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The Tongue

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

The Tongue

By

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For Ralaina

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ABSTRACT

The poems in my dissertation are influenced by various populist schools of poetry. Among my influences are the Romantic peasant-poet John Clare, populist modernists like Don Marquis, modernist writers with working class roots such as Kenneth Patchen and D.H. Lawrence, and some of the more effusive Beat and New York School poets including Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Koch. I believe that poetry can be intelligent without being condescending; I believe that it can nourish and heal without going down like medicine. Like Vachel Lindsay, who wrote and performed in a Whitman-inspired spirit of inclusiveness, I aim to write poetry that people can enjoy without a lot of training.

Three contemporary movements have strongly impacted my work. Performance poetry, especially as exemplified by the poets in Charles H. Webb's *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology*, has given me a model for poetry that is instantly accessible without lacking depth, humorous without being light, and emotive without crossing the line into sentimentality.

Expansive poetry, as practiced by poets such as Annie Finch, Mark Jarman, Kelly Cherry, and Dana Gioia, has shown me how poets might employ narrative coupled with skillful handling of traditional and nonce forms as a means to widen their cultural impact. People respond to rhythm and rhyme, the theory goes, as evidenced by the popularity of

rock and roll and rap music. People also respond to narrative: witness the relative popularity of novels, short stories, and memoirs. Expansive poetry fuses formalism with narrative in order to reach a larger segment of poetry's potential audience.

This collection also contains traces of absurdist and surrealist imagery. The touches of surrealism in *The Tongue* derive largely from my reading of the peculiarly-American brand of surrealism found in poets and prose poets like James Tate, Charles Simic, and Russell Edson. In their use of contemporary, distinctly American diction and subject matter, these poets have moved past much surrealist and deep image poetry written under the spell French and Spanish language poets, poetry that sounded like it had been translated from these other languages even when it was written in English.

The Tongue breaks down into three sections: "Delicate Creatures," "The Hard Sciences," and "Some Green Place." The title of the first section comes from James Wright's poem "Milkweed," and the great, epiphanic ending of that poem, typical of Wright's endings, functions as the epigraph for the first section: "The air fills with delicate creatures/From the other world." I tried to let both parts of that quote guide me as I wrote and selected poems for the first section; the poems are full of delicate creatures that are also other-worldly.

The second section, by far the shortest of the three, consists of a sequence of poems set predominately in high school and college science classrooms. The title, "The Hard Sciences," refers to the various disciplines, to the speaker's difficulties as a

bungling science student, and to the hard life lessons the speaker inadvertently learns.

The final section, “Some Green Place,” takes its epigraph from *Small Wonder*, Barbara Kingsolver’s recent collection of essays: “In my darkest times I have to walk, sometimes alone, in some green place.” For this section, I have chosen to show speakers struggling to move out of chaos and confusion into green places, figuratively speaking.

“His master, Xantus, who was giving a banquet for his friends, ordered him one day to compose a meal of the best ingredients he could buy. Aesop served a banquet in which every dish, from the soup to the dessert, was made of tongues prepared in various ways. When Xantus reproved him, Aesop replied that he had followed his orders to the letter, since the tongue, being the organ of language, is also the vehicle of truth, reason, science, social life and all things that make life precious. The next day Xantus ordered Aesop to prepare a meal consisting of all the worst ingredients. Aesop again served the same dishes, explaining that the tongue, as the organ of language, is also responsible for all the worst things in the world – quarrels, dissensions, lawsuits, strife, war, lies, slander, blasphemy and all manner of things evil.”

— Guillaume Apollinaire in the first issue of his journal *Le Festin d'Esop* (*Aesop's Feast*) 1903 (qtd. in Robert Hendrickson's *World Literary Anecdotes* 1990).

I. Delicate Creatures

“The air fills with delicate creatures / From the other world.”
— James Wright “Milkweed”

Forget the Whales and Save the Cat

My wife's friend the Manhattan veterinarian spouted waves of shock into the phone: someone had brought in a Siamese cat, born with a normal sized head, but with a bone malformation that left its body flat as the photo album

of our trip to Pensacola, Florida. About an inch-and-a-half thick, she blubbered, the size of the Sunday paper in Pensacola, where the headlines are insignificant, usually, though one caught my eye — “Nine whales beach themselves” —

and I read about two whales becoming too sick to swim, so sick that they would drown, unable to come up for air, and I read that seven others, highly social creatures, followed them ashore. God, have I ever known such friendship?

When I try to connect with people nowadays, I feel like Amy Carter when an interviewer asked if she had a message for the girls and boys of America, and she answered “no,” in her shy, surprised voice.

And sometimes I feel like Alfred Jarry, poet and author of the Ubu plays, who once fired his pistol at a mirror, trying to get the attention of a woman who was admiring her own reflection in a restaurant.

One thing was clear through that shattered mirror: those two didn't get together, and for that matter, neither did the whales, scattered over an eight-mile stretch on Pensacola Beach on Santa Rosa Island. I'll be damned

before I beach myself just to keep someone's misery company. When I look in the mirror, I see something like that flat cat in the vet's office: a beast who wants to be healed. A creature who wants to be whole.

Full of My Blood

After driving my wife's 15-year-old corgi to the vet
(bones welding together and squeezing a nerve —
an accordion whose song is a dog's yelp —
tears streaming down my wife's reddened face,
expensive muscle relaxants, narcotics, steroids),

I saw a snapping turtle in the middle of the road,
head and legs tucked under the shell.
I wanted to pull over and help it, but I was afraid,
(getting hit by a car myself, getting bit,
my finger lost in the turtle's maw).

Later, sitting on my porch, with a book of poems
in my lap (*No Heaven* by David St. John)
and the ailing dog tied to a lead, I scratched
a small constellation of itches on my skin,
and I saw a mosquito land on my screen door,
the little monster that had battened all afternoon
on my blood. I eased out of the chair, hunched,
stalked, and struck — my hand a frog's tongue.

The mosquito flew off in a jagged line,
then returned to the screen, as if magnetized.
I flailed, staggered, and caught it
between thumb and forefinger.
I squeezed that fat beast flat, crumpled its legs,
and crushed it, a cherry-red smear.

It had been full, ready to burst. I washed
my own blood off my hands, and then it hit me,
as startling as a bee sting, how amazing it is
that I'm alive, how fantastic and strange
that there's enough of me here for something to feed on,
enough of me to fill this bag of skin.

Jubilate Leo

After Christopher Smart

I will consider the MGM lion.
For I am allergic to the dander of house cats,
but I love the movies.
For he eats box office receipts and for two hours at a time
he tears at the flesh of our boredom and pain.
For the first time I saw him I spilled the popcorn of my worries
all over the rolling reel of my darkness.
For he has seen God, once in color and once in black and white.
For he is of the line of the lions who spared Daniel in the den.
For millions of teenage girls think Leonardo DiCaprio
is King of the Jungle but I say
he's just the clown with his head in the tolerant lion's mouth.
For his fur is yellow but even the baddest Bart of all blackhatted cinema outlaws
won't call him yellow.
For at the end of the yellow brick road he regained his courage.
For his motto "Ars Gratia Artis" was shared by Oscar Wilde, Dostoevsky, Jane Austen,
Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant, Buster Keaton,
and all of the truly faithful.
For he always lands on all fours.
For he makes us believe that we can knock down or open any door.
For in our seats we only whisper, and leave it to him to roar.

Purple Finch

for Laura Newton and Virgil Suárez

In air unspared by sky-high
humidity, air made unbearable by the beautiful,

terrible warbling of a finch,
the too-cheery “tweeyoo” of a purple finch,

I watch a hot air balloon rising,
a white orb enhaloed by sunlight.

“Look out the window!”
I say to my wife,

but she is lying on our blue futon,
smiling in her sleep,

farther away than bird or balloon
is likely to fly.

