

Ai

m a g a z i n e

issue 7. fall 2017.

IN THIS ISSUE

Leonard Kogan
Richard Robbins

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Art / Publication Design

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Denver, Colorado

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www.ajimagazine.com
support@ajimagazine.com

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Artists & Authors

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Aji Magazine does not verify the existence of nor do we endorse publications listed in brief bios in our magazine. We trust our readers to explore where there is interest and to evaluate publication venues as appropriate for individual pursuit.

Gian Carla Agbisit

Gian Carla Agbisit is a philosophy student at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. She believes that more than academic writing, creative and/or experimental writing better articulates philosophical ideas and their effects.



Devon Balwit

Devon Balwit is a teacher/poet living in Portland, Oregon. She has four chapbooks—*How the Blessed Travel*, *Forms Most Marvelous*, *In Front of the Elements*, and *Where You Were Going Never Was*. Her recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in several places, including *Non-Binary Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Almagre Review*, and *Stillwater Review*.



Doug Bolling

Doug Bolling's poems have appeared in *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Writer's Bloc*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Posit*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Blue Collar Review*, and *Red Earth Review* among others. He has received several Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations and, most recently, the Mathiasen Prize from Arizona's *Harmony Magazine*. He lives in the Chicago environs.



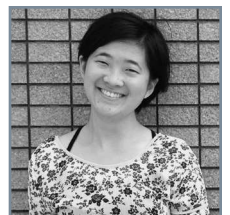
Carl Boon

Carl Boon lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American culture and literature at 9 Eylül University. His poems appear in dozens of magazines, most recently *Lime Hawk* and *Lullwater Review*. He was also a 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee.



Joy Grace Chen

Joy Grace Chen has been published in several undergraduate journals and was the recipient of the 2015 Norton Writer's Prize. She currently teaches English in Poland, and in fall 2017 she will embark on a new adventure of pursuing an MFA in creative writing at Ohio State University.



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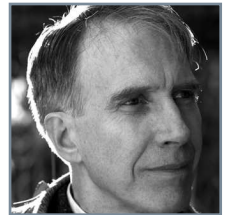
William Crawford

William C. Crawford is a North Carolina photographer. He invented the Forensic Foraging technique in modern digital photography. Find his genre essay and a more complete bio at ForensicForaging.com.



Tom Daley

Recipient of the Dana Award in Poetry, Tom Daley's poetry has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Fence*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, *Witness*, and elsewhere. FutureCycle Press published his first-full length collection of poetry, *House You Cannot Reach—Poems in the Voice of My Mother and Other Poems*, in 2015.



Adwaita Das

Adwaita Das studied English Literature and Film Direction. Her play *Chhayankaner Jonyo* won the Shyamanand Jalan National Youth Theatre Award. Her books *27 Stitches* and *Colours of Shadow* are available online. *Songs of Sanity*, her second poem book, was just launched. *Karon Kolkata Ebong Onyo Golpo* is her debut feature.



Edward A Dougherty

Edward A. Dougherty's fourth collection of poems *Grace Street* is available from Cayuga Lake Books. In 2015, he published *Everyday Objects* (Plain View) and his fifth chapbook, *House of Green Water* (FootHills Publishing); in May 2015, his emblems (small calligraphic artwork with a brief poem) were exhibited at the Word & Image Gallery at the Bright Hill Literary Center.



For more info, visit his site: <http://edwarddougherty.wordpress.com/>

Robert Earle

Robert Earle's short fiction has appeared in more than 100 print and online literary journals. Vine Leaves Press just published his story collection, *She Receives the Night*. In addition, he has published three novels and two books of nonfiction. He lives in North Carolina.

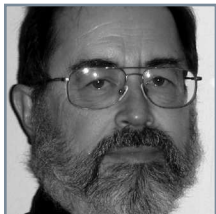


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John Garmon

John Garmon is a writing assistant at the College of Southern Nevada, Las Vegas. His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Passages North*, *Midwest Quarterly Review*, *New Mexico Humanities Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Commonweal*, and other journals.



Louis Girón

Louis Girón came to poetry by a back door. Without conscious premonition while he was writing a budget for a science research grant, a poem fell out. He hadn't known it was there. He has been writing poems since; and what began as a pastime has continued as necessity.

Russell Helms

Best American Short Stories nominee Russell Helms has had stories in *Sand*, *GFT Press*, *Temenos*, *Drunken Boat*, *Litro*, *Versal*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Moth*, and many other journals. He writes, designs books, and holds a lectureship in English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.



E.H. Jacobs

E.H. Jacobs is a psychologist and writer based in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. His work has appeared in the literary journal *Smoky Quartz*. He has published two books on parenting and numerous articles and papers on psychology as well as a regular newspaper column. He has served on the clinical faculty of Harvard Medical School and has taught nationwide.

Leonard Kogan

Leonard Kogan's works are images of perception; their content fluctuates between the visible and the invisible, the presence and absence. His themes are linked to synthesis of that which is ubiquitous, trivial, marginal, shattered and displaced. Kogan utilizes eccentric and distress-evoking imagery and uses overwhelming, multilayered, color-sumptuous brushstrokes. He employs dialogical transferences from one mode of representation to another.



