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On Sea-Goats

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ON SEA-GOATS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Chase McDuffie Hart II
May 2008

Accepted by:
Dr. Catherine Paul, Committee Chair
Dr. Wayne Chapman
Dr. Brian McGrath

ABSTRACT

This thesis can be viewed as mediation between two processes of interpretation. Once process affirms freeplay and the continuation of the game. The other still wants a center or “the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game” as Derrida calls it. On a deep level, these poems try to realize themselves as inevitably subject to play, while also acknowledging themselves as trying to meaningfully interpret experience.

DEDICATION

For my parents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the insight and recommendations of my committee members, Wayne Chapman and Brian McGrath. I am especially indebted to my committee chair, Catherine Paul. She encouraged me when I needed encouraging and defused me when I needed defusing. Most importantly, she made me keep at it until I got it right.

I thank Jeanne Emmons and Phil Hey for getting me into this habit of writing poems. They are my idea of what all teachers should be.

Many thanks to the Pine Ridge philosophers for the nourishment of their conversation, for their honesty as editors, and for creating a climate of thought good for growing poems.

EPIGRAMS

They are born for the solid earth, not for water. And naturally they won't think. They are made for life, not for thought. Yes, and he who thinks, what's more, he who makes thought his business, he may go far in it, but he has bartered the solid earth for the water all the same, and one day he will drown. (16)

—Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*

How did one map a country that blew into a new form every day? Such questions made his language too abstract, his imagery too fluid, his metre too inconstant. It led him to create chimeras of form, lionheaded goatbodied serpenttailed impossibilities whose shapes felt obliged to change the moment they were set, so that the demotic forced its way into lines of classical purity and images of love were constantly degraded by elements of farce. Nobody goes for that stuff... (382)

—Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

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ON SEA-GOATS

Introduction

There are [...] two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. (Derrida, 509)

I begin with a philosopher and not a poet because I studied philosophy before I studied poetry, and having done so, I find them inextricably linked. But the discussion I present is not so much dialogue between philosophy and poetry as it is between impulses found with equal abundance in both. More specifically, this thesis can be viewed as mediation between the two processes of interpretation Derrida describes—impulses toward both drive the development of these poems. The process of interpretation, or impulse, that affirms freeplay rises from Derrida's writing on the assumptions implicit in systems of explanation, especially as he posits them in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." My poems affirm play by provoking the reader to engage in the play within them. For instance, "Either/Or" presents two possible interpretations, neither privileged except perhaps by sequence. The poem's syntax further affirms its own

instability by using surprising word choices that encourage misreading. In the lines: “smelting / lilacs / is fragrant work” the smelting/smelling and flagrant/fragrant binaries shift in a battle for preference.

The impulse in these poems that follows the first method of interpretation—the (vain) search for a truth “free from freeplay”—takes off from the thinking of the twentieth-century Algerian writer, Albert Camus. Camus presented his philosophy in novels, and attempted to explain it in philosophical essays. His thought developed in cycles of explication and explanation, writing and reflecting in a revision process that dominated his thinking and living. Camus’s central concern is the search for rational reasons for living in the face of a world filled with arbitrary suffering and death.

My thinking on absurdity extends directly from Camus in two important ways. First, in following the process of interpretation which seeks truths free from play, I take Camus’s assumption that meaning is possible, but only in a provisional sense, which humans constantly create through interpretation. This assumption pushes against the deconstructionist impulse, which refuses anything’s transcendence over play. Mediating these two impulses of discourse—freeplay and the desire for reliable truth—I observed a cyclic movement in their interaction: we are constantly forced into a series of interpretations that fix the potentials of freeplay in necessarily already passed examples of stable meaning, which we must then work to access and inevitably continue to interpret. In the example of “Either/Or” above, this already passed example of stable meaning occurs when a reader reads either “smelting” or “smelling.” Once they make that choice, conscious or not, their interpretation continues from a now fixed (or at least

centered) assumption about the text. On a deep level, the poem tries to realize itself as inevitably subject to play, while also acknowledging itself as trying to meaningfully interpret experience.

Second, Camus argues that self-knowledge, especially felt knowledge of the imminent reality of death, leads humans to recognize the absurdity of their condition—that we must assert our lives' meaning, though we know we will die. I admire Camus for seeing this self-knowledge of death as life-affirming. As Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" cockatiel says, "Death is the mother of beauty." Stevens's wisdom parallels that of Camus's absurd hero—we end up making meaning because we will die; the capacity to suffer translates into the capacity to rejoice in living. In the face of our absurd condition, Camus urges us to rise to the challenge of constructing meaning. To accomplish this, Camus attempts a kind of self-objectification in his writing. He cannot observe himself directly, but his primary philosophical practice is self-reflection, so he observes himself in his writing in the cycle of explication and explanation I mentioned previously. For Camus, self-reflection leads people to value ideas even above their own lives, and thus profoundly affirms a common human solidarity. He writes in *The Rebel* that a slave revolting against his master, even when the revolt results in his execution, edifies the slave-owner, executioner, the slave himself, and indirectly the whole species, whether they understand it or not, by affirming the slave's right to equal ethical consideration. Camus optimistically assumes that introspection leads to a superior knowledge of the self which is aware of both the particular differences which allow for

unique identity, and also the universal sameness that convey an expanded, communal sense of self.

These concepts—two irreconcilable processes of interpretation occurring in cycles—are the backdrop for the poems that follow.

