

**ASTIGMATISM:  
POEMS EXPLORING THE MISSHAPEN I**

A Thesis

by

ANNA HALL-ZIEGER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

August 2006

Major Subject: English

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Chuck Taylor
Committee Members,	Juan Alonzo
	Judith Hamera
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## ABSTRACT

Astigmatism: Poems Exploring the Misshapen I. (August 2006)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Chuck Taylor

This thesis is a book of poems, containing two major sections. The first part is a critical introduction to the creative writing; the second part consists of poetry that I have composed, revised, and revisited during the time I have spent working on my Masters degree. The poems comprise the larger section and is a cohesive collection bound by a progression of theme, style, and mode.

In the critical introduction, I discuss many influences on my poetry and I explore how my poetry adheres to various modes and styles as well as how it differs from them. While I remain drawn to the confessional style, my work does not adhere enough to the strictures of that mode, and I find it rather stifling. However, instead of attempting to redefine the confessional/postconfessional mode, or arguing for one specific critical perspective, I attempt to propose different guidelines for my poetry, which seems to fall into a yet unnamed category, that I call the *lyric memoir*. I hope to suggest a method of reading that considers the confessional poem as representative of neither a completely constructed persona, nor a strictly autobiographical retelling of the poet's life.

The second section of the thesis consists of thirty-seven poems. Although, I do not subdivide the poetry into labeled chapters, I have organized it so that the reader can

identify a movement or progression of theme. The early poems contain reflective pieces that most closely mirror the confessional and/or postconfessional modes, as I explore my psyche, my perceived reality, and my role in the world. The middle poems address relationships—both my relationships with others and how people interact. The later poetry reflects the world as a whole, although, as suggested by the title, all of the poems respond in some way to the title’s implication of analyzing identity and add to the cohesion of the collection as they represent a journey from the self outward.

for my mother,  
from the little girl that you love

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I would also like to thank my father, who has provided endless support throughout my education and has always encouraged me. Thanks as well to the rest of my loving family: Mom, Paul, Seitty, Julie, Brett, John Paul, and Renée.

Finally, a special thanks to my wonderful husband Chris and my friend Glenn: you both spent endless amounts of time reading my poetry and providing feedback, only for me to ask you to read it again. I could have never completed this thesis without you.

The image of Ouroboros, which appears on pages 46 and 50, is taken from the following website: <<http://www.dragon.org/chris/ouroboros.html>>.

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## INTRODUCTION

The only thing an artist can do is describe his own face.

You're doomed to being you . . .

Your handwriting. The way you walk. Which china pattern you choose.

It's all giving you away. Everything you do shows your hand.

Everything is a self-portrait.

Everything is a diary. (Palahniuk 132-33)

These words from Chuck Palahniuk's Diary suddenly, accidentally, provided the answer I had been seeking when I was writing the poetry for my thesis: What am I doing? I can pose the same question in grander fashion: What kind of poetry do I write? To what poetic mode do I adhere? Which writers, past and present, influence my work? Stop . . . What am I doing?

The identity of "poet" is inherently frightening to me. I always hesitate, when periodically asked what I *do*, to admit that I am a writer—although I always prefer "writer" to the response, "I am a poet." As an undergraduate, I wholeheartedly refused to major in creative writing. I felt constantly surrounded, especially when I lived in New York, by the masses of writers who wore black and whose souls "bled darkness." Even now, as I complete my first cohesive collection of poetry, I am petrified by the notion that poets must have broken psyches, yet, strangely, I seem to fall into the mode of

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This thesis follows the style and format of the MLA Handbook, sixth edition.

writing most often associated with a life of despair: the confessional.

The first poet who had a unique and profound effect on me was Sylvia Plath. Her verses moved me. I jotted down my anguish and, more frequently, my rage, and I took my first steps towards understanding how to perform “myself.” I was filled with enormous amounts of angst and emotional pain—for a time, I enjoyed sewing designs into my skin with a needle and brightly colored threads; however, I wrote horrible poetry. I found my psychological turmoil overwhelming. I understood the desire to rise out of the ash and to “eat men like air” (247). I circled in pencil the lines “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (245). I never erased the circle, but this passage, on a dog-eared page in the only book I have ever stolen from a library, has new meaning now. I use writing, not to communicate feelings of depression, but as a means of reinventing myself and reshaping my image of who I am.

In the process of reinventing, discovering, and asserting myself on/through the page, I inadvertently discovered a need to establish a new mode of poetry as well. While I remain drawn to the confessional style, and those poets have influenced me more than any others, my work does not adhere enough to the strictures of that mode, and I find it rather stifling. The primary reason I shy away from the label “confessional poet” stems from the overwhelming turmoil, present and/or expected, in these poets’ work. In his article “The Postconfessional Lyric,” Gregory Orr notes, “when we consider the childhoods and adult lives of the postconfessionals we see a *misery* and *unbalance* commensurate with that found among the confessionals, but somehow the postconfessionals were survivors who brought their survivors’ skills to bear on their

autobiographical material” (229, emphasis mine). However, transcendence or no, the confessionals and their descendents focus of the devastation, the trauma of life.

I do not, by any stretch of the imagination, want to suggest that I no longer discuss pain in my poems, or no longer explore the catastrophes that brought me where I am. But, while it may often appear, trauma does not drive my poetry; I am not compelled to write as a result of my “misery and unbalance.” Indeed, I am drawn to poets like Billy Collins and Gabriel Gudding primarily because, while their poetry includes the entire range of emotions, their writing is never overtaken by despair. Some critics in academia disparage these men for seeming lack of a message, lack of a political statement, lack of depth, and so on. I, on the other hand, find their poetry—and that of others who write similarly—fresh and exciting.