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Beth Konkoski

Beth Konkoski is a writer and high school English teacher living in Northern Virginia. Her work has been published in numerous print and on-line journals including *Potomac Review*, *Pamplermousse*, and *Gargoyle*. Her chapbook of poetry, *Noticing the Splash*, was published in 2010 by BoneWorld Press.



Kate LaDew

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, North Carolina, with her two cats, Janis Joplin and Charlie Chaplin.

Billy Malanga (A.K.A. William Marshall)

Billy Malanga has published poems in many places, including *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Creativity Webzine*, *Write Launch*, Ghostwoods Books, *Picaroon Poetry*, *New Thoreau Quarterly Review*, *Wraparound South Literary Journal*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *Ibis Head Review*. He currently lives in Urbana, Illinois, and is relocating to Auburn, Alabama in August 2017.



Helena Mariño

Helena Mariño was born in Madrid, Spain, in 1990. She studied Law and Political Science at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and Comparative Literature at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. She holds an MFA in Spanish Creative Writing from the University of Iowa.

Suchoon Mo

Suchoon Mo is a retired academic and a Korean War veteran living in the semiarid part of Colorado.



Toti O'Brien

Toti O'Brien's work has most recently appeared in *Salt Hill Journal*, *Claudius Speaks*, *Rat's Ass Review*, and *Altadena Poetry Review*.

Artists & Authors

in this issue

Sergio Ortiz

Sergio A. Ortiz is a two-time Pushcart nominee, a four-time Best of the Web nominee, and 2016 Best of the Net nominee. He won 2nd place in the 2016 Ramón Ataz Annual Poetry Competition sponsored by Alaire Publishing House. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in *FRIGG*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Bitterzeot Magazine*.



Alexandros Plasatis

Alexandros Plasatis is a Greek ethnographer who writes fiction in English, his second language. His stories have been or are due to be published in UK and American anthologies and magazines such as *Meridian*, *Adelaide*, *Unthology*, *Overheard: Stories to Read Aloud*, *Crystal Voices*, and *blÆkk*. He is a volunteer at Leicester City of Sanctuary, where he helps find and develop new creative talent within the refugee and asylum seeker community. He lives in Leicester, UK.



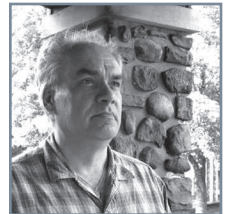
Fabrice B. Poussin

Fabrice B. Poussin is the advisor for *The Chimes*, the Shorter University award winning poetry and arts publication. His writing and photography have been published in print, including in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *La Pensee Universelle* (Paris), and more than 200 other art and literature magazines in the United States and abroad.



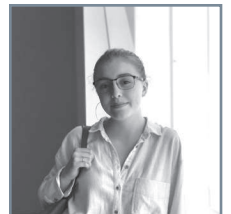
John Repp

John Repp grew up near the Palace Depression in Vineland, New Jersey. His latest book is *Fat Jersey Blues*, published in 2014 by the University of Akron Press.



Isabella Ronchetti

Isabella Ronchetti is a young artist and writer originally from San Francisco, California. She spent a few years studying in Florence, Italy, and currently is living in Virginia. She enjoys spending her free time reading psychology books, swimming, and people watching.

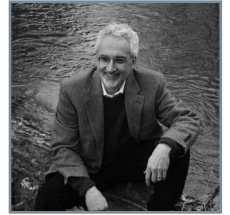


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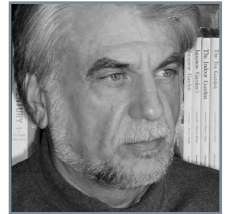
David Anthony Sam

David Anthony Sam was featured poet in the spring 2016 issue of *Hurricane Review*. His chapbook *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson* was the 2016 Grand Prize winner of GFT Press Chapbook Contest and his collection *All Night over Bones* received Honorable Mention for the 2016 Homebound Poetry Prize.



Peter Scacco

Peter L. Scacco is the author of five books of poetry: *Three Meditations* (2016), *The Gray Days* (2014), *Along a Path* (2013), *A Quiet Place* (2012), and *Chiaroscuro* (2010). Mr. Scacco's poems and woodcuts have been featured in numerous print and online journals. He has lived and worked in New York, Paris, Tokyo, and Brussels, and now resides in Austin, Texas. His art can be seen at www.scaccowoodcuts.com.



Lauren Scharhag

Lauren Scharhag is a writer of fiction and poetry. She is the recipient of the Gerard Manley Hopkins Award for poetry and a fellowship from Rockhurst University for fiction. A recent transplant to the Florida Panhandle, she lives with her husband and three cats.



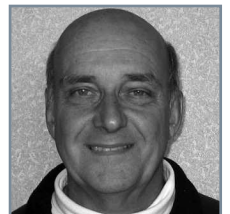
Domenic Scopa

Domenic Scopa holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. His poetry and translations have been featured in several places, including *Adirondack Review*, *Reed Magazine*, and *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*. His first book, *The Apathy of Clouds* (FutureCycle Press), is forthcoming in 2018.



