine
exceeding its mass, the only motion principle
I remember. Jet propulsion

is simple and the moon is very near.
To fly me there, apply
forward propulsive thrust. Or rear.

Stories I Know

Father, I've driven to the drive-in of your past and parked beneath the clapboard screen to imagine the stories I know. It's here that you proposed to Mother when the screen stars kissed in the foreground of a B-movie mushroom cloud. Is this the scene you see in your anesthetized sleep? You won't find Mother there among the overgrown weeds, the gutted refreshment stand. No alchemy of memory can unmake her grave.

When your friends gathered, they told of the night the projection booth snapped and ghosted Hepburn onto her coat.

But Father, don't rock back in time. Mother won't glimmer down to meet you. She was willowy and young, but dead now so long, how would you even know her—this woman you once said loved you.

Space Age Love Song: Buck Rogers' Ray Gun
Would've Been Nothing Compared to My Love

"Men experiencing divorce during middle age often attempt to replace their ex-wives with women who possess qualities similar to those of their adolescent crushes."

--Archetypes in Psychology

Fighting the Martian hordes, you were the most,
Miss Deering: rocking zero-gravity
peep-toes and skirts, averting tragedy
with Buck each week in grainy kinescope.

You kicked it fresh in the television future,
distracting Killer Kane and his horny minions,
your atomic push-up bra and death-ray nylons
the bait that Buck could use to cinch their capture.

But Wilma, this is how I would've had it.
We would've chilled right here on Earth, got floaty
on gin and chase and cans of Douggen-Dirby.
The doom-prone world we'd leave for Buck alone.
We'd jitterbug until the stars were done,
sticking to Earth like gravity was a habit.

Brief Notes on Helio-Galactic Lullabies

Song after song, it's become obvious

the sun is not the lone alto
astronomers once believed

but a chorus of atoms breaking
into lullabies.

Out there our planets

have been lulled and are falling fast
asleep. Even our most confident

astronauts aren't certain of what to expect
should Earth fail to open

its eyes in time to catch them
at splashdown.

But little has changed on Earth
for us. You still keep to your own

orbit at the end of the hall, sending
your wishes

to disinterested stars. Should you find
in your slumber that you're among those

celestial bodies, sleepwalking—
that suddenly you're wombed

with a child so round
its orbit startles you from sleep—

call me. I'll transmit to you
a lullaby like Earth

has never heard.

The Physics Professor in Marriage Counseling

We met, we fucked, we fell in love. In lab,
we turned our bodies into particle beams
and proved the theorem of magnetic flux.
We lay in the swaddle of our electron streams,
imagining a son aswim in genius.
He'd swing the distant solar systems, farther
than Poseidon, Arcturus or the blinking belt
of Orion—a rocket man just like his father.
But now we're married, she's quoting the Book of John:
Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids.
The argument rages on and on:
we'll rear our son the way her parents did—
lounging around on Planet Earth—or else
she'll raise our kid the way her parents did.

Ultrasound

We've come to see it—
the slumbering world
in the airless bowl

of the amnion.
Conjured by the monitor,
its heart thrums

a silver rhythm—
tiny pulses we count
in the black hole

of its chest.
Impressive, this orb,
its gravitational pull

on us. So small, still
something convinces:
it's the most important

planet. We watch it
ripple through its atmosphere
of slowly rolling stars.

Around this sleeping
sphere we orbit:
impatient astronauts.

Whatever Monster

I'm sad for what our bodies never made,
for the days we rose, fully rested, from sleep
no childish thing had interrupted. What's made
our lives a stalled biology doesn't sleep;
it clamors in the womb, scaring children.
Our nightstand spills with useless cures we've tried.
Whatever monster turns our would-be children
to blood each month cannot be stopped (we've tried).

On lusty nights let's cinch ourselves together,
knowing the halves we have to put together
won't come to something we can love together.
And when we feel alone, let's face each other
and do the things we could only do together,
like say we're happy to convince each other.

To the Double Helix

I've climbed up to the rafters and stared
into the crib I've hidden in the attic.

I can't comprehend a higher power,
so I pray to you, Double Helix

of Our Children Unraveling in the Womb.
Whenever I lie beside my wife, I fear the bitch

inside of her, the grisly machinery
of motherhood gone awry. Downstairs,

she's waiting beneath a blanket. So young,
her coils shouldn't have a coat of rust just yet

but do. I creep farther across the rafters
each time she calls my name. I'm counting off

the codons on the corkscrews of DNA.
Spring coils should widen and close with accountable physics.

But every month, she wakens to a crimson kiss—
another ghost in the graveyard of her womb.

Divorce Papers for a Rocket Man

Pursuant to this and other matters
are your working hours, the light years
you're gone from home, the unanswered question
of how much space

does one man need. I stand
with the other families and TV crews and *ahhh*
at liftoff, the last frontier becoming another orbit
to places none of us will ever visit.

You return with tales of other bodies
you've never touched, your tastes
in earthly delights lost or replaced
in splashdown. Such differences

should be adjudged irreconcilable, my material allegation
upheld. My body's not enough to pull you
from your mission, to ever have you feign
an interest in re-entry.

Post-Dated Love Note on the Doomsday Planetary Alignment: 5 May 2000

“With all of the planets aligned on one side of the solar system, astrophysicists feared the gravitational pull would snap Earth’s axis and send the planet careening into outer space.”

--Dr. Hans Craig, NASA

When they claimed it’d be like Earth had never been—
us catapulted across the blinking map
of satellites, spun down in a noose of doom—

I wanted only you to barrel-roll
with me across the blazy swirl of stars.
And if it’d been like Earth had never been,

we’d lost our grip on gravity together,
gone ass-over-elbow when things went tilt.
The satellites spun down their news of doom

and I imagined us as just another
set of heavenly bodies spooning through
the universe. The Earth had never been

so useless as it would’ve been right then—
us hovering in lusty weightlessness
while satellites spun down more news of doom.

When they claimed it’d be like Earth had never been
and satellites spun down their news of doom,
we would’ve been the greatest constellations
to ever swing from lines of glittered starshine.

Post-Divorce Postcard from the Atomic Test Site Museum

Metaphors are simple here where something so small tears everything apart,
where sepia tones can stir nostalgia for any event.

The soldiers pictured on the front, leaning toward apocalypse, look
content in that rusty shade
of pre-destruction, seated miles from impact, taken in
by the illusion that distance brings safety.

No one knew what piggybacked on the notes
of plumed uranium, its graceful
spectacle. It's easy to envy

a loudspeaker countdown
to annihilation.

I never even knew
a bomb was falling.