

SYLVAE PARVAE: POEMS

A Thesis

by

JEFFREY DAVID STUMPO

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

December 2004

Major Subject: English

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ABSTRACT

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The following is a collection of original poetry, supplemented by a critical introduction tracing biographical, literary, and theoretical influences. The critical introduction takes the form of a series of loosely connected notes. The poems are divided into two major sections.

I begin by discussing the difficulties involved in writing an overarching introduction to a collection which was never intended to be a cohesive whole, that is to say, a group of individual poems rather than a themed collection or sequence. I examine some of the influences on my work, including other poets and authors. These poets do not fall into strictly defined schools or chronological periods. Rather, I find that certain poets throughout history pay attention in greater or lesser detail to the spaces around words (potential meanings) and the system that is constructed in a given poem. I align myself, therefore, not with particular schools or eras, but with writing styles. I also discuss some of the theories that come into play in my work. Most often these resemble postmodernism, yet I tend to draw on metaphors from science or philosophy rather than literary theorists themselves, who are often needlessly obtuse. Lastly, I look at autobiographical influences that have shaped my writing. I complete my introduction with a detailed discussion of two poems and how these various elements are visible therein, and a few comments on the title of the thesis.

The first section of poetry is titled "Lyrics & Observations." As can be gleaned from this title, the poetry is primarily lyric, though alternating between formal and informal in structure. Additionally, most of the lyric poems I write tend to make observations on life, leaving any moral unspoken or open-ended. The second section of poetry, on the other hand, is titled "Narratives & Lessons" and tends towards poetry with an overt message.

These poems represent a selected output of the last year. Some of the poems may have begun their lives before I began my studies at Texas A&M University, but almost

all have been revised since that point, reflecting my continuing growth and change as a writer.

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My thanks to the following journals and/or anthologies in which some of these poems first appeared:

a common sense: "fishing trip," "Unknown Woman, Chicago, December, 1999;" *The Allegheny Review*: "Rosita;" *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*: "Julio 16 long," "Wearing History;" *Defining Moments*: "English 4, First Period;" *Exquisite Corpse*: "Dynamics of Claudia," "Goat," "Mike Topp and the Deaf Monk," "Meanings Behind my Words #1," "Somewhere in my Mind," "Standing Models, nude #5," "under cocktails;" *Karamu*: "Bacchae;" *Lilliput Review*: "At the Edge of the World;" *Luna Negra*: "On Frost;" *The Lyric*: "Telephone Poles;" *Mad Poets Review*: "Trinities;" *paper wasp*: "[bat flies];" *Poetic Voices*: "Dear Guy;" *Rhino*: "A certain beauty;" *Texas Poetry Journal*: "Soft Focus."

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INTRODUCTION: NOTES ON A DISORDERLY POETICS

Introduction

It is my belief that form is intrinsic to content in poetry, but that the poet should not be a slave to any particular school of thought or theory. This allows me a great deal of freedom when writing a poem, as I can apply a form when formality is appropriate, a postmodern approach if I feel it is more appropriate to the matter at hand, or some combination. It allows me to invent forms or bend them, creating new parallels and ironies.

However, it causes problems when the time comes to place all my work under one umbrella. If I highlight certain aspects of the poetry, other parts will be left out in the rain. There is a curious linearity to schools of writing, one which is not supposed to exist. In the sciences, once we have advanced past a certain stage, say believing in phlogiston, that age is over and done with. The new knowledge reigns supreme. We tell ourselves that this is not the case in poetry, as there are still neo-Romanticists and Modernists writing quite well and happily today, in the Age of Postmodernism. This only seems to apply to the broad categories, though, as a single poet who writes a particular kind of verse will forever be judged according to that verse. Poetry by a poet who wrote some postmodern verse will be expected to be postmodern, political poetry will cause all future poems to be looked at from a political angle, etc. I have conflicting desires for several schools of poetry—Modern and Postmodern, serious and satirical, political and pastoral. The result is the opposite of what judges look for in a first book of poetry, a disorderly set of poems, sometimes even in opposition to each other in terms of form or point of view.

This thesis follows the style and format of the *MLA Style Manual*.

My objective in this introduction is to overlay some principles onto an artificially joined collection. That is to say, I will discuss some of the reasons why I produce the poems I do, what some of the common elements are, and why they do or do not mesh into a cohesive whole.

Notes on Systems

System: a group, a collection of organs, a geological strata, a prevailing social order, a set of bodies moving about one another in space, the whole scheme of created things.

System is scientific, but system is also literary. System encompasses all and yet is nonexistent, false, as system is merely a system, a classifying and organizational method rather than a real physical thing. System is law, just as gravity is a law, yet is not really law, just a way of describing a phenomenon from a particular standpoint. Thus my words, which are not things, are also system. They are a useful system, a way of describing phenomena from a particular standpoint. The phenomenon at hand is my own poetry, and unfortunately, I must try to explain it through a system of prose. To do so, as many have tried to do, is sometimes enlightening, rarely entertaining, often tedious.

I find non-literary sources useful for literary theory, more useful than literary theory itself. Theorists have an interest in keeping literature out of the hands of the many, and even more of an interest in keeping theory difficult to understand. Certain scientists and classical philosophers, on the other hand, have an interest in making things easier to understand (e.g. the Theory of Everything, the Republic, etc). These scientists and philosophers often explain concepts through metaphor, much like poets, as opposed to literary theorists, who tend to explain concepts through mathematical compositions, much like we would expect of scientists. Despite this being prose and ostensibly theory-based, then, I will turn to some non-literary sources for my inspirations.

Notes on Non-literary Inspirations

Some useful items, presented unsystematically (one of many lies).

First of all, uncertainty. It can't be escaped in this day and age (it could never be escaped, but we like to think we have a better handle on it thanks to postmodernism etc). Uncertainty even pervades science. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: "The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa." I can know how fast an atom is going, but not where it is at that moment. Or the reverse. My intention obscures the periphery. Or, as popular culture has reformed the UP, I can't observe something without affecting it.

We poets have understood this for centuries. The forest for the trees. One is visible or the other (or perhaps a blurry not-quite-either). Moreover, we know that the manner in which the observation is communicated will affect future observations of it. All future observations will not only be in regards to the phenomenon observed, but in regards to the previous communication. All Western philosophy has been, to some degree or another, a dialogue with Plato (just by virtue of his being "first"). Any poem regarding Love cannot just deal with Love, but must take into account all previous declarations of and observations on Love. Or, as Borges noted, the exact same statement may change in meaning over time because it has acquired a history of its own (to quote the Koran in 680CE is not the same as to quote the Koran in 1680CE).

Going further, we recognize that every time an object is viewed (a poem is read), the viewer has changed and therefore the observation is different. We recognize (unlike the New Critics, who attempted to take poetry out of poetry in an attempt at scientific scholarship) that every element involved in the observation is part of a system, each element affecting each other element of the system. The viewer is part of this as well.

The philosopher Chaung Tzu wondered whether he was a man who once dreamed he was a butterfly, or if he was really a butterfly now dreaming he was a man. It's Carroll's Red King's dream. The Matrix. The User Illusion. It's the uncertainty as to whether or not we are real, are humans or butterflies or someone's undigested bit of beef, blot of mustard, crumb of cheese, or fragment of an underdone potato. We cannot step

outside human experience to objectively view it. The best we can do is step outside our personal experience and into someone else's. We can arrange the line of sight, funnel perceptions, but more on that later.

Why can't we do better? Because we are within our own skin, within the world, within the universe, within the system. As Gödel showed, we simply enter an ever-larger series of systems when trying to escape our present one. The question as poets is whether or not we want to overlap, combine, reduce, or enlarge these systems.

Our most basic and yet most complex system is language itself, an arbitrary order agreed upon such that we can communicate. Each poem or sequence of poems or book of poems, ideally, is a fathomable system. Form is intrinsic to the specific system. Words can change meanings and symbolisms. This is one of the powers of poetry, to construct a system which the reader can decipher, but which is not an instantly decipherable system. Borges again: it is a labyrinth built by humankind, to be deciphered by humankind.

Every high school chemistry textbook in the United States has a picture of an electron shell. But chemists can tell you that this is not a physical object, a touchable shell, but a representation of probability. This is the area in which an electron is most likely to be found. Similarly, words are not things, not the way a tree is. But as probabilities, they do have existence on their own. They represent the likelihood that a reader will think of the same or similar thing the writer thought of. I know as a poet that I cannot guarantee that my "tree" is the same as the reader's "tree," but I can increase the chances by using a specific version of a word, say, "elm" or "oak," or by constructing a tighter system around the word "tree" (three pointed leaves fell past Washington's face) (note also that this concept ties into the common advice given to writers- tighten up a section). I still recognize, however, that there is room for interpretation. This is what separates poetry from law—the use of the space around words, not the complete restriction of interpretation but the funneling of interpretation.

Notes on Poets A

There are particular poets throughout history who immediately spring to mind as cognizant of the spaces around words. Milton is high on the list as someone who even tried to use particular ways of spellings in order to direct interpretations of his words. As a translator, his attention to what can be lost is not surprising (loss is, after all, the omnipresent bane of the translator). There are those who pay close attention to spaces and those who don't. I tend to prefer those who do: Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Eliot, Dickinson, Baraka, Hume (Christine). I don't pay as close attention in my occasional poems as I should. This puts me closer to the company of those I don't care for as much: Whitman, Hoagland (Tony), many of the postmodern crowd, many of the poets being published in, say, *Poetry* for the last few years.