My favorite poem by Gudding, “The Lyric,” actually expresses my own disillusionment with confessional writing. Rather than moaning, “My supply / of tablets / has got to last for years and years. / I like them more than I like me,” Gudding, although sad and irritated, decides “all I could do / was bake my days of boo-hoo / into crusts of fuck it” (Sexton 165; Gudding 34). My elevation of hope over utter dejection is in fact, as Orr noted, what separates the original confessional poets from the postconfessional writers; nevertheless, I still cannot completely accept either label because of the never-ending debate that rages about whether or not to read confessional poetry as autobiographical.

Most modern critics argue against autobiographical readings, especially regarding Plath, the quintessential confessional poet because her work, in large part, so

closely reflects her life. Antony Easthope, for example, observes “a distinct separation between author and text” (223). At some length he discusses the problems of authorial intent and the gap between the writer and the words:

Reading a text in a context of interpretation a reader applies the various rules he or she knows for the language of that text—phonetic, syntactic, semantic—to produce a meaning from the “words” . . . Although it would not be possible to read a poem with a sense of its author’s intention, no intention can fill the writing so completely it must govern our reading of it; in a text ‘it is language which speaks, not the author’, and meaning will always spill beyond the text, beyond any known intention, beyond any context of interpretation. (223)

Easthope’s assertion, therefore, lies in his belief that, regardless of any personal or autobiographical inspiration for a poem, a reader must take the poem as it is, as it lies on the page, and not base his or her interpretation on facts about the writer’s life.

In contrast, Janet Badia, in “Viewing Poems as “Bloodstains”: Sylvia Plath’s Confessional Poetics and the Autobiographical Reader,” makes a case for autobiographical readings of confessional poems’ “hyper-personal subject matter” (180). She focus primarily on Plath, but advances her thesis to encompass the confessional mode as a whole, and she argues for such interpretations because she believes that, for instance, “Plath’s poetry operates as her autobiography and invites, even constructs, autobiographical reading practices” (181). Badia contests Judith Kroll, in her book Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, and similar critics. She claims that

denying autobiographical interpretations of Plath's work ignores the (perceived) reality upon which the poems were founded and to which the poems are inextricably linked: "In their insistence that Plath's poetry not be read as autobiography, Kroll and a host of critics . . . deny Plath's rights as a writer to make claims on and about her own experiences and memories and, just as important to my purpose here, her readers' rights to respond to these claims by reading her poetry as autobiography" (183).

I stand somewhere in the middle of this debate, not only as a critic, but also, and more importantly, as a writer, and I fear that labeling myself a confessional/postconfessional poet opens my writing to harsh analysis from both sides. Thus, I return to the initial quotation from Diary: "*Everything* is a self-portrait" (132, emphasis mine). I can thoroughly understand, and I agree with this statement. I am necessarily infused into everything I write, regardless of whether or not "I" ever appear in the poem. And this inescapable link between me and my writing stems not only from inevitability, but also from necessity. As Thoreau states in the opening of Walden, "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience" (11). In other words, "I" infiltrate all of my poetry because I know myself and I am all I know.

On the other hand, such assertions have the overwhelming potential to significantly limit readers' interpretations of poems. Artists may always reproduce/represent themselves, but they are not necessarily recording historical fact. Anne Sexton's "Imitations of Drowning," for example, can easily be read as a "confession," real, true to life: "This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying / went on and

on in water as white and clear / as the gin I drink each day at half-past five” (107-08). However, assuming that Sexton writes only about her life—her biography, the factual past—restricts other considerations and implicit readings. Sexton did experience much of her poetry, but she, too, struggled with being labeled “confessional.” After all, writing what you know does not necessarily include writing what you did.

As a result, I believe that, rather than attempting to redefine the confessional/postconfessional mode—the connotation is too far entrenched today—or arguing for one critical perspective or the other, I must attempt to set forth different potential guidelines for my poetry, which seems to fall into a yet unnamed category, that I will call the *lyric memoir* (in the literal sense, not a memoir in which the prose sounds poetic). I hope, through the creation of this term, to construct a method of reading that considers the confessional poem as representative of neither a completely constructed persona and experience, nor a strictly autobiographical retelling of the poet’s life. As the confessional mode—in the sense that I have thus far addressed it—falls largely out of favor with my contemporaries, and as the memoir becomes increasingly popular, such a combination both reflects and incorporates past and modern trends in creative writing.

Although traditionally considered two parts of the same genre—prose retellings of a person’s life—many critics have recently fought to detach autobiographies from memoirs. In her book *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*, Helen Buss delineates the important and inexorable differences between these two types of personal narrative. She explains of the memoir:

It is a form in which one cannot rely only on the facts of official history,  
yet it is a form in which one cannot dispense with historical narrative . . .

It is a form in which one cannot be entirely in control of self-construction,  
but must come to see that act of self-making as a process of *performing*  
the self. (xiv, emphasis hers)

Buss develops her characterization of the memoir further, but these points seem most relevant to the distinction between memoir and autobiography as well as to the categorization/classification of my own writing.

As an epigraph to her preface, Buss quotes Francis Russell Hart's pithy and profound definition of the genre—"Memoir: personal history; the personalizing of history; the historicizing of the personal" (xi). Hart perfectly captures why memoir should never be conflated with autobiography. The latter is simply not as personal, and is much more historical. The primary purpose of both biography and autobiography is to convey to readers the relevant facts of an individual's life. The personal—relationships, interactions, feelings, politics, selfhood, and so on—are relevant only in so far as they further the historical narrative. Memoir, on the other hand, focuses on the historical fact in order to better contemplate, analyze, discuss, and convey the personal.

