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Foot Held Against the Edge

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FOOT HELD AGAINST THE EDGE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Joseph C. Schumacher
May 2008

Accepted by:
Dr. Wayne Chapman, Committee Chair
Dr. Catherine Paul
Dr. Art Young

ABSTRACT

The poems included in this creative thesis demonstrate a growth in the author's personal development and interpretation of the world. This collection contains 27 poems, which use a variety of styles, themes, and structures to study alternative perspectives and to scrutinize cultural norms. The purpose of this creative thesis is to show the author's proficiency in this genre while also challenging readers to examine their own interpretations of the world around them.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, John and Jane Schumacher, to my brothers and sisters, and to all of my friends. Without their continued support, none of this work would be possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my advisor, Dr. Wayne Chapman, for his assistance during my production of this work. His intense edits, recommended readings, and overall suggestions have cultivated and strengthened these poems. I would also like to thank Dr. Catherine Paul and Dr. Art Young, whose contributions as readers have also bolstered this collection. These remarkable teachers have each pushed my literary understanding and provided several challenging opportunities throughout my graduate coursework at Clemson University. I sincerely thank them for their continued advice.

I would also like to thank several people whose influences have shaped my current perspective and, in turn, the production of these poems. My early English instructors, especially Em Ligon and Jane Sharpe, sparked my initial interest in advanced literary study, and my friends John Etheridge, Reid Taylor, Erin McCoy, Geoff Way, and Chase Hart (among many others) have always supported my personal endeavors with sincere interest and encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my brothers Nick Schumacher and Rick Arthur, and my sisters Emily Arthur and Katie Schumacher. Together, these amazing people have provided the much-needed love that anchors my well-being and fuels my desire to constantly explore and test the limits of my own curiosity.

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INTRODUCTION

1. INFLUENCES AND STRATEGY: THE ARCHITECTURE

A primary goal for this creative thesis is to explore a personal understanding of how human interaction and the human condition function in our contemporary world. I chose the medium of poetry to represent these observations because I find poetry to be extremely challenging and terrifically rewarding when constructed well. In contrast to prose, poetry forces the artist to express intricate and complicated emotions through efficient language. In essence, the poet is comparable to a world-class chef. While crafting her recipes, the chef scrutinizes every detail. She evaluates the flavors and quantities of each ingredient, considers textures and timing, presents an artful appearance through plating, and is careful to find the balance between the sweet and the savory. Poets function in a similar manner, instead choosing verse as their *plat du jour*. Words become the avenue to express core beliefs or careful considerations. The texture and appearance carry the artist's flavor, while careful phrasing carries the artist's mood.

I feel that art in this regard plays a major role in the long chain of progressing human thought. Looking through history, artists function as a liaison between philosophy and common sense. As artists formulate new ideas through their crafts, they communicate their points of view for others to consider. This consideration is the very essence of what it means to be human. As animals struggling to survive (and to survive *well* at that), we constantly assess our surroundings and current positions in the world. We compare ideas and make decisions that best suit our interests. With time, some ideas gain popularity over others. Some last through generations while others falter even in the

minds of their originators. We have faith as a society that logic and reason will govern our decision-making process to formulate best-case scenarios, but this belief only holds true if a diverse set of ideas presents itself for consideration.

In his *Defence of Poetry*, Percy Shelley declared poets to be “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (802). I respect his recognition of the power that words (and poets in particular) can have in effecting social change. However, this overly romantic sentiment may also be a dangerous one for aspiring artists, for while it is true that poetry can have a dramatic social effect, it is not the duty of the poet to decide whether or not the ideas he presents are accepted. In his essay *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill champions the need for creative and alternative considerations within a society. Eccentric opinions, while perhaps shocking at times, add variety to the whole social conversation out of which the best social practices may be identified. Without a free-play of diverse thought, a society runs the risk of becoming stagnant. Without new ideas to challenge old ones, the notion of social progress becomes limited.

The title of this collection, “Foot Held Against the Edge,” metaphorically describes the emotional endeavor that comes with recognizing my addendum to Shelley’s declaration. The poems in this collection are arranged in two parts, and the title lends itself to two separate interpretations to reflect the sentiment of each one. Through Part I, readers will see the speakers’ collective consciousness begin with a sense of personal obligation to show the flaws in contemporary thinking before falling victim to the very cynicism that sparks such motivation. The progression of this part reveals a loss of mental control that comes with a purely cynical point of view and a total devotion to the

idea of the poet as a social motivator—as if the collective speaker dangles from the edge of a cliff, saved from destruction by perhaps a snagged pant leg or a rock that holds the foot above the valley. Part II suggests a second meaning after the speakers regroup to form a new, more hopeful way of interpreting life. This interpretation speaks to a higher degree of self-reliance than the previous section and denotes a firm foot’s grip against “the edge,” either during a climb back to mental stability or as part of defending one’s ground and refusing to be pushed over the side. Overall, this title intimates several interpretations as do several of the poems in the collection.

My first exposure to the importance of multiple perspectives came at an early age, when I began investigating the work of William Blake. I love to push myself intellectually and to test the bounds of my own ability and understanding, and Blake provided an avenue for me to do that. His poetry, and more generally, his radical philosophy concerning the operations of life, shattered several walls that had previously kept my imagination boxed by another’s authority. Blake confronted the notion of organized religion; he showed several subjects from many different points of view; and he challenged others to do the same. Several of his poems work together to form a dichotomy of thought, especially in his collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Reading poems such as “The Tyger” and “The Lamb,” the two “The Chimney Sweeper” poems, the two “Holy Thursday” poems, and “The Clod and the Pebble” first exposed me to the philosophical concept of moral relativism—the idea that personal morality, ethics, and prior experience govern our individual interpretations and opinions of the world around us. This concept has played a tremendous role in my moral development by

teaching me to consider a variety of perspectives for any given situation before determining labels of “right” and “wrong,” of “good” or “bad.” That consideration has invariably affected my poetry.

The first section of this collection, entitled “Part I: Tantalize the Intellect,” represents a pensive, cynical perspective as presented through a set of critical speakers. These points of view are interested in refocusing cultural interest away from materialism and commercialism and toward furthering our intellectual understanding of the world. Several of these poems seem to investigate mankind’s place in nature and its current role as one of the Earth’s most prominent influences. Many harbor images of disgust and despair similar to what some of the Confessional and Beat poets of the 1950s and 1960s wrote about in their most famous poems (e.g., Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead,” Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “A Vast Confusion,” and Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”). The poems from this part communicate ideas, at times quite explicitly, which attack popular acceptance and belief. They follow with a sense of urgency, characterizing the same passion as W. H. Auden in his collection of essays *The Dyer’s Hand*: “In so far as poetry or any of the arts can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate” (27). In this regard, these poems express the same fervency for poetry as a catalyst for dramatic social change as Shelley’s *Defence*. The speakers represent alternative ways of interpreting a variety of common scenarios, be it frequenting a local bar, grilling out shish kabobs, or commuting to work, and often show contempt for their environments as they work to understand the conflict between personal ethics and the workings of contemporary society.