Then again, there's another division, another system: sound. When it comes to this, there's a shift in what I like, because I want a poem to sound good, to be pleasing to the mind's ear (as opposed to making a poem sound good out loud through reading style, another matter entirely). This comes from my experience with John Firefly, a homeless poet in Bloomington, IL, whose poetry was mediocre in terms of metaphor, but was musically rich. There are poems which are not intended to be musical, some of Cummings cubist work comes to mind, but of the ones which are meant to have rhythm, I would shift Milton to the "no" category (wonderful ideas, wonderful attention to language, but honestly not all that engaging on this level), and switch Whitman's luscious long lines and Hoagland's quick and direct approach to the "yes." The postmodernists might get split. Some of them are out there specifically paying attention to the sounds of words (Hume again), some end up sounding like a computer program randomly processing information (Cage). The poetry in *Poetry* is rarely interesting to that mind's ear.

Last, but certainly not least, is the emotional impact, taking the top of one's head off. Whitman's got it, Dickinson's got it, so do Dante and Milton and Shakespeare and Baraka. Hoagland sometimes has it, but he's often being too clever and self-referential.

Hume is generally for the intellect. The stuff in *Poetry* is boring as an ink drawing on a black wall. The postmodernists usually eschew emotional impact.

So who can I hold up as fulfilling all the categories? The top influences?

Notes on Poets B

My work draws most from and is closest to those who walk the line between modernism and postmodernism—Anne Carson, John O’Leary, etc—who understand and utilize the intellectual truth of decentering, defamiliarizing, deconstructing, but also recognize the intellectual need for a system which can be understood by the reader (as opposed to the full-out postmodernists who try to abandon system entirely) and also understand the emotional need of most readers to connect in some way with the system, that is, the words.

Additionally, these poets use the sequence as I envision it ideally: a series of lyrics/snapshots/broken forms which interact in both linear and nonlinear fashions, incorporate outside systems (allusions) and reinvent them, and produce a narrative of sorts without writing a narrative in the traditional vein of Dante or Milton or Spenser. To write a poem which stands on its own yet reinforces the whole is the poet’s most difficult yet most rewarding task (something I think Pound tried to do but didn’t, instead producing a whole which lacked intelligible parts—reading the Cantos is somewhat like standing too close to a pointillist painting). In political terms, this poem does not lean too closely to either communism/fascism or to anarchy. In scientific terms, we would say that reading Carson or O’Leary is like looking at a fractal, seeing common elements woven throughout individual poems and the collection as a whole. We do not always see connections between poems X and Y, but we can step back and see that yes, each has something in common with Q, and a similar pattern is set in A, B, and N.

The two sections which make up this thesis, however, were written without any particular progression in mind. They are, to bastardize the term, occasional poems, poems written occasionally. On one hand, I would therefore consider them inferior to a planned sequence, which is written to create specific effects, work within and without

particular systems, and funnel certain interpretations. On the other hand, this occasionality allows me to restructure the poems in various ways, creating, like Whitman, different systems through different arrangements. The connections which then emerge will be somewhat organic, unintended, unplanned regardless of my original intentions. Finding common threads within them, and analyzing the way in which I now consciously arrange them, provides an opportunity for self-analysis from a psychological perspective. That is to say, what themes do I come back to when I'm not actively trying to weave a leitmotif? What forms do I use? What subjects, voices, etc? And why?

Notes on Autobiographical Inspirations

Exhibit A: In grade school, I was the odd kid out. Picked on, beat up, and generally not happy. Not quite suicidal, but the first time I went to bed hoping I wouldn't wake up was in fourth grade. There's a lot of story and psychobabble that can start at this point, but the issue at hand is themes. Between fifth and sixth grades, I called up a kid named Mike Sammit. We'd been friends in kindergarten, and he was now quarterback at football during recess. That meant he was the coolest of the cool kids, and we hadn't talked for years. He started teaching me how to not make a fool of myself, and I apparently taught him something about the outside being all right. As we got older and became better friends, he increasingly turned to the outside—grunge music, purple hair, and existentialism—and I acted less weird in public. I never became one of the cool people, but I was very much aware that Mike and I had traded a few rungs on the social ladder. From seventh grade on, this idea of trading places, of occupying someone else's shoes, became near and dear to me, for reasons of personal survival and for feeling a little guilty. Mike took the change so seriously that he intentionally failed drivers' education so that he wouldn't be able to get a car, then a job, then become part of the System. As I came to realize, he had simply entered another system. Thus began my interest in exchange and system.

Exhibit B: I made an informal pact with the Devil in fifth grade. Realizing that all the advice my parents had given me—ignore them and they'll go away, talk your way

through problems—didn't stop wedgies or being hit every morning or people stealing things from me in class, I put all my effort into becoming physically stronger and emotionally harder. For over a year, which is a significant portion of your life at this age, I gave myself over to hate. If I got strong enough, I told myself, I could punish those who had hurt me. I spent a lot of time trying to decide if I had it in me to kill someone. The answer isn't so important as the fact that neither the guilt nor the hate lasted, but I had reinforced my internal storytelling ability, viewing things from every point of view (including the least desirable ones), and the fact that I had sacrificed a previous emotional and intellectual state.

Not letting on to my inner turmoil and desires caused me to produce a façade. When that desire for vengeance finally subsided, sometime in 8th grade I think, I was left feeling as though I was nothing but the mask. When one idea dominates your life for so long, it becomes more than just habit, it becomes you. Dropping that idea creates an interesting void. Additionally, while I was by no means a genius, I was good at all school subjects. I was one of the stronger kids in the neighborhood, with a chance at excelling at sports if I so desired. The combination of these facts meant that I was very aware of choice. What path I would take—intellectual or physical, mathematics or language, kind or cruel—was very much my own decision. Moreover, it wouldn't necessarily reflect a “logical” progression from my younger years. I could no longer remember what the “real” me was like. I believed that my personality could be built and rebuilt from the ground up.

I chose not to recreate myself. But I did experiment in various ways with trying on other personalities through the medium of school plays, role-playing games, and writing. All appealed and still appeal to the surface-jumper in me. I choose not to specialize in one thing or another, not a particular poetic form (though I do love the sequence), not a particular art for that matter (I dabble in photography and have produced some impressive photos), not a particular subject matter (my interests range from chaos theory to gladiatorial combat to small mammals). Every once in a while I wonder if this refusal to specialize is a problem in and of itself. For example, I was an

excellent soccer referee in late high school and early college. Had I concentrated more on that and less on actual college studies, I could conceivably be refereeing international matches by this point in my life. However, this highlights another aspect of what I do. I write chancy material, I open doors for others to act out dreams, but I generally follow the safer path.

A final anecdote: in one bathroom at my parents' house, the vanity mirrors opened. If you arranged them correctly, they would form a triangle with the mirrors facing inward. Peering through a small opening, I got my first glimpse of infinity, an endless symmetrical Alhambra of mirrors. And if I opened the gap just right, there would be an eye reflected throughout the whole as well. Since then, I have loved the infinite in all its forms: abstract concept, fractal geometry, palindromes, Escher engravings (which are a sort of palindrome), facing mirrors. The mirrors, combined with a reproduction of an Escher engraving in our hallway (across from the bathroom), also instilled in me a love for patterns: the way faces repeat in a crowd, the ramping up from atoms to solar systems to galaxies, chemical readouts, EKGs. Perhaps it is on some fractal level that my mind operates. I know that it doesn't work the same as, say, my wife's, whose logical progression is A to B to C. I can sometimes think that way, but it is more likely for my logical progression to proceed from A to B to solar system to baseball. The best I can explain that is by saying that bees fly around flowers in a manner much like planets rotate in the solar system and that planets are round like a baseball (at least more like baseballs than soccer balls or volleyballs, unless of course you're looking at a gas giant which appears more like a colored volleyball). It sometimes comes out much like Wonderland logic, but I'm sure that there is a logic to it.

This is one of the reasons why I seem to have trouble explaining my poetic inspirations sometimes. This seems to be one of the reasons why many poets can't/won't explain the same. In a general sense, I can say yes, I get inside the head of person X or am interested in the history of Y, which is similar to the history of Z, therefore I wrote a poem about it. Specific inspirations for poems, though, often come in a flash, and the connections are not necessarily out of the ordinary for me. For example, a short poem of

mine called “Telephone Poles” views them as if they were crucifixes. I’m sure that the thought has occurred to countless people before, but it was nothing that I read or heard or saw on TV. I was just driving by telephone poles on the highway and saw bodies on them. Incidentally, the huge hourglass shaped supports for power lines simultaneously struck me as samurai treading across the Midwest, but I haven’t been able to work that into a poem yet (actually, I did, but the samurai became Nazca lines drawn across a nonexistent neighbor’s arm with a razorblade...even I can’t tell you how that happened exactly).