So, like the memoirist, I take history and retell it—sometimes factually, sometimes not. The purpose of my poetry is not to provide reader with a Textbook of Anna, but to pull significant moments from my history, and the histories of those around me, and transform the moments into coherent thoughts and ideas about identity and life. For example, I met the boy in "With the Goat Horns" my last year of college through a

mutual friend. I wrote the poem only a year-and-a-half after the last time I saw him (at a drum circle, a protest, or something) and the poem contains only truth: I simply cannot remember his name. Really, he is a poem in and of himself; he performs the self on a new level. I embellish and add nothing, and I do not need to. Even in New York City, horns stick out. History, and a kid with goat horns, composed the poem; I just wrote it. In contrast, “Martin Birds” is a significant part of my past, but “I” never appear.

Much of the poem would offend a biographer, as I rearrange many facts of the story. I met the Martin-bird-house-man in my early teens when Paul, my step-father, took me along to buy these houses. The old man was thin, bony, not at all the way I like to picture him today. After ten years, I am surprised that I remember him at all, but Paul developed heart problems recently, and I felt the need to write. I remember very little: he sat on a rocking chair, wore overalls, and “should” have been dead years before. As a result, the poem is a retelling, not of the factual event, but of my memory, of the way the man’s story affects my life. I take so much liberty that the main character is a woman, and I portray her as, though I know nothing of the man’s actual character, kind and wise:

The old woman knows  
 She has seen the look  
 As many times as she  
 Has carved the small holes  
 In the birds’ homes

Thus, official history transforms into my history, the reliving of my past as it informs my consciousness, regardless of whether a man or a woman built the houses. After all, “the



remembrance or the searching again for the ‘lost times’ is never just an act of memory or research, but is inevitably a re-creation, something new” (Wilson 23).

With this sense of re-creation, not just of the memory, but of the self as well, I turn to Buss’s latter point regarding memoir as performance of the self. In “Performing Writing,” Della Pollock defines the performative on the page at great length, but provides a pithier explanation as well: the “distinction between constative and performative utterances [is] between words that report what other words and people do and words that *do* what other words report” (94-95, emphasis hers). Obviously, such a task is much easier said than done, but I begin to realize what I am *doing*. My poetry again corresponds with the memoir as I struggle to perform myself. Like with any performance, mishaps occur—sometimes the juggler on Central Park West drops a ball—but performing necessitates action, and action requires hard work.

On one hand, performative writing seems oxymoronic. Peggy Phelan comments this issue, stating, “Writing, an activity which relies on the reproduction of the Same (the three letters *cat* will repeatedly signify the four-legged furry animal with whiskers) for the production of meaning, can broach the frame of performance but cannot mimic an art that is nonreproductive” (149). In other words, a written language necessarily lacks some amount of performative power or capability because each letter, each word, must always represent the same concept. Nevertheless, Buss asserts, “the memoir writer ‘performs’ a self, one caught at a moment in time, a moment when the present self reflects—often through a scenic anecdote—upon some significant moment of the past self” (20). Thus, although the medium may not change, that the self remains in a

constant state of flux provides the permanent stage and nonreproductive nature of any literal performance.

Similarly, Elizabeth Wilson, in “Tell It Like It Is: Women and Confessional Writing” (she discusses prose works, earlier forms of the modern memoir, not confessional poetry), describes the autobiographical text—not, I must note, the autobiography—as “an account of struggle, a moral tale, the exemplary charting of a woman’s ‘born again’ process” (21). This rebirthing provides the opportunity for performance—rebirth followed by baptism, maturation, puberty, marriage, childbirth, death—all figurative, symbolic, yet pushed into reality by the retelling of the memory. Buss adds, “Contemporary women memoirists are performing their selves as they write their texts; their performances are speech acts in a way similar to (yet different from) Freud’s ‘talking cure’: a therapeutic process that reshapes the self through language” (21). Although Buss focuses on trauma much more than I prefer—she later mentions “the pain of recovering the past”—this concept of self-assertion through the written word brings the confessional poetic style in parallel with the memoir (22).

Not all of my poems perform. Indeed, some only report. However, the trend of performative poetry in this collection broadens the relationship between the continuum of confessional poetry that I write and the contemporary memoir. The performative can be found in the small and the large, the private and the worldly. I have organized the poems so that readers can identify a movement or progression through the body of work. The first section contains reflective poetry; in other words, this poetry most closely mirrors the traditional confessional/postconfessional mode, as I explore my psyche and

my personal role in the world. The collection of poetry will move slowly outward, away from the individualism of the confessional mode. Many poems address relationships—both my relationships, and how other people interact. Later poetry reflects the world as a whole, although all of the poems consider identity and how the individual interacts with the people, the society that surrounds him or her. Performative pieces appear throughout the collection—for example, “After a Bottle of Pinot Grigio” in the beginning, “Love Song” in the middle, and “The Taken-down Tent” at the end.

An additional feature these three poems have in common, like the majority of my writing, is the presence of “I”. Sometimes “I” am Anna; other times “I” am “the boy crying hotdog in the stands.” Of the first-person in memoirs, Buss notes:

Many contemporary women’s memoirs, on first reading, seem not to assert the traditional “I” of autobiography, the self that defines its maturation through a process of increasing separation and distinctiveness . . . Yet, in such texts, an “I” is at work through the writer’s emphasis on the specificity of the quotidian, reiterative, and ritualistic details of lived life. (63)

In autobiographies, the first-person pronoun always refers to the author. No reader or critic who analyzes the book uses the term “persona” in that genre. In contrast, the writer of the memoir does not seek the same sense of individualism, of separateness from society at large, and thereby decreases the specificity of “I”.

Correspondingly, critics developed the term “speaker” to refer to the appearance of an “I” in poetry. The term, however, produces as many negative as positive effects.

