

NAKED MEN FRYING BACON STAND SIDEWAYS

A Thesis

by

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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

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December 2013

Major Subject: English

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ABSTRACT

In Chapter I, I explain the chief features and underlying philosophy of the two warring poetic movements, imagism and symbolism, that have influenced my work. I also suggest reasons why coexistence among these two traditionally warring poetics is possible and important. In Chapter II, I present a collection of poems that concern, more or less, self-deceit and wishful thinking.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated to the memory of Michael “Hootman” Giannoni

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CHAPTER I
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION*

1. Introductory Remarks

When revising a poem, usually my central aim is to make it better meet the salient ideals of the imagist tradition of Pound and Williams: direct and accessible treatment of a world presented through images rather than ideas, and stripped of meaning imposed by the emotionally interested human. Although my preferred poetic is imagism (especially given its fundamental presupposition that the world is pregnant with forms that are not a function of the classifying mind), the poems in this collection also reflect the influence of, or at least what can be said to be the influence of, the main competing, and traditionally more dominant, poetic of Eliot and Stevens: symbolism. I do not lament the two-souled nature of my collection, and sometimes even individual poems. Coexistence among these two warring poetics is possible and valuable, as I will explain at the end of this introduction. First, however, let me set out the distinction between symbolism and imagism in broad strokes, in their ideal—inevitably caricatured—forms.

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2. Symbolism

The symbolist poet sees the items that surround him as representing something beyond themselves and as having worth—or at least their highest worth—only insofar as they represent something beyond themselves (see Ellmann 883-884). For the medieval symbolist these items were taken to represent God, the creator of all. For the modern symbolist, on whom I will be particularly focusing, they were taken to represent the self, the human mind. In modern symbolist poetry the focus is, in effect, on the interior. Subject matter that is other to the self is attempted to be seen, by the imagination of the symbolist poet, as a reflection of the self, as a clue about the self (in the same way that Freud sees dreams as clues about the dreamer) (see Bradbury 1976, 48). In effect, the goal of the symbolist poet is, as Eugene Jolas (1932) might put it, to submit the outer world to the hegemony of the inner world; it is to project the life of the interior—genuine life—into the life of the exterior.

It is perhaps informative to compare modern symbolism with the impressionist movement in painting. Impressionist painters pointed out that photography was ineffective at bringing forth the subjective impression of what is being captured, ineffective at bringing forth, that is, how what is being captured mirrors the mindset, the constitution, of the perceiving subject. Perceiving subjects impregnate the world with meanings. One person may see a snowcapped mountain as an inspiring sign of the awesomeness of the universe of which he is an integral part. Another person may see it as a nauseating sign of his insignificance in the grand scheme of things. The two paintings of this same mountain from the same angle will differ drastically and

informatively from the two photographs of the same mountain from the same angle. Photography is unable to capture the world as impregnated by the inner life. Or at least it cannot do so as effectively as impressionist painting. Photography unavoidably strips away many, if not sometimes all, of the projected meanings and leaves us with bare facts (which is precisely why, “in a world ruled by the hypnosis of positivism,” as Jolas would say (1932), photography is seen as superior to art forms, such as impressionistic painting, that celebrate the outward projection of the inner life). Just as the impressionist feels that he has an advantage over the camera and in fact recommends that painting not stoop to competing with the camera’s more effective ability to represent the objective facts (see Levinson 1997 and Sontag 1977), the symbolist feels that he has an analogous advantage over the camera (or the objective reporter). What is special about poetry, according to the symbolist mind, is that it is able to bring forth the world as it is for man, the world as it is impregnated with meaning by man. And this is exactly what impressionists think is special about painting in an historical epoch where there is a device, the camera, that more exactly and rapidly copies the world of bare facts. Both symbolism and impressionism, with their inclusion of subjective elements, with their presentation of bare facts *as colored by subjectivity*, offer alternatives to the cold photograph. That there be such an alternative is important, symbolists and impressionists believe, because the cold photograph, and all objective reporting for that matter, give little to no clue about the mindset of the one netting the scene and thus are doomed to seeing an incomplete reality.

In its extreme form—and this is especially seen in those subjectivity-descending writings of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), and the young W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)—symbolism does not simply preserve the meanings and values projected onto the external world in addition to the external world. Indeed, in its fight to cure “the hypnosis of positivism,” it goes even further than merely proclaiming “the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life” (Jolas 1932). It goes further by stripping the external world completely away (see Christensen 1979, 163; Wellek 1970). Leaving only interiority in its wake, this extreme form of symbolism, well captured by Rimbaud’s “A Season in Hell” with its hallucinogenic descriptions of personal sufferings and doubts, is the diametrical opposite of the photograph. This poem’s opposition to the photograph is, of course, what we would expect from a poet who holds that one requirement for enhancing poetical power is “long, intimidating, immense and rational derangement of all the senses” (see Ivry 1998, 24; Kwasny 2004, 147; Robb 2000, 79-80). And then there is Baudelaire’s prose-poem “Anywhere Out of this World,” where he claims that the best place to live “is out of this world.” To be sure, such an extreme form of symbolism—where poems evoke so much interiority that all referentiality is becoming lost, where for example merely inward dreams are the focus (as we see in the young Yeats)—are exceptions to the rule, and are in no way a dominant feature of Wallace Stevens, one of the paradigmatic American symbolist poets that I want to consider here. I do bring it up, however, to point out that the modern symbolist poetic, by having the self as its primary focus, is always at risk of going towards this extreme of interiority. This risk is arguably greater if the

symbolist practitioner is in an urban environment where—with its tight spaces, its disindividuating effects, its many languages, its ever-changing rules and fads and faces—there is great incentive to escape into the personal space of interiority, to a study of the only thing with continuity and thus the only place to secure one's tether: one's self, one's character. Nevertheless, the threat of drowning into subjectivity is always there, whether in city or country. For even if nature is considered really real for the symbolist, as it seems to be for Stevens and Eliot, it is demoted to a means for the higher end of an autonomous self: it is construed as a screen on which to project and then interpret the self (Bradbury 1976, 48).

I have mentioned Eliot and Stevens as representatives of the symbolist tradition. In order to better highlight the essence of symbolism it might be helpful to consider, in broad strokes, their differing symbolist visions.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

For Eliot, the goal of the poet is to arrange sets of objects in certain ways so that, when in the right order, they will reflect the emotions of the poet and provoke the emotions in the reader (Eliot 2004). Provoking emotions this way is of course possible. We see it all the time. All else being equal, people will be more inclined to come to college x if its brochure has a bunch of smiling faces juxtaposed, rather than a bunch of sad ones. Although this poetical view welcomes references to an external world, Eliot is primarily concerned with the self; the external world is still but a means to the end of

getting at, understanding, conveying the self; the outer life is seen as subjugated to an autonomous poetic vision (see Jolas 1932).

Not only is it always the human emotion that counts, but Eliot's very poetical process is self-oriented. Eliot says that poetry comes from strong experiences of emotion: loneliness, despair, embarrassment, fear, exhilaration. Once such a strong emotion is felt, all one's memories, all the sediment of the unconscious, get riled up. The snow globe turned over, if you will, connections naturally start to form; particles of past experiences—written or not—are attracted to the central emotion, all having something in common with each other. So say the emotion is sexual longing. Without thinking, certain items in the unconscious will cling to that. And thus I might say, "I'm so horny I'd fuck a hole in a board." What is happening here is that my strong emotion is, as it were, in a moment of composition. Flooding towards this longing, helping it express itself, is a series of associations to vaginas. The best poets, according to Eliot, are those who do not let their egos, their personalities, get in the way of this process. They simply lay out the associations that naturally form when the stirred up memory particles attach themselves to the strong emotion. Such a schematic description of the poetic process provides an expression of symbolism's preoccupation with the self. Notice that the main work is done inside the poet. The poet is not reporting the external world, but reporting the results of the presence of a strong emotion, reporting what memories of the deep unconscious fuse to that emotion. According to Eliot, you reveal who you are by getting the ego to the side. The primary goal, moreover, seems to be to reveal who you are. That is symbolism in its ideal form.

It is not too difficult to see how the confessional poetry of, for example, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Anne Sexton (1928-1974) can be seen as blooming from symbolism or, perhaps better yet, just another iteration of symbolism. Its goal being for the poet to reveal who he is in the most pure way, this poetic welcomes the urge to confess—in particular, confess things that one would rather not confess. And we see just that in Eliot’s famous poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Although he is careful to put it in a third person way, here Eliot arguably is concerned with revealing himself—in particular, the dark things about himself, the pornographic aspects: traveling through red-light districts and the like. Through Prufrock’s dramatic interior monologue, this poem is concerned with articulating the death of the sexual instinct in an aging bachelor, a bachelor who is too awkward, emasculated, embarrassed to participate in the courtship game (balls, and the like). Right in fact from Poe, who was a major influence on the French symbolists, we see poetry being used as a medium of psychological analysis. This is of course true of many poems in my collection, and is a central reason why I say, despite my imagist leanings, that symbolism has a strong voice in this work. Indeed, a recurrent theme throughout these poems is self-deception, self-deceit, wishful thinking, coping mechanisms, and the like. If preoccupation with psychology is a symbolist feature, then my work here is symbolist.

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

Wallace Stevens as well takes the real world to be important. He is interested in the imagination and its relation to reality, not its rejection of reality. Nevertheless, in

Stevens we find a clear articulation of the symbolist concern with “objectify[ing] the subjective” and the symbolist belief that form comes from the human agency of the poet (Bradbury 1976, 48). Stevens says that the goal of the poet is to ennoble the raw materials of nature through his imagination, the sovereign part of ourselves (Stevens 2004). Art, according to this poetic, sets out to express the human soul, and it does so through objects of our common experience. The poet is looking for signs of himself in the world. Rather than looking at the world for its own sake, the goal of the poet is to humanize the alien. And it is no doubt rewarding sometimes to find oneself expressed in nature. A poem about a weeping willow might be praising the aspect of the tree that bears some sort of healing quality and spiritual affinity to you: it might be a sign of your own weeping. For the symbolist, to see the tree this way is to ennoble it, make it meaningful (Stevens 2004, 43).

For Stevens, you cannot look on any real scene without finding an object in that landscape impregnated with our emotion and spirituality. The human element in nature is most important. If the human element were taken away, then there would be a demotion, and perhaps even a complete deletion, of value. This is made clear in his poem “Anecdote of the Jar.” The jar, especially because it is an artifact of consciousness imbued with meaning, makes everything around it become comparatively lower in importance. It is like the American flag put on the moon. Impregnated with great emotional energy, the jar becomes the central focus. And just as the flag on the moon or on any “new” land is a sign of some sort of ownership, possession of that spot, by impregnating things of nature with the essence of ourselves, we are writing our presence,

marking our territory. The artifact, the jar, in fact makes nature, the vague order, achieve focus and meaning. This power of the artifact is familiar. When we go off to college for the first time we leave our marks on the bare walls, putting up pictures of family and the like. Soon enough, we feel ourselves spread through that space (and thus can actually feel violated if we find that someone has, say, rummaged through our drawers). In general, Stevens' poem indicates that the human element is most important. And it suggests that when the human or the human artifact is on the scene only then do natural things become what they are. As Heidegger says of the Greek temple, the same seems to be true of the jar in Tennessee for Stevens. Heidegger says, for example, that when the temple, a creation of finite vulnerable beings holds its ground against the storm above it, the storm manifests *as* violent, *as* that from which to seek shelter, and yet also *as* nourishing in that its rains fill the troughs. Only in relation to the temple does the storm start appearing *as*, does the storm become what it is. Without the presence of the human for Heidegger, reality would be a formless, homogenous plenum; only when the human steps on the scene are there distinctions (Dahlstrom, 402). The same arguably is the case for Stevens: the vague order in the Tennessee wild achieves focus once the jar is there; beforehand there is just undifferentiated homogeneity; it is raised from its state of sleep in the presence of the jar (see Macauley 2010, 303; Strong 2012, 303-304; see also Hines 1976).

Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" seems to make the point as well. On the one hand, he does advocate letting go of our conscious mind so that we experience that feeling typically reported by artists in the zone of creation: passively

receiving the information—the song to sing, the image to paint, and so on—rather than consciously creating it. On the other hand, however, this receptivity turns out to be not an openness to the dictations of the non-self, but an openness to the pure self within us. In the poem, the sea provides some sort of blank canvas, a white noise, upon which a song stands out to a lady. As detailed as it is, and thus as impossible as it may seem that the song is really coming from her and not the waves, we learn that the lady, presumably in a state of peaceful alertness, is in fact creating the song. Both the importance of being receptive in art, and the important role that the non-self plays while we are being receptive, may mislead one into thinking that the artist is just nature's secretary. According to Stevens, however, the truth is that the artist is the secretary of the sovereign self. The power of the sovereign self is so magical that, if in just the right mind state (the alpha waves pulsing away), one can hear a full detailed song against the white noise of the night and swear that the nightstand radio is on, several times bringing it closer to the ear and farther away to check.

3. Imagism

Symbolism at its most extreme cuts away from the world and at its most moderate endeavors, like impressionist painting, to capture the world as it stands forth to the emotional mind, the world after it has been run through the filters, seen through the coloring lenses, of that mind. Imagism, in contrast, endeavors to capture the world as it is independent of the mind. The poet, according to this poetic, is one who eavesdrops, if you will, on the happenings of an autonomous nature (see Christensen 1991, 72). In

some sense, then, it is right to say that what impressionism is to symbolism, photography is to imagism. Thus Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" might be reduced to the following after strict and thorough imagist revision: "a sealed jar upon a hill / of green wilderness."

This comparison of imagism and photography, important and correct as it is, can potentially mislead. On the faulty assumption that photos do not have to do with interior of the human, with subjectivity, one may think that imagism is only concerned with the external world. This is not the case. As Pound says, imagism deals with both the objective and subjective: "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" (Jones 1972, 129). It is just that the ideal imagist poem evokes interiority the same way that a photograph does: by way of juxtaposing concrete objects as they are in themselves, stripped of subjective meaning—juxtaposing them in a certain way so that the subjective stands out vividly. This is close to Eliot's notion that poetry arranges sets of objects in certain ways so that, when in the right order, they reflect and provoke the emotions of the poet. Two things make imagism unique from symbolism, nevertheless. First, these objects in juxtaposition are ideally not going to be presented as colored by subjectivity. In order to indicate grief over procreative barrenness, an imagist poem would merely have, say, a skull in a desiccated setting. In order to indicate the same, a symbolist poem perhaps would have, say, a skull with eye sockets shaped in such a way to indicate pain and grief, and this fantastical—think: impressionistic—skull will perhaps be in a desert editorialized as unable to produce any offspring. Second, poetry does more than just indicate the interior for the imagist. For the imagist, there is an entire

natural world worthy of presentation for its own sake, not for what clues it can provide us about the emotional human subject.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Even when it is dealing with the subjective, imagist poetry has a tendency towards the objective. Imagism is supposed to mention only the objects themselves—indeed, as they are in themselves. The imagist conveys meaning through juxtaposition of objects themselves, concrete objects doing all the work of forming experience. Nothing else is necessary: no commentary, no fantastical intensifications. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is the paradigm example of an imagist poem: a simple juxtaposition of particular concrete objects arranged to interact with each other (see Christensen 1979, 162ff). "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough." The first line is about the faces of people in a subway station. Their arrangement is, as the second line points out, in the same form as petals on the bough of a fruit tree. Four important further observations can be made about imagism on the basis of this poem.

First, imagist poems, preoccupied with the objects themselves rather than any commentary on those objects, tend to be short. "In a Station of the Metro," although in the final product only two lines, was originally over ninety. Many of my poems have been whittled down in this way. Take, for instance, my revision of the following poem: "When I look at her / next to me at dawn, / I focus on her eye. / Rolls of lid skin / threaten to spill / over her lashes. / And yet, see how her ball moves: / back forth, up down, / readjusting like a hummingbird / hovering around a flower. / We are fleshy

robots.” In the final form, I reduced this poem to three lines: “eyeballs hummingbirds / hovering flowers— / we are fleshy robots.”

Second, especially when informed by Pound’s own statements of imagist poetics, “In a Station of the Metro” can be seen as indicating a major philosophical difference between imagism and symbolism. Whereas the symbolist tends to see reality as formless, undifferentiated, and meaningless independent of the classifying mind and tends to regard the mind as responsible for imposing form (see Hart Crane 2004), the imagist believes that there would be differentiation and meanings in reality even if consciousness—with all its interests and concerns—were not on the scene. There would be forms in nature even if man were not on the scene to create, as a result of his peculiar interests and concerns, a Heideggerian clearing where certain things can be foregrounded and other things be backgrounded, where things take on their shapes for the first time.

Third, “In a Station of the Metro” indicates that the imagist poem, in its ideal, is not just about painting a clear picture, unencumbered by commentary and abstractions. It is also about illustrating how forms repeat throughout nature (Pound 2004): the drain water vortex and the tornado vortex; the phonographic record and the rings of Saturn. And this is precisely what happens in the poem: the form that random and lonely commuters yield is that of radial blossoms on a fruit tree. I write this sort of poem often. Take, for instance, my following two line untitled work: “eyespot on butterfly wings: / the red cape in a bullfight.” In ideal imagistic fashion, short and sweet, this poem is meant to bring to the fore the kinships between things, how one spirit moves, if you will,

from one moment of materiality to another, inhabiting both. Nature thus becomes depicted as a constellation of distinct fragments united by the passage of a form through them. Although Pound's fixation on the divinity in all reveals his medievalist heart, his imagism is not simply a return to symbolism prior to its grand turn inward. This is because the divinity in question for Pound is impersonal. With imagism we are thus dealing more with a sort of animism common to primitive cultures: the forms of nature are themselves the divine (Christensen 1991, 72).

Fourth, the best imagist poems are the ones that report cases where the phenomena found to instantiate one and the same given form are as opposed to each other as can be. Hence, a reporting of the instantiation of the vortex process in both a tornado and a hurricane is much weaker than the reporting of the instantiation of the same pattern in a crowd of commuters and in fruit tree petals. In the former case, we are dealing with two windstorm phenomena. Such phenomena are much more explicitly closer than human faces and petals. An improvement upon the first, then, would be to juxtapose the vortex pattern of the tornado with, say, a spinning school of sea fish. The role of the imagination, for the imagist, is not to see itself in nature or to see how things of nature reflect the imagination (and especially the poet's emotions) or to impose order from without. Rather, it is to find, and then capture in words, the coherence of nature, the order that nature dictates to the open mind. Imagination, then, is not an organ for imposing form but for perceiving form, and the best imaginations, according to the imagist poetic, are those that can see coherence between parts of nature that seem so at odds.

Ted Kooser (1939)

Kooser, one of the most important influences on my work, is a contemporary master of the imagist ideal of drawing unexpected associations between drastically different phenomena, and thereby showing the familiar to be exotic—and vice versa. Like Pound, Kooser is addicted to the “rush” of highlighting kinships (Kooser 2001, 16-17), repeated patterns, that testify to the “impersonal” “universal order” (2005, 336). Like Pound, Kooser endeavors to unlock, bring to attention, overlooked features of items, events, or processes by way of surrounding these items, events, or processes with others that, despite being different, possess the features too (see Baker 2005, 345). Flip open any one of his books and you will find Kooser busy disclosing kinships. In “The Salesman” we see the kinship between stockings and batwings. In “A Rainy Morning” we see the kinship between the woman pumping the wheels of her wheelchair and the pianist bending forward to strike the keys.

Kooser, however, does not focus only on small instances of kinship: stockings and batwings (and the like). Although his association-making gift has been widely noted (see especially see Allen 1983, 175; Barillas 2006, 216; Hansen; Low 2005; Mason 2002, 190; Stillwell 1999, 99), what often goes overlooked is that like Robert Frost (1874-1963), whose famous “The Silken Tent” develops a protracted comparison between a woman and a tent standing in a summer field, Kooser is a master of the conceit: a complex and protracted comparison between apparently drastically different things. A paradigm example of his mastery of the conceit is “Etude” (from *Weather Central*), a poem that he describes as his strongest and most representative work (Kooser

2005; 2008). Over the course of the poem, Kooser highlights shared features between the blue heron fishing in the cattails and the blue-suit at his business desk writing a love letter: both are armed, for example, with sharp tools (pencil or beak) in their stealthy pursuit of the catch. Kooser's facility with conceit is so refined, in fact, that on occasion he will extend a metaphor into other poems. Still apparently possessing its lover features, for example, the heron makes another *Weather Central* appearance in "A Poetry Reading," where it finally catches the fish from "Etude" (see Stillwell 1999, 100).

As I noted above, I often revise my work to better meet the ideal of imagism. When thinking of this ideal, I have Kooser, along with William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), in mind more often than Pound. These poets, in my mind, better follow through on the imagist goal of directness and accessibility. Indeed, Kooser complains that with poets like Pound and Eliot, who use difficult words and exotic allusions, one often needs an encyclopedia nearby to figure out what is being said. Pound's *Cantos*, with their obscure references and languages, is a paradigm example of what Kooser is talking about. Kooser himself does not do such intricate research when writing poems (Low 2005, 396), and the chief principle of his poetics is to convey ideas in the simplest of terms, so that the words do not get in the way of what is being presented, so that surface features do not distract the reader (Kooser 2005, 341; 2008). Illustrating this imagist point in an imagist way, in his book *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* Kooser makes the association between reading a poem and looking at coral through a glass bottom boat: language that draws attention to itself takes the reader out of the world being presented just as the sudden dropping of sunglasses on the glass of the glass bottom boat brings the

glass itself into center attention, thus shattering the illusion of being underwater. In putting a primacy on such transparency, Kooser sees himself more aligned with Williams than Pound (see Allen 1983, 175; Brummels 2005, 348; Dacey 2005, 354; Holden 1999; Nathan and Nathan 2005, 414; Mason 2005, 10; Stillwell 1999, 98; 2004, 404): both wed literary and colloquial language; both admire the visual arts; both tend to appeal directly to the senses rather than to the intellect with abstract concepts; both take serious the mimetic enterprise of bringing into relief everyday objects and happenings, be it a farmhouse or the act of ice skating, with free-verse poetry sparse and accessible.

Now, even though I often have Kooser on my shoulder, there are likely to be several inaccessible moments in this collection. Most of these are likely a function of my lack of skill and time to revise. That said, however, I think there can be too much an emphasis on accessibility for poetry's own good; the imagist line as expressed through Kooser, when taken to the extreme, can become too exclusionary. I say this not because I believe that accessible poetry cannot deal with difficult concepts. I agree with Kooser that Dickinson's poetry, although clear at the level of expression, concerns deep matters that require rereading and meditation (Kooser 2008). Nevertheless, another aspect of poetry is to see the world in new ways and one of the ways to do that is to invent new terms or use rare ones (for example, "prostisciutto" in my poem "Ekstasis") or use, say, metonyms (for example, "slobber" for dog in "Ekstasis"). Such terms, being unusual, inevitably—and often quite purposely—call attention to themselves. The same goes for unorthodox placement of words on the page or unusual sentence constructions and line breaks. Unlike Kooser, who calls for the elimination of "peculiarities of usage, grammar

or punctuation” that ask the reader “to puzzle over the surface” (Kooser 1999, 439), I am open to a variety of styles and approaches, and many times in my own work I try to find a middle ground between these two desiderata: language and other surface features that draw no attention to themselves, and language and other surface features that are innovative.