Part I opens with “Somewhere in the Scourge,” a dramatic monologue that features a frightened male narrator who speaks to a picture of his late father while also negotiating a power outage. Throughout this poem, the speaker aims to recognize his father’s influence, which seems uncertain and perhaps inadequate. With the close of the final stanza, the reader is left with an image of shadows eerily drifting toward the room’s lone window. The looming darkness highlights the uncertainty that the speaker feels for the future. As in Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” there is a sense exuding from the speaker that he is ill-equipped to handle future events and is unable to progress beyond this point in his existence.

Out of this speaker’s timidity comes resentment toward the society that has created his uncertainty. “A Night at the Peaselburg Pub” paints a picture of a shabby bar in a blue-collar region of Covington, Kentucky. The speaker highlights the common behavior of drab barflies and even implicates himself in his description of the same people keep doing the same things at the same places without much to show for it. The sporadic rhyming and instances of repetition in this poem are meant to add a musical quality to the piece. This technique highlights the repetition of going to bars night after night as reprieve from daily life and also emulates the surreal effect of drunkenness. “Fat Man Falling” follows with a consideration of the collateral damage from the Second World War. Attending school as a child, I remember having a hard time accepting the bombings of Japan as the glorious finale that many Americans celebrate. To me, the whole situation seemed like a terrible end to a terrible war. I began to consider the casualties that have been legitimized as necessary means to an end. Thus, the poem is

meant to illustrate the perspective of an innocent. The graphic final image comes quickly, much as the blast from the Nagasaki bomb came quickly to Japanese civilians, and is meant to leave the audience considering the event's impact.

The speakers up to this point have considered a variety of fundamental subjects—familial influence, personal routine, political allegiance—that define their identities. Each poem probes these aspects of daily life to examine new ways of considering them. “The Morning Star” continues with this motif by illustrating religious doubt. In this piece, the speaker examines the Bible’s portrayal of Lucifer’s fall and then considers what would happen if Jesus fell in a similar manner. The poem shows a fading belief in Christianity due to the speaker’s awareness of contemporary social interaction and its incongruence with Biblical perspective. The final stanza showcases the speaker’s doubt and encourages the reader to ask whether the crowd’s reaction (“Is this the man / who made the earth tremble, and kingdoms quake?”) is due to the fall of the second morning-star (Christ) or due to the speaker’s presenting a sacrilegious idea that has minimized Christ’s role in life. The quotation is one of many Biblical allusions that surface in this reflection, which includes references to the books of Isaiah,¹ Revelations,² and

¹ Isaiah 14:12-14: “How have you fallen from the heavens, O morning star, son of the dawn! How are you cut down to the ground, you who mowed down the nations! You said in your heart: ‘I will scale the heavens; above the stars of God I will set up my throne; I will take my seat on the Mount of Assembly, in the recesses of the North. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will be like the Most High!’” Also, Isaiah 14:16: “When they see you they will stare, pondering over you: ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, and kingdoms quake?’”

² Revelations 22:16: “‘I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things concerning the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.’”

Ecclesiastes³ to add credence to the consideration. This poem's challenge to religion is essential to the overall theme of this collection as a whole. The poem functions as a natural questioning of an imposed set of rules and is necessary to establish the cynical disposition of the first section.

Having discovered fault in the foundational categories of family, daily routine, nationalism, and religion, the first section begins to consider the primitive characteristics of human life. "Poolside at Borinquen" and "10°33'57N, 85°41'27W" are both set in Costa Rica and both examine Darwinism and the pessimistic idea that maybe the human race has not progressed as far as it would like to believe it has. In "Spray Painting Speed Limits," the speaker applies this realized cynicism to the surging real estate industry of recent years. The patronizing tone of this poem spins an act of vandalism into an instance of concerned, vigilant civil service. The final pitch to "buy now" satirizes the current optimism of the extremely volatile and financially dangerous housing market. "Rush Hour Laugh" shows a speaker mocking the frustrations of an early morning commuter.

This rising animosity toward the world in Part I culminates in "Distracted," the longest poem of the collection. The five-part sequence shows a collage of scenes, each describing a new arena of discontent and anger for the speaker. In section I of the poem, "*Broken footpath*," the speaker laments the change in times that has caused a sense of alienation from his fellow man. The speaker feels that the age of congeniality has passed

³ Ecclesiastes 1:4-5: "One generation passes and another comes, but the world forever stays. The sun rises and the sun goes down; then it presses on to the place where it rises."

and has been replaced with an urge for instant gratification. Section II, “*Sedentary commentary*,” presents readers with Ben, a boisterous, opinionated, disheveled barfly who wastes no time in relating his dilettante knowledge to whomever will listen. Ben becomes a representative for this type of ill-informed, unmotivated behavior of saying a lot but doing very little that particularly irritates the speaker. The speaker uses the final couplet, “Ben finds amusement in commenting on things / and finds importance in threading smoke rings,” to illustrate Ben’s trivial walk through life.

“*Bonfire experience*,” the third section of the sequence, shows two young adults who are in the process of throwing objects into a bonfire based on how cool they will look as they burn. The bird’s nest image is meant to show their lack of respect for nature while also making a more general remark on pollution and its place in nature. The second stanza is meant to illustrate the boys’ need for instant gratification and their unaccountability in properly tending to the fire. The final act of urinating on the fire to end their responsibility highlights their insult to nature.

Section IV, “*Radio time*,” is the most abstract of the five sections and begins with a song playing on the radio. The song exemplifies contemporary political blues by alluding to the rising level of dissatisfaction against the current presidential administration. The person listening to the radio, though, changes the channel to something a little less argumentative and easier to digest—something pop: the Beatles’s “We Can Work It Out.” This action illustrates a person who would rather look the other way than deal with or even think about a possible problem.

Finally, the fifth section, "*The artist*" shows that the speaker would like to assimilate and become a happy, prototypical, standard American but is unable to do so due to his own psychological needs. People crowd to see what is produced as a result of this struggle and to stare at the artist, who is compared in the final image to a freak of nature writhing on a cave floor. In this last figure is a reference to Plato's allegory of the cave, where the artist represents a new and different perspective and is thereby ripped to shreds for being so iconoclastic.

After this collapse, the first section of the thesis ends with a fond remembrance of childhood innocence in "Below Hip Height" followed by the inevitable personal destruction found in the poem "Manifested." Such an unavoidable and abrupt ending to this point of view demonstrates the failure of the cynical perspective. With an over-reliance on skepticism guiding every action, the speakers of the first section exhibit the mental deterioration that comes with such an unproductive mindset. The first section ends because it has to. In order to avoid self-destruction, a new perspective must take hold.