Paul Smith

Paul Smith writes poetry & fiction. He lives in Skokie, Illinois with his wife Flavia. Sometimes he performs poetry at an open mic in Chicago. He believes that brevity is the soul of something he read about once, and whatever that something is or was, it should be cut in half immediately.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Laura Sweeney

Laura Sweeney facilitates Writers for Life in central Iowa. She represented the Iowa Arts Council at the First International Teaching Artist's Conference in Oslo, Norway. Her poems have been published in several journals and the anthologies *Nuclear Impact* and *Beer, Wine, & Spirits*. She is associate editor for *Eastern Iowa Review*.



Gilmore Tamny

Gilmore Tamny has a story in Madison Smartt Bell's *Narrative Design*, several short essays in *Not A Rose* by Heide Hatry and *The Dan Clowes Reader*. She has had essays, artwork, interviews and short stories published in *Chickfactor*, *Petrichor Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *Turk's Head Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Meat for Tea*, *The Drum*, *Vine Leaves*, and *Gravel*.



Amanda Tumminaro

Amanda Tumminaro lives in the U.S. Her poetry has appeared in *Cottonwood*, *Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Freshwater*, among others. She is currently working on her first poetry chapbook.



Kevin Richard White

Kevin Richard White is the author of three novels: *Steep Drop*, *The Face of a Monster* and *Patch Of Sunlight through No Frills Buffalo*. His short fiction has been previously published by Akashic Books, *Tahoe Writers Works*, *Crack the Spine*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Ghost Parachute* and Cactus Heart Press among others. He lives in Pennsylvania.



Jim Zola

Zola is a published poet and photographer living in North Carolina.



EDITOR'S WELCOME

"The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."

-T.S. Eliot, *"Tradition and the Individual Talent,"* 1919

When it comes to craft, these lines might apply not only to poets but also to fiction writers, essayists, and graphic artists. Craft involves the creation of a "new compound"—but how does a writer or an artist first generate and then select the right words, syntax, forms, colors, or pieces, finding the right places for each, recognizing and omitting the unnecessary?

We have probably all read or viewed works which are technically perfect yet lacking in some indeterminate, essential quality. Likewise, we have all read or viewed imperfect works, some seriously flawed, that endlessly fascinate experts and lay audiences alike. What is this "new compound" Eliot mentioned, and how, exactly, is it fashioned?

As reviewers were reading over the many wonderful reflections submitted for this issue on craft, one kept commenting, "This is a description of process, not craft." Acknowledging that this phenomenon probably had more to do with the language of the call than the fault of contributors, I was prompted to reflect on the differences. Process can to some degree be taught, although not everyone will find efficiency in the same process. Craft can to some degree also be taught, often involving successful replication of a prototype of some sort. But art? I felt a bit befuddled, so I googled it. Here's the first definition to pop up in a Google search on "art":

1. the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.

This definition is from Oxford UP's online dictionary, so—who has a better one?

Googling "craft" and "definition", I stumbled first upon a PowerPoint presentation entitled "Analyzing Writer's Craft" on Teacherweb.com. Written by Kelly Philbeck, a diligent teacher from Kentucky, this is what it says:

2. Craft is the art of writing. It is the writer's intentional use of the following to create an effect on the reader. . . .

From there, Philbeck's slides break down the "art" of writing to its elements, the ones students study for test questions. Her presentation ends appropriately with references to the two works she consulted in preparing the presentation. I am sure her students, and others as well, have appreciated Philbeck's work.

Merriam-Webster online defined "craft" as follows:

- 2 a. an occupation or trade requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill

How helpful would these definitions be to the amateur or to the novice, the student in every class I've ever taught who has a secret notebook, the one who is writing by impulse and wondering, *how?* I am horrified by the thought of rote exercises: *Use a hyperbole in this sentence or use at least one metaphor in your first draft.* I guess it's possible some of us learn to write this way. I work on a campus with an artist (and he learned at the Sorbonne) who expects his beginning students to emulate the paintings of the masters. Our gallery is filled with their amazing creations,

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the master works immediately recognizable, each student's unique vision and stamp unmistakable. He must be an incredible teacher because every year his students produce impressive creations, in some cases selling faster than the works of professionals on display in regional galleries. Edward Dougherty's "The Making of a Poem" and David Sam's "Sun or Moon: Reflection on Craft" both credit certain masters in their development of craft.

Writers and artists struggle to produce the perfect "objective correlative" (another attribution to T. S. Eliot mentioned by E.H. Jacobs in his reflection), which is of course irreducible, hence the apparent frustration of fiction writer Tim O'Brien as he answered the question of a mystified graduate student many years ago:

Student, on one of O'Brien's stories: *But what does it mean?*

O'Brien, after a momentary pause (the spirit, not the letter of his reply): *If I could tell you that, I wouldn't have written it.*

Unfortunately, even if they were so inclined, great writers can't simply share their secrets so that others can win Pulitzers. Truth be told, they might not know how they achieved their successes any better than you do. And they certainly don't know whether or not they'll ever be able to achieve similar success again.

For most of us, the development of sophisticated craft is a journey. Maybe craft is more a matter of control, like surfing a roaring wave or taming a wild animal without breaking its spirit. No one says, *gosh, I think I need a metaphor here*. The best metaphors just happen, like weather happens. We just kind of have to wait for them until they naturally occur.

Finding like-spirited others is crucial for most of us. Devon Balwit's poem "Forced" beautifully illustrates what happens when a master attempts to impose general rules on a writer. And sometimes, like-spirited others just cannot be found, which is why Van Gogh's own mother threw away so many of his paintings. *Who paints stars or flowers like that?* Everyone wondered.