Another reason that Kooser is such a particular influence for me, someone with a strong imagistic inclination, is that he welcomes emotion into his work. I mentioned that a threat faced by symbolism is focusing so much on the interior that the world gets forgotten. Imagism faces its own threat: facticity-obsessed poetry devoid of emotion. Late Charles Olson (1910-1970) seems guilty of this, writing mere notations of the time of sunrise on a particular day—wandering, unsure of where to go to next. Despite being frequently on the verge of lapsing into sentimentality (see Cryer 2005; Galbraith 2005, 184; Gioia 1983, 90; Holden 1999; Low 2005, 397; Welch 2005, 435), Kooser manages, I think, to stay true to imagism without sacrificing emotion. Although he does not think that gushiness is a good thing in most cases, he says that one should not be afraid of taking the risk. “I tend to be someone who writes with a great deal of sentiment. I’m willing to take that risk at a time when people are suspicious of sentimental poetry. But I think that is what I need to do as a poet” (2008). Interesting to note is that one of Kooser’s main strategies to avoid lapsing into sentimentality in his poems of deep emotion is precisely to stay close to the imagist ideal of understatement and reporter-like distance. “I am moved,” he says, “by poems in which strong feelings are present, but are held or controlled by language which is slightly detached and restrained” (1983, 104).

By describing highly emotional situations in a tone of detachment and/or with some form of understatement, the idea is that the result will be a balance between mawkishness and stingy-heartedness.

4. Coexistence?

These two separate traditions in American literature, symbolism and imagism, have been at loggerheads throughout the 20th century. I am hopeful, however, that there can be some sort of peaceful coexistence between them. Several things, I think, indicate that such coexistence is possible and valuable.

First, what attracts the attention even of the photographer, the pure imagist, is going to be a function of the perspective of the photographer: his moods, speeds, concerns, interests, and what have you. Therefore, what he “reports,” what he captures, what he juxtaposes, is going to reflect in some sense the creature he is. And one of the possible ways of approaching such a work is in considering what such juxtaposition may say about the reporter. What does the fact that Pound thought of radial blossoms when he saw subway faces tell us about Pound? Of course, it is the symbolist who stresses that what one reports reflects who one is. This does not mean, however (and here is where the imagist sentiment comes in), that what stands forth to the author given his interest and concerns is not really there independent of the classifying mind. There are, I believe at least, recurrent forms in the world as it is in itself. Of course, it may be that which ones stand out have something to do with the perspective of the perceiving subject to which they stand out. However, just because it takes a certain antennae to pick up certain

signals, that does not mean that those signals are not there. Just because it takes certain interests congenial to certain forms to register those forms, that does not mean that the realm independent of the perceiving subject is just a homogenous plenum, and that only when man steps on the scene is the space opened for things to enter into and stand forth for the first time.

Second, I believe that things have ways and natures independent of the classifying mind and that it is an admirable task for the poet to report those ways as clearly, as exactly, as richly, as objectively as he can—giving the facts and only the facts, not the intentions of the subjects in the picture, not commentary on what they are doing, not daydreaming and fantasizing and speculation about what is going on. However, it is clear that humans do invest their spaces with meaning. Although I do not believe that every form one finds in reality is a projection of the mind, which is why I stand against symbolism in its “ideal” form, humans without question do project meanings onto things. That one projects one’s very self into things is clear in that one can feel violated after discovering that a guest has rummaged merely through one’s spice cabinet (not to mention one’s panty drawer). Just as objective forms are worthwhile topics of poetry, things as they are stained by the human are as well. It is important to know, to have depicted, the snowcapped mountain as it stands for different emotional creatures. Putting a taboo on depicting the snowcapped mountain as it has been syringed with significance by a perceiver is just as nonsensically one-sided as putting a taboo on depicting the snowcapped mountain stripped of any significance projected upon it by the classifying mind. To speak by analogy, surely we would miss much if all we had was

impressionist painting and no photography, but we would also miss much if we did not have impressionist painting. The ideal imagist attitude and the ideal symbolist attitude thus seem to complement, complete, each other. Each poetic in isolation cuts off from capture important aspects of reality. This limitation and weakness is repaired when the poetries are married in some sense. With symbolism, the poet is and ought to be looking for signs of himself in the world, rather than looking at the world for its own sake like the imagist. I do not see why we cannot have it both ways, though. Why should we be disallowed to look at the world for its own sake sometimes and then look at it for what it tells us about ourselves on the other hand?

My minimal point here about the compatibility of the two poetries is evident when we attend to the role of words like “merely” and “only” in defining them. Symbolists see the world of nature as a screen reflecting back the state of the perceiving self. But that need not mean that they see the world of nature as a *mere* screen reflecting back the state of the perceiving self. Some symbolists no doubt do, but that is not a requirement of being a symbolist. The requirement is seeing things as representing something else (such as the self); it is not seeing things as *merely* representing something else (such as the self). Now, since the world of nature need not be for the symbolist a *mere* means to the end of the autonomous self, it is possible for a symbolist to recognize the autonomy of nature. Since it is possible for the symbolist to recognize the autonomy nature, and since the imagist orientation is called for if nature has autonomy, symbolism need not reject the imagist orientation. The same goes from the other direction. Imagists hold that there are forms to be found that are not a function of the classifying mind. But this need not

commit them to the view that the *only* forms to be found are not a function of the classifying mind. Since it is possible for the imagist to recognize mind-dependent forms (and, generally, to recognize that the mind invests things with meaning), and since the symbolist orientation is called for if there are mind-dependent forms, imagism need not reject the symbolist orientation.

Third, it may very well be that symbolism is all-too-enamored of Europe and its (Poe-inspired) flight into interiority. It may be that the imagist poetic, in contrast, is the poetic of those who have declared themselves colonials no longer. But soon after its independence, right from the start in fact, America was at least theoretically open to contagion from outsiders. It is the place to which all can come. To say that imagism is the American poetic, as some might be inclined to do, is only a half-truth. And the dark side of this one-sided truth is that, while it may have inspired us to get off the European teat, it has now set itself up as force of exclusion if it is indeed saying that symbolism is not welcome. If there is going to be any American poetic it has to be the poetic that is inclusive of other poetics—and yes, even if those other poetics are European (or African or so on). To be sure, the anti-symbolist statements of the imagist may just be hyperbolic. And can you blame the imagist for this? The dominant poetic in this country, the dominant force of exclusion, was and is symbolism. Sometimes one must fight fire with fire. In war, honesty can be detrimental. One fighting a struggle for independence does not want to hear about the good points of the other side. It is as unhealthy for them as hearing about how the struggle does not matter anyway because one is going to die. Plights get undermined by such thoughts. True as they may be, these truths can be

dangerous to action, to life. Those on either side of the poetics war may endorse such a line. I am for inclusion, however. Just as they have a stake, I have a stake. Relative to my interests, honesty *is* helpful here: it undermines the blind resolve of the warring sides who, for ideological reasons, do not want to hear about any commonality between them, or about how they may complete each other.

The poems in this collection do not just relay the what and the how of happenings. Many times they are also after the why, and mainly this is a psychological why. Insofar as they are thus prone to editorialize, instead of merely report, I find a friend in the symbolist poetic. Is not the asking of why, and the overlaying of interpretations on top of the facts, appropriate for poetry? I am not saying that all poems should do this. It just seems wrong to close off the option. That said, it is usually going to be better, I think, if the poet uses nothing but concretia juxtaposed in certain ways to suggest the interpretation. Insofar as I am open to this difficult task, I find a friend in the imagist. There are limits to this, however. How can you replace questions in a poem with a concrete fact? Surely we should be allowed to have questions. At least sometimes questions in a poem are okay. My poem “Darkness Blocked in the Light of the Bug Zapper” asks, seemingly permissibly, “Do the fans truly like his work they wine talk?” And what about commands? Surely you can indicate commands with images, but the command will only be indirect. It will not have the moving power of the final line of Rilke’s Apollo poem: “you must change your life.” Moreover, how are you going to express complex theoretical concepts? Surely they are allowed in poetry. How are you going to deal with complex psychological phenomena when speaking through images is

much more suited to external life? There are forms and things that repeat in the psychological world and, although one can try to use pictures to suggest these things, this is difficult and limiting. Also, how are you going to pull off narrative poetry? In addition, and this is a big concern of mine (although I likely need to get over it), when you speak in images you are opening up to an amazing amount of possible interpretations. So, when you are just positing one image after the other, how are you going to obviate unintended readings and, in effect, be clear?

Of course, the ideal imagist will say, “all this may be difficult, but it is a worthwhile challenge.” However, assuming that a pure imagist poem can be pulled off about any topic without leaving things, for example, too open for the reader, the treatment of the thing may very well be less direct than it otherwise would be in more ideational, less imagistic language. To appropriately guide the reader using *only* images may require so many qualifying images that the poem gets too bloated, too loquacious, which is against the spirit of imagism. If one’s goal is accessibility and concentration, making poems where the language does not get in the way of, distract us from, what is being presented, then surely the use of an idea in common parlance is less jarring and distracting, gets less in the way of what is trying to be reported, than actually using a whole bunch of images to try to bring the point home. Moreover, might it not be aesthetically worthwhile to intermix ideational with imagist language? Not only does such a mix reflect that we are the type of creatures that both picture-think *and* reason, but it also can serve to break the monotony in the same way as can varying sentence length in a piece of writing. Juxtaposing “abstractions” and images can make each more

sweet (although Pound seems to deny this: 1935, 4-5). It does not feel right to be so rule-oriented, where abstractions are always to be avoided (but of course Pound himself said do not take the tenets of imagism as dogma: 1935). Why can't an inclusion of abstract concepts here or there a few times in an otherwise purely imagist poem ever be good? Might it not make both sides further stand out?

Now, it may be that one can never succeed in achieving a strict fusion between these two warring, perhaps mutually exclusive, poetics. The best we might hope for is their coexistence and working together. If there is any temple wherein both are brought close together and still allowed to thrive, the most promising candidate might just be the New York "deep image" movement of the late 50s and early 60s. Its originators, Jerome Rothenberg and Robert Kelly, intended to create a space for poetry that, despite being direct and even reporter-like in expression, was focused on "the vast resources of inner life" and born from the deep wilderness of feeling—the sort of poetry, I would say, that Kooser likes to write (Rothenberg 1961). As Beth Fleischman explains, "Rothenberg coined the term 'deep image' to describe a concrete detail drawn from the poet's unconscious" (1980, 214). In a 1960 letter to Creeley Rothenberg himself describes deep image poetry as intending to allow the impressionist and photographer, involved feeling and distant intellect, to work together.

So there are really two things here, conceivable as two realities: (1) the empirical world of the naïve realists [or, in other words, the photographers] . . . (what Buber and the Hasidim call "shell" or "husk"), and (2) the hidden (floating) world [of the impressionists]: the "kernel" or "sparks." The first world both hides and leads into the second . . . and the deep image is at once husk and kernel . . . and the poem is the movement between them. (1981, 57)

If I am right to identify the imagist's subject-matter with the husk, that is, with that which is independent of the classifying mind, and the symbolist's with the kernel, that is, with that which is native to the imagination, then notice that Rothenberg himself—with his talk here of the deep image being unity of husk and kernel, “two-worlds-in-one” (1961)—seems hopeful that a pure synthesis (a sort of “feeling intellect,” to use Wordsworth's phrase) can be achieved. This may be an exaggeration on his part. In the least, however, he thinks there can be coexistence between imagism and symbolism, a vacillation back and forth between them in one oeuvre, collection, or even individual poem.

5. About this Collection

My collection of poems is concerned with “the thousand blue / story fragments we tell ourselves / each day to keep the world underfoot” (Kooser 2003, 18). It is concerned, more or less, with the protective atmosphere of illusion that all living things have surrounding them, the delusions required in order to act and get by, but that can also stifle our improvement and make us atrophy. It is concerned, in other words, with vulnerability and resilience, self-deceit and wishful thinking, and one of the last things ever to die: hope. My title, “Naked Men Frying Bacon Stand Sideways,” speaks to this concern. Are not such vulnerable men, standing there angled away from the pops of grease, men of wishful thinking hope?

CHAPTER II

POEMS

AA Meeting

The hand kept at its drum,
quaking the entire church hall
it seemed. I scowled left
to give a hint, but this
to no avail. For me it was
only sober day five,

and my own hand shot out at his,
stilling its chair rap. At once
I was stunned by my action.
Eyes in the circle homed in
to the site of touch
and I wanted to use right then.