As I turn to Part II of the collection, I must acknowledge the influence that James Joyce has had on me. His novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* describes a character, Stephen Dedalus, who struggles to form a manageable interpretation of the world around him. As the novel progresses, the audience sees Dedalus move from a devotion to his family to an exploration of physical satisfaction and then (unsuccessfully) to an attachment with the Catholic church before finally recognizing the need to balance his interests and commitments in order to fully appreciate the beauty of life. Similarly,

my collection of poetry depicts speakers whose crippling skepticism mandates their need for hope and satisfaction and forces them to find a different way of looking at life.

The title of Part II, “On Seeking Beauty,” derives from this search for a new method of interpreting the world. Again, to revisit the idea of moral relativity, the main goal of this section is to showcase situations of beauty that may not be overly apparent given the context of each specific poem. A theme surfaces that beauty must be sought to some degree in order to be perceived. “Perceiving a Housefly in a Car Ride,” for instance, opens this section by finding inspiration in a mundane housefly’s attempt to escape the car’s confines. In “Spring Expiration,” the speaker ironically expresses a sense of hope for a prolonged winter and disdain for the onset of spring, which for him acts as a reminder that his lover’s death draws near. “The Moonstone Experiment” is the collection’s second dramatic monologue modeled after Robert Browning’s form. This particular poem characterizes a scene from Wilkie Collins’s nineteenth-century novel, *The Moonstone*. While reading Collins’s work, I became intrigued by a scene in which Franklin Blake doses up on laudanum as a way to recreate his actions the night that the Moonstone diamond was stolen. I enjoyed Collins’s technique to relay this event through a series of journal entries from Ezra Jennings, an assistant to the family physician. Through this character’s notes, I envisioned a scene where drug abuse, normally a socially reprehensible activity, had become quite favorable in proving the innocence of the accused Franklin Blake, who would no doubt view the entire process as a beautiful set of events. This same sense of luck and appreciation in the face of unfortunate circumstances emerges again in “The Better Dead.” Based on true events that occurred

in Seattle, Washington, this poem describes a narrator who feels some unknown sense of personal misplacement while at a rave afterparty. Because of his inexplicable urge to be in another place, the speaker leaves the party moments before the killer, Kyle Huff, initiates a massacre that left himself and six others dead. The narrator cannot help but appreciate whatever it was that made him leave the scene. Though the shock and grief are real, a certain sense of happiness and thankfulness remains.

This sentiment echoes one of the profound subjects of poetry: death as the mother of life. In “Sunday Morning,” for instance, Wallace Stevens proclaims death to be the mother of beauty. William Carlos Williams wrote “Spring and All” as an optimistic rebuttal to the hopelessness of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Emily Dickinson’s “Success is counted sweetest” shows us that in order to truly appreciate the sweet, one must first experience the bitter. One’s perspective determines the perceived beauty in each of these poems.

“Tree Trimmers” and “Cleaning Up,” two of my favorite and most recent additions to this body of work, continue in this vein. The former describes a lamentation for trees that are sacrificed by the power company’s maintenance crew, and yet the poem’s final stanza suggests a certain acclimation to the altered scene that will come with time. The latter poem explains the yard work that comes after the maintenance crew’s visit and shows the speaker’s appreciation for the honest, hard work that the tree trimming from the previous poem allows. I believe that these poems make significant contributions to the second section as a whole by again finding the beauty that exists in otherwise mundane experiences or simple activities.

I must cite Seamus Heaney as an influence for this pair of poems. His poem “Digging” recognizes the same ancestral devotion to hard work acknowledged by the speaker in “Cleaning Up.” Furthermore, beyond any one particular poem, Heaney’s earthy style and specific diction have caused me to recognize a musical quality to the language that I aim to employ in my poems. Robert Frost is another poet who has had a profound impact on my poetic style in this regard. Like Heaney, Frost maintains a musical sense to his poetry and utilizes sonorous language with nearly every piece. He also challenged himself to let his work develop under its own weight, almost as if each poem was a living, breathing organism requiring careful nurturing from the poet in order to blossom fully.

In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Frost spoke about his goal to create a *hook*, or a moment of revelation, for both himself as a writer and for his readers as well. He adamantly explains a poem as “a revelation or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader.... No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader” (12). Every poem that I write aims to carry itself in a similar manner. Every poem has some underlying idea driving its creation, and in most cases, this idea comes as a revelation or is otherwise specifically articulated in the final lines of the poem. At times, this articulation will surprise even me as the author. Such was the case with “Fat Man Falling.” For this poem, I knew the final image was powerful when it caused me to pause and take a deep breath in the middle of the creation process. “Cleaning Up” caused a similar reaction for me as the poem began taking on a cathartic role comparable to the activity that it describes. Overall, I rely heavily on my

poems' endings to affect the reader and to solicit the same type of consideration that sparked their creations.

To appeal further to my readers, my poetry tends to focus on easily identifiable and relatable subjects but most often aims to portray them in new light. I seem to favor common language for my poems although I do enjoy flexing the beauty of our language by asking readers to consult a dictionary from time to time. I find my work allying itself with the tenets of Imagism in that I would rather show my audience a scene through carefully described images as a way to evoke specific emotions rather than simply tell the emotions in overly sentimental or personal lyrics. My overall goal is to cause an honest consideration from my readers for how they perceive each subject.

The final poems "Hands" and "Death of a Devout Grandmother" include a variety of similes and metaphors to communicate the closing ideas of the collection. "Hands" examines the physical pain that comes with raw, freshly worked hands and yet optimistically focuses on the opportunity that new generations present. "Death of a Devout Grandmother" shows a speaker who examines his fading religious faith while observing the death of his grandmother. When the ancient woman's eyes fall empty, the speaker looks hard for some type of religious confirmation. Each of these poems shows signs of hope and endurance in the face of painful situations and affirms the new, balanced perspective described in this section as a reprieve from the despair produced by the first section's cynicism.

Through the poetry of each section, audiences will see the advances and shortcomings of each frame of mind. Instead of functioning as prescriptions for how

others should live their lives, these poems are anti-didactic, for they put their subjects on display for others to consider by inference. Neither perspective claims to be the “right” way to live a life; instead, they are intended to showcase the possible repercussions of living life with an intense consideration for different perspectives.

2. ON COMPILING *FOOT HELD AGAINST THE EDGE*

All of the poems included in this collection have been written during my time as a graduate student at Clemson University; however, I have harbored the central ideas of some pieces for many years. The concept for the oldest poem, “Fat Man Falling,” originally came to me after studying World War II in the seventh grade. I was twelve years old, and yet my supposition then about a boy my age who might have been just like me and blown away by something he could barely even conceive stays with me even today. It wasn’t until I was a sophomore in Clemson’s undergraduate English program that I first penned the idea into a poem. What turned up on the page then was hardly the same poem that is found in this collection. In fact, it was written as part of an assignment in an entry-level poetry workshop for the prose poem form. My end result seemed little more than a paragraph reminder of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Later, after studying the work of the Imagist poets of the Modernist movement and really focusing on creating specific images in my poetry, I developed a rough sketch of the narrative with the final simile that echoed the mental image mentioned above: “... it blew his head back as if / he’d been running full speed / before someone jerked a noose around his neck.”