I name my thesis *On Sea-Goats* for the astrological chimera, the Capricorn. Top-half terrestrial goat, bottom-half aquatic fish, the Capricorn seems an apt emblem for poems that experiment with inharmonious collisions of the impulse for truth and the impulse for entropy. The sea-goat is a dissonant creature, the paradoxical enjambment of elements designed either for land or for sea, but awkward in both. The ideas of earth and water begin to take on symbolic reference to their corresponding impulses (earth connoting truth free from play, water connoting freeplay). This idea extends in two passages I have selected as framing epigrams. The first is from Hermann Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf*. The other is from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, concerning the poet Bilal. These framing quotations communicate that the poems of this thesis negotiate between the terra firma of origin-based ontology and the chaotic waters of play. I feel a real need to mediate these ideas in my life, so I find creative energy in explicating those tensions in my poems.

I selected the thirty-two particular poems that follow based on two criteria. First, I view my education as a poet's apprenticeship, learning both from practicing scholars and reading. I view this thesis as evidence of my growth as a student of poetry and as a young poet. Therefore, I have selected poems which evince that growth. Second, of those poems which I believe to be my best, I have selected those which seem most to feed off one

another to best present my struggle between the impulse chasing play-transcending truth and the impulse affirming play.

Turning from generative ideas to individual poems, I can discern themes—consumer culture and religion, for example—in which my negotiations play out through the collection. Poems like “Reading History at Lunch,” “Lighthouse Pollution,” “GSP 6:40 am,” and “After Progress” quietly bemoan cultural trajectories that lack self-knowledge, while other poems, like “Consider the Escalator” or “On Banana Opening,” directly invite audiences to activate their critical faculties. I often cast doubt on our common sense by holding particulars of place and time to the sweep of history. For example, “Reading History at Lunch” is a meditation on the situation of reading a biography of Alexander the Great at a McDonald’s in contemporary America. The speaker’s reflections on the homogeneity of the quarter-pounder establish the uniquely perverse context for trying to reconcile the romanticized Alexandrine Babylon of ancient history with the current state of Alexander’s former empire (Baghdad is sixty miles north of the ruins of Babylon’s city walls, which now contain a US military command post): “the music of Abyssinian maids is in his ears. / Now Babylon’s music will burst your ears. / ...What’s a wall / without a garden inside for us / to languish in.” The first poem of the thesis, “Genesis Eleven: Six Through Sevenish,” begins my cultural discourse by employing a similar strategy but on the scale of natural, not human history. The imagery presses comparisons of increasingly complex forms of life (from mollusks to those with sophisticated nervous systems) against human effort in a simultaneously biblical and contemporary context.

I often trace our dysfunctions to their roots in our underlying belief structures. Ideas stemming from religion and culture flow through my thesis out of the inciting claim in praise of human cooperation and our best hopes for technological progress at the end of “Genesis Eleven: Six Through Sevenish”: “our interbred tongues touch on the atmosphere, penetrate / space, given up to geosynchronous cathedrals which / actually bounce our prayers back—this is the new scripture.” The poem begins with a misquotation/revision of a passage from *Genesis* that I use to introduce the themes of towers, language, and the hubris of human progress from the Babel story. I also intend the imported and modified text to speak to the general instability of a text’s authority. The discussion continues through the whole collection, sometimes by satire as in “A Captain of the Honorable East India Trading Company Addresses a Foreign Affairs Correspondent,” but at other times by whimsical thought experiment as in “Eating My Multigrain Cheerios.” I see the final two poems of the collection, “A Thinking Creature” and “O, Rest Ye Brother Mariners, We Will Not Wander More,” as alternate doors to exit my thesis, and its discussion of these themes. “O, Rest Ye...” culminates in a climatic declaration of my faith in poetry: “...plumes / of the great sound covered the Earth, and it did move.” The penultimate poem, however, imagines a rational individual so absorbed in contemplation that he literalizes the drowning my epigram from Hesse anticipates. “Sequestered” in thought, the subject also seems obsessed with staring at the sun. I think of the title of the last poem as deceptively optimistic, or a tongue-in-cheek joke. If we have learned anything, we *will* wander more. The only Lotos islands are in the imagination, but maybe wandering through fiction is the best alternative to drowning.

Turning my attention from theme to form, I notice the poems of this manuscript gain energy from their differences, though they are all either dramatic or meditative lyrics. The dramatic are distinguished from the meditative only in that they play more on their speakers' personas than the denotation of their words. Most of the poems of this thesis are composed in a playful, compact, free verse, but I experiment with every form I work with. "Letter to Fuck," "On Banana Opening," and "Cycle of Four Seasons" particularly exemplify my experimentation with form.

I wrote "Letter to Fuck" fairly late in the project. It came just after "The Gardner Reflects on the Problem of Evil," when I thought I had reached the exact limit of "fucks" that I could justifiably use in this thesis. I felt that one more "fuck" would dilute the word's overall potency in my poems. My desire to use the word "fuck" in my thesis, however, had not yet been sated. Poetry persistently triumphs over limitation, encouraging us to examine boundaries and transcend previous conceptions. So I reached for a creative solution to my "fuck" dilemma. I thought, "How can I address 'fuck' in a poem, upping the number of 'fucks' without diminishing their effect?" Then I thought, "I'll address a poem *to* 'fuck.'" The epistolary form tends to a confessional approach, so that a direct, intimate exchange of speaker and subject transpires. As the poem developed, I noticed that the letter is partly dishonest if I fully assume the role of speaker as author (I am at least signer). The conflict that drives the poem, that the speaker has overused "fuck" and has worn out its effectiveness and so diminished its value, is one that I both solved before I wrote the poem, and also didn't truly create until I decided to include it in the thesis. The poem's conclusion was actually my selection criteria when considering

word choices and resting on “fuck.” So in the following lines, I lie when I say “restore,” except, after the poem, I would have said “fuck” more times than would have been effective, making the statement justified. I think it is a funny way the poem creates its own urgency: “I promise to restore you, Fuck, to prize you / as an entomologist does her exquisitely pinned specimens.” Also significantly, the poem speaks to the erosion process which language constantly weathers, metamorphosing through histories even as local as our own mouths. The evolution of fuck’s connotations is too fun not to...well, fuck with.