Obviously this isn’t being very helpful, aside from making one of those connections to the daemon or muse or Inspiration or whatever intangible source poets have claimed since the beginning of poeiness. Maybe I can bring this back to Pound, who intended to be able to represent the entire Cantos with a single ideogram. Anything and everything can be represented with a single character if we so choose, as it’s all symbolic. Even confusion and disorder, if represented by a word, like disorder, take on order. What patterns am I creating, do I want to create, by laying out my confusions and conflicts in this manner? Emphasizing the patternmaking itself is a way of making sense.

Notes on Patternmaking

Chaos theorists and experimenters have found that in all order there is the potential for chaos, and in all chaos there is some remnant of order. Used as a metaphor, it is an intriguing parallel to poetry. Poetry is nonlinear. It funnels interpretation and uses the space around words. I have no real control over the connections which will be made, but I can say that certain locks will click into place (both for the reader reading a poem and for images coming together in my own mind). A and B will align, and after roughing through them a few times, I will have part of a poem.

Wait, how does drafting and rewriting play a part of this spontaneous order from chaos? My mind may make connections on its own, order so to speak, but I never claimed that these would necessarily be easy to comprehend. As concepts, phrases, images, are presented together in my head, it is my duty as a poet to understand why the

two come together at all. What makes this particular metaphor work? Where does this funnel lead? This is what I determine when I put pen to paper.

Chaos is useful in other ways. From simplicity arises complexity, and from complexity arises simplicity. One of the poet's jobs is to take the everyday and make it magical. A grain of sand, a bird, a telephone call, trees. It is our job to see the spirals connecting these objects and events to other objects and events, to emotions, to fumes of mind. We overlay a set of experiences and ideas on another set and create something more complex than the sum of the two. The interaction itself becomes part of the system, of the complexity. The space between ideas, the space between words. Look at haiku, sparse, only a few characters long, with little in the way of formal constraints. Without all these elements just mentioned, they would not have the impact they do.

But if simple systems can create complex results, complex systems can also produce simple results. A poem may build line after line with specific images and meter in order to create a particular emotional effect in the reader. Think of freestyle rap (not all that different from the practice of wandering Irish bards who would challenge each other to lyrical duels), which might be disparaged by some, but the best of which utilizes complicated rhyme schemes, a forceful meter, and particular linguistic devices to address a particular audience. And yet the purpose of many raps is simply to express anger.

Notes on Interaction

This is one reason it is so difficult to describe a poem. It is not just the poem, as I stated early, but the interaction between the poem and the reader, the poem and its original context, the poem and its changing context, the reader and all the previous elements. Reading a poem for class can affect the reading simply through the state of mind invoked by doing something for a grade, and I have yet to see a good way of grading interaction with a poem. Comprehension of various levels, yes. But interacting?

I have a problem with poems that don't want to interact. Poems that tell the reader, here is what I have, I stand on my own without you. These are often amateur

poems, written by students and beginners, but they often include examples from postmodernists or avant-garde writers simply trying to make a philosophical or theoretical point.

I return to Carson and O’Leary, who make the postmodern point, but don’t deny the reader context, emotion, sound, etc. This, in my mind, is a far more effective means of conveying theory.

I want to write poems that interact. There are a few levels to that statement. There’s making an actual difference in someone’s life, and there’s making a difference in the poetry community at large. The poems here are ones which might stick in someone’s head, but they’re not complete. That is to say, regardless of how good or bad any of these are, they’re starters, rough drafts, steps on the way to something bigger. I have nothing against small poems or individual poems, but I’m still striving for that sequence, that connected set of poems that can simultaneously make critics say yes, this is good, and the average reader say, wow, I wish I’d said that. I’m still trying to write something that can be consumed in one reading but continues to be digested long after.

Notes on “Alley”

Alley is a short sequence of poems, structurally similar, painting a series of snapshots which produce a larger picture of a city and/or the state of mind of the narrator. I used terse language throughout the poems, attempting to build each line as a whispered, perhaps even furtive comment. My intent was to create a sound to the poem which revealed insecurity on the part of the narrator, not insecurity in what was being said, but in who might hear. Thus the relatively simple language, easy to follow sentences, such that the poem puts an arm around the reader and turns away from the cameras.

The initial poem sets the stage for these feelings, with the narrator being watched by a black cat. The cat’s eyes are like lazy planets, godlike in both power and lack of need to express such power. I emphasize first the aspects of the cat which collect information: the ears, the eyes, the window through which it observes. The second half (for each of these poems has a break in the middle, dividing concepts, much like haiku)

makes the narrator and reader aware of the restrained power of the cat, its association with claws, thorns, barbarians.

The sounds of this poem are, by and large, soft. There is a preponderance of sibilants, s's and l's. Even most of the hard t's are softened by association with a "th" nearby.

The second poem opens with a thought that could be a continuation of the previous poem: "For a moment / I am afraid." However, the second stanza brings the realization that this thought is separate, referring to children kicking a ball in the street. Though the fear may have subsided, the surrealism of the piece as a whole increases as the narrator realizes that the shop windows he feared would be broken by the children have been replaced by "boards or shadows or maybe / were never there / at all." I intentionally used an ambiguous pronoun to refer to the boards which might also refer to the children. Logically, this does not make sense, but I felt that it would leave the reader uncomfortable.

There is a danger in playing this type of game. Rather than creating an unsettled feeling, it might simply make the poem unmanageable or gimmicky. I decided to take the gamble, however, as the concrete nature of most of the imagery allows the reader to correctly identify the object of the description, while still causing the scene to twist somewhat. What is most important is the connection to vision, to illusion. In the sequence as a whole, there is great importance placed on observation and how observation cannot be trusted. This is the first time that such a problem is presented directly to the reader from the poem itself.

The third poem reveals that time has not necessarily been running linearly throughout the sequence. The old woman also balances the children present in the second poem. Furthermore, she continues the illusion leitmotif by selling the narrator a "gold crucifix" which turns out to be fake. I have considered making this the last poem in the sequence, as the final lines "leading back / into darkness" exemplify how the narrator cannot seem to escape the alley. The shining trail leading back to it recalls

Hansel and Gretel, perhaps, with a trail leading not back to home, but towards the old woman, the witch.

The fourth poem shows the narrator finally grasping the nature of the alley, merging with its illusions, and this is why I chose to put it last. The third illusion, Lenin's infamous photo doctoring (performed by Stalin), is being discussed by a middle-aged couple, the third age group (children, adults, old woman). The narrator offers to become part of the cycle, writing the couple into history through fiction. However, the narrator is aware, and makes the couple aware, that there is no real benefit to such lies. It is evident, however, by the very fact that the couple appears in this poem, that they agree to be written into fiction. Moreover, I can say as the real author that this couple never existed, that I never walked in this alley, and that one of the ultimate ironies is that nothing good will ever come of this poem. Yet there are those who have read it and are convinced that it is autobiographical somehow. Perhaps the illusions do reach beyond the poem.

A last comment on form: this is one of my more formal pieces. Yet as you can notice, I tend not to work in standard forms like sonnet or ghazal. I found a form which worked for the first poem, building each line, and separating stanzas by the effects they create, and breaking it into halves. I then constructed each of the following poems according to the same rules. The symmetry helps to create the interchangeability, the absence of chronology, and some of the surreal feeling (as the poem appears to be formal in design, but not according to a known form).

Notes on "Deep water: subconscious of a river"

This poem actually began as an exercise in ekphrasis, from a painting by a student at Illinois Wesleyan University. The painting was of corn stalks, but I reworked the imagery over close to a hundred drafts (literally) and over the course of time it metamorphosed into cotton. Again, there is form to this poem, but a completely different type of form. It works as a building up of images, a layering that is almost but not quite

repetition, much like a river. In chaos, there are patches of order, just as there are in this poem.

A fractal works in patterns of degree, rather than patterns like ABABAB. Similarly, I took a river, which chaos theorists would study, and applied patterns of degree, working from the psychoanalytically “shallow” yet archetypically “deep” level of colors and basic sounds “whistling // red // black” to the psychoanalytically deep and archetypically shallow descriptions in the last stanza. The images of the first stanza are repeated throughout the second and third, but often in variations, either more specific, allusive, or similar (eg- black reappears as shadows and seeds, whistling reappears as old Spirituals, red is used to recall the Exodus).

Again, short lines are used to affect the way that sound is transmitted. I use short bursts of words appropriate to the image they describe and break lines in odd places in order to achieve certain aural effects. For example, “the river rumbles” is alliterative in a way that recalls the rumbling of a river, its deep rhythmic flow. “By hands black / as the riverbed” is somewhat wet-sounding (hands black particularly).

Like “Alley,” “Deep water: subconscious of a river” plays to several levels of criticism, particularly psychoanalytical and historical. They both “get in the heads” of characters from archetypal (old woman, slaves) and more believable (narrator in “Alley”) perspectives. They move in patterns, some easily visible, some working behind the scenes.

Notes on the Title

Silvae, meaning “trees” or “woods.” Also the title of various collections of poetry over the centuries, beginning with Publius Papinius Statius in the first century CE. Occasional verse (verse written for a particular occasion) hence this work’s pun on verse written occasionally, divided into sections, mixture (hence use of word “trees” for title) of flattery towards the Emperor and nobility, portraits, lamentation and consolations, etc. Also name of a collection by Dryden (who spelled it Sylvae). Miscellaneous original

poems along with translations from Latin. *Silvae* is also translated as “matter” or “raw material.”