“Manifested” is another of the oldest poems in this collection. The piece originated from a dream that I had several years ago in which I imagined my own death. The descriptions and specific details all stem from the dream, including the final thought: “Mom, Dad, the rest / of my family and friends, / and my enemies, even them, / and I love all things. / I love all—.”

Most of my poems begin in this manner. I usually discover a personal realization of some sort and then work to articulate that realization—or perhaps the emotions resulting from that realization—for my audience through images. The realization might come with a challenge to a personal or popular assumption; it might describe an interesting comparison in some way; indeed, an endless variety of epiphanic possibilities exists.

“Hungry” originated as an attack on the commercialization of food after I became frustrated with the endless barrage of obvious advertising that we, as consumers, are exposed to every day. Especially as a male in the coveted 18-to-25-year advertising age range, I became disgusted by the sexual appeal that comes in nearly every advertisement directed toward me. In response, the speaker of this poem confuses hunger with sex and is only urged to awaken from this trance through a subconscious recognition: “Awake, awake / from the tongue-dripping stare” A similar attack against commercialization comes in the poem “21st-Century Love-Song for an Oak Tree,” where the speaker imagines the tree’s widely recognized beauty as a marketable concept before he is able to see beauty in the tree himself. These warped points of view were developed to show the psychologically damaging effects of being inundated by commercialism.

The five-part poem “Distracted” came as a cathartic rush for me—what Walt Whitman might recognize as a “barbaric yawp”—in response to the materialism and apathy that dominate our culture. After writing this poem, I began to notice a trend of aggressive anti-commercialism in my poetry. Having been freshly updated on some of the traditional explications of poetry in my graduate seminars, I began to see poetry as a medium through which I could express this political dissatisfaction. I wrote a few more poems from this perspective, the cynical point of view of Part I. I intended to write several more poems in this manner to create a collection that could be construed as a stratum of argument against various popular behaviors.

To my surprise, Part II developed out of my own discontent with this cynical perspective. I found myself becoming a skeptic toward all situations, all people, all areas of my life. The experience was inhibiting and destructive. I needed to seek a new way of interpreting the world, yet, I had this budding collection of poems riddled with discontent that I was working to complete. I needed more cynical poems, but I had no desire to be the cynic anymore. I felt a need to appreciate the world more, a desire to find beauty, and in recognizing that, I knew that it meant a shift in artistic perspective, as well.

I decided to embrace the change by removing the overbearing personal obligation to change the world with each stanza. I continued writing poetry as each poem came to me, attempting to let the poetry cast the mold of the collection’s emotional movement as opposed to writing poems to fit a prefabricated political mold. The poetry that resulted was more personal, leaving social implications to the audience and popular opinion. These pieces focus more on presenting situations where readers have to rely on their own

emotional intuition to find the beauty of each poem. Several intend for a multitude of meanings, often allowing for both an optimistic and pessimistic interpretation. In “The Moonstone Experiment,” for example, the beauty of Franklin Blake’s gross intoxication comes in recreating his innocent role in the theft of the Moonstone diamond.

I enjoyed writing this poem as part of an assignment given by Dr. Art Young, who required a dramatic monologue after the style of Robert Browning. This form appealed to me for several reasons. I enjoyed the flexibility of tone that a character’s voice permits. The relatively tight iambic pentameter in this particular poem, for instance, aims to recreate the formality of Victorian language. Also, in constructing the setting and action of the dramatic monologue, the poet chooses images deliberately to create an overall mood. “Somewhere in the Scourge,” the dramatic monologue that opens the collection, utilizes this technique to emphasize the uncertainty that the speaker feels. Overall, the form allows the poet to distance himself from the perspective of the speaker, in turn allowing for more description and inviting even more consideration from the audience.

The opening poem to Part II, “Perceiving a Housefly in a Car Ride,” similarly permits a multiplicity of meanings. In this piece, the speaker finds inspiration in a housefly that is trapped inside the car and unable to recognize its freedom in the cracked window. This poem came to me after I noticed a fly bouncing along the dirty dashboard in my car. I found myself quietly cheering for the fly to find its way out of the car and saw its repeated crashing against the window as a noble refusal to give up. With regard

to the motif of the section, the reader must recognize the beauty of that inspiration in the otherwise mundane figure of a buzzing housefly.

The next poem, “The Bumblebee,” originated as an exercise to write in the Elizabethan sonnet form. This poem’s concept derives from one of my earliest memories of playing outside as a young child and being stung by a bumblebee. For the speaker of this poem, the betrayal of innocent trust that came with the sting marks the first moment of worldly disillusionment and even hints at possible religious doubt, as well. Whether this is a positive reaction or a negative one for the speaker depends on the reader’s opinion regarding religion.

Several more poems in this section were conceived with the intention of allowing for many interpretations. I developed the poem “—Love Loves to Love Love” after reading the Gabler Edition of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.⁴ Because of Hans Gabler’s efforts to produce an accurate edition of the novel based on Joyce’s manuscripts, and also with the influence of Richard Ellmann’s preface to this particular edition, I constructed this poem, which can either be read as a sweet and, perhaps, funny account of a man hoping to impress a woman, or as a skeptical portrayal of man who tolerates his personal inconvenience because of a selfish desire to be loved. Again, the interpretation depends on the reader’s perspective.

After constructing several poems in such vein, I began to develop the structure of this collection. I separated the poems into their respective parts, and from there worked on creating a logical order to the poems within those parts. “The Bumblebee” is the only

⁴ A trade edition was generated at Bodley Head, Penguin, and Random House with significant controversy.

poem to have switched parts during this structural editing. This piece originally appeared in Part I as a cynical portrayal of religious doubt; however, after making a few edits to the poem and giving more consideration to the positive aspects of religious doubt, I felt that the poem would fit well in Part II.

I originally arranged the poems under the assumption that they would appear on both sides of the printed page. Because of this, I was careful to ensure that the pages of two-page poems and poems meant to be read in pairs (e.g., the two short imagistic poems “Rush Hour Laugh” and “Disturbance,” and the two Costa Rican-themed poems “Poolside at Borinquen” and “10°33’57N, 85°41’27W”) appeared on facing pages. After becoming more familiar with the single-page layout for theses and dissertations, I realized that I had more freedom in choosing the poems’ sequence and focused more on expressing the narrative-like emotional journey of the speakers’ consciousness while deciding on the poems’ final arrangement.