This often arbitrarily-established gulf between writer and speaker permits a poet to free him or herself from the tangled messes of intrigues about his or her personal life—for instance, the speculation regarding whether or not Shakespeare was bisexual.

Nevertheless, the proper role of the speaker presents difficulties when the poet does use his or her own life as a template. Janet Badia criticizes this approach to reading poetry, especially when taken to its extreme. She does not dismiss the notion of the speaker, but asserts that “the ‘I’ of the poem is no more or less constructed than the writing subject of any autobiographical text” (186). In other words, readers should approach the “I” with the same consideration that they should approach the writer’s past. Notably, it is out of these debates—the history of the poet, the identity of the speaker—that I determined the title for this collection, though it has personal significance as well.

Strangely, I write my best poems half asleep. I am a night person, full of energy from 6 o’clock to midnight, and I happily stay awake much later. However, I cannot write then. Ideas run marathons in my head—at least five or six of them—and I cannot focus. I will stare blankly at the computer till the whiteness of the unadulterated “New Document” makes me feel dirty. I write best at four in the morning. I crawl over my husband, Chris, and turn on the computer. I lean in. I am extremely nearsighted as a result of severe astigmatism—my eyes are so deformed they are shaped like rugby balls. I cannot see clearly more than three inches in front of my face. When I look at an eye chart, there is no Big E. There is no eye chart.

When I look at the computer in the middle of the night, in my dark bedroom, trying not to wake Chris, without my contacts in, I lose the eight different thoughts in

my head, and I am able to only consider one. In ten minutes I can't see anything, no matter how close I lean. The light in the darkness has the effect of a permanent camera flash. I just see spots. In this manner, I type and type. When I run out of words, I crawl back into bed. This time, I sleep soundly. When I wake up in the morning or afternoon, I read my work (wearing glasses or contact). The spelling is bad, capitalization wrong, punctuation non-existent, but the ideas are clear and focused. I glimpse my subconscious through my blind, misshapen eyes.

As you begin to read my lyric memoirs, I would like to add one additional thought. During the year I spent at the University of Houston, I attended a number of poetry and prose readings. Two of these stand out in my mind. One month, I heard Li Young Lee and a memoirist whose name I, sadly, cannot remember. Lee read, among other poems, his well known "Persimmons;" the memoirist read a story about an older woman who had a profound impact on her as she emerged into adulthood. At some point in both Q&A's, a person in the audience walked to the microphone and inquired, "Did that *really* happen?" Ethnic, gender, and genre differences between the writers evaporated, as I witnessed identical puzzled looks cross their faces. Each responded, somewhat in shock, by asserting that the "reality" of the poem/memoir was simply not the point. The pieces' significance derives solely from the impact of particular past events on the writer as well as on the reader. I hope my poetry can be approached in the same manner. Some of what I write is/was "real," but all is grounded in my reality, my own perception of "I".

**POETRY****Sugar and Spice**

Although in the end I choose to be a woman,

I believe my uterus helps,

and my breasts and hips don't hurt.

I'm quite convinced, however,

that I am mostly made of frogs

and puppy dog tails—

though not snails,

never snails.

My brother, who is eleven and

more frogs than tails,

but again never snails,

once spotted a slug—

large, black, yellow, slimy—

on the sidewalk.

I told him to get some salt from the kitchen.

He ran in,

ran back out.

Just as we were about to pour,

my husband yelled.

We stopped;

he berated.

Melting must be a horrible way to die.

Apparently, sugar, spice,

some snails,

and a penis make a man.

**After a Bottle of Pinot Grigio**

Ladybugs should always be ladys.

Puffy poodles should never be male.

The room grows increasingly warmer;

the cigarette smoke seems smoother as I inhale.

My toes grow cold, and I consider having a baby.

I file my fingernails, call my husband an ass,

    sit silently slurring still succumbing.

Eggplants should come with orange polka-dots;

the color blue should never be eaten.

Pink wine should be illegal

as should one-act plays

and goatees

and grocery stores

    that refuse to bag your gallon of milk.



**Chapel** Gray

Maybe black

Squares Sitting

On the bench

I don't know

What to think

Paralyzed

In the dark

Color fields

## **Bridges**

I.

As I climbed, the barbed wire called to my skin .

I tried to ignore the formidable red  
escaping from my insulted leg. I couldn't.

II.

I was sitting on the fence once, coping  
with the barbs in my backside, contemplating  
if this time I would jump down .

III.

Her hands reached out to climb,  
guitar slung over her shoulder, and the notes  
she sang, as her body trembled  
and writhed, haunt my ears every night.

IV.

My too effusive friend, in his trendy shoes,  
informs me that I have gone too far.  
I stare back, trying to silently express oblivion.

V.

He rambles, nonetheless, struggling  
to impress, and actually nears  
extinction, as my feminine soul turns.

VI.

I consider myself lucky that I am  
transient only by choice. The blood from the wire  
wounds feels caustic, causing me to shed  
the clinging barnacles of my old identity.

**My Life**

On this particular night, it occurs to me that, in and through my poetry, I converse not with Pope or Plath, Cummings or Coleridge, Brooks or Bradstreet, but—to my dismay—with Billy Joel. After all, I just want someone that I can talk to. In the middle of the night, I don't care what consequence it brings. Though I may be crazy, I yell at him, scream at him, and say, "Bill, I believe this is killing me." But, alas, I am only a woman.

*Lophocampa argentata*

(for my colleague who—momentarily forgetting to whom he was speaking—suggested  
that I write a poem about nature)

Crawling leisurely over the rolling hills,

I admire how heliotrope aroma accents

the luscious foliage.