Pursuit of the vehicle for the ideal, universally recognized beauty or emotional power that makes craft into art can be demanding, lonely, frustrating, yet these pages attest that some do reach their intended destinations. Thanks to all who submitted, and to all who shared with us and with our readers reflections on those journeys. Wherever you are on that road, the journey itself is probably what matters most in the end, imagined destinations as distant as Polaris more often than not.

It's like the husband played by Antonio Banderas in *Original Sin* (2001) chasing down the elusive bride played by Angelina Jolie. Once he found her, he realized she was not the woman he had been following, not even close. Heartbreakingly beautiful, she seemed hopelessly flawed. He loved her anyway.



Erin O'Neill Armendarez

Erin O'Neill Armendarez
Editor in Chief



A Little Promise: The Poetry of Richard Robbins

by Melissa Gish

I studied literature and writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato, back in the late '90s. The school's MFA in Creative Writing program had recently launched, and I was fortunate enough to be included among those early candidates. All of the professors in the program were (and still are) published writers of prose and poetry. The program director during my stint was poet Richard Robbins. I enjoyed all of my classes and all of my professors during the three-year program, but I recall especially looking forward to Robbins' poetry classes. Robbins had a calm demeanor; he spoke with purpose. He had a way of leading his students toward introspection and carried a magical bag of tricks that helped us see and hear and *feel* language in whole new ways.

I bought his first poetry collection, *The Invisible Wedding* (U of Missouri Press, 1984), in the college bookstore. It was magnetic. Over the years, I have read his title poem "The Invisible Wedding" countless times, studying it, admiring it. Some things stick with a person forever. I still consider it one of my all-time favorites. And so, imagine my delight to find the poem included in Robbins' latest collection, *Body Turn to Rain: New & Selected Poems* (LynxHouse Press, 2017). With the 1984 book now out of print, I'm thrilled to see a number of its pieces being given a second outing.

Also appearing in *Body Turn to Rain* are selections from Robbins' later books, *Famous Persons We Have Known* (Eastern Washington U Press, 2000), *The Untested Hand* (Backwaters Press, 2008), *Radioactive City* (Bellday Books, 2009), and *Other Americas* (Blueroad Press, 2010), as well as forty new poems. Back in college, and as a continued follower of Robbins' work, I believe that I have learned a great deal about sound, form, and language from this poet and his work. Recently, I asked him to share his thoughts on poetry and writing with the readers of *Aji*.

Gish: Why is poetry valuable? Do you think it has a purpose?

Robbins: Poetry is valuable, along with other arts, because it puts us in touch with our life. That poetry continues to do that, that it keeps finding us and waking us up a little more each time, is its purpose.

G: *Body Turn to Rain* is a collection of new poems and poems selected from your previous five books. Such a collection marks a milestone in a writer's career. What made you decide it was time for this project?

R: A former publisher suggested I put the collection together. On my own, I never would have thought to do it. The project allowed me to see where I've been artistically, and to try to maintain the separate feels of five previously published collections, even as I was carrying over only about a quarter of the contents of each. The forty newer, previously uncollected poems actually represent efforts spanning two decades, but nonetheless the grouping definitely demonstrates new directions I have taken, new experiments with language, music, and shape. As for the book's "milestone" aspect: I did feel some of that gravity surrounding the project, but as a practical matter, the new book allows readers to access poems that are harder to find now, what with some books being out of print, and it certainly allows readers to see my work in a larger context.

G: Was it difficult to choose the previously published works for this collection? How did you choose them?

R: I had a sense of the arc of each collection—its journey from first poem to last—and I had a sense of the fundamental energies that were influencing the creative tension or question of each book, so the challenge was to try to reduce the grouping to an essential skeletal structure that still conveyed meaning. I did not want the selections from each earlier book to feel random, which has always been my personal complaint about many new-and-selected-poems collections.

G: How do you think you have evolved as a writer? In what ways do you think *Body Turn to Rain* can be seen as a reflection of this idea of change and growth?

R: I think readers may see an evolving approach to the language, music, and shape of a poem, but I doubt anyone could draw a graph of it. I hesitate to say the more recent poems are “more of this” or “less of that” in one of those areas, because I think someone could read a poem from my first book and one of the newer poems in *Body Turn to Rain* and not be surprised they were written by the same person. Someone could read them out loud and maybe, for example, hear a more complex music in one poem over another, or a blunter tone, but some of these differences don’t have to do with the age of the poem as much as the subject matter, the inner imperative they respond to, and so on. It’s probably the case that the last person to ask about the evolution of one’s work is the artist him- or herself. What I can say, though, is that it’s been very important for me over the years to try to be on the lookout for self-imitation, and to counter that impulse by experimenting with new approaches in both subject matter and style.

G: Some of your poem titles include a hint at what is perhaps the inspiration for the poem: the title of a painting, a line overheard at a café, a photograph, a time or place. What makes a line of dialogue, a random object, or a particular place poem-worthy for you?