To help balance the number of poems in each section, I also recently added three new poems to the collection. I composed “All These Bits Will Be Forgotten” in the midst of preparing for a road trip to visit family in Kentucky. As I prepared for the highly anticipated weekend, I paused to consider my preparation and how I probably would not remember that effort as much as the trip itself. I started to consider more of my memories and realized that the collective amount of time spent on those specific events is relatively small compared to the collective amount of time spent *preparing* for those events. This poem recognizes the importance and beauty of ordinary preparation, which is necessary in forming fond memories.

“Tree Trimming” and “Cleaning Up” were written together as an homage to what has grown as a favorite hobby for me. Recently, due to a few severe thunderstorms in the area, the local power company sent a crew around my neighborhood to trim all the trees that had grown to hang over power lines. The crews were uninvited and did not consult the local homeowners before tending to the trees. Their efforts helped reduce inconvenient power outages for the neighborhood, but they also caused a feeling of strangeness for me when viewing my own house. The absence of the trees was noticeable and took some time before it became familiar once again. However, the experience also caused me to address the landscaping issue by chopping the excess tree logs for disposal. What started as an annoying project aimed to keep a clean front yard has since evolved into a source for emotional catharsis. This two-poem sequence chronicles my entire wood-maintenance experience, from the feelings of resentment toward the initial tree trimming to the acknowledged thrill that comes with physical labor.

Writing this collection has given me the opportunity to chronicle a very interesting shift in my personal perspective. Throughout its formation, I have maintained an honest effort to let the poems develop individually before attempting to arrange them in a sound, logical order. The structure that results characterizes this emotional transition and explores the ideas of a mind constantly working to understand its environment. During the course of this examination, readers are invited to consider these perspectives and to develop their own emotional interpretations. Any of the ideas presented here that go on to legislate the world in some way will do so only with audience discretion as a guide.

PART I:
TANTALIZE THE INTELLECT

SOMEWHERE IN THE SCOURGE

I can't see your face anymore, Dad—

I mean,

I can see your mannerisms,
your literalist sense of humor,
your clinched smile that exposed all of your teeth,
your expressive body language forecasting
your thoughts—but your face, I've lost it
somewhere in the scourge. I'm holding your picture,
I think—I mean

the power's out over here,
and the frame I've grasped feels like your picture,
but it's hard for me to tell. You see, it's cold
here, and before the sun went down, the trees
got the freeze. I bet one fell and pulled a power
line down with it. I bet the nearby people
saw a wild, spitting cobra whipping sparks
from its teeth, like an untamed fire hose
pinned beneath the tree. Or, was it calm
like a coiled roly-poly and only
lifeless until someone touched it?

It might
be a bad fuse in the house, but I can't be
sure. I guess I never learned about fuses,
or at least, enough to know what to do
next. But don't worry, Dad; I've found a candle.
There.—Can you see from that boxed frame
how the light glows the room copper?

It makes shadows out of everything,
shadows that convulse with the flame's flicker
and grease their sides against the walls.
Their feet anchor and hold off the window's pull.
Their heads stretch for the darkness beyond the familiar.

A NIGHT AT THE PEASELBURG PUB

There is always music here
and smoke
and beer
and sorrows and lust
and face-wrinkled sots
detailing tales of lost trust.
The air hangs stale here,
dry-brushed with hacked laughs,
amid top-shelf bottles coated in dust.
Ash trays, jostled on the drink bench,
spill clumps of gray-and-white rust.

The aged finish wears away
beneath pensive elbow scrapes,
and exposed natural wood
fades and fades and fades.

Our shouts come in spasms.
We jump to join the mellow
hue with claims of passion and know
that small place outside the fear—
for there is always music here,
and smoke
and beer.

FAT MAN FALLING

Susumu shifted,
a prisoner to his cold desk,
with knee-bouncing ambivalence
to the goings on inside.

And his sensei spoke,

but the boy drifted
and fixed his gaze
on the city

outside—

he caught a glimmer in the sky,
a tiny red-tailed silver streak in the sky,
sinking like a wounded bird from the sky.

Peering through the paned frame,
the boy's face and eyes pinched tight
when bursting quick dividing light
cut through the morning haze,

and the light—oh the Light!—
a flamed fever eclipsing
the rising Sun—

it blew his head back as if
he'd been running full speed
before someone jerked a noose around his neck.

HUNGRY

A picture of culinary marvel:

chicken shish kebobs

over grilled fire-caress,

pinned beneath heated air shimmy.

It's like looking through old glass

sinking from pressure,

like an old window

of sizzled colors evaporated,

reds and greens and pineapple and hiss

of flavor that sweats from plump pabulum—

to curl under my brain and thrust

my eyes back behind closed shades,

to force an arch-backed move

forward, to pry open the hood,

to claim it for my own.

Awake, awake

from the tongue-dripping stare;

though recognizing smoke can burn pinched eyes,

the reward is greater. The reward is worth it.

THE MORNING STAR

The morning-star fell once. It left
its lofted seat in the firmament
and crashed itself into a lake
of fire, where it ordered chaos
on Earth. The heavens lost their brightest
star and Earth its son of the dawn, and people
were there to wander. I wonder,

did the Earth

ever tremble from its skyward view?
Did the land quake to see what the heavens
would do next?

The sun rose again,
and another morning-star was born.

I look at it straight on to find my way,
and it disappears under my own sight.
If it should fall too, I would like to see it
plunk into the soft pads of a palm,
to roll among fingertips.

I wonder,

would the crowds shout in disbelief: "Is this the man
who made the earth tremble, and kingdoms quake?"
Would the sun rise again?

EVERY MORNING, I WALKED THROUGH THE OLD SETTLERS' CEMETERY

every monotonous morning, the same
walk around these same blocks, and found the same
sounds and sunlight stabbing at the backs
of my eyes. The flare taught me to traipse the sidewalks
with a lowered crown, to watch for rogue bricks
or small life-things that wiggled by accident
onto the parching cement. I carefully
avoided those slow-dying ones for fear
of understanding their suicides.

But through this cemetery
and its rhododendron corridor—
that flat-leaved hedgeway, peppered shade
strobing through cracks, sloped, eroded graves—
this plot is the only green in the city.

This two-minute track the only place
to spark that fractured recognition
together at once of ancestry,
origin, and inevitability.

So long ago, I stopped counting the new floors
of the growing highrise across the street.

Today it blocks the sun completely.

POOLSIDE AT BORINQUEN

Capuchins look down on us
with curious eyes—

at our blurred legs dangling safe
in the exceptionally blue lake—
sculpted and chemicaled,
lined with cement,
our white-toothed smiles and
pale, soft skin

—at our nearby bungalow, awkwardly colored,
with conditioned air and hammock ready,
meant to isolate and comfort us
from the life that bore us

—and at the lawns made clean,
manicured sharp, and removed
from the beautiful calamity
of untouched wood.