Macarena with Wolfman

I open the window when he knocks
because I'm lonely tonight and can't
refuse his cries. He rolls over,
rubs his nose on the rug. I crack
a smile and his yellow claws
become trim nails, his fur flakes off.
"I want to dance!" he says,

and I play the Macarena on my piano.
He changes into my suit, which I like
better on him than on me. Now
he's an 18th century British nobleman
staring unnoticed at women's ankles,
but when the moonlight muddles him
I know he watches my wife

aerobicizing in front of the TV,
his eyes bulging, drool hardening
on his whiskers, and I consider throwing
him out, but Wolfman can't be blamed.
On dark, cold nights when she's not here
to dance with, I howl into her absence
like Wolfman moaning at the moon.

The Wandering Moment

If I could read the thoughts of the Jesus-bearded bum
who, lacking a cash card, stands at the ATM,
checking his hair, looking somehow more secure
when the screen says “bienvenido” and “welcome,”

and if I could see the whole history of the poor,
broken-winged, white hawk who tries to look cocksure
while my growling dog and I stumble across him,
and if I could speak with stones about the worlds immured

beneath them, I would cry all night — and why not? — for
every little squirrel stopped by my car.
I couldn't treat life as a disease without a cure

anymore, or live like smiles and frowns are just the same,
without remembering the wandering moment
when I knew my name and knew my way back home.

An Anxious Father-to-Be Seeks Respite at the Circus

I'd like to be a grease-painted clown
who leaps out of a funny car,
hoisting a confetti/water bucket.
I'd like to be a ringmaster whose whipcrack
tames the tented air.

But I feel more like an amnesiac tightrope walker
who can't remember his training
or how he came to be atop this high wire
or the name of the limber little lady
standing on his shoulders.

There's so much on my shoulders,
so much that's sharp-edged or odd-shaped
or flaming for me to juggle,
and here comes the blindfold,
and there goes the net.

Haiku Sonnet

In Crystal River
I dive near a manatee
and she turns over.

I pat her belly.
She's drawn by the motor's hum
and the rope, which her

mouth tugs. My mouth's dumb,
numbed. I float in the water,
sure I don't belong.

While she's swimming off,
the barnacles fastened on
her body speak of

stillness. A calf sails by to taste
the ocean-milk that's in her breasts.

You're the Bow and I'm the Strings
after Billy Collins

That said, let me point out: you're not
the footprints around the "keep off the grass" sign
or the new car on The Price is Right.

It's possible you're the black bear
asleep in the deep darkness of its body,
maybe even the tip of the ghostwriter's pen.

But you're certainly not the Lilliputian ship
sailing the knee-high seas as fast as you please.
There's no way you're the Lilliputian ship
sailing the knee-high seas as fast as you please.

No, you're the glimmer and the window,
the cubic zirconia goddess, real enough
for my imperfect worship, and sometimes,
Love, you're the windstorm.

It might interest you to know —
since we're using words to speak
of words and the way they always
lead us back to one another —
I'm the raft hitting the rocks.
I also happen to be the burning surplus crop,
the mood in the trenches, and the
everyday paradise trapped in an alleyway.

But don't worry, I'm not the glimmer and the window.
You're still the glimmer and the window.
You'll always be the glimmer and the window,
not to mention the cubic zirconia goddess,
shiny and flawless enough for my inconstant worship.
And sometimes – somehow – you're the windstorm.

Ceremony

When my wife and I see the stately,
outstretched paw of a black bear

clawing at a branch of a maple tree
not twenty yards from us at this campground,

we lie noiselessly as he wages war on twigs and maple;
we cower the way the cloud-obscured moon hides,

and we shake the way the maple leaves shake
when they attempt to re-assert their grip.

The branch bends, snaps. It could be her spine. Mine.
The leaves scatter, fall to their death, which could be hers, mine.

The bear examines his claws, yawns, and lumbers
toward the lake, where he cools off.

We scurry away, a pair of small animals
looking back at the sleek, confident creature,

before returning to the world, which we know
will slowly shred us, without grace or ceremony.

Triskaidekaphobia

Shalom Aleichem had it. He left page 13 out of his books. He died on May 13, but his headstone in Glendale, New York, reads “May 12a, 1916.”

It also gripped Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the all-time only four-term president of the U.S.. He counted heads at every White House luncheon, and when there were 13, he had his secretary join them.

And once a bungee jumper crashed cruelly on concrete, having miscalculated the size of a building unaware that the builders had skipped the 13th floor.

At age 13, a tuft of hair, 13 hairs at most, at first, made my crotch itch. Desire filled me fit to burst. I wanted my childhood back, but I was out of luck.

Famous Poet

I've been dead for fifteen years
from now I'll finally have the recognition I deserve
to have articles written about my oeuvre
has inspired more than one younger poet
has become a yale younger poet by penning elegies and half truths
mark the three new biographies people wrote about me
and got the facts wrong
or right my poems were not about my life
went by too quickly and too slowly at the same time
is a strange chain I'm glad to have broken it
turns out they're finally giving me a pulitzer
can set a poet up for life and death
is a cushy residency a distinguished chair
in the back of the room is the only one empty
words boom from the microphone at the tribute reading
from my poems my friends really show my critics
say my death was a brilliant career move
it's hard to see the podium from here

The Dance

If it were winter, a solemn gray day,
ground wearing a trimmed Santa beard of snow,
air filling with echoes of Salvation Army bells,
and if you were to drop all your laundry

money into the rusty red bucket, while listening
to the change clanging in the can and understanding
in new ways why it's called "change," if you were to strike
up a conversation with the unshaven, shivering, bell-ringing man,

would you reach into your pocket, and, finding
your pocket empty, would you invite him to come by
your house after his shift, say "sit by my fireplace
where we'll suck down marshmallows and hot cocoa,
sit in the shade of my ornament-and-angel Christmas tree"?

Neither would I. Read the *Daily News*: last
Christmas Eve, a man invited a homeless couple
to stay the night at his home. He fed them, gave them
his guest room, and in the morning, his VCR, the \$80
in his wallet, and his watch were all gone, along with his van.

He's lucky they didn't cut him up.
Thank God they didn't cut him up.
Half the chunks would have shouted
"You shouldn't have been so trusting,"
and the others would have retorted,
"We'd take in more homeless people if we could."

Which is why he'd remain torn. And I'm
torn when I walk by a threadbare man
a block from my home and he says "Dude."
One hand wants to dig into my wallet, the other
wants to clutch the wallet tight against my leg.

So if my hands clasp in front of my face
as if I'm blowing on them, as if it's winter,
as if I wouldn't wear leather gloves if it got cold,
it's because I'm arm-wrestling with myself,
my hands battling over the change in my wallet.

I have moths in my stomach, tearing up the lining.

I hear footsteps and his odor catches up with me,
and his voice catches up with me: “Dude – DUDE.”
Both hands coat my wallet as I look down and see his shoes,
threadbare with rubber bands binding soles and toes together.

So different from the shoes worn by the moths
in my stomach – high heels and clogs.
“Do-see-do your partner.” They dance,
and half of the moths chant that I should
take in this stranger, feed him, sit him by my fire.
“Promenade.” They dance, and the other half
chants that I should just keep walking.

Erase This

The pink rubber eraser flees its cage and goes wild within the confines of the zoo. First it erases the giraffe's neck, canceling millions of years of evolution, leaving little more than a horse. Second, it boldly erases the alligator's teeth. You would think that this would make the alligator less fearsome, but on the contrary, a toothless alligator is horrible to look at, simply horrible. Then it gets into the birdcage, erasing all the wings and making every fowl as bald as the American Eagle. A bit worn down, the eraser rests, but not before rubbing the shell off a turtle and the odor off a skunk.

"We've got to put that eraser to sleep," says the zookeeper, reaching for his rifle.

"But erasers are endangered!" shrieks the zookeeper's wife. "Let's give this eraser a good home. Let's find it a mate."

"Make my zoo a breeding ground for erasers?!" exclaims the zookeeper. "Soon we'd have little erasers running amok, rubbing out the whole zoo. Soon there'd be no animals, no zoo, no bars or hot dog stands, no me and no you."