But this was not the hand
of a child being disciplined.
It neither cowered nor shook free.
It held my own in embrace
the whole meeting through,
and I spoke for the first time.

LWF

Having always said she's not one
to stand for chivalry display,
she reaches over the cowboy
holding the door for her
and grabs its edge so that he
may enter. She stays the course,
despite already being late,
when the man, brimming
with as much violence as her,
insists he will not budge.

Yet, just before, she found herself
compelled—as if going through
a stick up—to take the bus seat
offered by a black man, palms
strike surfaces for a match.
In his residual warmth, fear—
unconscious—turned to that joy,
often teary, one would get seeing
a cat groom the bird that rode in
perched on its black head.

Coupling

Although they now think nothing
of their Vaudeville shows (having learned
that this is just what couples do),
never did they tell each other that at first—
new at socializing as one—each felt dirty
performing the same stories for fresh faces,
the joint routines—down to bodily gestures
and word stresses—varying but a smidgen
each night. They'd clutch each other
for example, when he'd mention
an embarrassing moment at dinner,

and she'd conclude, "Let's just say
we'll not be showing our faces there again."
And as the belly laughter died down
he'd cut in, "Speak for yourself, you drunk bastard.
You were the problem! Not me."
And she'd jab his ribs with an elbow,
and he'd go "Ah!" in feigned pain on the couch
while she'd point her eye up to a far corner
with a bottom lip bite like "I'm a bad girl"—
the crowd in turn, aware that it has a role too,
surpassing its prior laugh-o-meter score.

Dying Wisdom

KS lesions purpling most of him,
the manager demands that he shirt up
so as not to frighten the motel guests.

He asks his lover, haggard as well there
on the poolside beach chair, face worm-woven,
what the point of going on like this is—

movie nights, massages, shopping, haircuts.
“What you don’t seem to see,” he responds,
“is that your question—it applies to all.”

The Stage in Question

It’s the stage where you take
your time through the junk mail
for what each item has to say,

 where you keep
finding yourself buying
the expressions of care.

That Siren Making Here such a Home

The horse reeking of his beer and his piss
clops off from parked at the curb.

Nuzzled into this city block corner,
the man raises his tin for nothing—
up to sordid figures of neon,
up to eyes glistening above adamant feet.

He has to piss bad again when he thinks
the old empowering, the old
I'm just garnering fuel here—

that siren making here such a home.

I'd Bet My Life That There Are Others in the Universe

Who has ever bet their life on faith,
not just at the time performing
the ultimate gesture of control,
and of lifelong insecurity
about not being believed—itself
but a gesture of control?

You say “Why many,” knowing
that you yourself say in times alone
“May I be stricken dead if not.”
But the audience before a rearing
of such control and insecurity
can be more than just the other.

Friday Night Fights

At the ringside toc-toc
the yeller of “Go to work!”
called out “Five seconds!”
She balked right at the end a bit, but
it had already shot through
her second-tier vicinity.

Perhaps feeling that fumbling with
“Uh, I mean Ten seconds!”
would have more of us realize
her mistake than already did
(and might have even drew forth laughs
at least from the children around her),
she didn’t correct herself, keeping up
her know-it-all confidence.

Nevertheless, her next move showed
her need for rectification. Or
perhaps she just wanted to indicate
to the kids, who by that round
knew what the toc-toc meant
from her prior screaming, that this time
she was privy to some nuance
about which they had yet to learn.

Whatever it was, she pulled the trick
of counting down from five slow:
“Five!”—one Mississippi, two Mississippi—
“Four!”—one Mississippi, two Mississippi.
The arrival at one still preceded the bell—
but not by much, which is okay
because the timekeepers are humans.

Elevating Frustration

The new father clearing tree limbs
strewn throughout his lawn by the gale
could figure out ways to unhook one
from the tangle of others. But sometimes
one needs to go at them as a brute,
shoving and jerking, getting all
worked up. The threat of self-injury
makes this bloody show akin to tugging
at the drawer jammed from within
by the tangle of spatulas and tongs.

Dad's Resume

At first, typing out my father's resume
was simply to help him out of the forest tent,
toothless and rotting in the elements.
It was to make him competitive: no one
pencils in misspelled credentials anymore.

But as I accentuated the positives
and dug up past jobs and even "volunteering,"
my gift became much greater. I knew he'd let
this professional looking compilation
tell him that his life wasn't worthless.

The Printout

The fetish—a route / to recapturing the past?

It was a heart-pounding, last minute rush
with which the boy was well familiar.
He washed his water repellent hand
as best he could, the sweet ache now an echo.
He set the petroleum jelly jar
back into the bathroom cabinet.
He stuffed the electrical-tape-wound sleeve
of banana deep in the kitchen garbage.
He ran the roll of that black tape
back down to the basement workbench.
He buried the panties that strapped his face,
just right for nostril tokens of the tart spot,
back into his mother's dirty-hamper.
He shot to his room upon the muffler's scrape
and recommenced his penny-rolling project.

The windows of his bedroom rattled
when the door slammed behind her,
startling him even though he expected it.
She placed her keys on the coffee table
to find, right there on the worn path
of the living room carpet, an image
pixilated on computer paper
of black thighs, spread-eagle, onto which
the hyperventilating masked marauder
had just moments before, squatting over
in ache, pumped out a diaphanous payload
that stank of starch and pool, and that cured
the ash of the so-called "Nubian Slut"—
a result of matte paper through cheap printer.

"What the fuck is this?!" she shrieked.
He jumped up from his pennies, possessed
by the fear that he'd been found out. But
by the time he was opening the door,
confident that he just had to have covered
all his tracks, he was more so possessed
by the twisted need to know, that if he had
by some crazy chance been found out,
what evidence there could possibly be,
what he could've possibly overlooked.

“What the *fuck* is this?!” she shrieked.
Clutching the printout at the top in a fist,
she thrust the gleaming gorgon head out
in his direction arm’s length, turning him
to stone there in the threshold, his expiry
dribbling coagulated to her feet.

Onset of Death

There was a sharp pain in my chest
and a lapse in my heartbeat. Faced
with hyper panic at the thought
that this was it, my instinct was not
to canine into the woods, but
to curl up next to my wife, there
on the bed, slow and soft in breath.

Were she anyone else, the goal
would be to hide my trial. Why
embarrassed? Well, only if it proves
to be a false alarm would it be
embarrassing; and don’t we hope,
and convince ourselves to believe,
that it is, indeed, a false alarm?

Embarrassment indicates disbelief
that this truly *is* the onset of death—
the start of something that won’t relent
the way it had before, when
change of position would take away
the pain, and a cough would restore
the regularity of the beat.

Regarding a Relationship Out in San Francisco

Noticing his inability to help himself
from digging furtive glances
into paraplegic crotch

was one thing.

But wheeling in on him
erupting to paraplegic porn
had me fear the true depth of his love.

Sonenclar

“Sometimes the subject / is not to be centered / in the viewfinder.”
—“A Defense of the Samuel Beckett Bridge (and Pam Grier’s Nipple Placement)”

Fourteen in angel white, the singer
raises her toneless arms with a note—
remarkable for those rosebud lips—
drawn out for the finale flourish.

Against the satin drapes behind her,
one arm of the resultant trident—
her up-screaming face its middle prong—
reaches up higher than the other.

Rising from such a voice, however,
somehow this spacing asymmetry—
waning with the waning of the note—
is as it should be: of the human.

Yorkies: Diary Entries 1-14-2013—1-16-2013

I. In the Secret of Night

Through their bars they watch me
suck marrow from bones.

So many must feel
that lower-jaw-extending urge
to torment such pathetics,
swooned by the thought
of lowering their cages,
rock weighted, into the sea.
And yet so many do
only what they can, just enough
to keep on with their lives:

jabbing at them with fork and butter knife ,
face reddening with each thrust
thwarted by bars, by slippings of the jab;

feeding them pepper sauce and vodka
in their state of forced hunger and thirst,
their kibble dumped in the woods
for the sake of the wife;

running them, mere leash weights,
through brambles and thorn bushes,
so insistent on continuous top speed
that the leashes strip finger creases of skin;

rubbing the little one's face,
bangs over its pathetic eyes,
too hard too quick into the tile
of urine and shit;

hammer throwing that little one
over the house, the windup
drawn out for centrifugal torture
in the heart-pounding secret of night.

II. Hidden Protest

Is it how pathetic they are,

how helpless, dependent
that at least partially gets us going?

White oppression had blacks so pathetic
the mere sight of them must have brought out
that lower jaw and that heart pumping
of sexual transgression. Might the whippings—
and yes, even the sea bottom sendings—
have been a hidden protest against white oppression?

III. *Mirror*

What makes it easier
for us to pop chicken heads off
with such a nonchalant twist
is how stupid the chickens are,
how easily instinct leads them
to peck down the trail of feed
we lay down as lure.

“Look at this wobbly fuck.
Pathetic piece of shit.”

They remind us of ourselves,
plagued as we are by the same finitude,
by the same ignorance. This similarity
makes us sick. Wringing their necks
is to punish them for their finitude
and yet also to smash the mirrors
they hold up to us.

IV. *Incontinence*

A sign of the incontinence of the abuser—
his feeling bad about following through
on that urge to hammer throw the pup
and his knowing the double guilt of staying the course
after having been moved by its wrongness—
is that he locks it away in the closet.
He does not want to be caught again
in the swoon: out of sight out of mind.
Otherwise he'd just go around
with his cooking, cleaning, and so on
just itching for the abused to provide an excuse.

V.

Who knows how many hidden horrors
have brought people to Christ
and keep bringing them back
with higher frequencies than
New Year's resolutions.

Finding Christ is good
for not having to confront
the beings you did wrong.
But you can't confront them all.

Ballerina Spalding

The afroed double-bassist of jazz.
So slender and adorable, yes.

But were you to get as close
as you dream, you'd be struck

by that monstrosity had by all
tenacious in their craft.

In her case: calloused dwarf nubs
for fingers; the toes of a ballerina.

Snuggling into Logos

The straw-haired professor, dizzy
and short of breath, stops his words, worried
he's about to die in front of the class.
Mouth-breathing from years of pipe,
his hand locates the desk's insignia:
"LIFETIME." His index finger strokes
the letters topographic against
the surrounding recessed rectangle.
So forceful and thorough does it rub,
back and forth, that some of the dirt lifts
from the desert of these letter-plateaus.
Rubbing, he hopes this won't be it.
And then he stops.

It was not merely the topography
that made his finger go there.
And one does not fully capture why
he continued to rub by noting
how repetition soothes: the child
rock rocking in a corner.
That the topography was a *logo*
was important too—and simply that
it was a word in general. What would you do
if you felt the advance in the bathroom?
Wouldn't you go for the toothpaste?
Wouldn't that be, for you, a buoy?

You know how nurses tell old patients
to get up, read the paper, go for a walk,
and do other such things they used to do.
The nurses may not express it this way,
but this keeps the patients attached
to the continuity of their lives. This way
they don't give up to that other continuity,
that other flow. And since people are always
surrounded by Logos, turning to them
can help handle the imminence. Perhaps
the Logos will soothe better than family. Even
veteran sailors stay close to the boat
when they bathe in the sea.

Ligne de Fuite

For Gilles Deleuze

Wind that bellows the drapes over me
no longer has me catch my breath.

Jump out to have the air fill me.
Jump out to stop it from having to.

As with Christmas Cards

In addition to the self-deception drive,
mean-spiritedness, often secret, explains
our feeling so calm before the anxious:
we're trying to arouse the envy of the afflicted.

And thus we disown fear of death
before the dying, booting their faces
into the quicksand; and thus we mass mail
Christmas cards, families in Sunday's best.

Guzzle Real Quick or Push Aside

For family snapshots
he'd make sure his beer
was out of the frame

as if future family viewers
wouldn't think "drunk" anyway.