“On Banana Opening” uses a structural device unique among my poems: stage directions. Stage directions let me efficiently establish details of scene, setting, and action. They also create the effect of more distance between the action of the poem and world of the reader. It’s like a play within a poem. Plato might criticize it from being an additional level of removal from the Real. I think this is a good thing. That distance from reality encourages audiences to suspend their disbelief, listen to the chimp, and look to take the episode as a carefully constructed art object, like a micro-drama. It doesn’t seem to matter what we use to eat our fruit, but I think the chimpanzee is on to something. I think this poem subtly argues against the assumption that more power is inherently better. Tools have neutral moral weight; they are merely power modifiers: tools themselves cannot be good or bad, but they give their users the ability to do more of both. I figure a very human-like rainforest dweller, like a chimpanzee, should have a voice on the matter. I thought a chimpanzee would know a lot about humans’ overkill, so to speak.

I have struggled to understand why some of the structures I’ve tried seem to work or fail. Formalist poets can be architects with equations to predict the tension necessary to

stabilize a span, but I find it much more interesting to build metaphors or bridges on the fly, working off of gut and revision experience instead of *a priori* processes. I wrote the first lines of what would become “Cycle of Four Seasons” stranded in the Minneapolis airport during a blizzard: “Sleeping beneath a tv / in an airport term-/ inal, she dreamt of snowfall.” There’s something of a delicate, suspended finality of the image that the syntax, especially on the delayed, enjambed syllable, reinforces to simultaneously create sadness and possibility. The lines are like Haiku turned inside out. Instead of five, seven, and five syllable lines, these are seven, five, seven. I tweak the power of the traditional Haiku’s caesura at the end of line two by stretching it one extra syllable and across the line break. Like a half-turn of a guitar key, the poem’s tone tightens a half-step. I preserve the Haiku’s use of nature words, but they repeatedly collide with evidence of civilization. I am trying to capture the very immediate dramas of mundane cycles which also contain microcosms for larger cycles. I want to impart the immediacy of mortality and the permanencies that are also contained in our idea of time all at once.

The shifts in form between poems also inform the poems’ ordering. I have tried to highlight the unique properties of each mode of composition and the reader’s sense of tone shifts and different distributions of white space, while also carrying on thematic discussions.

My concepts of poetic diction and meditative lyrical form have been most influenced by John Donne, Marianne Moore, and e. e. cummings. I especially admire how Donne reached through every realm of his language in crafting his diction. Marianne Moore similarly employs jargon from her wide reading and museum-going. Consider the

diction in the following lines from “An Octopus”: “a scintillating fragment of these terrible stalagmites,” and “miniature cavalcades of chlorophylless fungi” (ll. 55, 122). If Moore can make “chlorophylless fungi” poetic, I thought I could do the same for “bioluminescent algae.” Following Donne and Moore as exemplars, I believe poets ought to be generalists, stitching the gambit of a language’s special vocabularies into precise art speech. cummings’s willingness to experiment with typography, form, and diction encourage me to carry out my own experiments. cummings’s aptitude for farcical humor likewise informs my process.

In my apprenticeship as a dramatic poet, I have learned much from Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Ezra Pound, and John Ashbery. From Tennyson I learned to use descriptions of the natural world to reveal the inner desires of my speakers, as in the following lines from “O, Rest Ye Brother Mariners, We Will Not Wander More,” my sequel to Tennyson’s “The Lotos-Eaters”: “Ulysses’ bark had long been drowned by monkey / laugh when at last I reached a slumberous pool, / fed of foam from slow-dropping veils of snowmelt” (ll. 16-18). Browning encouraged me to chat with the grotesque, playing the distances between poet and speaker, speaker’s words and speaker’s thoughts, and speaker and reader. In “My Last Duchess” for example, the Duke reveals himself to be a sinister murderer to the reader without realizing he has shown his hand. I especially incorporate what I’ve learned from Browning about dramatic irony in “A Captain of the Honorable East India Trading Company”:

Guttural, barbaric beast speech he barked
between inhuman teeth—longer, sharper,

and far more possessed of the moon's rabid glint,
and eyes more fully burnt with ravenous flint
than any image of God. And we were
given dominion. No, this vassal creature
sneered his warning; I am quite sure it was male—
strength, vocal depth, a stature in the specimen.... (ll. 3-10)

The speaker unknowingly reveals much about his presumptions concerning what it means to be human or male. I didn't come across John Ashbery's contributions to the dramatic monologue until recently, but reading him has reinforced some of my own findings and expanded the scope of my understanding of the recent tradition. In poems like "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" and "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," I've studied Ashbery's combination of sardonic wit and gloomy surrealism, and deployed my own morose humor to comparable effect in poems like "Consider the Escalator" and "Angry Lady Skunk."