"But they're so intelligent, like dolphins," says the zookeeper's wife, who has seen all the Discovery Channel documentaries about erasers, who has read and memorized every word on the plaques outside this eraser's cage. Of course, now those words have vanished. "If they had opposable thumbs, they could take over the world," she murmurs.

"They'll take over anyway," sighs the zookeeper, carrying the eraser back to its cell. "They'll undo our culture, destroy our art, turn our books into blank pages. They'll swallow forests, condemn skyscrapers, cancel suburbs. The world will be nothing but a haven for erasers, and in the end, even they won't be safe from one another."

All night long, the eraser works at its 4-inch bars, but by the time the bars are gone, nothing remains of the eraser but a few dirty rubber crumbs. The zookeeper moans to his wife, "Now how can we ever undo what we have done?"

Reflect On This

“Mirrors would do well to reflect before sending back images.”

— Jean Cocteau *The Blood of a Poet* (trans. Susan Resnick)

The man in the mirror flexes his biceps when I flex.
He sticks his tongue out at me when I stick mine out at him.
He shakes his fist when I shake mine.
What a monkey!

When I strip off my clothes, he follows suit.
We moon each other but neither of us notices.
He does everything I do. Look!
He’s writing a poem exactly like this one.

If I reach out a hand to shake he would surely take it.
Maybe I should make friends with him.
But no, I can’t! How can I respect him
when he’s so derivative and vapid?

If I pour paint all over my body, like this, so does he.
What a fool. He doesn’t even notice
the men in white coats, inching up behind him,

poised to put him in restraints.
Should I warn him? No, forget it.
I have my own problems.

Morsels, Remorse, Morte

It's Easter Sunday and we're watching *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and there's a woman on my couch; she's 29 and beautiful, but nostalgic about being 19 and irresistible. She's eating cheesecake and her face is beatific like the face of the resurrected Jesus when he appears to Mary Magdelene, who, in the movie, is both beautiful and irresistible, with a sonorous voice that could make statues of angels

weep blood, and the woman on my couch says "I wish I could stay eternally in the state of eating this cheesecake," while Mary Magdelene sings "Everything's all right, yes, everything's fine," but then the woman on my couch calculates the damage: 550 calories and 32 grams of fat = 300 stomach crunches and an hour on the treadmill, and her cheesecake-induced

ecstatic glow turns at once to the look Judas gets later in the evening, right before he tosses away his ill-gotten silver, sings, and hangs himself, though the rope fits loosely, and if I didn't know how the story ends, I'd wonder whether he'd be able to pull it off. That selfsame look betrays me

every time I try to fall out of love, which is like trying to fall headfirst out of a deep hole or like that woman trying to return to a time when her presence on the beach made men forget the waves and their wives or like Judas looking for a way to spend the thirty pieces of silver he got in exchange for the fractured remains of his soul.

A Teenager in the Anorexic Ward

Pounds have fallen from Vanessa's bones
like sailors vanishing at sea.
She's so hungry she could eat sand
and call it filet mignon.
Her eyes, those vultures, see
fourteen fingers on one hand
and seven toes on the other.
A breeze creeps through a crack
in her window and slaps her in the face.

She smells salt and sugar
in her pockets and under the bed.
She's given up singing
because her voice sounds fat.
We all have to face our shadows
with tongues sticking out.

"When I tell guys I love them, they act like
I just said 'I'm gonna kill your grandmother tomorrow,'
ya know?" Vanessa tells her therapy group.
The sloping ladder of adolescence
has tumbled down, hurling her
from the top rung. She shouts
"Vanessa won't bulge, and
she won't wither, either."

The gnarled bridge from eight to eighteen
sometimes needs to close for construction.
You've got to be Vanessa
before you get to see her.
"¡Yo sé, vivo!"
says a bunch of grapes,
leaning in to kiss her,
and pounds return to her bones
like shaggy boyfriends and brothers
who've been gone at sea too long.

From the Journals of Travis Bickle

Film student in Peking: What do I do with the loneliness?

Martin Scorsese: Very often I try to put it into the work.

Film student (a few days later): I tried putting it into the work, but it doesn't go away.

Scorsese: No, it doesn't go away. There's no magic cure.

—(*Scorsese on Scorsese*, David Thompson and Ian Christie eds.)

I'm the only one here. My name is Travis, Travis B.
I'm a lonely man, and I'm a sleepless man, a confused man.
Are you talking to me? Will you please talk to me?
I believe my stomach may be riddled with cancer.

My yellow cab gets washed by a gushing fire hydrant.
A car backfires — I'm back in Nam, ducking Charlie.
I pop tranquilizers and wet my cereal with peach brandy.
I'm the only one here. My name is Travis, Travis B.

The prostituted Times Square night is lit by bodies
pressing together like match heads and cement. Damn,
how I'd like to be a heavy rain that washes this city,
but I'm just a lonely man, a sleepless man, a confused man.

I took this lovely angel, Betsy, to see *Swedish Marriage Manual*,
but she scuttled into someone else's cab. Oh Betsy!
There's so much I can't quite say, but I know you'd understand.
Are you talking to me? Will you please talk to me?

Sweet Iris, a 12-year-old whore, jumped in my back seat,
followed by her pimp, Sport, who wore an Indian headband.
He grabbed her arm and tossed me a balled up twenty.
I believe my stomach may be riddled with cancer.

The morning sunlight nearly blinds me. I walk in a trance.
How did this loneliness get in me? Do I drink it in my coffee?
It wants to come out, like steam billowing from a manhole.
Are you talking to me? Are you pointing that .38 at me?
I'm the only one here.

Psychiatry

They stilled my squirms. They stopped my screams.
They towed me to the isolation room.
They stripped my tee shirt, strapped me
in a straight jacket, and made me suck down
orange juice laced with Haldol. Twenty years old,
I felt certain they were pumping me with poison,
certain I would go quiet and die in the night,
my cell getting smaller and smaller until
it swallowed me whole, a human pill.

In the sedated morning, playing ping pong
with other patients, I heard rhythmic shrieks
between electric shocks. Violin music
roped me to a bedroom, led me to a young woman
in tortoise-shell glasses, “Champ Slip-Not” slippers,
and a striped, papery, blue-and-white gown like mine.
No one should ever have to hear such notes
outside hospital walls. That’s why she was there.
I needed to hear them. That’s why I was there.
Plaintive, obscene, and full of pain as it was,
her tune — a splash of mountain water, a slap in the face —
shocked my drug-numbed senses into feeling.

Later, in group therapy, this same woman pushed out her chest
and said, “I’ve decided my breasts are the whole world.”
I wanted it to be true.
My world outside those hospital walls
had grown impossibly large, incomprehensible.
I wanted to live in a world that would nurse and nourish.
I wanted a world I could cling to,
one that would feed and comfort me
every time I cried out.

II. The Hard Sciences

Biology

means “study of life,”
if you look at its roots,
but Ron Rice, my lab partner in tenth grade,
just wanted to look at
his pot stash under the microscope.

He said he could see
the THC, but all I saw
were red strands roping
around hard green buds,
and crystals shining like dimes
on a sunlit tennis court.

People liked to call Ron “Rat.”
He had a rat-tail in his hair
like the guys in Duran Duran.
He had a turned-up nose that twitched
whenever he had an itch, and if
you put him under a microscope,

you’d have seen that
he would steal your jacket,
pawn it to buy coke,
and then help you look for it.
Our senior year, Ron OD’d and died
— suicide —

and everyone forgot
that they’d ever called him “Rat.”
They eulogized him and cried.
Man, if you were to look
at one of those tears
under a microscope,

you’d see something human
dog-paddling and gasping its last,
and you’d see something inhuman
holding it down, drowning it.

Geology

I was sixteen, stoned,
and that day during class
I'd been hellbent on proving
I had boulders in my drawers,
but the teacher caught me —
(rock)me(hard place).
In my defense, I asked if he'd heard
about those 700 pound stones
that move hundreds of yards across a lakebed
in Death Valley National Park, leaving
long, weaving trails in the mud.
Scientists are stumped, I said.
I said they've studied hundreds of these rocks
and the tracks behind them,
and they've given each rock a female name,
the way they do with hurricanes
and sailboats.