Principium Individuationis

To evade the death connotation
recall that urge to stay in bed
those dark mornings of storm.

Say it was the urge to forsake
keeping the jigsaw together
(though that would be a lie).

The Find

One figures that in the first moment
he'd be excited to catch the shot
of his mother's foaming gash,
shaved there and everything.

But as soon as he entered the field
of onion, he knew the mass on the bed
to be lifeless, leaving him
a boy alone at fourteen.

Only after did he start
milking himself on the area,
driven by his age—driven
to snuggle away from the truth.

Fear and Indolence

Hear that horrid click click click
of your wife's nail-biting
as she lies next to you around midnight.
Recall the suggestion—
“Apply there, Larry's Liquors”—
that she voiced while waiting
for her friend to get off work,
a friend that you two were taking along
to the party thrown tonight
by the Woman's Studies department.
Worry that she played this suggestion off
as a joke at the time
because your caught-off-guard reaction
likely meant you'd embarrass her there
by sulking the whole evening
if she didn't make clear to you
that it was in fact a joke.

In vain, try to shake these thoughts
by getting up. Undress. After all,
she agreed, remind yourself,
that you'd pack for the move to Pittsburg
at the end of the summer, and that you'd do
all the cooking and cleaning in the meantime.
Lie back down on the air-mattress.
Supposing what you wish you weren't
(even were it true)—that she holds
the dreaded thought— inquire, “What's wrong?”

Hear only the above apartment's washer
vibrate the windows. Mislaid yourself (willfully?)
in the memory of plugging the seams between the panes
with red playdough to muffle the rattling.
Regain yourself (willfully?)
in guilt over how this summer
is going to be like the last few:
only her working a job.
You already asked, but solicit again the “Yes” with,
“That was fun tonight, huh?”
Wait a moment after her distant response
before asking “Whatchya thinkin'?”

Just as the spin-cycle stops, long
to prove yourself right about knowing
what thought hovers behind that nail-focused face.
“Tell me—whatever it is.” Yet hope,
and begin slightly believing, her response—
“Nothing”—indicates just that.
Don't just believe it, though,
goes your feeling, made explicit; *probe and unveil*
lest you torment both her and you.
Just then, catch yourself hoping
her response was a lie; catch yourself longing
to be saddened. Finally, nudge her
with “Sumpin’s wrong.”

Just as she indicates she’s about to speak,
clench your teeth for the major blow.
With closed eyes, repent that longing
to be saddened. Hear her reveal
what you feared—but didn’t entirely believe—
she had in mind and was going to reveal:
“We agreed you wouldn’t work,
but I think you should.” Recognize at once
that here’s a chance to conquer fear,
that she’s motivating you to fight
against your life-long enemy: cowardice.
An instant later, though, succumb
to the numb, stomach-sinking, detached,
this-isn’t-happening feeling.

Remain stunned by the fact
that what you feared might be on her mind
was actually on her mind.
Screw yourself all up with the worry
that she didn’t have this issue
on her mind all along, but spoke as if she did
only after picking up from your nagging that this
is what you were worried was on her mind.
Realize, in turn, that even if it was
on her mind all along, you still
should’ve kept your mouth shut:
getting her to voice it not only makes
it tough to convince yourself
that she might not have it on her mind,
it also hinders the undertaking

of keeping the issue out of mind.
For the person voicing it, your wife,
knows that you have heard
and (unlike the bearded guy
in the starving children commercial
who'll disappear with the press of a button)
there's no escaping her presence—
the presence before which
you must handle the news,
the presence that'll be watching
you handle the news,
the presence that you feel you can't let down.

Contrary to your want for this all
to have never happened, or at least for it all
to go away, notice commenting with a tone of pride
about having guessed right: “I *knew* that was the matter”—
this not just to say something
to fill the already too-long silence,
as well as to make it her turn to speak,
as well as of course to flaunt
that you knew what was up,
but also to strike your own self with a blow
insofar as with these words you're acknowledging it
as something significant enough
actually to be “the matter” with her,
which is a blow that will increase your distress
(something you unconsciously want to do
since your usual aim out of such binds
is to receive pity from her for making you so distressed).
Since she offers no words in response,
words to give you at least some respite
from your downward spiral, feel panic
begin flowing in. Sit there, feeling panic build,
waiting for an idea about how to respond
to what she revealed, to what was barely tolerable
being merely *thought* by her, to what
you hoped would never extend beyond her mind.

After a few endless moments of silence,
leave the bedroom without explanation.
Notice that your pain increases
when she doesn't stop you or ask you
for an explanation, since this means—

well, at least take it to mean—
that she's not going to take it back,
that the issue is not up for debate,
and that she doesn't care if you're upset.
Not hoping to find anything online,
search "jobs in Nashville."
Work yourself up when you're feeble effort
unearths nothing. Feel that urge to rebel, that urge
arising anytime a situation becomes such that
it exacts something of you.

Walk past the room she's in,
giving her another chance to do something
to make this all better or even just
to say anything so that you can be
at least temporarily distracted
from what you're feeling, distracted
by having to concentrate on her words
not only in order to comprehend them,
but especially in order to find in them
anything that can provide some hope
for the possibility of a line of flight.
When she does nothing, says nothing,
picture yourself punching a wall, breaking a door,
throwing a flower pot out the window.
Lacking the energy and the trigger, and knowing
that you lack any hint of righteousness,
don't do any such violent lashing out;
violent lashing out in these circumstances
will provoke anger, not pity. Just lie down
in the closet of the guest-bedroom like you do.
Numb, want out of this.

Return upon hearing another load start.
Complain, "There's nothing!"
Keep prodding her in subtle ways
for a response—any response.
And as she dozes, having never spoken,
spoil for a quarrel despite your own exhaustion.
Don't let this go unresolved to plague you tomorrow!
Throughout the night, offer suggestions
you know she'll dislike since she wants to see you
on her nights and weekends off:
"Maybe a night watchman or weekend retail."

Feel that this tactic to punish her for speaking
the never-to-be-spoken is ineffectual,
especially since she's likely asleep.
And know that it's sick, that you're sick—
sick not only because money is needed for the move
and you working would be fair since she's working,
but because you're scared to do
what it takes to develop, to enhance.

Wake up. Try remaining asleep
like a drunk does when he knows
he'll be facing a day without alcohol.
Be depressed today in order to earn pity
from yourself and her.
Keep verbalizing your worry
about what job you can get. Finally, go,
both of you, to the Kaplan website
to search for a position as a tutor,
this being her first engagement with you
since the revelation. Hate her
for helping you search as opposed
to doing something such as bargaining with you
(as in fact you've been doing with her in your head:
"I'll massage you every day
in addition to cooking, cleaning, and packing
if you just take back your demand,
if you just make the universe rewind
to before you voiced your demand.")
When you see that applicants need to audition
for the instructor-position, yell
"I don't even fuckin' agree with this bullshit company"
and kick the shelved LSAT books
from last summer's studying,
not trying to keep covered, to your surprise,
that your fear of the audition is the reason.

Lie down in bed. Roll off with a thud.
Swoon and moan on the floor. Go back into bed.
When she finally states, "You don't have to work,"
which she does perhaps after letting into her mind
the fact that cooking, cleaning, and packing counts
as a real job (a point that you didn't bring up
because you didn't believe that it did
and you knew that you guys needed the money),

be happy and saddened at once—happy
because she finally let you off the hook,
thus taking off some of the pressure spurring you
to challenge yourself, and sad
for various reasons, such as that her statement
doesn't change the fact that she wants you to work,
that her statement testifies to her acknowledgement
of your cowardice and that she's your enabler,
and that her statement has taken off
some of the pressure spurring you to develop.
Then, strangely made confident by her statement
(perhaps precisely because the pressure has eased off a bit),
find yourself responding, to your surprise, "No. I must."

Build up nerve to do Kaplan. *After all,*
I'm an aspiring lawyer, say to yourself
in your upward climb out of bereavement.
Grudgingly apply by nightfall.

Awake confident. Actually get excited
about the origami design you'll teach the evaluators.
Receive Kaplan's call, proud of yourself.
Get depressed when it's revealed
that visual aids are disallowed.
Get happy that Kaplan's schedule doesn't work
since it's during nights and extends through August
when you'd already be living in Pittsburg,
gearing up for first-year law school study.
In short, get happy that this is helping you duck
the chance to face your fear. Get sad
that this is helping you duck the chance to face your fear.

Feeling that you're letting yourself down,
that you're your own enabler,
and yet somewhat empowered by the fact
that your wife has already let you off the hook,
search more. (Actually, know deep down
that you're searching more only because
you know that your wife letting you off the hook
entails that you'll not be working—
the search that is supposedly motivated by your desire
to stop enabling yourself thus being
but a way to deceive yourself
about having made some headway

in your project to conquer cowardice.)
See how to make money blogging.
You can blog for money only if
you're a successful blogger already,
so get disappointed. Apply online at Borders.
Undermine the application
by inputting that you're available weekends.

Feel sad for yourself. See that you're depressed
being in this apartment all day
because you're nurturing cowardice,
because you're ensuring (by restricting your experiences)
that you'll be the bungling idiot you fear you are—
a fear that has you intimidated about work in the first place.
Yet desire to maximize your time inside,
where you're most likely to be alone and secure,
where you're most likely to let your bowels drop,
where you're most likely not to be challenged,
where you're most likely not to be placed
in unfamiliar situations that expose you
as the bungling idiot you fear you are.

Lie in the bed so that when your wife arrives
she'll pity you and feel bad for having you,
someone she loves so much, feeling so sad.
Spoil for pity. In particular, spoil for an experience
of being pitied in which she reiterates
that you're off the hook, which not only will appease you,
but will help her feel better for having you feeling so bad
these last few days. Enjoy head-rubs
and tell all that happened (save details
like the application-sabotage). Pray
that she'll explicitly repeat, "You don't have to work,"
after hearing about all your good effort.

When she does (excruciatingly later), still avoid
verbally agreeing to take her up on her offer
even though you're sure now you will.
In order to stop being pained
by the victory of cowardice here,
just try to block this victory out, put it out of mind.
When it does, however, manage to pop up,
just tell yourself that you did at least try to get a job
and that cooking, cleaning, and packing

count as a real job anyway.

Standing at the door the next morning,
when you give her the “Have a good day,”
make sure to avoid the “at work” ending.
Then do the bravest thing you can
within your safety net: in your journal
write a self-deprecating comment for women
with men like you. “You know how he complains
he hasn’t time to focus on his art,
how he can’t concentrate on his devotions,
with you around, needing attention—
or even just sneezing or brushing against him accidentally?
Well, to limit his outward blaming of you
for his inadequacies, and to have him
spend more time with you, remind him on occasion—
by mentioning that he should work—
how he’s dependent on you for ensuring
he stays sheltered. For sure, he’ll still feel
like throwing tantrums and snapping at you
and wanting to get away, but his guilt,
his indebtedness, will check him.”

Wallace

We say, “consider this jar
out in the wild on the hill.
Doesn't it dominate all
despite its size? Doesn't it
put into relief the wildness
by its contrast: black
all the blacker against white?”

We say this and feel glory
in being human—special as we
and our artifacts are.
But we've rigged the game,
as it were. We're positing
a human in this scene who'd notice
the dominance, the contrast—
the relation between jar and wild
that between the aristocrat
and the mob through which he walks.

But even if the human observer is allowed
into the picture, there's no denying
that the jar gets swallowed: overtaken
by buzzing moss and bugs, using it
like birds do candy wrappers for nests.
Leave the pompadoured aristocrat
on the streets for just a few weeks
and his colors will fade;
his nails and hair will grow.

Nom de spray: 1971-1989

As the first sunlight opens
upon the Monday train yard,
the broken rhythm hissing
of a spray can endures, now
against the jazz of birds.

Passing through the MTA doors,
commuters voice their hate.
But settled in and onwards rocking,
their nostrils pulse away,
finding peace in the perfume.

Shakespeare's Wooing Strategy?