The effect is intended to be pointed and strange enough to shock the reader into paying attention, which leads me to Ezra Pound's ideogramic method and the multi-modal aspects of this thesis. As Pound declares in his *Guide to Kulchur*:

That being the point of the writing. That being the reason for presenting first one facet and then another—I mean to say the purpose of the writing is to reveal the subject. The ideogramic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register. (51)

I have included two illustrations in this manuscript, one coupled with “Consider the Escalator,” the other with “After Progress.” Pound named his ideogramic method on his erroneous inference that the appearances of Chinese characters, or ideograms, were significantly indicative of their connotations. Pound was impressed by a system of writing with signs that he believed actually contained pictorial references of the ideas for which they stood. Pound asserted such a system should be prized for the fullness and efficiency of expression it afforded a user. Information could come at the reader from the lingual and visual modes at once, thus heightening the potency of the language. As our culture becomes more and more visually dominant, it makes sense that poets should also consider bolstering the communicative capacity of their compositions by including elements of different media. The novel has dramatically evolved into the graphic novel, and I am encouraged to see that the Poetry Foundation recently commissioned a handful of graphic novelists to illustrate poems from the Foundation’s archive to bring the poems to new readers. I loved the illustrations that accompanied Shel Silverstein’s poetry as a child, and later developed a similar affinity for the illuminated poems of William Blake. I will continue to explore multimodality in poetry. I think it will help bring poetry to new audiences.

Goethe once remarked that poets should know all philosophy and keep it out of their poetry. I hope he’s wrong, because I fail on both accounts. For me, poetry often finds itself at the intersection of philosophy and literature, where poets work for public benefit as mediators between the worlds of intellectual discourse and practical things. I attended a high school named after a bishop. Our mascot is still the Crusader and our

motto and mantra is “Pride.” We wear “Pride” on the back of our athletic jerseys, and shout it in unison at every gathering the way marines yell “Semper Fi.” We distinguished between types of pride in religion class, constantly assured by clerical-educators that the thirteen-foot letters circling our gymnasium were not endorsing the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. All this is very funny to me, but I also saw more painful dysfunctions result from the confused value. “Pride” often suffocated open discussion of real problems and created a climate of exclusion. We gave lip-service to separate notions of righteousness and vanity but lived as hypocrites. Conformity was required at the expense of both the integrity of the individual and the solidarity of the community. Depression, eating disorders, and drug and alcohol abuse were common among us. Many suffered quietly for fear of even greater consequences from acknowledging a problem. According to Camus, embracing the most vital self-knowledge we have, namely our mortality, makes that sort of culturally enforced shame absurd. When one of my classmates hung himself, the community internalized that lesson for a while. Literature can help permeate cultural memory with philosophic discoveries. I see this as part of the pedagogical project of poetry. For me this idea is not a theoretical concept distinct from everyday life. I see it as an immediate and local collaboration of philosophy and literature. To that end, these poems want to be a cultural medic, prescribing introspection like a social panacea. This never seems sufficient, though; play continues, and I cannot help but mistrust every answer to which my poems reach. I do think poetry can encourage discourse which softens the exclusionary boundaries humans tend to form. It seems especially important to refute the ultimate ideas of exclusion in our time, known in various guises of

fundamentalism. I realize the chain of thought here quickly jumps from local to global in scale, but the conflict seems to exist in concentric micro/macrocosms everywhere I look. Saying that, I'm reminded of phenomena recently embraced by both literary criticism and physics: namely that measurements are relative to the measurer, and that sometimes just making an observation influences your object.

This process of stepping back and reflecting, zooming in to scrutinize and provisionally discern, and stepping back again, is the general movement of my process as a writer and thinker. These poems tended to expand and contract as I invented them out and shore them down through cycles of revision. Cycles themselves appear repeatedly in these poems, constantly reminding the poems of their process, helping them acknowledge themselves as having an unstable being in respect to time, containing and refusing both temporal and permanent existences. I thought I shared W. H. Auden's sense that poems were not finished but abandoned. After another helping of research and reflection I found that not only did Auden probably never say such a thing (as best the internet can remember it was the French critic and poet of Mallarmé's circle, Paul Valéry), but also that I never quite believed it. I will continue to revise these poems as soon as I finish revising this introduction. The game goes on.

Genesis Eleven: Six Through Sevenish

*6 And the lord said, shit, the people are one,
and they have all one internet; and this they
begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained
from them, which they have imagined to do.*

*7 Let us go and tear their tower down, and there
confound their language, that they may not
understand one another's speech.*

Rebuild Babel, and zealots would see the tower burn.
We speak through our warm conducive web—the digital gardener
watches, notes each trail oozing along from under

our golden, mean shells, records every viscous history, all
our predictable munching of always the same salad—

we are flashy little bait-balls, stirring wakes of bioluminescent
algae so all our movements glow like neon worms—

the dendrite fingers of corroboration and trans-
oceanic axons carry our glorious heresies of cooperation—

our interbred tongues touch on the atmosphere, penetrate
space, given up to geosynchronous cathedrals which
actually bounce our prayers back—this is the new scripture.

Reading History at Lunch

I sit with Alexander in the East
amidst fire-lit palace walls
alongside the Indus while
entertaining elephants lumber by us
like stout walking tree-houses with ears
like windless flags and an escape rope nose

like the one I see, looking out past my nose
through the window to a backyard, out the East
side of the McDonald's in which a kid with ears
like an elephant serves me cardboard-walled
quarter-pounders with cheese. He serves us
identical products everywhere while

I return to my booth; meanwhile,
a little boy climbs up his elephant's nose
in his backyard. Alexander doesn't notice us.
He is now less East,
reclining in cool shades within high blue walls;
the music of Abyssinian maids is in his ears.

Now Babylon's music will burst your ears;
but never mind, my burger cools while
these thoughts settle to occipital walling
and I wonder if he knows
he'll die there, half the world East
of home, half the world East of us.

Such a ridiculously relative word, “us”—
elephants with different colored ears
parading ceremoniously and stern from West and East
like gods while
a kid climbs a rope nose
up to Alexander's view, less a wall

and a garden. What's a wall
without a garden inside for us
to languish in. My nose
and my ears
sense fries frying while
Alexander's fever won't break. At least

the boy peeks his nose over the wall;
he looks to the East, watches us.
Alexander is fearless. I only chew awhile.