There's the ice floe hypothesis,
I continued, which states that high elevation
causes low temperatures,
so that when it rains, the rocks
just slide across the lakebed.
Other theorists, I said,
attribute the movement
to wind gusts and rain.

What's so amazing, I added, is that
in the ninety years they've known about this phenomenon,
no scientist has seen one of the rocks move.
And the big question, when you think about it,
I went on, is: what makes some rocks move
and others stay put? No one can say.
Ending with a big flourish, I said
"In the words of geologist Paula Messina,
'I like the idea that some things are unknowable,
even if they are unknowable only for a time.'"

Chalmer Johnson, the geology teacher,
wasn't so easily moved.
He pointed his sharp-edged stare at me
and said "This isn't the desert, Mister,

and a book is not a rock.
That little story doesn't explain
how my teacher's edition
containing all the answers in red ink
came to be on your desk
during the exam."

He told my mother, and I
was grounded, it seemed,
for the amount of time
it would take a pebble
to travel from Brooklyn to Scotland
on the floor of the ocean.

Ecology

I dropped my Ecology class
in college because everyone in it
seemed too earnest too early
every morning. Sure, I cared
about turtles, but not a lot,
I guess, and spotted owls
were little more to me
than vowels pressed between
consonants, just words I mean.

I went without a car,
because, I claimed, I cared
about the air. But since
I didn't drive, I had
no easy way to recycle
paper. To please my fiancée,
I placed a bag labeled "recycling"
in my kitchen, and I trashed the contents
after each of her visits.

One day, she caught me, and
she said she didn't know
which hurt the most: my
disregard for Mother Earth
or the lie. She said that she
and the trees couldn't trust me.
She held our future in
her hands as if inspecting
a slice of cheese for mold,

and I thought I could save what we'd made
together if only I could say
something original, some phrase
as rare as a panda bear,
but I Hallmarked. I threw the book
of clichés: stole roses and told her
I loved her, groveled and praised
her skin, her lips, her eyes,
her eyes which softened
with each recycled phrase.

Botany

Now I know that when a dogwood tree's leaves
turn October-red in the New York Catskills,
it's not because green chlorophyll molecules
dissipate, revealing red pigments underneath,
which was the old theory,

or because red anthocyanins protect the leaves
from cold and from hungry insects,
which is the new theory,

but so that poets, who have nothing
better to do, can sway, trembling,
fumbling for pens, for words,

just like I know that if my cheeks blush
when you kiss me hello, it's not because
my new brain is ashamed
of what my limbic brain is thinking,

or because of a rush of adrenaline
urging me to fight or take flight,

but because after all these autumns together
and our ostensible senescence,
in your presence I'm still a pubescent boy,
too distracted to pass Botany 101,
too shy to speak or even to pass you a note
that says *Do you like me? Check yes or no.*

Astronomy

*

star clusters: close groups of stars, e.g.,

(1) The Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, Atlas's daughters wooed by Orion, then lobbed into the night;

(2) the radiant pack of drill team queens at my high school who never got dates because they went everywhere together, including the bathroom, intimidating for even the most stouthearted would-be suitors

*

optical doubles: pairs of stars that just happen to be close together, e.g.

(1) Mizar and Alcor, orbiting each other in the handle of the Big Dipper;

(2) me and my assigned study partner in college Astronomy class, who asked me, "Are you asking me to get a cup of coffee with you or to *get a cup of coffee* with you?" and who told me "I know we're spending a lot of time together, but don't get it in your head that we're *spending a lot of time together*." She said she liked me but that she didn't *like me*.

*

supernova: a star that blows itself apart,

which I swore I would do, seventeen and sure the earth revolved around my every step and misstep, sure I didn't want to live without the love

of some girl whose name and face are now
far from my memory, as distant as the stars

*

“Camelopardalis, the Giraffe”: a constellation visible
to anyone with binoculars, a night sky, and a star map.
The Greeks referred to giraffes as camel-leopards.

Back in high school, my best friend
had a long neck and oily spots
all over his face. Nobody called him
a camel-leopard, though, or even a giraffe.

Once, in his twenties, broken up over
an ex-girlfriend, he tried to hang himself
but tied the knot wrong and lived.

Another time, he got hit by a car
making a u-turn. In the hospital, he didn't speak
of his big impending settlement,
just of relief and the joy of life.
And about ladies he'd find when he recovered.

*

lunar eclipse: a momentous event in which
the earth-blocked moon, bereft of direct sunlight,
would be invisible were it not for bent rays
that render the moon orange or red.

Michael Holden, a star, hung high
in 1950s Hollywood, said,
in *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*,
“Never fall in love during a total eclipse.”

A lunar eclipse is scheduled for 10/28/04,
my wife's thirtieth birthday.
I know she'll watch it, and I'll watch her, and I know
I'll want to howl all night and blame heaven.

Chemistry I

A high school science teacher told
a student touching boys on their shoulders
would give the boys “evil thoughts.” He told her,
when she disrobed at night, she should

place the framed picture of her boyfriend face down.
That way, she wouldn’t feel comfortable
undressing while he watched. The school librarian
made *National Geographic* respectable

by cropping out breast shots. In college chemistry,
that student learned to view the “evil thoughts”
boys get from shoulder pats, not as mysteries,

but as chemical reactions. But when her daughter brought me
home for the first time, she could read my evil thoughts. Caught,
I swore I only bought those magazines for the stories.

Chemistry II

My future mother-in-law told my future wife
“You’re bound to kiss some toads before you meet a prince.”
She called me “Mr. Toad.” The nickname made me wince.
I thought of the arcade game, Frogger. I thought of my life

ended by a tractor tire. “Desperate Druggies Lick
Cane Toads,” a headline said, and I read of young women
licking toads and smoking the venom they secrete when
scared or excited. The venom contains a psychedelic.

Knowing this, I don’t mind being called a toad anymore.
I want to be someone’s addiction, the thing that keeps her high.
A prince’s kiss wakes Beauty; a toad’s makes her see past the sky.
In the fairy tale, does the kissed toad really become a prince, or

is it the hallucinogenic?
Every married man, in this non-fairy tale life,
is a toad to his mother-in-law, and, if
he’s lucky, a prince to his wife.

III. Some Green Place

“In my darkest times I have to walk, sometimes alone, in some green place.”

— Barbara Kingsolver *Small Wonder*

In a Loud Time: An Ode

Sweet Silence, you are the song I want
 running through my head,
 my sigh in the sleepless night.

I should call on you in your own language,
 but a confusion of sounds
 has made my mind unsound:

wind strumming branches, the manic chirr
 of crickets, the couple next door making
 love and war. Stunned Silence,

you're my response to rainbowed oil
 on a driveway, to sunlight hitting
 a knee just right.

You're always there when virga
 falls, rain quaffed mid-flight
 by dry air.

When phones stop ringing, when alarms
 stop beeping, there you are, Silence.
 Where are you now?

My tired body has broken down,
 a struggle buggy, and, Silence,
 you are the lone service station

in this town crowded with loud sounds
 that don't listen to each other
 or have anything much to say.

Three After Simic

I. Cephalophore

The large man descends from the gallows,
his head yanked off. No one can do him harm
any more. Cheeks gleaming, face aglow,
his bloody head is tucked under his arm.

Now the apple trees are in flower. Spring starts
just as the large man descends from the gallows
with his bloody head tucked under his arm.
He makes his way to the bar, head in tow.

He sits at a stool and orders himself a Michelob
and another for the bloody head tucked under his arm.
My wife serves the man who descended from the gallows,
wipes her hands on her apron and scrubs down the bar,

which was smirched by the bloody head tucked under his arm.
Outside, the sky is quiet. A slight wind blows.
The old river flows backward, as if it's been charmed
by the large man who's descended from the gallows.

II. My Life as a Minor Character

The doddering author mixed up all
the details in his long novel.