R: Generally, a piece of language or image doesn’t have to be big, but it has to resonate in the ear or have a little promise hanging from it for it to work for me in a poem. I may not know where a thing is going to lead, but if it leads to a second line, that’s all I need for now. Then we’ll see if anything else happens. The titles you refer to may not always refer to the inspiration or trigger for the poem, but I generally like titles to be evocative of something—place, time, mood—so that the reader feels located somehow, and is predisposed to be engaged with the details of the poem even before the poem begins.

G: Where else do you get ideas for poems?

R: Beyond bits of language and bits of imagery, I do sometimes have poems triggered by the large events out there in the world that somehow ask to be digested by a single sensibility. Certainly, I have “ideas” now and then that I want to write about, but ideas aren’t enough—they need to be made flesh somehow in the local details of the poem.

G: I have always admired your skill with form. How do you decide on the form for a poem?

R: I don’t very often begin with a form in mind. I generally am following the hunch of the sound or image in my mind. After a few lines, I try to notice if the language is trying to fall into discernible audible or visual patterns. If it seems to be, I will adopt that as my form for the nonce until the poem announces to me it wants to sound or look another way. The main thing is that I am trying to be responsive to the process, to capture the feeling and thought of the moment, and the developing music of it as it moves down the page. At different times in the composition process, I may be paying more attention to language than image, shape, or something else. And then the attention will shift from the one thing to another. The important thing for me is to let the developing poem speak back at me and not to try to constrain it to such an extent that I eliminate certain directions it might otherwise want to go. Of course, precisely what a poem wants sometimes is more constraint, and I have to pay attention for that signal.



My teacher Richard Hugo, in addressing this issue, said that “you have to throw yourself in jail if you’re going to ever break out.” The same goes for some poems.

G: You have a way of selecting the *right* point of view for each poem. For example, I can’t imagine “Violence” in first-person or “A Map of the World” in third-person because they work perfectly the way you’ve written them. How do you make decisions about a poem’s point of view?

R: It’s pretty intuitive for me. And certainly there are poems that may have begun one way and flipped to another point of view in revision. I can say that I am suspicious of the first-person/present-tense as a default. Some whole bodies of work have nothing else. I want to remain open to the possibilities for speaking collectively, retrospectively, toward the future, and so on.

G: What do you believe are the characteristics of a meaningful or memorable poem?

R: There has to be something that gets its hooks in you, either at the level of phrasing, imagery, or music. That’s the signal that the surface of the poem has found its way into your inner life.

G: You’re not only a writer but a teacher of writing. What motivated you to pursue this dual career? What made you choose poetry?

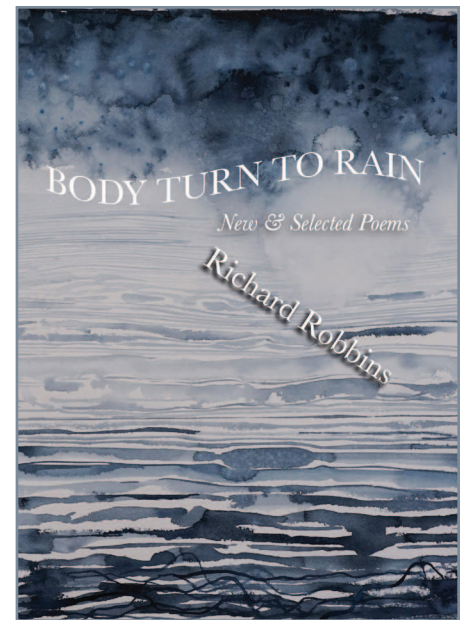
R: Well, as Neruda has said, poetry chose me. My commitment to becoming better at that headed me toward reading other poets and associating with others of like mind—in graduate school and elsewhere. When I first pursued a teaching position, it was more about making a living, but year by year I was able to appreciate how teaching also stimulated, rather than competed with, my own work.

G: Do you think that teaching writing has influenced your poetry or vice versa?

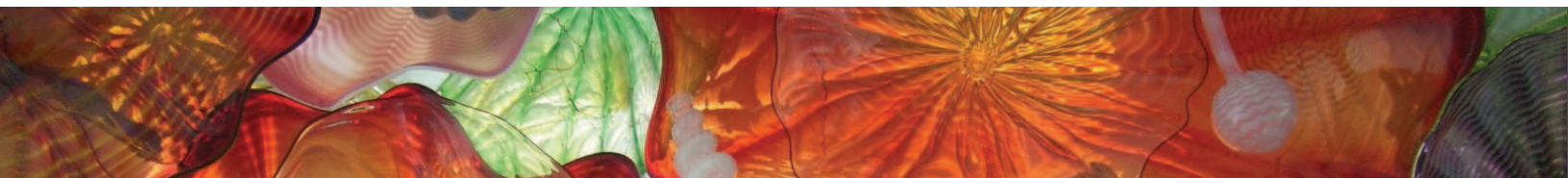
R: I think teaching requires you to find the language to express yourself about some of the processes of creativity that someone else might not need to vocalize. In that respect, it makes you cultivate an editorial distance that may be valuable in improving your own work.

G: What have you valued most about your experiences as a poet?

R: Any involvement in the arts, I think, is a way of experiencing physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual pleasure—running the gamut from the physical pleasure of words heard in the ear, to the more subtle pleasure we feel when we experience a new insight, or are made to feel empathy for another. Poetry is pleasurable for me in this way. Making poems makes me feel more connected to my world and to others.