Lighthouse Pollution

Cell phone towers keep time and planes from hitting
them by beating out their electric pulse.

As many fixed points lay constellations
below the hill on which the towers stretch
as above in the low dark. Streetlight connect-
the-dots suggests Draco toward downtown.

The moon is new; the sky is searched by a
white cane of light rotating on the fake
lighthouse at the casino on the river.
They would have you think it is a wand, but
it clicks across the clouds like stones and knows
too much of the infinite dark that wells between them.

Now, as I feel my breath begin to fall
in time with pulse and click in thoughtless ease,
I want to burn the towers down and only
feel the steady tone of stars' old light;
they stare oblivious of me, wanting nothing.

GSP 6:40 AM

A gaggle of octogenarians prepare
to board ahead of me. Their luggage
blooms, raucous if static. Spring
also half resides in the rouge of the ladies'
cheeks. The men remember they
saved the world from Nazis,
and earlier shuffled rank and file,
patriotically removing their shoes,
patriotically regarding the Pak-
American TSA agent who patriotically
regarded their, is that exploding cough
syrup? I sit on 36D, two layers
of plexiglass and eighteen inches
from the Philips-head screws
that hold the engine together.

Fearing the Worst, the Climatologist

fit a diamond-tipped
drill-bit of doubt to his
introspection and tunneled
through his Russian-doll mind.

He studied core samples and
learned the subtleties of ice,
the volumes of innuendo
within blue-white strata.

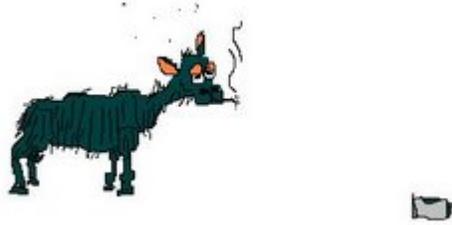
Bearing deep sediments to light,
he found ages of climate
change in an ash-speck,
cataclysm in an obsidian sliver.

He predicted a cold year
and ran to her flapping
collated stacks of analysis.
She had gone. He has not

restored the cylinders.
Tubes of him roll about—
contaminated, melting
anachronisms.

the steady tread of rubber
soles or bovine molars over grass—
the erosion of cusp and crown.

After Progress



No coffee houses here,
where everything smells like it is.
Nothing mellow will make you jump,
the tulips are not painful, if
a llama looks blue, it has been painted or dyed.
The pathetic is always fallacious here,
and scorned—
in righteousness and perseverance,
we have pegged it.

Chopping

Partly because of the flint in my eye,
partly because I'm wearing sandals
and no safety goggles and project
my father's judgment everywhere,
I stop chopping when my neighbors
walk outside. The apparent utility
of my effort somewhat redeems the
unbecoming appearance of my wild,
cathartic whacks to practical minds.
I have a backyard fire pit, but I've
already chopped and stacked more fell
timber than I'll burn all year.

Translucent green broken beer bottles
jut from the ash more often than
flames the colors of fall leaves.
My neighbors go back inside so I
stop pretending to watch the blue jays
and return to my tree.

The chopping goes quickly—the white pine
was soft before it went porous with fungal rot.
With whole body strokes hacking xylem
to dust, my palms gain only a blister each before
my dull blade splits the final isthmus of fibers,
and drives into the red clay beneath.

(stanza break)

I stand the thick neck of trunk upright. It'll
burn well once quartered. One mid-
sagittal blow cleaves the length.

When the halves fall open, a thousand
shiny bodies lay on both cracked
planes, delicate tangles of antennae
and limbs as still as everyday genocide.

But most of the colony are only stunned.
Moment by moment the light from their black
exoskeletons oscillates more vigorously until
the disaster smitten hive writhes with the
pheromones of organized hysteria: "The Queen!
Where is the Queen? God save the Queen! and
the eggs! Quickly now girls, no time to waste!"
screams the unconscious wisdom of well-tested
chemical language, unanimous and accessible
as air.

I raise my axe to quarter the colony's log,
but let it fall to the clay. It is not compassion
or respect exactly that sends me inside for beer
and paper. Only that the indignant sap that
went chopping had reduced to an aromatic powder
in the dry heat.

Bruegel's Daedalus

Every line bows
to the most distant point
on the horizon,

even the furrows of the plow
which the horse pulls.

The world balls
in the sun,

and no shadow
of Daedalus falls.

Does even he pause?
Can he hover
against the wind of earth's spinning?

He will keep flapping:
if he resisted

the ecstasies of immoderate flight,
he will resist

pining to exhaustion.
According to Bruegel,

(stanza break)

Icarus fell
all afternoon.

By the time no one
noticed the splash,

Daedalus was taking
a warm bath.

Walking Through Library Aisles

Walking through library aisles I feel the lines:
first of my own progress toward the shelves'
converging/vanishing point, all their reaffirming
horizontals paralleling my direction, the vertical
spines of a thousand volumes, and my own
perpendicular support, and now
palpably the lines of text
the lines and lines of text
reaching beyond the illustrated
segments bound by margins but actually
stretching infinitely through curved space, colliding
mid-aisle, adhesive as spider-silk, it becomes difficult to
move, in my struggling only tangle more thoroughly within
threads, and what arachnid of greater context is waiting?