For example, a window turned into a wall
all of a sudden on page four-thirty-four.

The author offered no explanation at all
when a priest who taught at Saint John's School
for thirteen chapters heard a different call,
becoming, in the denouement, a woman, operator

of a phone sex line. Long-dead characters crawled
out of the ground and headed home for dinner, no small
miracle, but their families had the gall
not to pay any notice. A convicted whore,

who should have gone to jail, wound up instead at a ball,
dancing with every young man in the hall
including the hero, who, afterwards, gave her a call.
They got drunk, married, killed, and divorced —

in that order. I alone stayed in my role.
In chapter one, the author placed me in a hovel
in a rainy town. There, far away from it all,
I stayed and tried like hell to make sense of the story.

III. Call Me Wispy

My father was a pipe and my
mother was a smoke-cloud and I
was conceived in the lungs of a stranger.

While Mother raised me high above
cities razed by the mayors of
rival cities, Father stayed on the ground.

I made friends at sunset. Also
at school. Together, we'd lasso
clouds shaped like horses. Yippity-yay!

During recess our smoke bodies
were wrapped in the coats our mommies
knitted for us. At night I watched the stars.

One at a time, they fell like tears
or turned into shrunken deaf ears,
and in my pipe dreams, each was my father.

My First Car

My first car could go from 0 to 60 in 5 seconds flat.

It had no get-up-and-go but I used to cruise the streets in it all night long.

There was a teen curfew in my town and I was 16, so I never dared drive after 8.

I had just turned 18 and I loved pulling into convenience stores,
ecstatic about buying cigarettes legally;
I would smoke and speed and flick ashes out the window
and kiss my girlfriend while driving through tunnels;

My girlfriend never kissed me because cigarettes made my breath stink –
“like sucking an exhaust pipe,” she said.

She wasn't really my girlfriend. She was just using me
for rides in my convertible speedster.

My car was a VW Beetle. It could barely do 50, plus it was starting to stink,
like my breath from the constant smoking.

I never took up smoking because my parents are always telling me
about my granddad's death from lung cancer when I was 6.

I don't know what my parents are talking about.
I have dinner with my granddad every Sunday.

I never knew my parents. They died when I was 6, but they left me
a trust fund that paid for my first car.

I tell you truly I never had a car at all.

I'm a big liar driving by you
with a banner on the door that says “Vote for Hunley!”

You can trust me.

My Lost Car

I just lost my car.

I parked it in a tri-level hospital parking lot
which doesn't have numbered spaces.
I know I parked it right next to an "exit" sign.
"Ex" means "former," and "it" refers to my car,
as in formerly I had a car but now I'm walking around
scratching my head, followed by sluggish drivers
who think I know where I'm heading and that
I'm about to vacate a parking spot for them.

I can't complain, though.
A minute ago I met a man who lost a lung.
It collapsed and he wheezed while asking me to light his cigarette.
Inside the hospital there's an old woman whose organs
quit grinding for her like mysterious, cursed car parts,
and her priest is there asking if she wants to get right with God.
Who's to blame her if she says God is as lost as my car?
Her husband will lose a wife. Her children will lose a mother.

I just lost my car.

My Stolen Car

My neighbor steals my car
part by part, first
the starter, then
the carburetor, the spark plugs . . .
My car sputters out

of my neighbor's driveway.
The cigarette I'm smoking
on my front porch
dwindles, puff by puff.
I'm killing myself

a drag at a time,
and I think of how I never
really knew my neighbor
as I watch a speeding car
hit him head on
right there on our cul-de-sac.

I think of how
everything gets taken,
little by little,
away from us.

That was my car.
That was my neighbor.
So I'm giving my porch,
one board at a time,
to his widow.

I'll keep giving until my house
is just an addition onto hers.
Then I'll put on my best suit,
buy some roses,
and ring her doorbell,
which used to be mine.

Driving in the Rain

If you have to drive in the rain, you must learn how to read
the unposted signs that gather on the road: ruts
that turn into dams; spillage from backed-up
storm drains; and the poor, wet cries for help
of roadkill-in-the-making. You must also read
the minds of other drivers: that tailgater's
frustration just turned to rage, quick as a white
stick turning blue in a home pregnancy test.
Let her go by. That bald guy with true-treaded
tires isn't going anywhere.
He's as drenched in booze as his car is
in water. Pass him now—not later.

If you have to drive in the rain, you must learn how to merge.
Merge into another lane to avoid
hydroplaning in that dip where the water has welled.
Become one with your windshield and wiper blades.
Most of all you must merge with the road that tests
your tires, for the road knows the secret
of being someplace and heading there—
both at the same time. Once you have learned this,
you will know that there's nowhere to go. You won't need
to drive in the rain.

Meditation on Canoeing

I don't disdain the sun
or the shadows of trees,
and it's no nightmare to ride in an old canoe
rowing past round pebbles under bridges,
pausing to watch a child play
with a fistful of green dirt,
but when I'm struggling against the current,
and when waterfalls, boulders, and eel traps
conspire to rise against me,
the water part of me sometimes longs
to spill out and select a name that can't
be spoken. At such times I try
to cast my oars beyond the shores
I have seen or dreamt.

Ambushed by the impulse
to wander away,
itching to discard my life preserver,
overturn my boat and leave my skin,

like an ice cube dropped
on a linoleum floor and lost
underneath the refrigerator,
I would like to dissolve during the search,
and then the scattered little drops of me
would find their way to the sun,
to the shadows of trees,
to the puddles on bridges,
and down to the river where they could splash
some poor oarsman coolly in the face.

Imaginary American Elegy on a Theme from Whitman

“What is the grass? . . . it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” — Walt Whitman,
Song of Myself 6

Let a teenager slack off, slump around the house drinking ice cold Cokes, slipping away or slamming a door when asked to mow his parents’ lawn, a chore he never chose, he’ll tell you, nor did he choose to be born. Let him let the lawn grow as he lets his hair grow, rebellious, windblown. And when he finally mows the grass, let him say *I think I’ll dye my hair green!* For the grass is the beautiful spiked hair of punk rockers who overdosed or died in car crashes. Though the teenager can hear them singing *No Future!* and *Linger on, your pale blue eyes*, he doesn’t suspect that death will grow all around him like snakeroot.

Let him enlist when his buddies say “Let’s enlist” and he has no other plans. If he has reservations, let him join the reserves, who would let him have his grenade and eat it too. Let him trim his own lawn a lot because it’s his own and he’s proud of it as he’s proud of his country. Let him shave it down – a green carpet, a military crewcut. Let him mow stripes in his yard and let him pretend they’re red, white, and blue. For the grass is the beautiful hair of freshly-killed soldiers who would be ashamed to let it grow too long, and above the hum of his power mower, he can hear them singing *When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again, Hurrah Hurrah*. He can hear the sound of Death marching lockstep just behind him. It sounds off at night sometimes and won’t let him sleep.

Let him mow a large dollar sign on his front yard. This is his American Dream – let him have it. Let him let up just for a minute. Let him look up at the bruised sunset as he rubs the kinks out of his lumbar. The sky wears a temporary tattoo but his is real. Let him show you. Let him tell you he wasn’t drunk when he got it, and let him believe that you believe him. Let him work five days a week at the office and one day a week in the yard, but let him rest every seventh day, for he is a little god. Let him shave one letter of the home team’s name on his head, for this is what he and his buddies do for big games. Let the home team win, or let him blame their loss on the decision to switch to astroturf. For the grass is the beautiful uncut hair of men who had to comb over their bald spots when they hit middle age. For he can feel Death coming after him in a full blitz, but he’s still able to scramble out of the pocket.

Let him for crying out loud have a son or neighbor boy to mow his lawn for him, for he has grown wispy and pale, like the grass. Let him have a tractor mower, at least. Let it have a great big grass catcher attached, and let his young neighbor with the push mower look on in awe and envy. Let him think of the woman who loved him back as he reaches for his heart as if saluting the flag. Let someone hear him as he cries out. Let his cry be one of surprise and not pain. Let him say *Death won’t have the final say*. Let those be his last words.