Feeling the ground shift in the breeze,

I inhale, hold on, and smile as I sway back and forth.

My hair dances, tickling my back.

The wind dies; I continue on my journey.

As I reach the crest, crescendos of light rise

Between the purple and the green.

Lavender sunbeams frolic.

Suddenly the sky thunders, quakes shake the ground, deafening shrieks surround me.

I lose my balance and plummet down, down,

landing belly up on boulders and parched earth.

I glance skyward as an oblong mammoth

obliterates my world.

## **Tai Chi is Dumb**

I am quite convinced  
that I have no Chi (or Tai)

and am missing at least  
a few of my Chakras.

The Chakra I do have  
seems to be misplaced, as

I am absolutely sure  
my Third Eye is located

in my left atrium, which  
explains why I inevitably cry

during Alzheimer's commercials and  
on the second day of my period.

## **Tai Chi is Still Dumb**

I have discovered  
a second Chakra of mine.

Unfortunately, it will never  
align well with the first one

which is located under my ribcage  
on the slightly left side of my body.

This new one is—or has migrated—  
somewhere to the north of my

duodenum, and I commune  
with it continuously, which explains why

I will always be slightly chubby,  
and why I tend to like wine.

**Biology**

I did n't love you the first time I saw you.

I did n't love you the second or third times either, or even the fourth, when you took your shirt off "because you were hot" and I got to see your perfect body.

I did n't love you the first time you took me to dinner--you only did it because my husband was busy.

I did n't love you when you had to move out of your house and you came to live with us.

I did n't love you any of those nights we lay on the sheetless mattress on the floor, me in the middle, him on my right, you on my left, all of us trying to avoid the spot where the dog had peed.

I did n't love you the first time you kissed me. You asked me if he would mind; I asked you if it mattered. He was asleep and never knew. I knew, and I fell asleep in your arms that night, but I didn't love you.

I did n't love you the last time you kissed me. We were in my car and you were moving into a new apartment. You grabbed me, held me to you. It was the most passionate kiss I've ever had. I think you loved me.

I did n't love you that night you came over with some friend of yours to tell me you were moving away. I wanted you. I wanted you to ignore my husband sleeping in the bedroom, to ignore your friend sitting on the couch, and to spend the night making love to me on the kitchen floor. You just said good-night and left.

I did n't love you for the three months that followed. I didn't even talk to you.



I loved you when I was sitting in a chair, naked, reading my biology textbook for a test I had the next day. I looked up from the book, and I loved you. I knew I would never see you again, but I loved you anyway. I walked into the living room where my husband was reading the newspaper, and I told him I was leaving. He didn't get up. I put on underwear, jeans and a tee-shirt, and as I walked to the door, he asked why. I told him it was because I loved you. He frowned and said, "I know."

**My Child**

I find you suddenly,  
hiding behind my couch,  
crouched.

You leap at me,  
laugh,  
and sit back down.

I squat next to you;  
the seam of my jeans  
irritates my hips.

You glance at the ground,  
then at me, and timidly move  
a trembling finger toward me,  
poke my breast,  
and whisper,  
“I’ll be riight heeere.”

I lose my balance and fall  
on my tailbone.

You giggle,  
kiss my forehead,  
and scurry  
into the haven you have made  
out of an old tee-shirt,  
your pillow,  
a fuzzy quilt,  
and two kitchen chairs.

I scramble after you,  
lift the blanket away to uncover you.

I awake alone  
in an old house,  
in an old room,  
in a old bed that's too small  
for my grown-up body,  
surrounded by stuffed Pooh Bears  
and E.T. posters  
and quilts that never build  
living room tents.

**Wisdom**

*for my Seitty,*

*who will always know best*

I have learned that,  
when playing games,  
someone has to lose,  
why shouldn't it be me?

I now realize that,  
When drinking,  
I don't drink the cup.

I have learned that,  
in English,  
Seitty means  
grape leaves,  
baba ghanoush,  
big hair,  
endless love  
for all her grandchildren...  
especially for her first.

**Undone**

I know the even streets go east

but 86<sup>th</sup> is two-way and from there

I lose myself

stumbling and slipping

along the sleet-frozen sidewalk

every morning

I watch the weather

every morning

as I eat my shredded wheat

And they say

every morning

that warmth will arrive

but the margin of error always prevails

and they are wrong yet again

I struggle to pull on my thermal underwear,

pants, socks, boots, shirt, sweater,

coat, scarf, and gloves

I refuse to wear a hat



in this mass of  
edifice, alley, soot, sleet, and  
piss-smelling bums begging me for that quarter

I finally see a man in a wheelchair with  
veteran--god bless  
scrawled on his sign and  
drop  
it into his cup

He cusses at me for not giving more

Where the hell am I

Central Park South

I turn in circles but fortunately remember

that yesterday I learned

(when I got lost)

this is 59<sup>th</sup> Street

59<sup>th</sup> when I needed 68<sup>th</sup>

God only knows how I ended up

nine blocks south

yet inspired by Simon and Garfunkle

I greet the streetlight  
and trot back towards Lex

I cover the blocks with renewed energy  
and arrive at  
school in time for class

Collapsing into my seat  
I wonder what it will take for me  
to discover how I belong

I wonder when the jumbled mess  
will evolve  
into well-planned columns and rows

When the cold will not bite  
the foliage will not be missed  
paying \$7 for a drink at a run-down bar  
won't bother me

When will I not hear the sirens, the  
car horns, the  
constant buzzing  
from the millions of busy people  
always being busy