Parvae, meaning “small.” Meant to imply that the verse will not compare to those masters who have already written *silvae*, also ironically addresses Statius’s propensity to brownnose, which I do not plan on doing. Put together, *Sylvae parvae* resembles scientific classification, a new species of an existing genus (same root as genre). “Small matters” or, perhaps another way, small raw materials (complexity out of simplicity). A system has begun to take form.

LYRICS & OBSERVATIONS

Somewhere in my mind

Somewhere in my mind a child is playing chess against the world. Somewhere in my mind I am down on one knee. Somewhere in my mind God is asexual. Somewhere in my mind I'm drowning my sorrows in a tall blonde. Somewhere in my mind I'm on both of them. Somewhere in my mind she says yes. Somewhere in my mind Mozart and Count Basie are grafted together by a techno beat. Somewhere in my mind a whip falls across my back. Somewhere in my mind a scorpion is trying to catch a bee. Somewhere in my mind Alaskan malamutes, California redwoods, and Persian kittens are the key to happiness. Somewhere in my mind it stings. Somewhere in my mind the rook just moved diagonally. Somewhere in my mind Jesus, Buddha, and Lan Cai-he are triple-teaming the American dream. Somewhere in my mind the king is fleeing. Somewhere in my mind it fights back.

Goat

I am the Goat
shuffling off
this 2-dimensional
worldview
Mountains ache
for me
dancing
amidst the peaks
to the rhythm of avalanches
bleating my off key
accompaniment
for winds
though knifeblade
valleys
I am trip-traipsing
across
the bridge
with Thor
swimming
through the ruins
of mighty Asgard

The Other White Meat

For some people
Polish is
the Other White Meat,
the solar-powered-flashlight ethnicity,
undefined features—
no red hair, squint eyes,
or separating skin color,
not even worth
a lynching
or a star.

Then there are those
for whom Polish is holding out
against Hitler *and* Stalin,
the discovery of planets,
tilling Midwest fields,
folk tales, polka,
Solidarity, rave.

But here's my Polish,
no lies, no myths:
it's butter on rye bread
while watching the Cubs game,
it's the Saturday morning
in Wisconsin
when six of us picked
78 pounds of blueberries

in only two hours,
it's Nana telling us
that what she just called Papa
means "silly goose,"
knowing full well
it isn't that easy
to trick a Polack.

The geometric prayer of monks and prisoners

Let l = the length of my cell.

Let w = the width, and

Let the area of my cell be less
 than that covered by my mind,
 which can fill volumes.

Let the last second of daylight
 extend into centuries.

Let all my wrongs be forgiven
 with a single act of penance.

Let the walls become paper.

Let the bars become ellipses.

Let inside and outside lose
 their relationship, and

Let it be revealed that
 You and I are not so different,
 that everything depends
 on the point of reference.

Soft Focus

Yes, this is the pair. These glasses have grown ornery,
the screws unscrewing themselves from the hinges,
lenses popping out to scuttle across the kitchen tile,
revenge, I think, for being retired,
relegated to yardwork and woodcutting,
unused, useless any longer for reading or even TV.

But still, this is the pair for when I want to see
the garden as Monet would have painted it,
the streetlamps turned will-o-wisp,
my wife in the photographs I never could take.

Here we are, imperfect, the intersection of scratches,
two old codgers throwing everything at each other,
more than a little blind, but throwing all the same.

decrescendo

My words are fragile and kept
in what used to be my wife's
jewelry box in what used to be
our bedroom. Sometimes
when a friend visits, memories
cling to the words as I grab
a handful, dropping in the hall
like pearls on that Sunday
morning, rolling to hidden places
in what used to be our home.

days of tag

in days of tag
and hide & seek
we were baptized
with Kool-aid and sprinklers
every day was sunny
and nights were for fireflies
when we caught the
little lights but
were always it

On Frost

I'd like to find
an old box
full of Frost's
bad poetry,

not to reveal
his failures,
but for the
reassurance

that even gods
need practice.

Meanings behind my words

When I say,
“You, my dear sir,
are a true gentleman.”

I mean that by way of
congratulations,
assertion,
accusation,
and consolation.

When I say
“You, my dear,
are a true lady.”

I mean that by way of
congratulations,
assertion,
accusation,
and consummation.

High School Sestina

“Nerd, geek, dweeb, dork, bimbo, and scumbag undoubtedly owe their popularity to some merit that is recognized by a sure instinct among the people.” From *A History of the English Language*, 5th ed.

At least there is potential in the nerd,
 A practical iteration of the geek,
 Not so dribbling as the dweeb,
 Indubitably more intelligent than the dork,
 Though he’ll never get laid, even by the bimbo,
 Plotting in notebook after notebook against the scumbags.

Nobody wants to go near the scumbag,
 Opposite in cleanliness from the nerd,
 Picturing every woman as a possible bimbo,
 Who wedgies the geek,
 Thumps the dork,
 And shakes lunch money from the little dweeb.

Pity the skittish dweeb,
 Hiding from the scumbag,
 Too small to be noticed by the dork,
 Too stupid for the nerd,
 Too normal for the geek,
 Pissing his pants at a word from the bimbo.

Power and powerlessness unite in the bimbo,
 With a shake and a shiver she drops the dweeb,
 She fills the monitor of the geek,

Fills the eyes of the scumbag,
But hasn't a teaspoon of brains compared to the nerd,
Knowing a man's heart only through his dork.

There's no subtlety to a dork,
He grins at the bimbo,
Grins at the nerd,
Grins at the dweeb,
Grins at the scumbag,
Grins at the geek.

In a world of fantasy lives the geek,
Where the knights are all dorks
Who fight against the orcish scumbags,
And the laser-toting wenches are bimbos,
And every episode of *x* features dweebs.
(But all these dreams are still written by nerds.)

Written with Light

The natives had it
backwards.

 The camera
doesn't steal their souls.

The photographer is the one
who forces

 his essence
through mirror, lens, and filter

until the light beats it back
onto a thin

 strip of film.

Spoken Through

It is only through translation
 That we know the masters.
 Even God had to speak
 Through prophets.
 Perhaps
 Cassandra's warnings were lost

Not for curse, but for ignorance. Loss
 Is a natural product of translation—
 An open parenthesis, a doubt—perhaps
 There is something the translator could not master?
 Even a prophet
 Should know it is not always wise to speak.

Q: What is it to speak?

A: To map what is known when one is lost.

Q: What is a prophet?

A: One who draws a map (again, a translation)

Of the unknown, the unmastered,

And says, "Perhaps

You will not follow this, perhaps
 You will not even listen to me speak,
 But there is a higher Master
 Upon whom nothing is lost,
 Who needs no translation
 To know your hearts." A prophet

Cannot abide another prophet.

Two things propose questions: Perhaps

One has mistranslated?

Or just loves to hear himself speak?

Which one is primary, and which is a gloss?

Which the student and which the master?

Prophets cannot tolerate an earthly master.

Prophets

Wish us to think nothing is lost

Between the unknown and themselves. But perhaps,

We think, they cannot speak

Except in translation.

They profess to serve masters, perhaps

Prophets do, but until we know for whom they speak,

We'll always wonder if something is lost in the translation.

Deep water: subconscious of a river

Hypnotist: Tell us about your earliest memories.

Mississippi

whistling

red

black

H: Imagine a camera panning such that you can watch yourself. What do you see?

hands black

as clouds

wait

to be picked

the river

whistles

the river

rumbles

sunlight crosses

criss-crosses

itself across
wooden planks

shadows stretch black
as sad hands
hanging

H: You're holding back. Go deeper.

doves
light
on cotton plants
wings
hung out to dry

balls of sunlight await
eclipse
await brittle black
hands
parting
sorting
washing
out black spots
out damned
spots

the river whistles

bodies sway

in the breeze

doves stretch wings

like clouds over

red earth drinking

red seas fed by

red rivers

whistling Swing

Low Sweet Chariot

whistling Wade

in the Water

Moses cries

let my people go

the river rumbles

bodies gathering

cotton slowly gather

strength

strength

stretches wings

clouds wait

to be picked

by hands black

as the riverbed

hands

black as

a seed

Telephone Poles

The Romans would wonder
What giants we've suffered
That such massive crosses
Display their great losses.

Man on the Corner

There's a man on the corner with sunglasses on.
He's freezing tonight, but there's nowhere to go,
And he's holding a sign that says, "Jesus ain't gone,
But all of you might be for all that I know."

Unknown woman, Chicago, December, 1999

her movement: impossible

to catch: fire:

revealing

only instants of her soul: we:

too afraid to reach out: held

our hands together:

as though cold

Standing Models, nude #5

Revolving doors strike playing children

Movie stars piss limestone after one night stands

Football players crack their backs on folding chairs

My best friend ovulates within the scheme of two men

Fraternity initiates stick stolen chopsticks up their asses

Hookers outside the 7-11 lick the ears of passing gangbangers

My neighbor carefully carves Nazca lines on her forearm with a Bic

At the edge of the world

to ask

 why the wave drowns

 the fisherman

is to give

 the wave

 humanity

and to take

 away our own

bat flies

unerringly

listening to trees

owl glides
tree to tree
questioning

who
dares reply?

roses in moonlight
white petals raining
on a red sea

revising a poem
as I push the lawnmower
I almost miss
the slippery black toad
hopping away from it

reading a book
on Ancient Greece
thinking
how long ago
this morning was

Naming

One town. One
store front. One gas
pump. One grave
yard. One church. One cross
roads. One wheel
barrow. One rain
barrel. One chicken.
One schoolhouse. One
train track. One dry
cornfield. One long year.
One outbreak of polio. One
bad leg. One girl
against one fence post,
searching
for one word
to explain
the whole thing.