Cover art for *Body Turn to Rain*, Lynx House Press, 2017

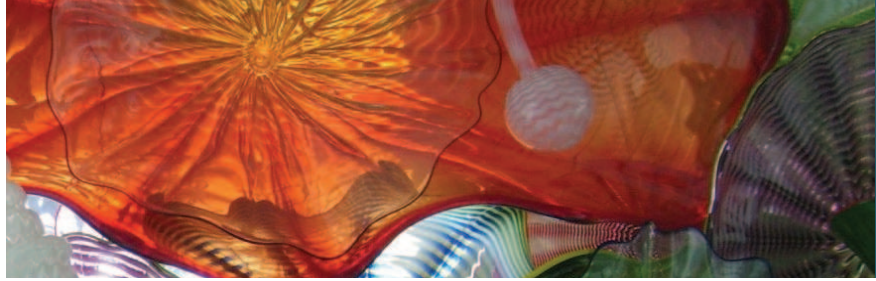


G: Which poets or poems most inspire you? Can you recommend any works that best represent the craft of poetry?

R: I have pretty wide tastes and draw different things from different writers. I have always loved the energy of a Gerard Manley Hopkins or a Sylvia Plath, but I also like the playfulness of Ross Gay, the easy erudition of Larry Levis, the fierceness of Philip Levine and Lucille Clifton, the tenderness of Li-Young Lee and Pablo Neruda. I think a lot of people find their way into poetry through a good anthology, which allows them to fix on some writers and pass over others. There are good anthologies out there that focus on writers of the last 50 years, and not just a single theme. As for whole collections, Ted Kooser's *Weather Central* or Ross Gay's *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* or Ellen Bass' *Like a Beggar* would be excellent places to begin.

G: Your latest book is still fresh from the press, but can you tell us what's next for you?

R: I am working on a couple of collections right now. I have groupings of poems that seem complete as individual entities but don't all seem to want to be together in the same book. So every once in a while I listen for any direction they might want to give me on the matter.



Rick Robbins in Punta Arenas, Chile circa 2009

Richard Robbins continues to teach at Minnesota State University, Mankato. In addition to his poetry collections, his poems have been published in such journals as *Paris Review*, *Manoa*, *North American Poetry Review*, *Miramar*, and *Santa Fe Literary Review*; and his work has been included in various anthologies, including *Where One Voice Ends Another Begins: 150 Years of Minnesota Poetry*. Among his many awards, he has received a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship, the Loft Award of Distinction in Poetry, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.

Images used on pages 14-17

Details of the Chihuly Bridge at the Tacoma Museum of Glass, Washington, courtesy Melissa Gish
Cover art for Body Turn to Rain, p. 16 & Rick Robbins in Punta Arenas, p. 17, courtesy Rick Robbins



The emotional, quarrelling, nomadic, redemptive and metamorphic work of **LEONARD KOGAN**

KRedfield: Where are you originally from and where are you living/working now?

LKogan: I was born in the former Soviet Bloc. In my teens, at the beginning of the '90s, my family immigrated to Israel. I pursued my studies at Avni Institute of Fine Arts in Tel-Aviv – Jaffa. Following graduation, I taught printmaking at Beit Berl College of Arts in Israel. In 2002, I visited New York and right away fell in love with the city; I took part in a number of solo and group shows in New York while living in Brooklyn from 2004--2009. Since 2009, I have lived in Baltimore, Maryland.

KR: When/how did you get started in visual arts?

LK: I grew up in a family where art was not foreign; my mother is an art teacher and many of her friends were painters or craftsmen who regularly surrounded me, ever since I can remember. Therefore, exposure and passion for art were all-pervading in our home.

KR: Who are/were your mentors and role models?

LK: Shortly after arrival to Israel, I stumbled upon a book of correspondence between Theo and Vincent Van Gogh; it had an effect on me and shaped a certain context in my perception of art. In addition, unconsciously, I started gravitating towards modernist architecture as well as design.

KR: When did you begin working in your current style? Was there any catalyst for the shift (if there was a shift)?

This body of work started to emerge roughly eight years ago in Baltimore. Portraits always fascinated me; I can spend hours wandering in museums, solely looking at the portraits. My collagistic mask-like portraits gradually built up into stratified erosions. In my works the drawing is usually complementary and secondary in importance to color, which is instinctively the moving energy.

KR: What cultural influences, if any, do you think appear in your work?

LK: Having lived for just about equally divided time on three dissimilar continents, it is hard to point out exactly what cultural influences or sensibilities have prevailed the most. To a certain extent, I see my works as a matrix of existential conundrums along with synaptic circulations and at same time convulsive organism-like structures.





“I am not aiming in my works to be recognizable by a patent, systematic style...”

-Leonard Kogan

KR: What feelings, thoughts, or reactions do you hope your work evokes from its viewers?

LK: I am not aiming in my works to be recognizable by a patent, systematic style; therefore, reaction to the works, along with visual and emotional aspects, I would pass to the viewers' own personal aesthetic interpretations.

KR: How would you describe your art using only 5 words?

LK: Emotional, Quarrelling, Nomadic, Redemptive, Metamorphic.

KR: Your work seems to have a figural presence. Can you tell us a bit about that?

LK: Yes, instinctively portraits are figurative; no matter if the work is stylized there will be interchanged traits that eventually will resemble facial characteristics.