**Failure**

The little red hood

Pulled over

My eyes

As the she-wolf

Carried you

From my hearth

Now I am without a woodsman

**Iphigenia**

I have no story

I have no complex

I wandered lost

Into this world

I grasped the hand of my father

I found greed and rejection

I grasped the hand of my mother

I found betrayal and limitation

I fought for splendor and self

I received a sword through my soul

I am the misplaced daughter

I am the Furies

I cursed a man

I doomed a nation

To die a virgin

Is no great feat

**Anna**

The foundling,

Raised by fairies and fauns

And Aslan

The river

Painted fingernails

A married woman

Tears

a few freckles

Bad hair

T S

a l

l e

l n

d

e

r

Divinely fair

Powerful and entropy

Have overcome

Will overcome

Falls apart

Live by a pond

Reflection

Echoes

Excess      Excess

Eternity      Eternity

Emptiness      Emptiness

Ecstasy      Ecstasy

The withering flower

The dulled thorn

That has fallen to the ground

Always spring and summer

A little Prometheus

A lot Pandora

And everything Pandora shoved in her pockets

I am often Graceful

**Gas Chamber**

I will not board this train

I will not leave my children

with nothing

but milk and cookies

I will bite my own lip

and not die

I refuse to stick

my head in—

a casserole

a pie

**Love Song**

I live in my own world  
of constant exhaustion  
and wanting to squeeze you  
between my thighs

I watch the sun rise  
from the office  
window  
and witness the clouds

form shapes  
of your body

I walk long blocks  
and miles  
from there to here then home  
only to stand in the kitchen

cook dinner  
wash dishes

and finally collapse  
onto the couch to read  
I wait for you nightly  
to finish

whatever it is I can't do  
with you this time  
and my eyes glisten  
as you walk into the room  
to let me undress you  
caress your arms  
run my fingers over your chest  
I whisper  
there's no place like home  
as you glide into me  
clutching my shoulders  
kissing my forehead  
and eventually I fall  
asleep to the rhythm of your heart  
only to yell at you  
in the morning  
for forgetting  
to unpack your lunch-bag  
and for leaving  
toothpaste in the sink  
I make you clean  
I make your sandwich



then mine  
and pause from scrubbing  
cereal bowls to feel  
your tongue  
graze my neck  
and your eyelashes  
kiss my cheekbone  
the door slams behind you  
then me  
and I wonder  
as I walk to work  
if the sun will rise earlier  
once spring arrives

**witches**

i dream all night

about witches

in connecticut

and your hair

falling

over your

shoulders

hiding

your breasts

i cried

in the morning

woke up sobbing

that beauty is forever

unattainable

for me

but when the witches

fly

by

it all comes rushing

away and

the world's no good

you say

i laugh

wounded

by your childish blasphemy

i will always

forget you

every evening

until you return

to haunt me

once again

and were there witches

in connecticut

or have i

hallucinated

every moment we have spent

apart

did the words even belong

on that page

i have never remembered from

which poem

the spirits came  
as they danced  
in the colorless purple

the witches sleep but  
i want you awake  
to keep your eyes from fluttering

closed  
as you  
fall  
out of  
reality

would you come  
with me  
chase those women  
on our own  
broomsticks  
never look back  
discuss  
yourspiritmysoul

what it means

to not understand and

why i confuse

every aspect of you

with some unknown

portion of me

i am locked

outside in

i love the way you smell



a towel in the bathroom  
falls to the floor  
a four-year-old runny nose and  
four muddy spaniel paws  
flee from the filling bathtub  
she wipes her soapy hands  
on her khaki corduroys and  
runs  
through the bedroom  
in pursuit of the Lone Ranger and Silver

Lone Ranger giggles, points:  
“Bang!...Bang!...Bang! Bang! Bang!”  
while Silver chases his tail  
she sighs

grabs the boy in one arm  
the dog in the other and  
notices as she scrubs them that  
her left hand now has an even tan.

\*\*\*\*\*

My father never really left me,  
though I thought he did for a while.  
He never came back home;  
my mother cried,  
got remarried, and  
had another baby.  
I went looking for my father and  
spotted him hiding beside an antique icebox,  
while he was waiting for the milkman  
to deliver the glass gallon of milk  
(the ice man and the fish man had just left).  
He looked as though he had seen a ghost,  
  
which at first I thought was me,  
but realized that it was his mother

who died of a heart attack  
while they were picking daisies in a field—  
he was only four.

He got smaller when I first saw him,  
but, after the ghost left  
and the milkman came and went,  
he got bigger again.

I watched my father

grow, then go to college  
where he met and fell in love  
with my mother and married her  
and, after making me and my sister,  
left her, me—all of us—  
although I am sure that he would have come back  
if any of us had given him the choice.

My father died, rose, and then left  
for better people and places

and to return to his father who had  
emphysema, lung cancer, an oxygen tank,



still smoking four packs a day,  
resenting that his wife had died and  
left him with nine unruly children.  
My father, the youngest, left him then,  
and went searching for others,  
for his first girlfriend,  
for the dog that ran away the day his mother died,  
for the 1976 Chevy truck in a junkyard somewhere,  
for the purple balloon that flew away at his eighth birthday party,  
and for the lost daughter who had run away looking for her father.

\*\*\*\*\*

she stares down at her watery gin  
and grapefruit juice concoction  
she plays with the cherry stem and  
the bouncing floating ice cubes  
she sighs  
while he saunters back over to her  
“Wanna come to my place?”  
the Lone Ranger points his thumb

over his shoulder and looks toward the black street  
through the cigarette smoke  
stares  
at her tight skirt  
she wipes her teary eyes and thinks  
about her son sleeping with his puppy at home  
she knows what this man wants  
that it's not what she has to offer him so  
she moves alone across the floor  
leaving the soulless room



**For Christopher**

This is for you, dear,

Because I'm not eloquent,

But had to tell you.