Time for a New Notebook

These leaves have loosened, their ink and graphite smudged,
this binding disintegrated, the faux-leather
cover's come unstuck from contents wedged
between. Only the elastic strap weathered
well enough to hold these scribblings together—
a meager volume of doubt and revisions, fixed
documentation of oscillation, word levers
with which I've tried to pry into the first
principles of being human and in this place.
The contradictions scurrying on facing
pages gnaw at the leaves' stitching, would
have fall what will not cohere, and make
my words consider themselves foreign or fake.
Hypocrite lecteur! Time for a new notebook.

Derrida for Beginners

decenter the fuck out of it all?

this means proximate.

watch it (be)-en [g(o)ne] (t)he (w)hole ti(me)

/

see/clock/guard—always too l(ate)

infinite digestion/re-syn-the-ti-ca-tion/ebb/flow/ /meaning?

no quanta or all—knowledge of being a part of a [(k)not]whole

means {(for a moment always past and about to be, fuck missed it start over) (theta?)

coda. }

knowledge of being apart from the whole. the whole of parts means a hole, and never anything whole for a part.

Solve.

$$a^2+b^2=c^2$$

—*Pythagoras*

This is a
poem about an
idea but not

+

an actuality: words be—
just as numbers do—
or remember a single
instant in a rainstorm,

=

and now think and see
the extension in space-time of
a drop of rain a
thing separate from rain and
drops. Names are not solutions.

The Gardner Reflects on the Problem of Evil

Oh my little pomes, how you've
helped me fuck this up.

I grew and whispered little complexes
of you to see them fall

on brazen ears—brackets around minds
that say to themselves they know

such vile purity as can reflect susurrations,
and I grew you, truths,

and let fall fruit that softer falls,
and would yet fall—.

Where is the fault? Words? No,
grown things, known fools.

Of course, pomes are better when tasted.
When dropped on ears

however—well, I wasn't trying
to feed them.

Letter to Fuck

Dear Fuck,

You were once an untouchable,
an outcaste traitor to the sanctity of boys mouths,
but I've come to call you friend.

I've slipped you into the rebel outposts of my vocabulary,
smuggled you gleefully as rumrunners into conversation.

And after loving you rugged
with the first fixation then reckless
abandonment of the youthful,
I came to wear you easy, not even mouth filling.

I thinned you, stripped you of the snake,
the cottonmouth punctures of your endless applicability,
Fucked fuckers fucking fuck.

And so I promise to restore you, Fuck, to prize you
as an entomologist prizes her exquisitely pinned specimens.
I will study your many incarnations,
only expanding my collection when I discover a new species.

Love,
Chase

A Captain of the Honorable East India Company

Addresses a Foreign Affairs Correspondent

I swear to you, he spoke to me, I swear.
Clearly I heard him say, “Man, man, have fear.”
Guttural, barbaric beast-speech he barked
between inhuman teeth—longer, sharper,
and far more possessed of the moon’s rabid glint,
and eyes more fully burnt with ravenous flint
than any image of God. And we were
given dominion. No, this vassal creature
sneered his warning; I am quite sure it was male—
strength, vocal depth, a stature in the specimen—
he swung from a canopy tendril, a pendulum.
As casual as a man waiting for a train to come,
let swinging stop, and through the dark—have you
kept watch a night in the jungle? Of course you haven’t.
The dark of the jungle writhes, rattles, curls
with heat and insects, screams of every nocturnal
abomination, viscous as ink. But barest scraps
of pale light vine through the leaves, if you’ve the chance
of cloudless sky and moon—from a scrap he spoke,
only in leaning toward me did he uncloak,
bringing thick brow and muzzle into light,
then teeth and his demonic speech. “Fear? Quite!
I do not fear the tiger, snake or savage;
I will not fear this forest devilage,”
I said aloud and reached for my revolver—

(line break)

her name is Pamela, you may hold her
if you like, balanced and true she'd killed steady
for me dozens before, always ready—
she'd jammed with sand and ants. My God the ants!
A carnivorous colonnade was pouring through my pants,
upon becoming aware of which I promptly
removed the afflicted accoutrements, and calmly
whirled to aim, but found the beast had fled.
Thus compromised, I decided it best I take
my men back to the city to get laid and fed
and a half-night's rest. In the dark before daybreak,
we'll rearm and return to hunt the speaking ape,
to tame with lead this disgrace of human shape.
So go! tell London, the beast-man of Bombay
lurks not for long. I'll bag him by Sunday.

On Honshu, Giant Salamander

On Honshu, giant salamander gods
garden the river for eighty year spans:

wise beyond need for locomotion,
pruned grey folds with tiny, frosted eyes

and smooth jaws agape, gulping
always after the next generation,

they are gentle to speak with
and ruthless as nature,

but we have dammed their streams
with concrete so they bleed

their sacred hands and toes
on those abrasive controls

to attend their plots of river-bottom.
I would have us worship them.

Eating My Multigrain Cheerios

Eating my multigrain cheerios,
I pretend I am god of their bowl.

Civilization clings to the dry center,
a milk-moat sea between cheerio-

people and the blue dome of the bowl
at the edge of their world. I nudge

one lightly sweetened whole-grain torus
with my spoon and the holey continent shifts.

Curved steel is an apt means to touch
my people—the steel is stainless and reflects

their image bent. It is all they know of me
before I slurp them from this world.

Consider the Escalator



Escalators haul our fat asses from swimwear to electronics, theaters to food courts, and perhaps make consumerism more accessible to the walking disinclined, perhaps even extend the lives of heart attack prone shoppers.

But what do we exchange for the escalator?

The Consumer Product Safety Commission recorded thirty-nine non-work related deaths between ninety-two and o-one, nine of them ten or younger.

How many children are we willing to sacrifice on the altar of the escalator?

Apparently, on average, one a year.

And there is much outcry,

(line break)

but not against the escalator.