KR: In your cover letter, you wrote that “Associative references and flashbacks are convulsing simultaneously on the surface.” Can you speak more to that and give us any insights that might help us draw us deeper into the work?

LK: In my works I do not utilize life models or readymade imagery, but project amalgamations of impulses and moods. I attempt to capture ephemeral particles and phenomena, which are at once in tremor and in flux.

KR: Can you describe the process from the spark of an idea to the culmination of a completed piece?

LK: My ideas develop directly on the surface; habitually there are lacunae between my mental sketches and transmission to the actual painting. I enjoy working slowly; therefore, finishing the painting is not my absolute aim. Even if I might consider the painting as finished, nevertheless, later on it could be repainted or destroyed.

KR: How long do you typically spend working on a piece?

LK: Generally I work simultaneously on a number of pieces and do not strive to time-limit myself; as a result, it's hard to define the timeline, but it may take months or even years to completion.

KR: How do you know when a piece is finished?

LK: More often than not it is merely an intuitive decision.

KR: Can you tell us a bit about how you share your work? For example, have you done gallery shows or do you prefer to share in other ways?

LK: Yes, I have done a number of gallery shows. In addition, I share my works on Instagram.

KR: Do you share your work with people as it is in progress or wait until you have a finished piece?

LK: Yes, I do share my works while they are in process. The expansion of the internet has significantly redefined the way artists work, a process that was once considered solitary. Today at no cost and with immediacy an artist can independently share his or her works to an unlimited community, a blinded experiment in a way, and receive feedback; in addition, artists are no longer confined to a particular place or country.

KR: Do you work alone or within a community of other artists?

LK: I enjoy working alone.



KR: What tools do you use to grow and develop as an artist?

LK: My main sources are books that range from fiction to scientific or philosophical observations, and I love watching European art house movies.

KR: How do you want your art to contribute to the world/your community?

LK: I don't know about this, I hope that my work offers an aesthetic and a challenge. I believe that an artist's contribution is defined by the community he or she may not even be a part of.

KR: What do you think is the inherent value in all art?

LK: I think art serves as interpretation of psyche and an essential expression of it devoid of material utility and necessity.

KR: What goals do you have for the future?

LK: I would like to travel more and explore new approaches along with new techniques.

KR: What other artists would you recommend we check out?

LK: Perhaps as a result of the current political climate, lately I've found myself being more interested in either Modernist painters or artists that are devoid of fanfare. My favorite list: William De Kooning and Elaine De Kooning, Lee Krasner, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Pablo Picasso, and many more.

KR: What advice do you have for aspiring artists?

LK: In this peculiar politically charged time, my advice to artists is to try to escape pre-programmed paths, to take more risks and to investigate more scientific and literal milieu.



*Photograph of Leonard Kogan,
courtesy Leonard Kogan (above)*

Images that appeared in this issue of Aji Magazine:

Optical Illusion, mixed media on paper, p. 18

Farcical Play, oil on paper, p. 19

Intimately Alien, oil on paper/mixed media, p. 20 (top)

Blind Spots, oil on paper, p. 20 (bottom)

Parallax, oil on paper/mixed media, p. 21

See Leonard Kogan's Latest Work

*follow @leonardkoganstudio on
Instagram*



The Making of a Poem

I.

For me, it is not unlike a cold and cloudy day. Experience moves through me and I move through my experiences like the conditions of weather: the sky largely unnoticed, just there above us, the light flattened out and casting no shadows. But then, sometimes, when those conditions are aligned exactly enough, dewpoint and whatnot, the first few snowflakes begin to fall. It often starts with an image.

Picture a sleepless girl, lying on her back on the family's flat-roofed house staring at the night sky, its light-dust and depth of dark.

From the image, sometimes language emerges. I don't know if there is going to be a poem, and I certainly don't know if it's going to be good, but we must start somewhere, right? And I start with this combination: some few physical details and whatever phrases assert themselves.

It has been the work of a lifetime, sometimes more deliberately than others, to attune myself to these impressions that arise in me. Whether they arise from lived experiences, from artwork or reading, or as in this case from imagination, I can sense these assertions.

When I am busy or preoccupied, these conditions may align and I do not notice them. I may notice and even begin manipulating phrasing inwardly. However, unless I honor this coming-together of impressions and the resulting arising of language, honor it with the discipline to actually write, little else happens. In fact, I grow grumpier the longer I live with the lid of routine screwed tight over this well of happening.

As I've attuned myself to my own internal weather, I have noticed that the images need to have some kind of clarity and specificity to them, not something generalized. For me, close-ups are better than vistas. That's where feeling is active, not the other way around. Rarely, but occasionally, I can start from strong emotion and let it propel its way toward what the body registers: images and rhythms. Also, unlike my apprentice days, I can also begin by playfully working with language, and out of the associations, thoughts, and shadows already operating in word-roots and syntax, emotion or story or imagery coalesces. No matter how it happens, there needs to be a fusion: feeling (the insubstantial impressions that the body registers) unites with the sensory (the body's knowledge of substantial impressions).



The energy of her sleeplessness is not anxiety but excitement. The world is enormous but not threatening. Her solitude up on the roof is not lonely, but capacious and hospitable. The sky bends over her, an arch or billowing sheet that is floating, is always floating above her and towards her.