Henri, a diligent Borinquen staff member,
approaches, starched and straight-laced
with plated drinks and a bill.
I flash my Visa.

Overhead, the monkeys quiet;
they ease on branches and look hard
at us looking back at them.

After quick wild-gaze
and calmed canopy limbs,
they explode and throw sticks
at us, maybe not as victims
of some id-forced thrill,
but perhaps to remind us
of the tools we used to wear.

10°33'57N, 85°41'27W

We walked for an hour
down the tican shoreline
to where the stone-elbow jetty
cradled the whitewater wire.

Here, past the developed land,
we watched the sun melt
to a semicircle and bleed
into less. One by one,

at first, and then in bunches,
the constellations revealed themselves
from their navy-blue bedding,
and, away from all else,

we saw new worlds. I remember
sinking my feet and finding the tiny
flickers in the water rush.
Minute blue glows shimmered

like moonlit seashells and yet
endured through the tussling
undertow. A closer prod
on the next wave ruptured

a jelly shell, and the blue ooze
poured bioluminescence
like a crystal river

across the dark, wet sand.

“Barely a polycelled organism,” I smirked and, looking to the moon, continued, “S’ amazing how far we’ve come from this to have walked

on that.” “But you have to think,” you said without pause, your skin cooled in the anemic moon glare, “... which one are we touching now?”

21ST-CENTURY LOVE-SONG FOR AN OAK TREE

I invented air but forgot the patent.
I discovered earth but left my flag unplanted.
You use both in your enduring sway
and stand breeze-hushed with your limbs at play.

Wordsworth would have me lie at the base of you,
think of my place with you, an unadulterated natural view.
And in his flustered rush, feel himself a child—
excitedly convincing me of your power wild.

Pound would carve his hard thoughts into your hard grain
and press his petals onto your wet, black boughs.
And without questioning his deliberate shapes,
I would accept his asserted style.

But under this white-blanket glare,
I see you apexed in the sun's way,
and I recognize opportunity
to market your delighting sway.

I will not miss this chance to find the green
in nature's sleep. I will sell tickets
for others to see the assigned beauty
in which they would have me believe.

SPRAY PAINTING SPEED LIMITS

Through rows of houses ranging
in the city's newest subdivision,
careful drivers may notice
newly installed speed limits
with 30's curved forcefully into 80's.

Maybe it's a clever trick
meant to spark a fool's game
or inspire reckless car chases
through otherwise quiet streets.

Or perhaps, a sense of vigilant
civil service drove the vandal
to hush the drone of a normal day,
to strike out against the rules of another,
and to make an impact.

Though vermillion clay cakes
still blanket all the lots,
prospective buyers can see
the sense of public concern
already glistening in the citizenry.
Buy now. Rates are at historic lows.

RUSH HOUR LAUGH

See the car-boxed woman
there—water droplets
linger on her frame's edge,
and the sun positions itself
so as to cast a series
of awkward-looking moles
across her face.

They speckle her
furrowed frustration.

DISTURBANCE

On a white-sanded coast
of the warm Gulf Stream,
my sister bitches
about the squawking gulls
made closer by tourist feed:
“Look at them,” she sneers,
“tossing Doritos at the crowd;
the parasites can’t get enough!”

DISTRACTED

I. *Broken footpath*

Breaking through pinched, clouded eyes,
sunlight sharpens to show the day's disguise
and highlight the bridgewalk where so many former lives
have trodden daytime strolls to escape from troubling times.

And by the water there, people used to focus passing stares
on smiles and brief hellos: amicable repairs,
brotherly reminders beneath sunspun glare,
hatching from doubt the urge to care.

Now we walk on sidewalks, gray lining gray
streets, bustle-broken and frayed,
hoping to capture some security, placated
in stolid feet, where our focus stays.

Strangers' eyes no longer subdue
the fear we put off with electronics, bemused
by iPods and cellphones, conversations confused.
Instant gratification deludes.

II. *Sedentary commentary*

"I tell ya what it is;
it's all that outsourcin'
over to Japan and China.
It's killin' American trade."

His hands clap tight
a tumbled whiskey and water,
liquor hot on his breath:
“Cheap labor over there, ya know;
buyin’ up all our jobs.”

Bar-tended, refreshed,
Ben picks at another,
looking down, furrow-browed,
at the cubes in his glass.

The news comes rushed
over the box of a downed Dow,
and opinions are needed.
Without prompt, Ben offers his:
“Global warming. What a crock a’ shit.
If there’s so much global warming,
then why the hell’s it so goddamn cold?”
He sips his drink complete
and carouses with no one,
his clothes rumpled and time-worn.

Ben finds amusement in commenting on things
and finds importance in threading smoke rings.

III. *Bonfire experience*

The fire whips and seeks
the vacant air around its reach.
“Man, it’s cold out here. Let’s get inside.”

“Wait; check this out.”

He shows a bird’s nest
made from mudwood and plastic bits,
sprinkled styrofoam and bread bagged in shreds.

“This should look cool.”

Tarnished home thrown to the fury,
pulled deeper by snapping orange fingers.

“Nice. *Now*, let’s go inside.”

“We can’t just leave it here. What if it gets out of control?”

“Well I don’t feel like sittin’ out here and watchin’ it anymore.

Let someone else do it.

Or better yet, let’s just put it out.”

“But it still has lots to burn,”

Still reaching, still trying its best to explode the world into itself
Spark, fuel, air alive,
pushing. Always pushing.

“So what? I’m cold.”

“Fine, let’s put it out then. I’ll grab the hose.”

One goes to find the floodwater
and returns to see him standing over it,
hands at the waist, unbuckling the clasp:

“Don’t worry about that shit. I’ve got this one covered.”

Lips snarl a power display
and steam escapes the side unseen.

The firepit releases spittered scream:
the cry of enduring annihilation.

“Unless you’re pissin’ a five-gallon bucket,

you ain't gonna finish the job.”
“Fine—” the word comes forced
with the drip drip drip,
sigh and done.
“Turn on the hose, then, and finish it.”

They walk inside
while a withered carcass smolders behind.

IV. *Radio time*

... been spendin' mah tahme
readin' the news:
memphis, chicahgo, and nawlin's city blues
echoes of cries from langston hughes
of rivers overflowin' with wash-'em-out coups,
of careful conscriptions aimed tah reduce
the risin' concerns from warmongah reviews

(Flick, flick to something more pleasant.) And

... Try to see it my way,
 Only time will tell if I am right or I am wrong.

V. *The artist*

He wants the calm,
the tranquility. Happiness
in knowing what to expect.
He wants to have friends over to watch the big game on the big TV.

He wants to joke with suited co-workers around a water cooler.
He wants a loving family, with the 2.5, a dog, a house, and a car.

And yet he cannot make a life out of this life.

Instead he crafts his warped insecurities,
his unrequited loves,
his suppressed idiosyncrasies
for the world to see—
The monkey and the roly poly man,
the sideshow.