Arm's length for the first time,
he homed in on her flaws.
Bloody fingers, jagged coffee teeth—
these encouraging him. Dark
as it may sound, they
made her human, made her
approachable, attainable. Dark
as it may sound, were
she to reject him, he could
hold this over her, have a comeback:
“Brush your teeth, bitch”—
although he'd never say this.

Bringing forth her flaws in poetry
is not just about showing
that he doesn't care about them.
It's about quietly reminding her
that she's approachable by him,
that he could comeback at her
in the aforementioned way
were she to reject him.
The wooing strategy works on her
without her knowing, or at least
this is what he assumes—in effect,
assuming she's not so bright.

Doubtless some will wonder how
he could live with the fact that the hand
was bullied to submit. But it's not as if
this strategy was conscious. And besides,
even if it were, he could tell himself
that otherwise she'd never have been
open to seeing him as right for her
as she now does after all these years.
This is just as called for as lying
about being a doctor to a women
you believe to be your match
but absurdly will only date doctors.

Loopholes to Flattery

Some have an amazing ability
to persuade you from what about yourself

you worry is true—from what is so true.
Their strategy is to have you feeling

stupid for entertaining it. The trick
is that you think you must be wrong. What else

could account for their being so upset
by your self-deprecatory concern

that they must break decorum to offer
such sharp words at your being so off base?

The dangers of flattery now well known,
people have cultivated strategies

for convincing others, even themselves,
that they are not guilty of flattery.

Fighting

I. Chess Play

Often an explanation for why
men just attack wild, without putting hands up
and being strategic with their blows—
regulating breathing and taunting,
slipping the jab and fainting—
is that the loss will be that much more painful
if they look like they were trying,
serious about this. It's like acting as if
you don't care—say, in chess.

II. In the Alley

One is unsuccessful in a fight
against his equal, or even inferior,
when he does not attack strong for fear
that his opponent attack strong in return.
He fears that if he try to kill, his opponent
will have the same objective too.
It is logical that the opponent's objective
will change to one of a higher degree,
such as the objective of killing,
if he notices that someone is trying to kill him.
Yet, if the opponent is already on that level
in the first place, he, the fearful one,
will have defeated himself.

Tribals

Only coming back / did I see / where I had grown up.

You're young and still rocket-thrusting
as far as you can from your town
of downhill BOCES students
and high school dropouts. Your poor—
well, at least the few of those detractors
from downtown revitalizations
not at it twenty-four-seven—
draw well-water from sulfur springs
and can set it afire from the tap.
They eat utility-grade “value” bacon
from white cartons leaving no window
into the all-fat product.
Their bragging consists simply
in being able to read a bit,
and they carry such bragging out
by faking a struggle with the words
for you, and to them it never gets old:
“hi—hick—hick—corey—sm—
smock—èd; hick-corey smockèd!”
They have an affinity for rice and potatoes
and praise the fat of the steak
and the crust of the pizza
as the best parts.
They dress in wash-worn clothing,
as faded of color as their line-dried towels.
Their skin seems all the more worn,
they're growths and discolorations,
their obesities, all the more intolerable.
They abound in retardations and flus,
and so the face-warted teen diarrheas
from diaper to hair throughout the single-wide.
They bring in friends and family members
and let them shit and piss and die
under your old comforter.
When you finally visit your mom,
clenching your jaw the whole stay
in repulsion from such tribalism
and its smell of shit muddied by bleach,
she'll give you that same blanket
without thinking a thing.

Raiders

No one jacks off sniffing their wife's panties.
Sure, in the honeymoon phase

you'll catch sight of some healthy crust
and slink off to a safe space

out of instinct, groping for an old thrill
only to find something lacking.

A few years in, you'll hold them for laundry
with pinched fingers and grimace.

The convenience of presentism

White fuckers decimate
the black people and then
have the audacity to parade
the most audacious effects
on daytime talk shows, saying
without saying, "See.
look how depraved they are."

Self-Deception from Early On

Regarding *it* as the agent
of the superior paint job,

he whines for the brush
in his father's hand.

Compacted Marbles of Dark Brown Sugar

She awakens under the train trestle,
the creek lapping at her Reebok Dumpsters.
Scabrous chin in her throat, her first vision
is of the blinding foil nailed to her chest
by sun-blades through rotten timber sleepers.

Rolled buck still glued at lip from the last go,
beneath the sheet she flames the Bic, her tokes
desperate for that vinegar burn of throat.
No sizzle freeing the sour dragon,
she prays anyhow to exhale its ghost.

Squinting down cobbled Main Street, she stumbles
to her mother's room where she sometimes stays.
Her mom has her plasma cash, which is why
she's unmoved by the *wanna-suck-a-dick?*s
from dealers swarmed by children asking too.

Gnawing her flint-wheeled thumb despite loose teeth,
expecting to hear it for needing cash,
she enters to a bed of family
she hasn't seen in years. "Fuck this shit, man"—
the day's first words gravel she's so dry.

“Go. Go get her, John. Get her to come back,”
says the mother upon the window’s quake.

“We aren’t mad at you,” Uncle John says,
cigaretting her by a dead storefront.
“We’re not there to yell at you. We’re not mad.”
She knows this, and he knows she knows this—
well, at least all this knowing is down deep.

His words give her the out to go back in
to learn the impacts of her addiction.
His words are meant to have her believing,
or at least acting as if she believes,
that he thought she fled to duck a scolding.

This way she can cry, as at last she does:
“You promise they’re not mad at me in there?
They’re not gonna yell at me if I go?”—
thus moving herself past shame for fleeing,
thus helping herself open to the help.

“This is How We Have Always Done It” Is Not the Excuse

I.

A father roused his son from sleep and said,
“Today you will learn the joy of catching bluefish.”

They set sail toward the rising sun
on the barnacled Northern Star.
When the shore was but a haze,
sails were drawn and stone anchors released.
Men crowded the sides of the ship
and dropped their hooks of herring.

The boy pouted about not being able to see
and about not getting his own pole.
“You’re still too weak,” the father said.

A drunk nudged the boy and crouched to his ear.
“Tell your father to mind the *fish*.”
The father turned to find the thick rod bent
to a bow ready to distance its arrow.
He took the rod from its holster
and paused before ripping back
to bury the hook deep in flesh.

“Let’s see your strength, boy.”

But the son could not turn the reel
and the pole dipped low over the edge.
The father took control and wore the fish down—
releasing line, reeling line, releasing line.

Plucked from the water and set on the floor,
the blue slapped its tail and flapped into the boy,
knocking him down.

The slaps and flaps few and weak
an hour before the end of day, the Northern Star
began to ease the shore out of its haze.
“Let’s see if we can win some money,” the father said.
The boy followed the father and the fish
to the center of the boat. There a man
held up a hand scale, a blue hooked on either side.
The scale-man removed the blue of lesser weight

and put the father's in its place.

"My boy got this one," the father said,
as the seesaw tipped in his favor.

The father's fish proved heaviest until
the final round, where the drunk took the prize.

"How could this be, father? Our fish was bigger."

"The drunk stuffed his blue with more stone."

"That's not fair, father. Men shouldn't use stones to win."

"But son, this is how we have always done it.
We keep our slaves to stay competitive among farmers
and stuff our fish to stay competitive among fishermen."

II.

The next time the boy sailed the Northern Star
he was a man. The air of early autumn
reminded him of the first trip—he,
wrapped around his father's legs,
shielding himself from the cold.
At the bow alone, heaving toward the gusts of mist
and the source of light, the man said to his heart,
"I must honor my father."

Before the anchor was dropped,
his hook was sinking into the school of blues—
the other men still filling with drink and laughter.
With dedication he eyed the line, reeling it a bit.
When the rod bent he gave life to his father
and was aware of it. Forearms tan and rippling,
he took the pole from the holster with care,
planted its butt into his groin, and tore back.

"This is no war, young man," the drunk said.

These words did not phase his rhythm.
He dipped the rod forward, reeling;
he pulled the rod back, not reeling.

People cheered as the great blue was brought to light.

“This is sure to win the prize,” said the drunk,
teeth gone and chin much closer to his nose.

Before the young man could remove the deep hook,
the pole of the drunk pitched forward.

“Ah, I might be giving you a run for it,” he said,
reeling in a forty inch blue by the magic strength of years.
No one had ever seen a fish of this kind that big.

But the young man had brought a pocket full of stones.
He gorged the blue to the point of ripping
and took the prize. The drunk hugged and kissed him.
“You sure came prepared to win.
Well played, young man. Well played.”

III.

The next time the young man sailed the Northern Star
he was a father. He took his son
as his father once took him.
He even let his son reel the pole, relieving him
when the struggle proved to be too much.

At the competition, the father and son team
faced a former slave with a fish not much bigger.

“Yeah!” the son said when the seesaw tipped in their favor.

The former slave was angry. He stomped the ground
and ripped open the winning fish.
He picked up the stones that clinked the floor
and punched the father with a fist full.

“Thisy noty right. Thisy noty right!”

“But this is how things have always worked,”
the father said, holding his jaw.
“This is what we do. Next time you will stuff.”

“Never do,” the former slave said. “Never do!”

The father turned. “Come on, son.”
But the man punched him in the back of the head
and threw him overboard.

Holding on tight to his father's leg,
the son would have went over too
were it not for the drunk
that reached out and grabbed him.

The choppy sea banged the father
against the bottom of the boat.
He was left alone with his shame in the black.

“That it was always done like this
is no excuse,” he said to his heart.

“You are not responsible for what you have done.”

He was swarmed by bluefish.

“You must release your shame,” they said in unison.

“But I cannot blame my ancestors.
I decided to do it. I was responsible.”

“You will die soon, so you must listen.
You would be wrong to blame your ancestors.
No one is responsible to such a degree
that they deserve punishment or reward.
It may be right to punish or reward
in order to change or preserve behavior—
or just to appease others.
But no being *deserves* punishment or reward.
No one is responsible for anything they do.
No one is responsible even for actions
that were planned about beforehand.
We who are deep know this truth.”

“How can this be? Help me before I die in shame.”

Zooming around the man, the school gave its case.

In order to be responsible for action O
at least some part of you
must have been involved in giving rise to O.

In order to be responsible for O, then,
you must be responsible

for at least some part of you
involved in giving rise to O—call it ‘Z.’

In order to be responsible for Z,
at least some part of you
must have been involved in giving rise to Z.

In order to be responsible for Z, then,
you must be responsible
for at least some part of you
involved in giving rise to Z—call it ‘Y.’

And this chain will continue
in an indefinite amount of steps
until a point is reached, at best your birth,
where you were not responsible
for the part of yourself in question by that point.

Never does responsibility get conferred
to action O, at the end of the “chain.”

It'll Be Okay

We've always found relief
from guilt and worry
going home to mom. For her
we're innocent. But

however cleansed we feel
before her pasta, this
won't stop the police
from knocking.

And You Weren't There

Walking back from class I saw
an ambulance and a crowd up ahead.
When I got close enough
and at the right angle
to see through the thick,
I saw you, lying there,
alongside a truck. EMTs
were moving you onto a stretcher.
Of all things, the baby carrier
was on your back, empty.
The guy in the truck
had his head in his hands.
Some students were close by
praying, beseeching the sky,
as if they knew you.

We fantasize about tragedy
to prepare ourselves.
Kiemy Nativs—*The Bum Chronicles*

Was it this, them,
that kept me walking to the library,
where I was going, where I always am,
where I was always trying to escape,
from you, both of you,
to do my work?

Was I hoping to avoid the embarrassment?
What would be the embarrassment?
Would it be pushing through the crowd,
and then disregarding those demanding
that people stay back,
and then pushing aside
even those praying, only to find out,
before the collective gaze,
that it wasn't you?
Or would it be finding out
that it was in fact you,
and having my finding out
be witnessed by the public,
and being expected to do
something—cry, scream, hug you,
throw haymakers in the air, throw
haymakers at the guy who ran you down—
by the public,
and letting my emotions out in public,
and risk being judged as not behaving the right way
or making the right decisions
by the public,
and being helpless in public?