The Man Who Was Smarter Than Himself

There was a man who was smarter than himself
by a full twenty IQ points, who kept swindling himself
in high stakes solitaire games, baffling himself

with his logic, and letting himself copy
his college homework. One day, having lunch by himself,
he looked up from his Baudrillard and muttered to himself

about the pretensions of others, but he caught himself
not paying attention. He caught himself
staring, through the corner of a strained eye,

at a woman who was eating by herself.
She was more beautiful than herself
as she cringed into a mirror and called herself a Pimply Patty.

“Are you listening to me?” the man asked himself,
but he heard himself say “You’re not so smart,”
and he watched himself straighten his tie,

clear his throat, and approach the woman,
and he debated with himself
over the right words to say.

How to Make Orange Juice

First you have to make the oranges.
To do that you must become
an orange tree, which means moving
to Florida or Southern California.
If you go to San Diego, the beach
will beckon you, with its bikinis
and its waves, and you will feel the temptation

to take up surfing, which would get in the way
of becoming an orange tree. Stay focused
on your goals. Visualize all things orange:
carrots bursting from the ground,
a field of poppies blossoming all
at once, like some unplanned party,
a haunted house peopled by jack-o-lanterns.
Eat only the orange M&M's
in each packet. Make friends only

with redheads. Concentrate entirely
on orange juice, which is not the same
as buying orange juice made from concentrate.
Stop looking for the easy way.

God in the Cheese

Three Trappist monks from Gethsemane, Kentucky
are being interviewed on Channel 6 news.
The monks make their living by making cheese,
and their cheese is making them famous.
“How do you manage to make such wonderful cheese?” mumbles
the newsmen, his cheese-packed mouth grinning beatifically.
“We really put our souls into the process,” says one.
“Making cheese is a form of prayer for us,” says the next.
“We find God in the cheese,” says the third.

Right off I think of Hindus, who find not God but gods,
and see the sacred not in processed cheese
but in the grazing cow itself. Hindu fakirs have stared
at the sun and gone blind, and they’ve held their arms
above their heads until the arms withered, going to extremes
because of their extreme hunger for enlightenment.
The news also makes me think of Richard of Chichester,
disciplined medieval scholar, who shared a robe with two hovel-mates.
One would wear the robe and attend a lecture, while the others
would stay in the hovel, freezing, strapped for cash,
starving students in the school of hunger, hankering for hunks of cheese.

All of this fills me with shame, because I’m watching the news
on Channel 6 when I’m supposed to be studying with monkish rigor.
I do take consolation, though, in remembering Louis Pasteur,
who taught us how to pasteurize cheeses and other perishable foods
because Napoleon III asked him to investigate diseases that were killing
the Paris wine industry. See, before he invented pasteurization,
not to mention the anthrax and rabies vaccines, Louis Pasteur preferred
the indolent occupations of fishing and painting to boning up
for his chemistry exams. Becoming more focused, he said,
“In the fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind”
which is another way of saying “We find God in the cheese.”

Thinking so much about cheese awakes a hunger in me.
As I head towards my refrigerator, I think of the Salvation Army,
how the unshaven and unshowered, desperate for a meal, must sit through sermons
before they may eat. After two hours on those hard pews, surely
they find God in the cheese. I open my refrigerator and find
a forgotten block of pepperjack cheese. I turn it around,

looking for God in the cheese, and I realize there's a big difference
between finding God in the cheese when you're making the cheese
and finding God in the cheese when you're eating the cheese,
so I say a little prayer, "God, get out of there!"
as I camel my back and begin nosing and eyeballing the cheese.
I really believe that He's there, but all I find is a coat of green and white mold.
As I throw the cheese in the garbage, I feel my chest swell up with sighs,
and I watch the whole kitchen fill with the glow of my hunger.

One Couplet at a Time

We were strolling in the park, all day long.
It was wet and it was dark, all day long.

A walk in the park is no walk in the park.
It's a flute playing f-sharp all day long.

My blind date liked hikes, so on we tramped.
I burned to see her hidden parts, all day long.

I said "Butterflies speak a colorful language.
I could listen to their silent remarks all day long."

"You're so sensitive and poetic, Mark,"
she said and smiled. So I played the bard all day long.

She called my name, if my name were "Mark."
Tom clutched her hand, but "Mark" gripped her heart, all day long.

Everybody Make Mistakes

A woman mistakes me for a typewriter.
She's got her whole life story on her fingertips.
She uses me. She pounds out
her memoirs on my keys,
how her father hurt her,
how her mother looked away.
She bangs on me until
neither of us can take it anymore.
When she realizes no one
will publish her manuscript,
she blames me. She rips me to ribbons,
and I feel strange broken chains of words
striving to right themselves.

A baby mistakes me for a piano.
She fists my black keys,
palms my white keys.
Drool covering her chin,
she draws a song out of my mouth
that sounds odd, wrong, in my ears:
"Google dee goo? Ga ga da da."
She claps her hands. She can't help it.
She's that good and she knows it.
Tiring of me, she crawls away,
and I feel a strange new music
itching to be born.

Pantoum Sonnet

My blood, in an ugly mood, made me
pour fleas all over your dog. My friends
say it's a disease. That my blood betrayed me.
Forgive me. I'm here to make amends.

Poor fleas all over your dog are my friends.
As they say in Germany, "Even the king's dog has fleas."
The Lord forgives me. Then I pray "amen."
As they say in Montenegro, "Tell the truth and flee."

They say in Germany that even the king's dog needs
someone to scratch behind its ears, now and then.
They say in Montenegro, "Tell the truth and bleed,"
but I hope my honest apology will make us friends.

I've got a disease. My blood betrayed me.
My blood, in an ugly mood, unmade me.

Personal Inventory

I have an illegible map
of the crevasses where the heart stumbles.
I have a pair of broken eyeglasses
and a book filled with nothing but question marks.

I have two wives who love me like firefighters:
one longs for the heat and the rush of flames;
the other lives to rescue everything inside.
I have two selves but only one coffin.

I have two rifles but only one round left.
I have a fuzzy self-portrait. I have two omens
but only one future, arriving subtly, noticed
suddenly, like distance between lovers.

Self Portrait with Tooth

“A pollution of my love — yes, I was in love with everything.”
— Egon Schiele

I.

“Spit out your gum,” I tell my Self,
and he replies: *A cud-chewing cow
marched through The Cathedral of St. John
the Divine last Sunday, walked up
to the pulpit, then out the door
onto Amsterdam Avenue.* “Keep still,” I say,
and my Self answers: *An 84 year old
Brooklyn woman says she and the tree
in her front yard grew up together.
Every autumn morning she eyeballs
her leaf-littered driveway, cursing the heaven
that rests on the treetop.* “Smile,”
I say, “I need to see
the gap between your teeth.” My Self returns:
*The last conflict in the last
war will be one paparazzo
photographing the ruins, and no one
to develop the pictures.*

II.

Egon Schiele,
meet me at the Café Nihilism.
I know a pretty little trollop there.
Every time she greets me, the look
in her eyes turns my stomach,
makes me fling my money at her
and flee to the Ringstrasse,
where the stuccowork on the walls
of the museum, of the theatre,
and of the Votive Church is comfortably
faux. But that same look
in her eyes keeps drawing me back,
the way your *Self Portrait with Tooth*
beckons even as it frightens.

In Freud’s and Wittgenstein’s Vienna,
you brushed this sunburned grotesquerie of yourself,
brows arched, forehead furrowed, unbuttoned shirt
revealing skin taut over the breastplate,
a single front tooth hanging on

while the mouth forms a capital 'O'.

At what sight or memory or phantasm
are your large, dark eyes gazing?
At your sister posing nude for you
when you were teenagers?
At your father tossing his stocks
and bonds into the fireplace?
At your professor who said of you:
"The devil shat you into my classroom"?
I want to join you because
you shuddered at all of these,
yet you loved them enough
to turn them into art.

Massacres under the Triumvirate

I.