His art is the spotlight
they use to expose him,
to highlight him,
to draw others to flock and see
the strange creature
writhing on the cave floor.

BELOW HIP HEIGHT

I. *Kitty*

With my brother
on back patio steps,
I peeled husks
and finger-tweezed hair.
The cat would come along,
purred presence announced,
despite mechanized creening
from the rotisserie grill.
She'd sniff at fallen kernels
and bring her chest close
to the ground before lapping them up.
"What kind of cat eats corn?"
We'd laugh to ourselves
without lifting our eyes.

II. *Tiny Guy*

My earliest realization
of shrunken perspective
grew from jealousy
at not knowing the countertop.
There with barely capable legs
I tiptoed my finger reach
to top-digit grasp
of the coveted laminate.
The same countertop

now below hip height—
How small I must have been.

III. *Hurry*

All I recall is
the panicked race
across the backyard
to the back door and Mom,
knowing with certainty
that I was in a spot
and needing to make fast
my next few actions.
The ants covered my pant legs,
red eclipsing blue,
and dirt clumps dropped
off with each hurried step.

They tore at my flesh
as she stripped the soiled clothes,
each venomous sting
a reality pinch.

IV. *Night Games*

The best hiding places
were on the shrub edges,
or at the end of the driveway
if you could make it that far.
You had to lie still, though,

or hear the breath-quickened call
of being spotted in the name of the can.

You'd listen so closely for calculating
teammates, using acorn shells
and grass blades to whistle guard locations.
And hearing your cue,
a hurried footrace
to reach the base before him.

Ah, that sweet-aired glory
of kicking the tin
way farther than necessary,
at setting your buddies free
and being their hero for an instant.

**PART II:
ON SEEKING BEAUTY**

PERCEIVING A HOUSEFLY IN A CAR RIDE

Sirrah!—The buzz slipping by my blank face
to crash yourself against our windowed view;
to crash and crash again, to test your bounds
and see the world through faceted stare.
Consider your predecessors, those winged steeds
once determined to find their races, now
laid to rest as empty exoskeletons;
their souls shed their bones where the windshield
meets the dash. See their crooked legs, broken wings
amid the dust, and focus your rabid
flapping to solve the riddle. Crash into that
framework; beat out your significance
to the world—the window cracks and exposes
your freedom, now you must be there to take it.

THE BUMBLEBEE

In youth I spent a summer day outside,
alive, my history ready to unfurl,
when suddenly my wandering eye spied
a clover jump under a bumbled swirl,
the skipping black-and-yellow exploration,
a settled, fuzzy buzz, flecked with gold dust.
I jumped with subtle adoration
to seek a friendship through my inherent trust,
but when I went to hold my friend—to bring
him to my realm—he turned against my squeeze
and planted in my palm a divine sting:
awakening through newly shattered belief.

There he left me alone with realized shock
and flitted back to his eagle-governed rock.

SPRING EXPIRATION

The green is a rash engulfing
golden undulations, inviting
parasitic robins to scratch sun-soaked skin—
sobering reminders
that we're no longer protected
beneath Winter's fast crumbling shell.

In bud-heavy branches
I see your demise
as assured by medical prophesy.
And when you shunned their prescriptions
for a slow fall in sterile surroundings,
I saw in you a cereus blooming
proud despite the darkness.

You dismissed diagnoses,
full of certitude.
And though your principles inspired
my admiration, my awe
now melts with your fading weight and health,
with cavernous eyes that struggle to focus on mine.

April comes swiftly
and brings with its rising
temperatures and longer days,
the promise to change our world.

I am not ready. I hope still

for frost-bitten days and icy nights,
Winter's comforting guarantees
that tomorrow we can rise
and play and laugh and hold
these things which Spring will melt away.

THE MOONSTONE EXPERIMENT

“Are you willing to try a bold experiment?”

‘I will do anything to clear myself of the suspicion that rests on me now.’”

- Ezra Jennings to the accused Franklin Blake, in The Moonstone

Before we start, I'd like to thank you all
for helping to elucidate
the mystery which holds me as a thief
and bears ill will to my person and name.
And while I sit and hope for vindication,
conviction seeps into my thoughts
to show the truth from that night's events.

The Moonstone's absence surely causes grief
for Rachael, my dear, the one to whom I pledge
my all. And with the hard-fought gift of light
and love trapped within a diamond crust,
I hope tonight's investigation shows
my stern devoir to right the lingering wrong.

With this in mind, I accept the charge
to ease my shaken nerves in laudanum
and recreate the sober scene which came
and comes to haunt me still. So if you please,
Mr. Jennings, I am ready to begin.
Let Bruff and Betteredge bear witness too,
for their kind words and optimistic gazes
encourage in me the thought that truth
will prevail

—and now sir, the laudanum.

* * *

And I can feel the haze, its calming grip
groping every pore and I do
believe its working now, my sight soft
and heavy. What's that you say, sir? The stone?
The Diamond—the one wrought from Brahmin charge
and picked like a fruit from some forbidden tree,
leaving vacant the moon's idol brow—
the yellow diamond, and my yellow haze,
I brought it here for her on his behalf,
a gift bequeathed by some outcast uncle,
with promise to deliver to his niece
the precious gemstone meant as birthday tiding.

But sentiment aside, there is some want
of worry. Throughout my journey many
jewel-lusted eyes invoked in me
a guarded stance against possible plots.
Although the gift did bring Rachael
a glow of joyous consternation,
the man in me wants to see her safety first.
Yes—

The man in me wants to see her safety first.
How can I imply that she is safe now?
They don't even lock the house, and the gem—
the Diamond—it's sitting in her cabinet,
and even that will stay unlocked. Bloody hell,
how am I to sleep with *this* on my mind?

We must ensure the safety of the stone
and thus the same for Rachael. Come, gentlemen,
my trusted friends, down the corridor.
I must make way to secure my worry.

* * *

Finally!—the drawer in which the prism dwells,
tomorrow we will take it to the bank
and let another wake in sleepless dream
to worry of its safety—its safety.

Pardon me, kindest gentlemen—it seems
that I am unrecognized—That is to say,
not recognizing the thing—oof!—And
the floor jumped up just now, I swear it, or else
I came to it. I don't know which is right.

The couch there—the couch is
there.

ALL THESE BITS WILL BE FORGOTTEN

We remember putting our first foot on the precipice
or falling bluntly to the valley floor,
but we push away the rocks along the gray
mountain side; we pass those battle-moments
that segue our thoughts. Condense,
condense to flashing memories
the ordinary fuzz, from beta to psi.
This is the preparation that makes
for more interesting afterthoughts.

* * *

Gizmo sleeps; dark slits cut into her gray,
striped face; they open—green tiger eyes
surprised to see mine. Vexed, she jumps
from her cradle-chair—a tall-backed stretch
and stride—curls by white couches beaten yellow
and fabric bits picked out from claw-sharpening
techniques. I can't wait to buy new furniture.
New couch, new chair, new coffee table.