Was it that I was simply hoping it wasn't true?
Is that why?

Was it that you wouldn't be on this street?
Was it that you wouldn't be wearing a baby carrier?
Could our toddler still have even fit in that carrier?

I tried phoning you
as I struggled against the rush
going towards the spectacle.
I called you once
during the time I was studying,
the precious two hours I had

before I was to meet you
in front of your building
so we could go pick up our boy from school.
Thinking in the back of my mind, I guess,
that if it was you
I would've been called,
that someone would've called back
the number that called twice,
I'd lost myself in work so much
that I was a few minutes late,
like always.
And you weren't there.

“Living Well is the Best Revenge”

He wrote: “A feeling of blessing is attached to the understanding that you will die: your journey would lack sweetness were it not for the abyssal pit at the end.— But you’d always postpone if you could.”

Bed lamp off, he consoled himself with how he’s neither the first nor the last man to die in this world.—And yet the world for *him*, life for *him*, he knew, was all he knew, could know.

These countless others, past and future—barred, he was, from their lived experiences, their personal dear-life clinging to self. Thus he realized it was truer to say the world begins and ends with him.—

Nevertheless, the knowledge that we’re *all* in this boat of loneliness, roused consolation even in this dark, cradling him to sleep before the strike of the next move: how what the point of this process could be, how

there could be no point, how this could all be an accident, such that even if each man was not the first and last it wouldn’t matter, such that our being companions in isolation is no matter.

What’s the next move? Is it to say, act in accord with your idea of perfection and be either a hero hereafter (perhaps) or else, if mere oblivion awaits, one who rose above this farce?—Better: Is it just to live Herbert’s line?

Distraction

A week in, the mountain prayer
to be found. The sacrifice:
never to drink any drink
but water from here on.
Then the thought of friends
cracking beers, 10 years in,
and the realization that I
would fold on the promise.
Then the thought that God
would understand
such mortal behavior.
And then the hope that He
will reward such honesty
even from this position of need.

Townhouse Community Jobsite

Legs hang from the back door,
the deck yet to be built.

Salami sandwich warm
with summer; mayo clear.

Skin and clothes and air one
in dampness. Speckled hands

open Dostoyevsky
on a painter's lunch break.

Pleas

The mother thinks her son cries
there in the custody court
for her to come back because
he doesn't want the change

and doesn't comprehend
the complexity of the situation.
But the son recognizes, senses,
in his own dumb way, that

she's not coming back because
she has already committed herself
to going this far with things.
He's appealing to her on *that* level—

saying, in effect, "It's *not* too late."
She's defusing this call in the above way,
feeling, but not citing, that it is too late,
that going back is a sign of weakness.

Voorhies, L.

“How can they china-doll their face,” you say,
eye corners so high their world disappears
with each smile, those who knew them before
Googling late-onset mongolism in fear.

You make the point about how in that town
everyone’s getting the surgery and
that it becomes okay because of this:
raping in war, frequent fast food eating.

What you don’t see, what you can’t fathom,
is the twilight-zone twist: extra-terrestrial
trout puffs, like the fake breasts you find
repulsive too, are gorgeous in that town.

You’re deluded insofar as you think
they must delude themselves about how
they at least look okay—this the only way
to cope with how botched they really look.

Yes, likely the ladder to the twilight zone
was, in the early days, the wishful thought
that it wasn’t so bad—this the only way
to avoid breakdown before the mirror.

But what drove the practice onward was that
even most of those who did see, knowing
it couldn’t be undone, did what they saw
as the next best thing: redemptive surgery.

Public Arguing

The wife getting loud in our argument,
do I smile at our fellow shoppers
so as to convey something like
“Yeah this is a shitty situation. But
I’m cool with it—cool enough to joke
with you all about it in this way.”

Or do I look at them on occasion
but look through them when I do, as if
I don’t give a fuck about them seeing, as if
I’m not embarrassed about all this.

Or do I lower my eyes and grit my teeth
and pretend to look at the sports jackets,
saying “How about this?”—the others,
with hope, thus thinking the swell in voice
was not due to fighting—while I pray
she won’t go on at this decibel?

Bracketing “Outside” Problems

We only think about “inside” problems,
problems within the known universe:
pandemics, wars, asteroids, the sun using up its fuel.

But there’s always that analogue
to child hands clapping a bubble.

Underwater Rock Running

A stranger records me moon running
along the floor of the aquifer spring,
a boulder tight to my sternum.

A full minute into viewing the footage
it takes for me to notice my hand
holding his, his holding the screen my way.

This blind intimacy with an other
has sprung from a surprising source:
blind interest in myself. I’m that

audience questioner holding the hand
holding the mic. Only by the end
do I ease his liable unease.

“He Died Peacefully in His Home”

You are now starting to realize
that when he said “Get her out of here”
to you, referring to the hospice lady,
who said to him “The Lord is with you,”
he was not, despite what she said,
going through the normal panic stage.

He was always cerebral and sensitive
so he heard her say this to you—
say this was normal panic-stage stuff.
Always caring that people believed him
to the degree that he would lash out if not,
he was fueled with reaction enough
to plead with you, and the lady whispered
“See”—you nodding, to his horror.

He tried to release the words
that would appeal to you on that level,
that level of friendship 35 years.
But you, never having been bedside before,
and so distraught about all this
that the religious comment didn’t register,
and knowing that these things do have stages
like the hospice lady was saying—this one
parallel to the transition stage of labor
still fresh in your mind—you said
“Please sweetie. Don’t get upset.”

Darkness Blocked in the Light of the Bug Zapper

Sighing in bed he wonders
whether the choice had been right
to spend his life as he had:
composing pieces recorded
from faucet drips and cupboard creaks,
dog sneezes and street traffic,
cassette hiss and record static,
videogame controllers in use,
and other such treasures overlooked.
Should he have done medicine, like his father?

Do the fans truly like his work they wine talk?
Or are they lullers just searching to be different?
Do they, as perhaps many who praise
the poet of plums and wheelbarrows,
claim to love the work mainly because
they feel they could pull such stuff off too—
this way they keep out of mind that misery
that comes when standing before genius?
Was he opium for the mediocre?
Was merely that his contribution?

The sound outside of bug zapping
knocks him from his reverie of doubt,
and he's compelled to get his recorder.
Bareback below his neighbor's zapper,
arm up and grinning, this sign of his being called
soothes his worries, now seen as silly.
Yes, that he's wired to capture such sounds
is no guarantee against the worries—
is not even an odds-increaser against them.
But, somehow, people have to get by.

Italian Way?

Everyone says, “It’s not
that they’re fags. Italians
just tend to get real close,
in your face when speaking.”
But there must be *some* link.

Each time I’m over there
friends I make snuggle up,
nudging to ass-dick me.
I shrink and they whisper:
“USA. We friends, no?”

Their moms seem in on it:
I’m not to sleep the floor.
One breakfast, my eyes red,
one mom, all chipper, asked:
“Young men have much good night?”

I didn’t pay attention
enough to see for sure,
but asking this she seemed
to shoot me a small wink—
dad’s head in a paper.

Difference in Degree, not Kind

When someone is in the stall next to me
making me all disturbed and retentive
(a reaction exacerbated if
my shits are fiery that day), sometimes
it suffices for me to do something
I would be too embarrassed to do
in front of such a stranger, such as
make a monster face and hold up claws or
put my head in my shirt and hide and rock.

This way I guess I prove to myself
that I am indeed in a private space,
and it's just that I would've preferred
it be *more* private.

On the Forest Trail

I

Even by our high school years her life's purpose
was to gather up sweets and glom them down
in those places hidden from the fat chance of a parental eye:

under the piss-stained and forever sheet-less mattress
from which for my reaction the bull-neck would bounce so high
that a ceiling fan blade would catch her great round face;

in the closet ripping out cat shit crusted in the shag
and then gobbling away for my reaction, eyeing me
below self-scissored bangs with those far-set, up-slanted cross-eyes;

in the drainage pipe that passed under our street
through which would course the winter-melt stream
that she'd dunk her big head in for my reaction;

under the overpass amongst the discarded 40s
that we'd smash and stomp once she downed their slosh,
her tongue protruding more than usual as she gimped about

neck-less in drooling concentration.—All these images
savored but for a moment, superimposed
as they so quickly were by more, and more.

II

How good it was
not having to think or speak,
hiking the forest trail with her;
her musk of mouse droppings warm on my side;
she in her element among the ahistorical,
appearing at each moment exactly how she is, as honest
as the mouth-breathing goldfish, tied as she was
so close to the peg of the moment—
no expectation of Christmas.
Who has never envied such a short leash,
that of the low and receding browed?

How good it was
not having to coax her,
coax her into enjoying, into seeing
the innocence of, me pistoning out—

head to hilt, head to hilt—
that rotten gourd's every hole:
that shitty asshole and pissy pussy,
that mouth replete with rows of rotten teeth
guarded by cracked lips, corners chocolate crusted.*
No sounds but those close to that of one hand clapping
intermingled with her giggles and boar-grunts,
the crinkling of the leaves,
the ruffling of her uncanny windbreaker.

III

Pink, faded, too large, secondhand,
to this day it haunts me, that windbreaker.
I picture her still wearing it, there in the facility
where she still likely spazzes out
when it's removed for washing—
where by now she might've died.

It—the vivacious image of it—
is what has my wife and children, my co-workers,
wondering where I am, where I've suddenly gone.

It is what tells me how
gutless and sick I was
and still am, letting concern
with how others perceive me
come before love.

* In his chapter “The Copout Claim of ‘Complicit’ Critique” from his landmark book *Meat in Contemporary Poetry*, Braithwaite comments that there is a crude depersonalization of the Mongol going on here. It is clear especially in the mouth description, however, that the speaker does not simply see the partner as vague and mute meat, but rather as one of a kind: no one else has this mouth—at least for all the speaker knows. Braithwaite goes on about all the “unconsensual sex in the poem.” But wouldn't she have bitten him? Remember there was no coaxing. Unlike Braithwaite, then, let us not take the boar grunts as those of struggle, but rather those of pleasure. This is not to say that there was no mistreatment of the girl. It is important to note—although this is no excuse, of course—that the poem leads us to believe that any mistreatment was a function of the speaker being too weak, too vain, to admit to himself and others his—as is said in the final line—“love.”

My Neighbor's Passing

It was calm outside my window
two days ago. No ambulance and squad car
like this morning. No visitors weeping, hugging
like now. No lady explaining at my door:
“The cancer came back.
He knew it was his time.
He refused to go to sleep.
He finally gave in this morning.
His kids, his grandkids got to kiss him goodbye.”

It was calm outside my window
two days ago: my toddler,
dimpled with delectation,
rolling his ball down the driveway
in spite of my orders; my neighbor,
oxygen-masked in the truck he used to drive,
creaking down the cul-de-sac
from bingo with his old lady.
Passing us that peach afternoon
(just after my dash to save
the ball from the road), the man
gave full-armed waves through the glass,
drawing the process out with tired eyes.
In a tone opposite my frustration,
I hollered, “Give a wave!” My son
disregarded the ball and stared back
dimpleless, grubby fingers waving. Both
didn't want it to end, it seemed—didn't
want to be snapped from the snuggle
across the distances. And then
the truck was in the garage,
the door descending.

Perhaps because this might
be something I would do, I wonder
if the man fixated on this
mundane image. I wonder
if the peach image of my staring son
would thrust forth, backgrounding even
the closest of faces: wife, kids. I wonder
if it thrust forth through garment-rucking
nightlong, his refusal to sleep

a function of fear of not waking
(each nodding off a dropping down
a black hole, the voices and the fan buzz
cutting out each time). I wonder
if it thrust forth through complaints
by the grandkids this morning:
“Mom, I said I didn’t want cheese!” “Mom,
what about the sleepover?” I wonder
if it thrust forth through concern
about the unsaid and the undone,
as he lied there glassy-eyed
in that bed of memories more aware
than anyone could know, than his eyes
and soft breaths let on. I wonder
if it was there, reposing,
through the rapid gurglings of the throat,
through their decreasing
in frequency and violence,
through the giving in to rest,
the taking of the last breath.