Do you think about it?

I know someone thinks about it: someone has to stick the disclaimer stickers
with fine polyglot print
and paper-doll silhouette people getting mauled by the escalator
to the front of the escalator—
a machine wouldn't put them on slightly crooked.

On Banana Opening

*A man stands at a cutting board in his kitchen.
He is holding a banana in his left hand and a knife
in his right. He cuts into the banana just below
the stem.*

Enter Chimpanzee

Chimpanzee: Hey, man. What are you doing? Seriously. Look, give me that. *Takes banana.* Open it like this, from the other end. Pinch and peel, ok? No reason to always be so different. *Bites banana.* We all have opposable thumbs here. *Chewing.* This 'I've got to use a knife because I can use tools,' thing needs to shtop. Let'sh all be responsible highly evolved primates, *Swallows,* and cooperate a bit. This banana thing, it's small, I understand. *Returns half-eaten banana.* But you see my point. Stop using a knife when your hands will do.

Restaurante Papagayo

Here, the Pacific is as it's called—
it does not crash on the beach,
she siren-whispers.

The sun's drowsy eye weighs
into the horizon, forgetting
the bay's shady flotilla,
ghost boats dancing beneath
monkey dark islets

and un-orange sky,
washed cool and abrasive
as beached wood.

All lull me like driftglass—
poured through ten-thousand churns
of lunar consistency—

all pour me as Ana pours
sweet rimmed cosmos
to the forgettable gringos,
vodka and beach juice red.

Ana the wiccan bartendress
singing Dylan to me with the flirtatious veracity
of one who knows precisely
what she is saying.

(stanza break)

In the warm inches between us,
she breathes stories of waking at midnight
to tan herself beneath the full moon,
to give her naked body to the dew-lit grass,
to smoke joints and know peace as dark
and electric as her skin, to forget the difference
between skin, and sky, and grass.

I give her the hills of Iowa,
the dry prairie grasses whispering
of the ancient ocean,
rising from fossil fish
and deep black topsoil,
the waves of tall grass rolling
the same as cloud bottoms when
barefoot, fingers stretched, head thrown back,
I drink the warm wash between.

And we drink deep between us,
far past remembering.

Zydeco Café

the music syncopates your introspection
and there is no containing those eyes
amplified acoustic hollow bodied
electric slap bass brilliant
drunk accordion coronal dance
in those peerless eyes

love me in your multitudinous eyes
your brass usurpations ensnare melody
at a glance and in a burst shatter music
into your iris dance the discourse of the body
leave the singing still and brimming
without containment boil over
heat only heat and melody
usurp the melody and
only only heat

In a Churchyard on a Birch's Branch

a blackbird's plumage drank in full the bare dusk light
seeping through December's sieve, and reflected
a sheen like oil slick shifting purple or green,
now bluish from an angle.

The eyes of the congregation (set in faces supported
atop spines that rested against cold gray
folding chairs) thirst most for gleaming ebony
emanations of god from the casket.

A flag on a pole the color of folding chairs
cast a reflection that filled a bit of the blank space
of the black coffin's lid. And then a shadow
on the otherwise slate field of reflected sky—
a man with glasses sees a small winged movement
in the otherwise slate field of reflected sky.

The blackbird, having preened and shat, flew off.
The owls would soon be out. The great horned
death—that whispers down-wreathed talons
through the stiff night—would soon be out.

For the Hummingbird's Tongue

lily bud-petals on

stems

banana peppers

until inside lavas

belie

mating salmon

until deepens pulls

stalks

groundward

until bursts crux

bloom

rupturing

when petals peel

burnt

converging

stamen stigma

pistil

pour

Either/Or

Either

I loved you
mostly
in the shade bush,

or

smelting
lilacs
was fragrant work.

Nocturnal Monuments

I

Tiny pillars of worm-digested earth
testify the instinctual laboring all night.

II

We did not sleep all night
undreamt monoliths,
ozymandian obelisks
tremble and fall with
artemis obliques,
light shards her hair
a constellation falls—
dry leaves sweat lilac—falls
again we did not sleep all night.

III

Figment visions, under time and
tectonics of the mind, coalesce
into object sense while meditating all night.

Angry Lady Skunk

I came upon an angry skunk, and I
stared into her dark bedeviled charms—
eyes darker and rounder than eclipsed moons
and same coronal glare—bestial shards
barely restrained; but she, snarling hiss-sharp,
full loosed, lips drawn, glinting teeth.

“My darling kindred spirit, have you rabies?
Has the mad-white bolt—that parts
opaque nights of fur from distal genesis
to push flint-sparks into your eyes and out
your mouth—set fire also into your brain?
Oh doubt nothing you feel—in your foam and rage,
the truth, in Ionian flashes, in terrible marish
trances, still lights. Storm on into dementia—”

That range only remains for her to mark
before her jagged mind breaks. We parted.
In parting, she sprayed, but hadn't the luck of keeping
upwind, thus skunk lady found herself stinking.

Picnic

Today I have packed a turkey sandwich with apple slices
and fish-shaped crackers, so I have gone
to the park for lunch. Down the footpath,
the gnats announce me like tiny, monotonous heralds,

but their pond ruffles at my arrival.
A flotilla of ducklings bursts
with cannonades of quacks,
eight children screaming for mother.

The great blue heron sweeps across the water,
a flash of slate under wing echoes
in the sky of her stilted reflection.

The ducks turn algae in their wake,
an unavoidable disruption but far
more graceful than my awkward influence
(so many unintended ripples rebounding).

A cigarette's remains—
butt burned to melted filter and
the air's Marlboro tinge—
show me the tranquility I had hoped

to breathe in for a moment
is only a heavy exhalation,
as when rude company leaves.