## **The Search**

Moving softly through the noisy city,  
she creeps back and forth through the alleyways.

And it would, would it not, be a pity

if she realized the solemn sanctity.

As she wanders at meandering pace,  
moving softly through the noisy city,

moaning to her god her fractured frailty.

“Lost,” she cries. “He’s lost.” Tears dampen her face.

And it would, would it not, be a pity

if the rivers enhanced the clarity  
as they wash away the polluted haze.

Moving softly through the noisy city,

she knows she has lost the ability  
to rationalize why she’s in this place.

And it would, would it not, be a pity

If she found you by serendipity.

For you would force her to resume this chase:

Moving softly through the noisy city.

And it would, would it not, be a pity.

**Ending You**

But when you summon

Winter

Colors fade

Your long black curls

Bouncing

In the light

Reflecting off

The shimmering snow

Caressing your white cheeks

As I seek

To keep you

Pulling

Pulling

You back to

Spring

Where hurricane

Winds bellow and

Rivers rise anew

But your slender fingers

Slip

Through my dark hands

And you are gone

**My Mother-in-Law**

is forty-two years old,

is beautiful,

is mean,

is manipulative,

is a belly dancer,

is an extrovert,

makes me angry,

makes fun of my eyebrows,

makes fun of my weight,

makes no money,

makes us clean her house,

loves her sons,

loves herself,

loves manicures and pedicures,

loves to be the center of attention,

hates cheesecake,

hates New York,



hates religion,

fights with her second ex-husband,

fights for her independence,

will die waiting.

**For Lizzie**

How do I love thee,

Let me count the ways...How does

one count to zero?

**For Will**

Your love is like a  
summer's day...oh no, it's not:  
you're cold and frigid.

**The Shoes**

lime green

tennis shoes

ugly

very ugly

I would never picture them

on a boy named

Brandon

but he wears them

to class

and I imagine

calling him

Raoul

Matthias

Donovan

or perhaps

Gerard

nevertheless

they belong to

Brandon

and I wonder

if the navy blue laces  
that clash so badly  
with his faded-black socks  
are original  
or his addition  
Brandon  
complements his brown hair  
khaki shorts and  
plaid shirt  
maybe the shoes  
were a gift from  
his mother  
who must be named  
Calypso  
she would have called him  
Mikhail  
but surrendered  
to her husband  
Dave  
and dubbed him  
something practical  
however

I notice

Raoul

slip through when

Brandon

wears those

lime green shoes

**With the Goat Horns**

Went to college with a boy

Who had horns like a goat.

They were made of bone and

Had been surgically

Painfully

Grafted to his skull.

He says he underwent

The procedure

To set himself apart

From the rest of society.

He wanted to

Forge

An identity for himself,

Different for everyone else.

But while we clearly remember

Justin and Charlee and Leah—

He only survives

As the boy

With the goat horns.

## The Tour Guide

She held his hand running it over her body,  
showing him the intricacies, how they all  
belonged together, where the beautiful pieces originated,  
who created this magnificent work of art,  
and the admission price.



**Waiting**

She asked how long it would take

He said, "About three years"

So she left

Her heart broken and trampled

She asked how long it would take

He said "About three days"

So she left

Her car dented and mangled

She asked how long it would take

He said "About three hours"

So she left

Her hair all wet and tangled

She asked how long it would take

He said "About three minutes"

So she left

Her skirt unzipped and wrinkled

**Feminist**

I can wear the pants

As well as my husband—

Not surprisingly, considering

I own only two skirts

And neither are mini

I want to go shirtless

Just because men can

I want to keep my bras—

I'm not flat-chested

And my breasts are sore,

In desperate need of support,

The week before my period

I cook dinner

fold underwear

sweep floors

scrub toilets

Windex windows

I have a career

I want every woman who is a doormat

(and I have been a doormat)

To stand up and scream,

“Damn it, I don’t need a man.”

I want to need my man.

**Fat Cells****(an interruption**

(and no one laughs,  
although everyone thinks  
“sex cells”  
is punny and delightful

(except the difference  
is that no one likes  
chubby chicks,  
the latest epidemic

(a group of thin peers  
continues to be confused,  
a hung jury  
on who's to blame

(maybe fat is all genetic,  
a disorder, a disease;  
maybe all we need  
is pity and a weekly meeting

**Cul-de-sac**

Watch the children play

In the mowed and edged yards

They dodge the sprinklers

That flow uniformly over

The grass, the sidewalk

The grass, the sidewalk

The grass, the sidewalk

Mother, Father, Sister, Brother

Proper Grandmother and Grandfather

Come over for lunch and tea

They always go home again

By five o'clock sharp

Everyone sits down for dinner

On china and lace table cloths

The perfect family

Does proms and private schools

Does regular shopping and haircuts

Goes to the church on Sunday

To marry in the perfect woman

Accounting and bearing boys

Sitting on a rocking chair too

Watch the children play

In the mowed and edged yards

They dodge the sprinklers

**A Pair of Boots**, in brown and red, old blood and new blood, from years back: they say  
1887, the Industrial Revolution, but the walking began before.

Broad brush strokes march—left, right, left, right—deep into the night for days on end,  
toil, no sleep, and listen to the stomping with the one good ear.

Shoes like that still march, plod in the fields not far from home, worn by these feet that  
plow and pick corn, cotton, rice, maybe a dozen other things.

The feet have staggered up from the south—Mexico, Belize, Honduras, places across a  
grand river—to make some money, and they try. The feet try.

The heels wear off, the laces break, but onward the boots stomp, in hopes of sending bits  
and pieces of coin back to the feet's aging mother and little brother.