I hope he found the image
comforting, if this were the case.

I worry that I’d find it haunting,
all the way through the end.

The Ice Pack Buoy

Getting it seems almost no oxygen
here in this southwest sweatlodge,
I'm a shark finned and thrown back to sea,
my pulsing gills brushed over too faint
by the dullest of mocking currents.

But my hand just activated
and is now curled around
the cold-pack in my pocket.

Now the heat's not so hot, not so stifling.
Somehow, the cold-pack's a cold shower
washing away the gold full-body paint;
somehow, it's an oxygen tank.

They marvel at the newbie endurance.

The Activist Photographer

At rest in a swath of shade,
clearing their scratched throats,
sipping their dusty coffee,
the tar black marlstone cutters
studied the blonde photographer—
intense in her postures under intense sun—
snapping the white-tipped dolabra blade
dropped down to the dust minutes ago,
at the toll of the break-bell.

She began ambling towards two of them,
young and off alone but overalled like the rest—
coming to snap them too, they hoped.
Quick, with the fine stone-dust
pinched up from beside their white cracked feet
they plastered their thick cracked lips.
Around sun-bloodied eyes they rubbed that chalk,
swooping it past the temples even.
She acted as if she didn't see the two
make superheroes of themselves.
For they did to themselves
what she longed to do but was unable—
unable given her resolve never to manufacture
signs of the harsh conditions of this labor.

Her publicist found so moving
the image of these white-orificed Guyanese
that it was made header of the program
distributed at her premier showcase
“Laborers of the World.”

Baseball Game in a Small Southern Town

Unfamiliar with being
at baseball games,
and not caring who wins,

I find myself clap once
on a line drive down
the left foul line
hit by the visitors.

Then I catch myself.

At the mean glances

I think I receive,
I shake my head,
grin in disappointed,
and mutter "Damn."

Again I do that single clap
to reinforce that the first one
was not in support.

Ekstasis (inspired by Hans Memling's triptych painting *The Last Judgment*)

*One end of it the remote past and the other the remote future, all
ever to disembark this life-train arrive in station eternity at once.*

I

She washclothed her goosey region and burst
for the kitchen to quiet the hunger barks
so as not to get shit about chores undone.
As she bent over to drag the kibble from the cupboard,
the pit-bull terrier ran its snout just right
into the nude spread of her teensy rear.
The cold wet of the pink nose shocked her system.
“You like, Jamal?” she asked, rising turning around.
The dog tilted its head and barked once, lifting an ear.
“I got it good, see?” were her words
as she parted lips pale as the belly of a bass,
disclosing the same pink that edged the dog's mouth.

She was caught up inspecting for herself
when Jamal stole a lap. “Hey mister!
What do you think you're doing?”
But the menthol cold cream she used for the shave
had her much more hot and bothered
than the old conditioner approach. Possessed,
with filiform papillae enflamed as they become
on a tongue tasting after a long absence,
she clawed out a glob of chunky peanut butter
and slathered it into rosebud holes, muting the icy burn.
She went missionary on the cold terrazzo tile
and took the cleaning by the tropical tongue.
Her blonde head fell hard on the floor. Dizzy,
she gave in to the feasting of the slobber.

Along with the sheer taboo of the act
and that parents were due home any minute,
not tensing against the risk of being bitten
made the pulsing pleasure overwhelming.
Gallop out of her pelvic-thrusting body,
she slapped on more and more of the chunk
in a frenzy that triggered frenzy in the dog.
Black nails untrimmed swelling the space with clicks,
Jamal snap-snapped at spray as he does out back,
the sounds of the Hebrew Chaim echoing the space:
Hahyim, Hahyim, Hayhim, Hayhim.

II

Both got a tremendous treat and no one was hurt
she was thinking later that night when mother,
preparing father's PB&J for the next day, called out:
"Debra, honey. You're not binging and purging are you?"

Anyway, she was just a new teen then,
a little sex crazed as is not uncommon
with all those hormones coursing.
Is it so unusual for a little girl
to get herself with a curling iron,
pushing the limit on the speculum?
Is it so unusual for a little girl
to race to rub herself off at the window
as father is walking up the driveway
about to enter the field of her scent,
fantasizing about him as she does—
his hand around her neck, taking her?
Is it so unusual for a little girl
to grind against other girls, objects, animals,
and to keep on despite the beatings when caught?
Is it so unusual for a little girl
to let the dog sniff and lick around,
exploring and showing affection in its dog way
after being pulled in by that universal scent?

Yes, in her twenties she intended to have
an orgasmic childbirth, a birth climax.
But if the conception was so pleasurable
why couldn't she try to have the birthing be?
And yes, she did in fact receive The Gift,
achieving another extreme out of body releasing that body.
Hunkered down and rocking there over the afghan mat,
the bald and goosey olive-oiled vulva fanning and splitting,
full-body orgasms doubling and tripling with the contractions,
gestation revealing itself to have been drawn-out foreplay,
she was overtaken by the feeling of supreme empowerment,
the primitive oxytocin rapture of oneness with the cosmos,
the same pelvic thrusting of the last out-of-body
and all the other minor thrustings after that point helping
to bring the body out of her, and to bring her sobbing,
once again, to spiritual transcendence:
"More more more. Oh God yes."

Besides, she was a good mother. Yes,
she got the “prostisciutto” for her down-syndrome son,
having the Mongol boar-grunting in the next room.
But why couldn’t he enjoy being loved
by a normal man like he wanted but couldn’t get?
Anyway, she was a caring citizen,
a charity-giving, fund-raising lady who lunches
and board president of a food bank.
And she was an exemplar engineer when she was working,
not only going beyond codes and standards of practice
when she felt they didn’t protect the public enough,
but also going beyond preventative ethics altogether,
innovating and self-sacrificing to enhance humanity:
the low-flow sink and toilet, the free services, and so on.

III

She has told herself these things in the quiet times
(not once helping whatever case she was building
by admitting, accepting, who her master was).

But to her horror, a horror without analogy,
she was unable to voice them as an appeal
she found herself desperate to make
during her next and last, and most trembling, ekstasis.
All she was able to do was receive the cry
so penetrating it had to come from within her,
but so booming, so masculine, so adventitious,
it had to come from something alien.
“BE GONE FROM ME, YE CURSÉD!”

She could only manage a howl in response
to the subsequent experience of being cast away,
her arms stretched out to the parents
she hadn’t seen in so many years,
as well as to her husband who was next to them,
and yet who’d just been caressing her sickbed hand.
Overcome with the most intense feeling of rejection,
of having been instantaneously forgotten,
at the collective turning of the back on her,
the dropping dropping down down felt so real—
except there was no resistance, no medium.
Against the looping backdrop of Hahyims and boar-grunting,
so clear was the “You’re not binging and purging are you?”
and the moans of “More more more. Oh God yes.”

No Vaccine

The boy gets a preparatory dose
of the lack of a beyond when
after days of gameplay there's just
“Great Job” and “Thanks for Playing”
glowing down at him.

He studies the credits and dates,
the Yamamotos, hoping
for something more—something more
than the end. But after the black
comes the light of the start screen.

A Mere Frosted Tube

Being there was not enough.
Something more needed to be done.
Having others there too
eased him a bit. But what he needed
was to bring the place, the occasion, home
somehow. A shell from the beach—
surrogate to the music and colors,
to the embrace by his father.

It would've been forgotten anyway
eventually. A shell in the drawer. Still,
in the backseat during the drive home
from the fireworks event this fourth,
and while buried under bed blankets,
the child denies the dimming he senses
in the necklace whose neon will endure,
he thinks, for as long as he keeps it.

The Grand Finale

I

A break in the one by one launching pattern,
four glowing tiny-tailed orbs
into the black soar almost at once.

Upon reaching their apices,
swift-swelling blooms of radial filaments
spider the all-eyed firmament,

illuminating neon the peopled field
towards which they start weeping
just as the flam of booms reaches the ear.

Enhancing their viewing pleasure
by being witnessed being right, the way
some do by puffing cigarettes or eating,

spectators throughout the crowd forecast
the imminence of the grand finale.
Kids that hear them brace themselves,

many holding back pee with squeezing hands
even if they don't quite know what is meant;
a few repeating the good news.

II

In worry that others noticed their mistake,
the forecasters gulp, distracted from the show
much longer than those that noticed their mistake,

the one-by one steady. Finding no relief
in knowing that, given the length of the show
so far, the term "start" is open enough here

to have made the forecast not wholly wrong,
one forecaster, after a three-by-three, admits his mistake
through another forecast, one he finds himself

voicing to his son even louder now
to ensure that others can hear: "Ah,

now *here's* the start of the finale!"

III

Hoping to avert eliciting
that blow-of-a-question
"Why are you acting funny?"

(but instead further encouraging
the attack), he quick looks up away
from his glow-necklaced son,

whose furrowed face seems to confirm
that the affectation of excitement,
of locution there—

like employees giving explanations
to customers while bosses hover,
shifting random items—

has turned guardian into stranger as if
he were seeing his father's face the first time shaved
or mirrored an odd number of times.

But clear by his glinting flex of temple muscles
is that he believes the blow can still come
as he sits with his expectancy grin

(yet another false front he feels has been seen,
one he undoes in increments to coax doubt
in both about it having been seen—his trial

lacking the practiced grace of the niqab, who
is able to have the man and even herself
believing she never eyed the man.)

IV

Odds are even the most sensitive,
those that suffer along with him
mortification over his second mistake,

have forgotten him by the time
the torrent finally does begin.

Knowing this, though, is no relief.

And so mired in a wincer, a cringer
under the burden of which he'll hunchback
whenever the ghost of this event returns,

and from which at present his only respite
is the prayer not to be called-out by his son
or by any of the other children

(some with parents praying for the same),
he misses the grand finale
reflected in his eyes.

Even on Dawns less Spectacular

His head, wherein still echoes
the sound of slippers shuffling
the hardwood of the dark hall,
now rests against forearms folded
and pressed against the cabinet
creaking above the toilet.

Eyes closed to keep tethered to sleep,
he rolls his hips around with care until—
hips pointed sharp to the back right
(a model striking a sassy pose)—
liquid on liquid sounds, no longer
liquid on porcelain or linoleum or plastic store-bag.

Upon silence his shaking frees
not final drops but what would have been
one more few-second stream.
But stubborn that this is done,
the naked man leaks a few shuffles
past the start of the bedroom carpet.

As he lies turned from the grey brightening
the drapes, drips that come even on dawns
less spectacular grow the two saffron stains.
These he'll blame on his wife. Monthly
they end-for-end the one-sided mattress,
and he's damn sure he hasn't pissed this bed.

naked men
frying bacon
stand sideways

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Insofar as the deep image movement of Kelly and Rothenberg attempted to deal with matters of psychology without transgressing the fundamental tenets of imagism (Christensen 1991, 35), the poems of this thesis, dealing as they do with subconscious self-deceit and wishful thinking while remaining attentive to concrete detail and oriented against vague generalities, are perhaps best seen as being in the vein of deep imagism. In particular, they could be described as being in the vein of Clayton Eshleman, whose poetry often deals as well with the coping mechanisms of the vulnerable psyche (refusing to face, to use one of his own examples, the neck wringing that allowed for dinner) and how the psyche might in fact be renewed, enriched, transformed for the better (it may come to terms with death by grappling with the reality of such neck wringing) (Christensen 1991, 124; see 28, 46). Although I do not consciously see myself as a shaman figure of visionary powers, which is what the poet should aim to be at least according to some deep imagists (Diggory 2009, 32), I find that my best poems arise while I am in the “trance” of doing yard-work or some other sort of repetitive manual labor. I always look forward to reentering this quasi dream zone to which such work takes me. Whether walking the mower or stroking the fence with the paintbrush, I am always prepared—pen and paper in pocket—to record the treasures of the underworld that the receding waters of the ego bring to light.

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