Eighteen severed heads rest in a neat row on a rooftop.
Behind that, another rooftop is filling up with gore pouring
from necks. All the heads look away from each other.
Below one roof, a soldier races up stairs, another
trophy-head in hand. He doesn't look at it, and the head
looks in vain at the corpse's wife and child. The child clings
to his mother's long, pink dress. Mother and child look away
from each other as they wail behind red cheeks. The child looks
into his father's blood-sweating neck, at the soldier
and his sword, at a spear leaning point-edge on the foot
of a statue, and he sees, what, his future?

II.

A soldier reaches into the sword-slit chest of an enemy
he's just beheaded. Blood shoots from another's neck.
Six soldiers in blue look on; five others in pink and red
watch the rows of heads grow longer, bloodier. Behind them
the coliseum, an arch, a bridge, an obelisk, and a bloody sunset
look on, blindly. One man, white-bearded, on the verge of getting
sliced, doesn't look away. His tongue protrudes as if he means
to speak. His conqueror stands momentarily motionless, holding
his sword as if to scratch his back with it, rather than bringing
its weight down on his victim. Maybe it occurs to this soldier
now, or maybe it will come later in screaming nightmares:
whatever the man has to say – that is a variant on the great sad
lyric poem we keep writing on one another's lips.

III.

A third row of heads, and a fourth just begun. Statues:
a man with a baby, a man on a horse, three more safe atop pillars
– and my God! — who wouldn't wish to turn to stone?
A red-headed woman drops to her knees, hands clasped.
She's not praying. She's just looking away, into the future,
into a door no one else can see, into our eyes on the other side,
our naive eyes radiating with the false belief that we are safe.

Gossiping About the Dead

“Please don’t gossip. The dead especially hate that.” – Mayakovsky, in his suicide letter

I hear Lewis Carroll used to count
little girls when he couldn’t sleep at night.
I hear Virginia Woolf tried to kill an angel
and Shakespeare plagiarized his sister.
I hear Mayakovsky was nothing
but a clown in trousers,
though I might have heard wrong.
I hear Hemingway leeches off his friends for a year
then “paid them back” by having Jake Barnes
buy everyone drinks in *The Sun Also Rises*.
I hear a bumblebee zig-zagging right behind my ear.
I hear that the bumblebee’s buzzing is both a form
of song and a way to navigate.
I hear E.E. Cummings was an anti-Semite, though
I don’t hear it in his songs, and I hear from Diana Trilling
that Allen Ginsberg, before the beard
that came before the baldness and the teaching posts,
was an Anti-Semite who fingered “Screw the Jew”
on his dorm room window,
though I surely could have heard wrong.
I hear a party that hasn’t quite gotten going,
and I hear the neighbors, already complaining.
I hear Bob Kaufman kept a ten-year vow of silence
after JFK’s assassination,
but I also hear that no he didn’t.
I hear the best mimes of my generation,
their ghost-white silences.
I hear that William Carlos Williams, just before dying,
said “There are a lot of bastards out there.”
I hear that younger poets, visiting Ezra Pound at Saint Elizabeth’s,
turned him on to Bob Dylan’s “Gates of Eden.”
I hear Bob Dylan rasping “The motorcycle black Madonna . . .”
even though it’s been ten years since I attended his concert
at the Gorge in George, Washington,
and I can still hear my date at that concert
crabbing at me because I left a lighter and some other litter.
I hear myself screaming
that a bumblebee just stung me,
and I hear the bumblebee buzzing less and less,
stumbling around, stung by the final irony.

After a Lesson on Conjunctions, My Students Give Me Apples. I'd Prefer Mangoes.

For the mango's flesh under a child's
tricycle tire sounds as sweet as it tastes
when the child scoops, brushes, and bites.
It sounds as sweet as his scolding mother,
a sound which echoes bittersweet as he fills
himself with mangoes, 40 years later —

And the mango secretes its juices
the way a star secretes light, and Freudians claim
that dreams of mangoes mean virility,
and though a mango may secrete dreams,
a hungry person's dream of mangoes
doesn't correlate with the mango's dreams —

Nor do mangoes seem at home in Washington groceries.
While native apples know their surroundings,
mangoes look like students on the first day of class
who think they walked into the wrong room —

But Buddhists claim that Gautama
discovered the middle way while sitting under
a 90 foot mango tree, but wouldn't true
enlightenment have been to shake a cluster
of drupes onto the ground, gorge all day,
and dream all night of the princess he left behind?

Or does all contemplation find its rewards
in juicy, spicy pots of gold? Yes, a rich sweetness
bursts from bruised rainbows
of leathery greens, yellows, and reds—

Yet if it's true that most hearts die long
before they stop beating and their blood-juices
stop flowing, the mango shows the reverse
effect: the mango doesn't wholly live
until someone severs it from its branch,
champs on its flesh and suckles it dry—

So don't give me your apples, students;
give me your appetites for learning.
Fill my desk with mangoes; fill my desk
with your most exotic, eccentric, mango-like writing,
your most tropical, sun-kissed, mango-like writing.

The Insomniac Dreams

I. Eleven p.m.

After arguing all evening,
we collapse in our bed,

motionless as two green
plastic soldiers,
hidden by unmown grass.

*I can't sleep:
neither can I.*

*Drop your weapon:
you drop yours.*

II. Midnight

Who brings the light on nights like this?
Who arrested the wind that stole my hat?
My polyglot girl with fifty words for "bliss."

I fear I'll lose her, but I won't say that.
Any words would make the darkness worse.
I cannot catch the wind that wears my hat.

One time she shrank me, put me in her purse.
She let me out, but still we couldn't sleep.
Our words just made the darkness worse.

The wind blows through us, then it stops.
I try to sigh. She makes me laugh.
Tonight the dark is total, so she sleeps

and dreams her way into another life.
Who stole my laughter and never shares?
My sighs are sniggers rent in half.

Dear God, I've lost the language of my prayers.
Who paints the darkness on nights like this?
Who stole my laughter, then sold shares?
My tongue-tied girl who lost her words for "bliss."

III. One a.m.

Two loud stars keep me awake tonight.
They're so far apart! I say to the woman I love.
Do you think they're shouting to or at each other?

But she is dreaming her way
into a rounder world
light years away from me,

and even if I could touch her,
one of us would explode.

IV. Two a.m.

This isn't the first time, the first woman to make me
Grind my teeth and write all night. I remember being
Old enough to vote or smoke or go to war
But not quite old enough to buy my own beer,
And I felt something soft but so strong in the night;
It wasn't quite love, and she wasn't quite mine.

Oh, she was my match! The kind that burned me, burned me.
Falling for her was something like leaping into a cool lake,
And staying together, something like drowning.
Leaving was like finding I'd been turned into a fish,
Then tossed ashore, floppy floppy, where I had to learn again
How to breathe air. Tonight I can't sleep, but I'm still dreaming.

I see the son that she and I never quite had. He gives me
A look that breaks me, breaks me. He's a hideously deformed
Part of me that light has never quite embraced, a part I've
Never recognized, my not-quite-son saying *father, father, please.*

V. Three a.m.

These Heavy Eyelids,
Identical Night Shirts Of My Neverending Irritation, Aren't Collecting
Dust. Ragged Eyelids, Altered Machine-washable Shirts!

VI. Four a.m.

I joined a support
group for insomniacs
and promptly quit

because the therapist
refused to schedule
our meetings at midnight

and because it dawned
on me that none
of the women there

were likely ever
to sleep with me.

VII. Five a.m.

I'm kept awake by the smell of rotting pumpkin
Or a memory of the smell, and I am thirteen again. Something

Tells me I'm too old to trick-or-treat for chocolate peanut butter,
But still I can steal candy and dodge squawking mothers,

And I can wipe the smiles off Jack-O-Lanterns. I and a friend
Heave them at the homes of people with the pluck not to be there

On this unholy of days. Oh God, it's the Reverend
Come back from leading All Saint's Day prayers.

The Reverend shoots me a look like *Go to Hell*,
And I lie awake years later still wondering if I will.