Cycle of Four Seasons

Crank started cougher, mower
groan has rumbled yel-
low jackets from under ground.

The window ac unit
dripping down graffi-
tied bricks leaks authorship.

+

Slime mold globulates the slick,
dead heartwood, marmal-
ade clinging to a black spoon.

Gutter sprouted shoot, absurd
gumption, meet my buck-
et. Tenacity, despair.

+

Sleeping beneath a tv
in an airport term-
inal, she dreamt of snowfall.

And all who enter the flow
become it, a fright-
'ningly bright drowning in ice.

+

Thaw washes corpses toward
the boiling spring, di-
stilling beliefs from old bones.

Nothing knew always something
new must fill the wreck-
age of civilization.

+

The Smoke

with which I so enjoy blackening my lungs pours
off the cherry. These lighter-than-air cascades

(no less beautiful than hot-springs
to which tourists pad in flip-flops)

remind me, everywhere the air breaths
in little torrents of detritus

(not huffs into dust devils or waterspouts,
but scratches leaves up a corner,

turns dust in the sweeper's wake,
or dances dead cells in the sneeze gust)

I see the tiny pulmonary sacs
that mediate the atmosphere and my inner ocean gooped

with residue like an orchard of apples caramel-dipped on leafless limbs.
I expect that when my mind goes white,

terminally lovesick for oxygen, my last relaxation
will send a plume of wind from me which will whisk

tiny spheres of saliva from my lips, just as happened
now when you said spheres. Tiny crystal balls

on expired current, they will wrap
the world around themselves until they pop.

A Thinking Creature

lies sequestered beneath nine
and a half feet of clear swimming pool water,

contemplating the sunbeam perfectly
maligned through space and sieves of atmosphere
to, through water's lens, strike a crystal face
and behind eyes' chiasm transfix the brain,

lies sequestered beneath nine and a half feet
of clear swimming pool water.

O, Rest Ye, Brother Mariners, We Will Not Wander More:

Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" Continued

Having sung from my innermost heart and mouth,
the tyrant gave no regard, but bound our hands
and ordered our mates haul us back, ordered
all his Ithacan sailors back to the ships.
So urgently did Ulysses herd us toward the beach
and so severely did my lotos-drunk comrades resist,
that I remained unwatched. Off swiftly,
I left no reminder for my mates save
the splash and sway of giant ferns closing behind me.

Through many dew drenched fronds, I climbed the mossy
hillside, pulling myself up the ever steep-
ening slope by the many flowered vines rooted
in the canopy of world-old trees and spilling
along the forest floor in braids as soft
as Helen's hair and far more fragrant.
Ulysses' bark had long been drowned by monkey
laugh when at last I reached a slumberous pool,
fed of foam from slow-dropping veils of snowmelt.

I drank until I felt no thirst, and thought
I'd see my former companions' sails from the shelf
off which the water fell. But when I neared
the precipice, two lotos-men reached down
in greeting. I met their soft-eyed smiles with mine
and took their hands as friends. Their gazes drifted

(line break)

past me to the sea; the bearded native pointed
far into the squinting blue. How small and pitiable
are men of action on Poseidon's furrowed brow.

Seeing the horizon would soon swallow them all,
I turned again to the lotos-men whose arms
were full of blossoms now. On either side
of the falling stream's bank, massive flowered bushes
drank of all the languorous seep the mountain
sluice's thaw might reap, dropping drowsily
from its snowy peak, and from that liquor
river brewed, condensed and bloomed with nectar-food.
We ate of the flowers' bride-soft flesh and rested.

There beside the glinting stream
in pillow moss and shades of green
I met a prophet in my dream,
who opened my mind like doors.

He spoke of pillaging and of rape,
of killing and the loot they take
when Ulysses' warriors make
fall on innocent shores.

The men of power wielding sword
will all find death who follow lord
beyond the island nectar poured,
where they might have peace.

(stanza break)

He told me of the one-eyed men
who live in caves and do not lend
themselves to war—in isolation
each lets live each.

The Cyclopes do not bother much
with ordering nature or fearing lunch,
but eat from the vine the ripening bunch
as providence provides.

Ulysses will not tarry long,
finding Cyclops terribly strong,
who eats intruders caught at wrong,
stealing his cheese and wines.

And though a few will, under goats, escape,
they will be slaughtered too at great
Ulysses command. Proud Ulysses only
will see his home again. Loyal marines,
whether by Scylla, Cyclops, or gods' hurled bolt,
will to the very last man die.

And hearing die, I awoke.
My lotos-friends had carried
me sleeping into their village.

There I've stayed,
learning to make
the language and ways

(line break)

of the lotos-folk my own.
I've sung and rested,
married, raised a son.
And every afternoon,
music in our ears,
our beating hearts
do make. I sing to you:

In the misty lotos land there are no priests
but only poets. We plow no fields and cut no trees,
in the river we bathe and speak with ease.

We eat from the limb or fish while we smoke,
and suffer the storm no more than ants, no less than goats.
The fine dust and grit of the earth is ever between our toes.

Once, a young man who'd neither write nor sing
nor fish nor bring forth in contribution anything
tried to burn the lotos groves to blackening.

With one bush burned he lost his nerve and ran
to tell the others. We came and soon we danced,
inspired the vapors and were entranced.

And then such a primal heavy music,
together we produced it,
and up from the island we spewed it—
volcanic, terrestrial, the sublime imbued it,
thousand foot slap of titans ensued

(line break)

and voice chants erupted with volumes
alluded in myth but never human
ears or throats conceived and plumes
of the great sound covered the earth and it did move.

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