Miss Erehwon County, Iowa

knows it's her job to crown the winner
of the tractor pull and smile
like it really matters,

knows the captain of the football squad
will fumble in her panties,
a tryout before the college
cheerleaders next Fall,

knows her little brother will still repeat
fourth grade, and his friends
will be even more likely
to spy on her in the shower,

knows she's not much to look at,
in or out of the shower, but
there's three good-looking girls in the county,
and they've all won already.

* * *

But she's got dreams,

dreams of a world
where a woman doesn't have to be bulimic
to fight hunger,

dreams of an America
where red, white, and blue
have nothing to do with tanning beds,
Vaseline on teeth,
and what contestant #4 did
for Judge #3's vote,

dreams of kindergartners assembling
to burn their Barbies,

dreams of guys in John Deere caps
not going glossy-eyed
when her politics are more complex
than "world peace" or "education,"

dreams of a Miss America pageant
conducted via newspaper interviews.

* * *

Miss Erehwon County, Iowa
practices her turns, learns to smile
at enemies, to balance
schedules, watches the scales
of justice tip her way
as she's nominated
for Program Director,
knows that who really makes
or breaks the dreams.

Dynamics of Claudia

I.

These are my criteria:

II.

You must lie

Unprotected from the fish.

III.

Fish must be cold

And broken

On the backs of clouds.

III.

Partygoers must be

Small. Smiles

Wish they were frowns.

IV.

Close, but no

Cigar.

V.

Repetition should be subtle

When used in polite company

So as to not offend

Or make obvious

Gentle manipulation

Of the corpse.

VI.

Random statements

Should be thought through thoroughly.

VII.

Wishes are like glass

VIII.

Es

A certain beauty

Sarah was certain
ly attractive at
tractive in a Pica
sso sort of way

no what I me
an to say is sh
e was attr
active like you fli
nging yourself i
n front of a movi
ng truck is aft
er a long we
ek at the office

although when I thin
k about it she was real
ly beautiful in the man
ner in which Aar
on must have app
eared to Phar
oah through hea
vy lidded sw
arms of locusts

Logic Bomb

TO: Marianne@body.org

FROM: AnneMarie@instincts.gov

RE: Action

We are sad to hear about the recent events regarding you and your boyfriend. Our databases suggest you take the following actions:

1. tear posters from walls
2. scream
3. strike door
4. repeat
5. edly re
6. peatedly repeat
7. don't cry
8. ignore blood seeping
9. from hole in door
10. grasp knife
11. by blade tear
12. sheets using
13. handle ignore
14. fingers sprouting
15. from carpet fingers sprouting
16. don't cry
17. scream
18. run
19. remaining fingers down
20. face ignore

21. scream

22. repeat

23. repeat

a riveder la stella

At some point the sun stopped
being driven in a chariot, no longer
pursued by wolves, not even
a hole in the celestial
cloth. We don't sacrifice

to the axis of the solar system, no temples
built to the origin of photosynthesis,
no kowtowing to the uncountable atoms
flashing by at nearly three hundred million
meters per second- the one constant

we recognize. There's no more fear
in the eclipse because we know
why and how. We know
we'll wake up tomorrow. We know
it will come back. As the sun

disappears, all of us,
soldiers of fortune and priests
of Xipe, walk on
without realizing
we're still tearing our hearts out

to keep it all going.

WWII on A&E

I. John Wayne drops
Nazis like flies

II. London burns

church windows

writhe in the inferno

lead melts

a blue pane

shatters on the ground

III. shat

ters

on

the round

g

Let there be Light

Have we erred in winning?

We are seen grabbing and gobbling. Souls
 fare
 back down
 each night. Unseen gods appear,
 seeming so hurt, saying, "All die beholden."
 This unseemly hurt. "All die, beholden."

This grasping hurtful nightmare:
 Warden Night, wise before fawning
 kings lied,
 before
 kings spoke,
 dumbed by unending candles.

I come still, though I come for naught
 in this un-Night. I grab
 you,
 grab for anything
 before we're worms,
 before the sickening door sags.

*Woden goes from door to door,
 turned aside at each hovel
 by wolves devouring lightbulbs.*

midweststep

ploughs sift

tribal bones

arrowheads

stones thrown

away sodbuster

ballet step

toss row

on row

green ocean

waving we

seed dragon's

teeth world

feed roots

deep as roots

of mountains

bind us

through dustbowl

through Fimbrul

through flag

call and flagging

hand on

heart sky

faith soil

part grown

hunched

till flatland

mimcs hills

still the step
is never still

If this were an allegory

& we were downtown marching
past a homeless man playing the violin,
he would be a grasshopper, & we
would be ants, & depending
on who was telling the story,
the moral would be different.

For instance, if Aesop were in charge,
it would be the classic tale of the industri-
ous ants & the lazy, doomed grasshopper.

For me, it would be symbolic of
infinite lines
& forced
o r d e r .

For the old man, it would be about scratching away
until someone finally
notices.

But this is life, not allegory,
& there are no morals,
just facts:

such as the hole
in the old man's shoe,
& the 87 cents in his violin case,
& the way
his shoulders shrink
each time someone ignores him,
until he is small
as a grasshopper.

Wearing History

for a brief moment the two most important questions on my mind are whether or not I can slip into this black man's skin as he plays guitar and how offended will he be if I try, his offense stemming from the lessons he learned playing sandlot football with the other desegregated children referred to only as *boy*, their status as boys unfortunately doing them no good after school for while they were good they were not old, goodness you see only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades, horseshoes like grandpa and daddy used to play in the backyard dripping laughter and sweat onto the red October earth, the end of that month bringing the anticlimax of Fall when the leaves are already done swaying and falling and shiver limply along the ground, limping the way daddy once did after his left knee was broken by a bat-wielding lily white ghost outside the flaming First Baptist on Cotton Street, cotton like his shirt was made of, so soft and refreshing to hide in and cry against the drenched barrel chest

NARRATIVES & LESSONS**Alley**

A black cat
observes me from behind

the window:
ears curved,
eyes

rolling towards me
like lazy planets.
It stretches, clawing

the sill, revealing
thorny tongue and white
teeth arrayed

like a barbarian's
crown.

* * *

For a moment
I am afraid

all the shop windows
will be broken

by ratty children

kicking a ball

in the street.

But now I see

that couldn't happen,

as they have been replaced

with boards or shadows or maybe

were never there

at all.

* * *

An old woman

sells me

a golden crucifix,

an heirloom

from her mother,

from before

the bad times.

On my way

to the hotel,

the paint flakes off:

a shining trail

leading back
into darkness.

* * *

A middle-aged couple
unaware

I can understand them,
speaking in hushed tones,
discuss the purpose

behind a photograph of Lenin
standing before the masses.
I tell them I can do the same

for them, write
them into history through fiction,
but to be warned,

nothing good
ever comes of it.

“BEWARE of DOG”

And below, someone has handwritten
“Pit BuLL With AIDS!”
assuring us that the dog
is less crazy & dangerous
than whoever posted the sign.

I imagine Hades lives here, retired
after paganism went out of style,
scratching Cerberus behind the ears,
full of cheap wine and fried chicken.

And on a sticky summer day,
a baseball flies through the window,
followed by the new kid in town, knees already skinned.
Hades moseys out to the yard and hands him the ball.

“Have a seat,” he says, pointing
to a stone bench. The kid chooses to stand.
Hades grins. “Haven’t seen one this smart
in a long time, so let me tell you something.

See that sign? Maybe my guard dog
really has AIDS. Maybe he’s got three heads.
Or maybe he’s just a raggedy mutt.
But the point is that the best defense
ain’t a good offense. It’s a sharp PR man

and your enemy's imagination.”

breaking the surface

This is the *good night*
Before dead men's fingers.

See how the landscape swallows
Itself, willows bent under sky,

Reflections weighted convex
As she inhales herself.

In the After
He will speak

Of dust, he will speak
Of kings, but it is her

Blood flowing through
The river, the sea, carried

Into clouds, her blood
Feeding grapes,

Crushed
Into wine.

As she inhales her Self:
Reflection [wait!] convexes

Itself. Willows blend, undo, scry.
See how the land escapes, swells.

Before dead [men's fingers],
This is the good night.

Trees

Silently they stole upon us,
Filing forth from infinite Birnam.
When the alarm was raised, already
They had dammed the crest of Dunsinane,
Lashing the air with fateful limbs.

What we asked
for Charles Bishop

*“A note written by the 15-year-old boy
who crashed a Cessna into a Tampa office
building indicated he supported Osama
bin Laden and that the act was deliberate.”*

-CNN.com, January 27, 2002

Genie-kin, given wings
After years of waves
And odysseys, you vowed
Death upon your escape.

You collected feathers,
Spoke with the East
Wind of mazes, arrows,
And the beautiful god asleep

In a sunlit throne across
The mountains. Were your eyes
First poisoned in dark
Tunnels and righteous lies?