Used coffee cup. Virginia High School, Class of '01:
Geoff's coffee cup. Geoff doesn't drink coffee.
My coffee cup. My cell phone. My camera.
My Clemson mug holding myriad
pens and pencils among a galaxy
of remote controls. Basketball plays on TV,
almost March Madness—Penn State and Illinois—

neither likely to make the tournament.

From outside: blue jays' chirp-chirp, jay-jay!
Open-air day, open window pushing goldenrod
warmth to fill the room. Fan slow-moving,
pushing cool breeze debris.

Tomorrow we head to Kentucky.

THE BETTER DEAD

Rave patrons with sweat-soaked skins
slip away from the scene and gingerly reunite
for the afterparty;

the lone man meets and greets
and accepts the spliff
and talks and laughs.

They shout at him:
“Kyle, didn’t you used to work for Dave’s Pizza?”
—He hears the joke coming,
echoed from a former life
when kaleidoscopic peace offerings
accompanied every appearance. Buying acceptance.
A recalling of darker days.
“Why don’t you go skip your ass up there
and pick us up a pie?”
They laugh.

Maybe this isn’t the place for him.
Maybe there’s some other thing
to run to. No,
this is the place.

And the lone man lifts his head
and rises above the crowd
and shuffles for the front door.

Excuse me's and frustrations
delay his exit,
but, his combat boots determined,
he drives apart the party
floor with purpose,
down the stoop and to the truck:
The difference-maker lives there.

And I, in the party still,
ignorant and unknowing,
feel some mental catalyst,
a sense of personal misplacement
or a disengagement of comfort,
like walking through a cold spot,
to make me ready for a new place:
"I'm out, y'all
take it easy. Be safe"—
and out the door.

Down the walk I pass
the lone man sitting there.
Now. Now. Now.
Pistol-gripped and bandoliered—
he's just another costume in the crowd.

And in five minutes, I will
hear the faint firecrackers—
but I won't notice the gravity
until a careening squad car
forces the recollection
and the realization

and a frantic sprinting back
for affirmation.

With six lives lost!—
Seven, counting the lone man—
I will sit shaking
with glazed eyes and wonder
about my sense of misplacement.

—LOVE LOVES TO LOVE LOVE

“Amor vero aliquid alicui bonum vult unde et ea quae concupiscimus...”

(Love genuinely wishes another’s good on account of which we desire these things)

- *Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses, considering Thomas Aquinas*

I helped her move
her dresser once. I arched my fingers
around its oaken frame and felt
my spine curl to accommodate its heft.
I inched past her most intimate possessions:
the one-eyed Snoopy doll she’d had since she was five,
the Calvin and Hobbes leather-bound set, her starlight
lamp dancing woodshadows on the wall, her pictures.

My jaw did little more than clench.
I didn’t want to voice my shaky
burden. She held the narrow door open
for me, but when the cat tangled my feet,
she let go to shoo it, and the door hanging free,
smashed its knob into my anchored fingers.

The camlock construction trembled and fell
fast into the ground with a thunderclap convulsion.
It shook the room in a thud with my toe—
my toe! An aftershock lift brought it free
from beneath the dresser feet hammers;
the bulbous supports crashed back to the ground.

I hesitated to assess the gravity.

The nail, I was sure, had severed from its bed.
My sock, no doubt, now thick-coated with dark blood.

Though my quick-breathed “BLARMPH!”
had made my pain known,
I did my best to soothe with a smile
her russet brow and tender eyelids
to brood on the fear and mystery no more.

I engaged the pulsing toe
to walk without a limp
in her presence. I never told her of the damage,
of the bruise that stayed for more than eight months.

SNOW POEM

I didn't want to wake you this morning;
I didn't want to wake myself.

Outside, the gray dim sky dropped gobs
of bunched ice, massive clumps that floated
quietly toward their forefathers. They collected
in gossamers on the ground. No sound

to soothe us. No movement there to disturb
the white-swept turf, to break the cardinal
from its frozen perch and flash its scarlet
through the bleached twilight.

When you rushed to the window and announced
the morning fall, I pretended to sleep.

TREE TRIMMERS

In a world of gas pipes and electric lines,
there is little need for a man to chop wood.
Just last week, the power company
sent its workmen to cleave the threats
of heavy-limbed trees, poised to blacken our street
with the next late-winter freeze.

These men aren't meant to knock on doors.
Their stained skin and shirts, trickled with pine pitch,
excuse them from such affinity. But man oh man
can they wield a chainsaw. Atop the crane basket
they didn't even look when I snuck from my house
to gauge the impasse of their truck in my driveway.

Carefully they maneuvered the beast
around each orange-tagged trunk.
They forced the jointed steel neck
between the dryad limbs, and
from inside, we felt ourselves tremble
with each limp thud of an old limb
giving way.

After piles of neat, wooden cylinders
adorned the ends of our street face,
the house sat like a naked virgin,
embarrassed by the honesty of her own body,
shocked to see the sun highlight
parts that had grown used to the shade.

CLEANING UP

I still chop wood.

I do my best to maintain a solid front,
and chopping wood allows for that.
Each strike aims to split atoms
and force an explosion from my mind.

I hope my neighbors don't spy
my furious undertaking, the grunting
air-heaving thrusts that drive
small creatures from their caverns and spill
them like winks on the thick orange clay.

When the splinters shatter and spit
themselves as blood spatter
against my trunk and limbs,
I don't worry about my eyes,
or about a vengeful piece lodging
in my windpipe. I don't think
about muscle mass and endurance,
about the techniques that let my grandfather
crack through to the marrow with just one blow.

My mind sets to pound that fucking wood
into the ground, through blisters and sore
hands, through dried layers and termite worlds,
until all that remains is the pulp and pant.

HANDS

Like rock-rubbing serpents,
these hands shed,
peeling anemic white rind from tender pitted fruit.

They sweat clear blood;
they crack, and flesh separates—
crag split by magma when movement reopens.

New layers breathe
prematurely; they sting in the air
like freshly salted eyes.

Soon they'll acclimate,
pink pulsing grooves,
young fingerprints ready to impress,
ready to wear.

DEATH OF A DEVOUT GRANDMOTHER

“... whether I have sought in a right way or not, and whether I have succeeded or not, I shall truly know in a little while, if God will, when I myself arrive in the other world.”

- Plato's Phaedo, quoting the words days of Socrates

She kept her Phaedons until the end
despite the anguished creases
falling down her cheeks and lips,
a drop split from the corner of her eye.

Bone tired and laden,
she smiled at four generations
when time stilled her
face, and we saw nothing—

and yet that hope:
a diamond winnowed from dust,
a green cocoon cracking
to show the last monarch of the season.

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