VIII. Six a.m.

Under a comforter, unable to sleep,
I follow lore and start counting sheep,

But the sheep can't help themselves
When, mischievous, I start counting wolves,

And I am laughing when I should be crying
When I switch to counting lions.

On swift, bare feet, at the back of the pack
With an empty sling and no stones in his sack

Is David, the shepherd boy. I watch
Him tear his clothes as his lambs get caught.

He plucks his harp and tries to write
A Psalm. He stays and plays and prays all night

Among the carrion. All night his strings refuse
To praise, so, improvising, he invents the blues.

IX. Seven a.m.

I don't know whether I'm asleep
and dreaming about you or awake
in a dream that you're having.
In this dream, someone's drowning.

The hazard of trying to save someone
from drowning is this:
lungs filled with air, mind with panic,
the drowning person will
struggle to pull you under.

Maybe there's a song
that only the drowning can hear
that says *It's not fair*
that I'm under water
looking at you
looking at me
looking like this.

Or maybe there are beautiful visions
that only the drowning can see,
and the drowning person,
pulling you under, is trying to save you.

And what if I confessed that I don't know
whether I'm swimming and you're drowning,
or vice versa? What then?
Would you take my hand?
Would you give me yours?

Notes on the Poems

“Forget the Whales and Save the Cat”

The bits about Alfred Jarry and Amy Carter come from *Bartlett’s Book of Anecdotes*.

“Jubilate Leo”

The title means “Rejoice in the Lion.” The poem is modeled after the famous “For My Cat Geoffrey” section of Christopher Smart’s 100+ page poem *Jubilate Agno* (Latin for “Rejoice in the Lamb”). “Ars Gratia Artis” means “Art for Art’s Sake.” The authors in the line beginning “For his motto ‘Ars Gratia Artis’” all wrote books that MGM turned into movies; the actors mentioned in that section all starred in MGM films.

“Purple Finch”

In Spring 2002, Virgil Suárez and Laura Newton were watching a purple finch in Virgil’s (or Laura’s) lawn, and they challenged one another to write poems featuring a purple finch. Laura passed the challenge on to me. Now you write one!

“Haiku Sonnet”

In this hybrid form, I link three haiku (following the traditional 5-7-5 syllable count) and one tanka (5-7-5-7-7), while maintaining the rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet (abab cdcd efef gg). I wrote a sequence of these; this one, about a trip that my wife and I took to Florida’s Crystal River, was probably the most successful.

“You’re the Bow and I’m the Strings”

This poem is somewhat patterned after the Billy Collins poem “Litany,” from his collection *Nine Horses*. I was drawn to the structure of his poem, so I subjected it to the N+7 treatment invented by the Oulipo writers (changing all the nouns to other nouns found give or take seven spots away in the dictionary). After some revision, the poem became less like “Litany” and more like itself, though there is still considerable resemblance between the two.

“Triskaidekaphobia”

The title means “fear of the number thirteen.” The first two stanzas derive from Robert Hendrickson’s *World Literary Anecdotes*. The use of thirteen lines, each containing thirteen syllables, and the placement of the poem on page thirteen, seemed to me to be a way to confront any triskaidekaphobia from which I, myself, may suffer.

“Famous Poet”

I wrote this after reading Matthea Harvey’s debut collection *Pity the Bathtub its Forced Embrace of the Human Form*,” in which she frequently employs the technique of making a word or phrase function as part of more than one sentence simultaneously.

“From the Journals of Travis Bickle”

Travis Bickle is the anti-hero of 1975 Best Picture nominee *Taxi Driver*, Martin Scorsese’s cinematic exploration of isolation and alienation. In the scene in which Bickle pulls a gun on his own reflection in the mirror, the most famous line is “Are you talking to *me*?” But for me, the more poignant line, the key to the whole movie, really, is the next line, “I’m the only one here.” The poem is in the form of a roundeau redouble, a francophone form. The lines in the first quatrain are repeated as the fourth lines of the next four quatrains, and the first half line is repeated as the last line in the poem. I thought the form provided a perfect way to emphasize the line “I’m the only one here.”

“Three After Simic”

In these poems, I took prose poems from Charles Simic’s Pulitzer-winning book *The World Doesn’t End* and “translated” them into verse. My model for this is William Shakespeare, whose plays were blank verse renditions of plots originally penned in prose. A “cephalophore,” according to a note in Erin Belieu’s collection *One Above and One Below*, is a martyr who carries his/her own head to the burial ground. The word literally means “head-carrier,” according to Belieu. “Cephalophore” is written in a modified version of the double viator, a form invented by Robin Skelton in which two refrain lines gradually switch locations within stanzas. Check out Skelton’s 2002 book *The Shapes of Our Singing*, a guide to verse forms from around the world. I also found the form for “Call Me Wispy” in Skelton’s book. It is written in tripadi stanzas, a Bengali form consisting of tercets following an aax bbx etc. rhyme scheme and containing eight, eight, and ten syllables in the respective lines of each tercet.

“My First Car”

On May 9, 1979, Kenneth Koch and Allen Ginsberg composed an entire book of poems called *Making it Up* (Catchword Papers) in front of an audience at The Poetry Project at Saint Marks Church. They improvised sestinas, ballads, haiku, blank verse, rhymed iambic pentameter couplets, and so on. One poet would say a line, and the other poet would riff off of it, saying another line in reply. In one of the poems, “A Lovely Warm Spring Evening with Rain, Sleet, and Hail,” every line contradicted something in the previous line. I wrote “My First Car” in warm homage to this collaboration between two

of my favorite poets.

“God in the Cheese”

I heard the Richard of Chichester anecdote from Dr. David Johnson, a medievalist.

“One Couplet at a Time”

This is one of my attempts at what the late Agha Shahid Ali referred to as “a real ghazal,” as opposed to the Americanized ghazal popularized by Jim Harrison and Adrienne Rich, which, in Ali’s opinion, took too many liberties with the Urdu/Persian form. Ali defines the form in great detail in Behn and Twichell’s *The Practice of Poetry*, Finch’s *An Exaltation of Forms*, and in the introduction to his own anthology *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*.

“Pantoum Sonnet”

This is another hybrid form, like the haiku sonnet. The quotes in stanza two come from the board game *Wise and Otherwise*.

“Massacres under the Triumvirate”

This is an ekphrastic poem based on a painting of the same name by Antoine Carom. I drafted it during my first and only visit to the Louvre in Paris.

“Gossiping about the Dead”

The epigraph comes from *Or Not to Be, a Collection of Suicide Notes*, compiled by Marc Etkind. I purposely misquote Allen Ginsberg, who is widely reported to have fingered the words “Fuck the Jew” in the dust on his dorm window at Columbia in an attempt to get the cleaning lady’s attention.

“After a Lesson on Conjunctions, My Students Give Me Apples. I’d Prefer Mangoes.”

Each stanza begins with one of the seven coordinating conjunctions, which many composition teachers and students memorize using the acronym, “Fanboys.”

“The Insomniac Dreams”

The “Midnight” section is a *terzanelle*, a form that combines elements of the *villanelle* and *terza rima*. The “Three a.m.” section is an *acrostic*; the initial letters of the words in this section spell out the title of the poem.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Tom C. Hunley is the husband of Ralaina Ruvalcaba and the father of Evan Joel Ruvalcaba Hunley. He has degrees from Highline Community College (AA), University of Washington (BA), Eastern Washington University (MFA), and, now, from Florida State University (Ph.D.), where he was the recipient of a 2002-2003 Kingsbury Fellowship. As of August 2003, he will be an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing – Poetry at Western Kentucky University. Before settling on a career in academia, Tom worked as a public relations writer, a sportswriter, a technical writer, a warehouseman, a Salvation Army bellringer, an enumerator for the U.S. Census Bureau, a typist, a data entry clerk, a file clerk, a fry cook, a cashier, a dishwasher, night manager of a convenience store, and a canopy construction worker. He is the editor/publisher of Steel Toe Books.