Or did the wind bring you
Word over sand and sea
That the sky was falling,
That the sun would set you free?

Trinities

Observe her in the bar
Watch her pour years into glasses
Watch her children slip from her face
See her at six about to go on stage
Trembling
Rattling the years against each other

Bend the room around your shoulders
Slide in between sips
Tell her without smiling
Buy you a drink
Shadows carve lines in her cheeks
See her at sixty alone in the house
Trembling
She pulls your ear to her lips
Speaks like a starving woman

Study her
See her at sixteen still untouched
Trembling
Part her lips
Taste the salt on her cheeks
Move lightly away and listen
As she says *No*
I want this

...

Morning

The blood has dried

Drape your arm

Across the sheets

Smelling her still-fresh yes

Leave your eyes closed

As you step into the shower

To shed her tears

The Circus

We were always the odd
ones out, never even
robbers to their cops or
Indians to be watched
in monkey-bar jailhouses,
only the insignificant gods
of one-sided games:
freeze, dodge, hide.

We were second-grade
carnies: unwashed
clothes or gangly legs or glasses
huge enough to cook a steak with
as if your family could afford it
or unpronounceable names
or simply town to town
travelers with no lasting identity.

We were illustrated
children without enough skin
to finish the stories. We'd do anything
to fit in, to think we fit in. We played
the games, whored ourselves
as sideshow freaks. They presented us
with barking voices too big for their bodies:

SEE THE LARGEST WOMAN

IN THE WORLD
GUESS HER WEIGHT
WIN A PRIZE

BURST THE BALLOON

TEST YOUR STRENGTH

HIT THE TARGET KID
C'MON THREE SHOTS
FOR A DOLLAR

The same dollar
changed hands
each time. God we hated
that dollar.

At night we'd go back
into the tents,
bury ourselves
in the straw. We'd lay awake and listen.
We could still hear them
laughing.

Their laughter tore open the walls.

It made the playground shake
and scream, and every night
we'd lay awake listening

to the laughter as it rattled
the moon like a piece of forgotten
candy, wondering if it knew
it was alone up there, too.

Such was the dawn of Freedom

We gathered outside the city to bury
dates in the sand and would come back
in the evening to eat them warm. We
gathered secretly to study, to debate
the differences of Sunni, Shiite,
Christian, Jew, America, South America,
America, Europe, America, World.
We gathered near the remains of Babylon,
not ruins but memories still clinging
to the earth. We gathered in the homes
of friends who had lost a father or a brother,
taken in the night, some unaware,
some knowing too well this story
has been repeated in all times and places:
February 2, 1893 “ANOTHER NEGRO
BURNED,” Warsaw, Krakow, Dachau, Paris,
Cortes and Montezuma killing sun after sun,
India under Britain, China under Japan,
Mothers are still marching in the Plaza (how long
must we march unseen?). As always,
the cavalry rides in to preserve stability
with guns. As always, someone grasps
the truth: naked bodies make for the wrong headlines.
Speech writers ride in to revise, to erase
the difference between them and us
(isn't that what they came for?) War
is always about Freedom in the end.

Afterwards? We have seen the pictures—
they hold a parade, and people gather and forget
the little girl buried under their confetti,
a veil made of all the colors of the world.

Rio Grande

The stories said that across the river lay Texas, and beyond that,
America. My brother whispered those magic words:
All men are created equal, even *indios*. For enough money
Our children would be Americans.

Coyote led us to a truck, black, rectangular, like an open grave
Against the night sky. We stepped inside, praying
We would be pulled out alive at the end. Some thought
We were in the midst of a miracle.

But then, we heard him laughing as he closed the door, heard
The metal screeching as a bar was dragged across it, laughter
As only a rich fat man can laugh, screeching
As only a jail cell can screech.

The river lapped at the tires,
Rising out of its banks in anger.

In the old stories, Coyote lets Death into the world and is condemned
To wander forever. They say that is why he is so lean,
Why he is always running. They do not say
When we traded places with him.

For four days we rotted in that truck, and each day I felt
The absence of the sun as it rose and set, rose and set,
Rose and set, rose and set. On the fifth day,
My brother broke open the door.

Coyote must have heard the noise, because he stopped.
When he came to the back, we jumped out and grabbed him
And killed him with rocks. His skin was empty
On the inside, hollow.

His blood was not drunk by the soil,
But mixed with the waters, still following us.

We used his map to find the town, but when we arrived
It was full of ghosts. Men stared through us. Women turned
Their children's eyes away. We heard the voices of ancestors
On the wind, but could not understand their words.

We drove off into the night. Black on black
Is the ellipse of American sky stretching over American soil,
An unseen seam connecting asphalt highways
To trails of constellations.

Ahead of the rising waters, we see the highest point in America
And drive, climbing up through the holes in the sky
to the next world, hoping once again
that this will be the last time.

Respect

Jeremy taught himself
how to drown,
plunging into the deep
end without being
able to swim,
before discovering asphyxiation
burns, before learning water
explodes
when swallowed
too quickly. He found Death
is a mime
underwater, wavering, grinning
a Cheshire grin.

Some cultures believe
the souls of the dead reside
in birds, particularly ravens
or owls. They are wrong.

The soul is a series of bubbles
battling their way to the surface
for one last
breath, realizing too late
that contact destroys
them, their contents dispersing
over the water, over
the deck, over

the heads of the boys
still expecting the shy kid
to come up
any second now.

Any second now.

Rosita

She only kisses men who are ugly
on the inside, hoping to cleanse their souls
with her tongue. You'd think it works,
the way they keep coming back for redemption
week after week, bathing sin in sin. She dreams
ragged wolves drag her down the street,
dancing on their hind legs. They gibber
at the moon with russet eyes glowering
behind black fur and furious canines. She knows
the old stories. She can relate

how Iseult tricked
the King, professing love
without saying his name, how Scheherazade
captured the Caliph's heart
over a thousand and one nights,
how Little Red Riding Hood
never really needed the woodsman
to save her. She knows

all this and does not fear
the wolves. She grasps them by the paws,
picks lice from their pelts and swallows
in an ancient ritual. They ask no questions.
She answers by breathing silently
into patches of fur, her cloak
tight as a womb around her. She uncrosses

her arms, exposing her neck and that sweet,
singular vein streaking down to disappear
deep as the roots of mountains
inside her. The earth shakes
as another bridge is crossed
and burned. Her eyes close
in the darkness of a total eclipse. She awakens

to wolves lacing up
boots at the edge of the bed, white
ceiling and sheets slowly collapsing
like jaws. She stretches
a leg with one shoe on,
covers their bodies with the sole.
She always brings them home.
She reaches down to feel
blood, touches her lips, and smiles
as they try to leave
without saying goodbye.

Julio 16 long

Julio 16 long
years later baptized
in his dying
mother's blood runs
corner to corner
second to second
burns the air
from his lungs
(Julio says he's
like a god
when he runs)

Julio 16 long
years later choking
on the sweat
of 90 hour weeks
starts cutting
class and runs
weed
for Hernando to 18th
(now when Julio smiles
he's got gold
front teeth)

Julio 16 long
years later a flash
of lightning a flash

of finger symbols thrown
down until one night
someone flashes back
(on his last day
in class he wrote-
“go on I dont care
if you rite bout me
in some stupid poem”)

English 4, First Period

Attendance: Alma? Anita? (almost Abish already) Miguel G? Miguel R? Have to learn to tell them apart. Late student. Rubia on crutches. Esperanza? Yes. She quiet. What happened to your leg? I got shot this summer. Me quiet. Attendance: Carlos? No Carlos. Alguién conoce a Carlos? They quiet. Veronica? Rica, Mister, Rica. Sure, just hope nobody wants to be called pobre. They quiet. Ricardo? He quit. This class? School, but he might come back, usually does. They getting louder. Attendance: Leticia? Brain! Chill, Miguel. They getting louder. You like English, Leticia? No, math, but they still think I'm a nerd. Well, nerds rule the world, so don't worry. Smile. They getting louder. Attendance: Manuel? Manuel? Manuel? Quiet down, people! Oooooooh! Smirking behind hands. Yes, I know what you're smirking about. I'm going to use terms like folk and people, so just get used to it. Manuel? Student pointing. He's Manuel. Looking down, paper already full of ghetto roses and katakana. Does Manuel speak English? Yeah, still looking at paper. Hey, man, I like your work, but please work on it in art, not English. Sighs. Puts paper away slowly. Attendance: Jorge? Man, call him Pancho! Laughter. They getting louder. Red on tan, Jorge raises the bird. Quiet down, people. Oooooooh! At least it got them off Jorge for a moment. Attendance: Tonisha? Toe-NEE-shah. Lo siento. Man, do I look like I speak Spanish? What, something wrong with speaking Spanish? Yeah, yo mutha speak it out her fat ass. Bring it, bitch! Alma, sit down. Tonisha, sit down. Let's at least pretend to be civil for a moment. But she/ But she- stereo protest. No buts. You don't insult anybody's mother or culture. You don't jump across a desk to rip anybody's hair out. No, I don't care who started what. It finishes at this moment. Sideways glances. Knuckles pop. And don't think that you can finish it outside this classroom, because I will find out about it if you two crack each other's heads after school. They quiet. Too quiet. Attendance: Too late. That's the bell. Less than halfway through the roster. Four books left behind. One new doodle on a back row desk. They tell me this is a good first day.