**Martin Birds**

The old woman sits

On the porch

In her rocking chair

Waiting

For customers to come

Buy her Martin bird

Houses that she builds by hand

And paints white with red roofs

She watches the people from the city

Rush in and

Rush out

Rushing to do their part

For nature

By installing a house on a pole

In their backyards

The old woman looks

At the people

And their children



As they rush to choose the best

Birdhouse for their lawn

Periodically

When the old woman bends

To load

A carefully selected house

Into a sedan trunk

Her loose shirt opens slightly

Revealing a long pale scar

The child always notices

And inquires why

The old woman laughs

As the mother scolds her child

And the father looks uncomfortable

She moves back toward her chair

Sits slowly

Rocks carefully

And explains

I had three heart attacks

All right in a row

The last was really bad

And the doctor told me

To take some pills

To take it easy

She pauses and nods

The man in a rush looks

Guilty for making her

Carry the house

But says nothing

So she continues

He gave me

Six months to live

Maybe a year

So I quit my job and began

Making Martin bird houses

I love watching people

I love watching birds

The family looks torn  
Between continuing to rush  
And wanting to know  
How she is doing  
How much longer she has

The old woman knows  
She has seen the look  
As many times as she  
Has carved the small holes  
In the birds' homes  
She smiles as she says

That was thirty-six years ago

**History**

Explore Colonize

War Wait More War Reconstruct

Wait Wash Rinse Repeat

**Man**

He slowly crawls out of bed  
Inching carefully over his wife.  
He leaves his briefs at the bottom of the stairs  
And wanders through the kitchen.  
Outside in the back yard,  
He begins to pinwheel, slowly, then faster,  
Spinning in pine trees and St. Augustine grass.  
He beats his chest and he howls,  
Calling for his elephant friend.  
He points his nose to the air,  
Scoffs at the peasants, and builds Versailles.  
He sits regally—an enlightened despot,  
Bringing Russia on par with Western Europe.  
He screams, “Off with her head,”  
While he births a new religion.  
He contemplates dying at the Alamo;  
He charges Breeds Hill—twice.  
He rejects the beat of the different drum,  
Dances to the winds of a strange piccolo,  
To the roars of a unique bassoon.

He jumps up and down transcendently,  
Yelling, "Few and mean as my gifts may be,  
I actually am."

He brushes off the mud and the leaves

And tiptoes back up the steps.

He leaves only his fallen underwear

To remind him that life should not be made

Of cubicles and stale croissants.

**The Taken-down Tent**

I am the fat lady, soft and round

I am a planet without a name

Come to me you tired ones

Circle me and feel redeemed

I loved you before you were born

I am the strongman

I am the passion you didn't want

All the glory you didn't see

I am a child

The child you used to be

I am the fire-eating sultan

My mother is the radiance of the universe

I am father of the light that shines within me

My warmth is my child

I am my own family

Yes, I am the fat lady

I am the strong man

I am the fire-eating sultan

I build a house over frozen meadows in November

To catch the sun before it slips beneath the world

Inside me

Painted people fly beneath

Painted skies, and

Painted elephants dance beneath

Coconut palm trees,

While waiting in the wings

Pink ladies in

Pink tutus fan their

Pink faces with

Lace pulled through fake diamond rings

I am the broncobuster

I am the acrobat on his hands

I am the boy crying hotdog in the stands

I am crying clowns, lion tamers

Kings shot from cannons

Nymphs on balls tossing flaming rings to the sky



## CONCLUSION

Poetry is more than simply the mechanisms by which it is created, more than just a lyric or verse, and much more than just another method of expression. Poetry provides the writer with an opportunity to convey his or her thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints in innovative and original ways. The mechanics should support the message and intent of the poem, not the other way around. Every device should support the poet's effort to capture one essential moment in a unique form of language.

I write by that guideline. The purpose of my endeavors is not to simply tell a story or relate any sequence of events. Rather I find a significant object, person, emotion, or point in time and describe and explain it in a way I believe to be completely unique. This explanation should then serve to allow the reader to view the subject as I do. From these poetics springs my belief that the contemporary confessional mode, free from the expectation of tortured psyches, can best be understood as lyric memoirs: personal retellings and performances of the self.

I believe that all poetry is personal. I do not mean that every poet ought to compose confessional or autobiographical pieces; however, I feel it is impossible to entirely separate the self from the art that the self produces. For this reason, I do not dupe myself into believing that I have ever removed all of myself from any poem I write. Since it cannot be done, I then search for the way to best put myself into the poem. Sometimes I write about my life and experiences. This confessional aspect serves both the purpose of memorializing moments I do not want to forget, and allowing others

a glimpse of my inner being. One of the most difficult tasks in the world is to truly understand another person, and poetic expression seems an ideal manner to share myself. Why poetry, then, and not some other art form? Simply, poetry conforms to my aesthetic tastes and comes forth from me more naturally than other forms of creative expression.

This almost innate love for poetry parallels the final reason I write. The English language is beautiful and amazing. I am constantly in awe of the power of words. Poetry is akin to solving a puzzle: all the pieces must fit in order to create a beautiful picture. However, herein lies a trap. In a puzzle, the picture is already set before anyone begins to put the pieces together. A poet must use form, diction, rhyme, meter, and all other devices in a way that will best express the intent of the poem. The picture should dictate the methodology, not vice versa.

I believe poetry is the most beautiful art form because it can encompass all others. With it, one can paint pictures, tell stories, compose lyrics, cry, scream, love, rage, and just be. No boundaries exist, and people who attempt to regulate the definition of the perfect poem only diminish poetic potential. Poetry also has infinite possibility because personal interpretations allow many individual readings, each of which derives something new and different from the same poem. Poetry exists anytime someone has an idea or emotion and, through creative and innovative use of language, composes lines to express the seemingly ineffable.

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