e-rrhythmia

my brother calls

& says

There's been a bombing

& 3 threats

since we talked last

this is how

we measure time

these days

the clocks wound

so tight they ex

p

e

l

d

o

gears

t

u ing

r n

in every sieve-

ilization &

every head
 asp[
 persp[
 ex[piring
 to the apathy of being sivul *hic*
 sivul *hic*
-weer goin duhSIVILEYEzum-

gears t
 urn
 ing around the earth
 fractal cracks appear in the land
 escape patterns

e-merge

frogs awaken early
 in the desert

the rains
 are still
 in a hurricane off Florida

the Amazon is stripped
 of her remaining breast

5 small farms left
 in the Midwest

3

2

liftoff

the search for another Other another
planet to colon[

civil[ize

Springless

watches on every wrist

& a Coke in every hand

in China

in America

we track the seasons

football

basketball

baseball

but have no way

to tell

the years apart

the same heroes

recycled

into different bodies

o no there's no o

just

e-riginality

black & blue

ur (banned) ink spills
 from the screen
 stains
 my fingers tele-
 tapping

a synch
 opiated

beat

through the mesmereyesing

e-viscerating
 information

hi (bi) way

POPUP: my friends & i

just turned
 18! Their hot!
 going
 my way?

conversation not to mention

right
 of way gone
 by
 the way
 side

mp3 soundbytes dominate teen

age

mines

BOOM BOOM BOOM

key

strokes

like bombs key

strokes (oh baby)

like tom-toms

3ntR the password

famous last words or

rite

my name

strike

enter

find my hole life

e-rayed on search engines for download

Wiping the dirt from his hands

*We wuz cold
 as bonez. We saw
 they stix
 & razed 'em
 stonez. Niggaz
 thought they'd come out
 on top
 but they got manhandled.
 We wuz like termites
 in they brains
 cuttin' away
 wit' our mandibles.*

These are the words
 my boy speaks to me
 when he's stoned. I can feel the sickness
 spilling out of his mouth. When he gets up
 off the couch and groans, still faint
 in the pale TV light, all I can see
 is that painting by Dalí
 where one night
 some god
 is eating
 his child,
 some crazy projects god
 eating his child,
 some fucked up, down

on his luck, impotent nigger god
 eating
 his child, and I would pray
 I don't end
 up like him (like my son the fool),
 but what if
 he's the one I'm praying to?

*They say bad
 things come in threes.
 They say Dante
 on yo knees
 & pray.
 They say ain't
 no skitzo-
 frenic nigga can do a thing
 about it either way.
 They say no
 difference tween
 love & hate
 in the hood.
 They say we die
 not for God
 but for good.*

These are the words my boy
 once spoke. There's a river raging
 down my face, my throat, trying to erode
 the memory of his head

on the stones, of his body
on TV (just another black
bag for fifteen seconds, no words
about his soul, like this place swallowed him
whole). I walk to the wall where he was
executed, on my knees
I trace the scrawls that polluted
his brain: a broken crown
and a pitchfork pointing to hell
(because we know no one was saved),
and I add a cross turned upside down
in memory of lost faith.

Witness

For Randy, who showed me his poetry on the train on his first day out of prison

Hold this poem

U holdin' a man
 but none of that
 Camerado shit
 get yr throat slit
 for that

Wife don't come

She do
 I cry
 I die
 Ain't dumb enough
 to love
 on the outside
 when yr inside

No Glory, no Green

Mile (orange jumpsuits
 ain't mean to be
 in Style)

Jorge Shoots up

 cuz it
 clears up
 Tested
 Positive

What!

“not Drugs”

Baby oil’s sold out

no TP neither

time to watch out

(these the signals

in the cell blocks

b4 grease fires

turn guards 2

grease spots)

Attack!

Fight back!

Crack

heads nigga

bled

Saw his eyes go

gasoline

red (rum) red

Free weight in hand

bump chests

Bam bam!

(1...2...3...)

another

Disciple’s dead

Run

with the Kings

Vaya

con dios

(opposites but shit

at least son

mios)

5yrs

10yrs

how long u gonna wait

spend that long pissing

in a steel sink

u start to lose

yr faith

Nightmare #74

trapped in a fly's body.

million-eyed. graves.

millions of graves. the same

grave. a million granite angels'

eyes following a trapped fly.

surrealism. aware of an increasing

desperation. an inability

to turn from the grave. reciting

a million names.

the same name.

in a tiny voice.

a million graves dissolve

into darkness. eyes closed at last.

I am(?)

now conscious and still

the darkness contains

a million swirling flies.

A First-timer at PBA (Po-Biz Anonymous)

Hi.

My name is -----,

And I'm a po-biz addict.

I think about my C.V.

More than I do about content.

With so many poems to submit

Who has time for revision?

When I read poetry journals,

I always check for ages

In the Contributor's Notes

To see if I'm falling behind.

I'm tempted to drop names here

Just in case they're reading

And can help me get my book published.

I've stopped going to poetry readings

Because I enjoy them.

I go because I need to meet people.

I carry a business card

In case I actually do.

I long for the days

When poets had patrons

And wonder if corporate sponsorship
Would really be so bad.
I have a shrine

To Lyn Lifshin
At my desk.
I never write

Cute love poems to my wife
Without drafting them first.
I tell myself

Just one more,
That's all
I need.

How to make an impression

Look the interviewer in the eyes.

Speak clearly.

Ee-nun-see-ate.

Make casual references
to celebrities you “know.”

Play an instrument,
but don't practice too much.
Let people say
you could have been great.

Play a sport,
but just enough
to get a six pack.
Otherwise they'll think
you're a jock.

Quote dead people,
especially in tongues
you don't understand,
then sum up their knowledge
with a quick golf anecdote.

Smile at children.

Have children,
especially outside of marriage.
People will secretly
consider you virile.

Allow your child to choke
on a McDonald's toy.
Sue them.
Ask for a lifetime supply of Happy Meals
as part of the settlement.

Write haiku on the
windows of the Sears Tower
using pigeon shit.

Adopt hundreds of homeless cats,
then donate them to starving children
in China.

Strap hollow dynamite
to your testicles,
march into an abortion clinic
screaming "Fuck
the Ivory Tower!"
and hold the SWAT team at bay
until you are allowed to receive
an exclusive with the 7 o'clock news.

Make your demands clear.

Keep eye contact,
and just as they pan
to the interviewer,
smile
and press the trigger.

How to become a poet

For the first three days
eat nothing
but eggs.

Grow your hair out
if you're a man.
Shave it if you're a woman.
Dreadlocks are acceptable
for both sexes.

Bind one arm
and one leg,
put a patch over one eye,
and hop three times
around SoHo.

Build a shrine
to the style of poetry you want to write:
burn candles
for Romanticism,
old books for Modernism,
your house for Postmodernism.

Stop going to Hallmark.
Just stop.

Don't just imitate,

improve on the old masters.

Sample goals include:

- Finding 14 ways of looking at a blackbird
- Determining just what depends on a rain-glazed wheelbarrow
- Getting any number of demons to dance on the head of a pin

“Read.” “Read.” “Read.”

“Read.” “Read.” “Read.” “Read.”

(the preceding is a summary
of the collective advice
of the editors of literary journals
found in *Poet's Market*)

Avoid rhyme, slang, meter, and cliché.

Similes are, like, so passé.

Get in touch with yourself.

If you can't find yourself,

touch someone else.

Go ahead, people are happy to have poets touch them.

I've seen it in the papers:

“[His/her] poetry touched me...deeply.”

You're allowed to have sex

with a member of the opposite sex,

but only if there's a poem

in it somewhere.

(see Whitman for details)

Don't cut off your ear.

That's next door in the art department.

Don't tell the readers everything.

Let them figure something out for themselves,
no matter how insignificant

Mike Topp and the Deaf Monk

A deaf monk was seated next to Mike Topp on the subway. Mike passed him a slip of paper which read "How did you lose your hearing?" The monk covered the paper and wrote "Listening for the answers," then put it in his pocket.

under cocktails

Pleasure

she crooned

is the only goal

in life

Bullshit

I said

Oneself

he warbled

is the only recipient

of happiness

Lies

I spat

the room turned

upon two faces

growing red

I laughed

quite pleased

The Theory Blues

Fretting a fractured Fibonacci tune,
 Rocking back ad forth in a mathematical mood,
 I heard a Postmodernist play
 Down the hall in the department from me
 By the dull pallor of a computer screen.
 He'd made it the lazy way....
 He'd made it the lazy way....
 To the tune of those Theory Blues.
 With his wan hands on each tan key
 He made that poor computer fill with entropy.
 O=B=L=U=E=S=!
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
 He played that sad raggy tune like a PhD phool.
 All Rules! O Blues!
 Ain't no soul in PoMo.
 Just Rules!
 In a squeaky voice and scholarly tone
 I heard that Postmodernist to his publicist drone—
 "Nietzsche says there is no God.
 Schopenhauer that there is no self.
 But what passes for an I still prays
 To see my books up on the shelf."

"Nobody understands," he continued to complain,
 "I'm obviously a genius yet they won't pay!
 I got the Theory Blues
 any Kant bee sadist fined

Got the Theory Blues

Ankh ant beastie defy

Millions of readers out there

But they might as well be blind.”

He watched the international students go home,

Turned off his computer, continued to moan

The words “Wittgenstein,” “fractals,” and “gestalt,”

Until his subconscious mercifully hit CTRL-DEL-ALT,

And he ground, like this poem, to a slow, banal halt.

fishing trip

I go in search of worms,
 Across town, looking everywhere.
 My fingers sift through echoes
 At the local playground,
 Tires shredded for ground cover,
 Next to the swing set whistling in its whiskey voice,
 Next to the teeter-totter teetering on the edge of its time,
 And yes, next to the slide,
 From which I can still hear the gritos
 Of a hundred happy niños when we were young.
 Some of them wanted to grow up.
 (Move on)
 (Move out)
 Some never grew.
 (Never moved)
 (Gave up, Passed on, Went out)
 But I'm in between, and must leave
 And leave
 And leave,
 Trading one viejo for another.
 There are no worms here.

I go in search of worms,
 Across the playground, across town, looking everywhere.
 I pause at patches of dirt in a concrete sea,
 Asphalt waves interrupted by the strength of a weed.
 It's tierra negra, but dirty dirt.

(The words stick in my mouth like dirt)
Sooty, wind-beaten, whipped by feet,
Not the kind of dirt in which a worm can survive.
No, there are no worms here.

I go in search of worms,
Across the playground, across the parking lot, across town, looking everywhere.
I stand in front of the vending machine
At the drug store.
A dollar for a box of worms,
Sickly almost-worms in round white coffins.
(Fluorescent shining coffins)
(Overbright moon-shaped coffins)
Unable to hide,
Mass produced, massed together.
There are little boxes of death,
But there are no worms here.

I go in search of worms,
Past the playground,
Past the parking lot,
Past the vending machine,
To the river,
Mojado,
Jóven y viejo,
And there,
In tierra dulce,
Are worms.

First Generation
for all immigrant grandmothers

Turtle said,

“Let them
put the mud
on my back.”

Maheo, the Spirit,
took the tiny ball
brought up

from the bottom
of the ocean
that covered all

and spread it
on her shell.

It grew

to form
the foundation
of the earth.

She is still there,
supporting
the world

and thinks of us,

little

though we do

of her.

Matruschka

It began with Bugs Bunny
pulling a tommy gun
out of a violin case
like (dare I say it?)
a rabbit from a hat
like a quarter from my
just-turned-ten-year-old ear
like candy from an egg
at Easter

I began to notice things
packed inside other things
where you wouldn't expect them

Next it was
breasts budding under the shirts
of childhood playmates
like the silver
flask in Father O'Malley's bible
like the Trojans
in my Catholic father's wallet
like the Dum-Dums in the hand
of the old man
parked across from the school
like the face of a friend's father
in the back of a police car

Later I saw
white maggots wriggling
in a rabbit in a field
like heroin packets
sewn into a two-month-old baby
by its mother
like tricked immigrants
packed ten or twenty at a time
into sweating infested apartments

In the airport I see
a tiny Russian girl
tiny like a whisper
tiny like the sulfur dust
still on her shoes
afraid to look out the window
but her mother and father
or aunt and uncle
are holding her hand
pointing across the runway
saying Look Here in
America you will be like
a butterfly

She tilts her head up
and growing huge
in those tiny eyes
there's hope

Midnight

You, with the subtle hourglass
And faint ticking
of your heels on the hard
wood floor,
unlock me.

Exact, exotic
steps: a cat prowling
the house.

Unlock me.

I, like you,
crave
meaning, grasp
at completion,
shudder
in my need.

Come
sit with me.
We will swallow
sweet nothings.

Place your hands
at midnight. Close your eyes,
and the door swings

open. The world
disappears
as each stroke sounds.

New Orleans Baptism

This voodoo woman, abstracting my clothes,
Weaving her spell as the night folds
Its hands in prayer, wraps legs around
The sky and coaxes rain, drowns
Out the world with thundering cries,
Breaks against me like the river tide.
I take the mark, plunge deep down,
Hold tight and bring the bow around,
Feel the pull of the Louisiana moon,
Hear the watery voice of Ezili croon,
“Speak carefully of what you have found.
The true depth of Woman you’ll never sound.”

Spectactile World

First Movement

*This bittersweet cane taps a B.B. King cadence
on the bridge near Wacker and Madison.
Car horns, cell phones, jackhammers, the El:
A surround-sound Chicago greets the sun...*

Streetside Improv 1: Quarters

one two

one two

one two cool quarters

clink into this chipped cup

one cool quarter

George's face bleeding

out into silver-smooth space

hair blending and balding

eyes scratched out

by a thousand hands and

a thousand sidewalk sins

E P UR IB S U

almost Braille

almost true

second cool quarter

sharptack lines

stately pro-file
yes, the Prez is standing out
this, brother, the face of America
clean collared cherry tree
Servant of the People

beautiful day, yessir
can you spare
one two
one two
one two quarters
for a servant of the people?

Chipped Cup Interlude

World's Greatest Da

Streetside Improv 2: Hands

paper hands rattle
a chipped cup and two cool quarters

these hands are history

landscape hands
this wrist blooms
into a muddy delta
veins meander across dark soil
each fingerprint

a hay bale bound
these hands shaking loose
the dust of a hundred thousand
sunburned fields

steel-beating hands
black as ash
each scar a mile
of railroad ties
these hands shaking
loose the memories
of a hundred thousand
sunburned souls

hands shaking
shaking
searching
spreading
across weathered jeans
and resting at last
on hope

Last Movement

*The world speaks.
Quarters and cups fall to the ground.
Cars and phones fade out.
Only the tune tapped
by this bittersweet cane*

*echoes down the streets,
dives into the Lake, and
swims
with hopeful hands.*

The Inescapable Ernest H.

Hemingway died last night.
I killed him with a blunt #2 pencil.
But the fight was hard:

He landed the first blow,
A metaphor strong as an elephant,
Simple as a hill.

I tried to trip him up with commas,
Relentlessly throwing adverb
After vicious adjective.

I was exhausted by the end of the first period;
I pressed on with semi-colons,
Biding my time.

Hemingway sized up
My rope-a-dope structure
And dropped me with one strong verb.

There was an ellipsis,
Three quick hits and a pause
For thought...

I saw my opening
And introduced
A female lead.

He faltered.

She drank bottled water

And ate no meat.

He stumbled.

She became a CEO, never married,

Appeared on the cover of *Forbes*.

He fell.

She did not commit suicide

Or estrange her children.

Hemingway gave up the ghost.

We defeated him at last.

I must tell the papers.

The Old Man with the Crazy Eyes

When I am an old man
I will write letters
describing the recipients' lives
rather than my own,
astounding them
with the simple trick
of having already been there.

I will wear an expensive suit
and walk very slowly
among teenagers and twenty-somethings
so that, in their frustration,
they learn to question authority.

I will visit retirement homes and dance
with Alzheimer's patients
who will never know that I return
to my wife every night.

I will not offer candy
or tell stories to children,
but fix them
with a gaze so curious
that they create their own
tales in treehouses
of the old man
with the crazy eyes.

Bacchae

we drive by a small town with no graveyard and people
so crackly-old they must have forgotten to die

we picnic by the side of the road
and corn husks
mutilated by ants
litter the ground
tattered as poor ghosts

expecting farmers
we instead find dancers
bloody as newborns
spinning in the fields
leaving little hoofprints in the soil

and knowing that the old people do not die
and knowing ghosts are poor
and knowing that the hoofprints are very small indeed

we begin to dance

CONCLUSION

My research, so to speak, has revealed a number of things to me. One, while I am not a strict formalist, I much prefer to work within a certain boundary. This has been an issue while working on this thesis, as the elements have not come together as smoothly as I would like. Poems do not mesh properly, work with or against each other. This is not a clockwork thesis. My other major work to date, *El Océano y La Serpiente / The Ocean and The Serpent*, is much preferable to any individual poem in this collection, and quite frankly to the collection as a whole. As I stated in the introduction, however, this relatively unintentional grouping has allowed me to examine my own leitmotifs and preferences in an organic light.

I know that I come back to certain themes: racial issues, poverty, water, the odd-kid-out, history. My techniques are certainly varied, but I seem to use lists, narrators other than an autobiographical one, and character sketches most often. The race and odd-kid-out elements can be traced back to my own childhood experiences (odd-kid-out leading to an empathetic link with “outside” or “minority” groups), and both are augmented by my interest with and studies in history. Water is a bit more difficult to trace, as I am from Chicago. I would argue that the Midwest is akin to the ocean, where hundreds of miles may be uninhabited by humans yet full of life and motion. The lists seem to come from a need to fit as much information as I can into as small a space as possible, an effort which is currently fueling my interest in haiku and other short forms.

Above all, I have come to realize from my work on this thesis that I have an unlimited source of inspirations at hand, just as any poet does. The difficulty comes in choosing which inspirations to act upon, which histories to incorporate, which daily events to portray and how to portray them. This thesis represents an ongoing process, which is not to say that it is unfinished. In its present form, it is finished...as a thesis. More importantly, however, it acts as a marker for a poet always learning, always growing.

WORKS CONSULTED

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