Now, see if you can do more than picture her: can you *be* her?

This is unusual for me, but I've been allowing it, even seeking it, practicing it more and more: can the one who speaks the words of a poem be someone else? A character, of sorts. Or: just another self, one I can know inwardly through empathy and imagination, if not through related lived experience.

Here I was imagining Mary, the mother of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, the only one with this infancy narrative, we read in one verse that, "Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country..." and the next verse has her arrival, "where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." I was interested in the in-between-ness of her travel. Having had the angel "overshadow" her and invite her to participate with God in a

grand plan, she leaves her home. Between the welcome of her relatives and leaving her childhood home, Mary was not only moving through the land toward the hill country but moving into a whole new life for herself. She was giving birth to a new version of herself.

She's remembering those nights on the roof!

With a fictive speaker, I am more conscious of how the mind moves, what might startle it into insight or strong reaction. When the speaker is a dimension of myself, these layers are hidden from me until revision. But whoever is the speaker and whenever these concerns are workable, these too need to be embedded in the body of the poem's language. They are part of the overall sequence, the pacing of whatever reveals the poem will make, the rhythms, the line and stanza units, the linebreaks and stanza breaks. Sometimes changes in formal aspects help me realize the speaker's internal state, and so revision can be a means of discovery about the heart-mind of the poem. Other times, the inner workings are already fairly clear; revision then becomes a means of allowing formal choices to reveal them.

What causes her to cast back to those nights? What in her current situation makes the past attractive? Or what now needs to be escaped to the refuge of memory? What's happening that prompts a new understanding or at least a re-examining of what's gone before?



In the earliest drafts, the Salt Sea (commonly referred to as the Dead Sea) was up front, prominent. To allow young Mary to speak of her landscape with authority, I felt I needed authentic detail. And so I did quick, impressionistic research. I grabbed my *Oxford Companion to the Bible* and the *Oxford Biblical Commentary*. The Commentary drew my attention to how she responds not to the predictions about her soon-to-be conceived son, but to the method. She does not inquire about his greatness or what it will mean that people will call him the "Son of the Most High" or how he will be given David's throne. Instead, she asks how she could conceive since she's a virgin. This reveals her concern in that moment. While this characterization interested me, and while it reoriented my attention to the story so that I noticed how it says Mary was "perplexed" by the angel's greeting but he reassures her to not be afraid, these details did not resonate the way others did.

When I browsed the language of the verses, one word rang out, like a hollow bowl being struck. In his answer to Mary's fairly practical question about how she'll conceive if she's a virgin, Gabriel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." (Luke 1: 35). Reading the word "overshadow," immediately, I could picture an over-sweeping darkness, a cloth of shade waved over her like a cloak. I also sensed this was a rich Biblical image, one with intricate associations. The *Harper-Collins Study Bible*, with its New Revised Standard Version, directed me to the story of when Jesus was transfigured, and a cloud overshadowed the men on the mountain. Biblical theophanies often blend light with clouds, but I was mostly interested in the paradox of darkness. Rather than a revelation "dawning" on someone, a darkening can be a revelation.

Her childhood is ending. The curtain is falling on that phase of her life, and she can feel the change in her own body.



Most poems (and stories, in writing or film) map a terrain. There is movement from one place to another, whether that travel is geographical or psychological. A decision, any decision, marks a change in location, even if that change is in the will. There is something pleasing when the decision or action is small but the significance outsized.

The question is whether that travel is reported on, having happened, or if it is enacted within the piece itself. In my apprentice days, a moving realization or discovery would become the basis of a poem. It would be about what happened, and so they were often in the past tense because the “action” or “plot” had already completed, and it occurred in the writer, not in the writing.

For this poem, Mary is literally traveling; she is also passing from one form of life to another. And yet, she is in-between, also. She is suspended between home and her relatives’ house but also between the news of what her life will become and the actual unfolding of that news. As a person, Mary is no longer a child but not yet a fully grown woman but she is pregnant. How does she feel about these movements, these forms of stasis?

She would not travel alone, not in those days. And according to the maps in the Biblical commentaries, it would be several days’ journey. They’d have to stop for the night. They’d have to prepare food, have meals; they’d have to prepare sleeping arrangements, go to sleep. What was the division of labor between men and women? How would she participate?

They were stopped for the night, the activity completed, and she can’t sleep. Staring into the sky causes her to recall her childhood nights of wonder and excitement. How different she feels now, just weeks or months later.



The Salt Sea (early draft)

Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah... (Luke 1: 39)

I lay on the roof as on a raft,
afloat under a white river of stars.
Night’s whole territory of night curved over me,
over all the village houses, over
the animals asleep in their pens,
and over all the people asleep on their mats.
The world was wondrous, being inverted,
a place for imagination, for dreams
to play themselves even in waking.

I was so childish as a child-just
months ago, thinking nothing
could change, thinking
what I expected to happen
would happen. For days now,
I have been walking, walking away
from my home. Under that roof,
I was no longer at home. I’m no longer
at home in these arms, these legs,
and certainly not with this belly.

When I was overshadowed, I was sure,
but sent further away into the hill country,
all the world feels dry and cold.
Now I know the future is not mine.

With the others, I walk into it, a voyage
without shore. We stop for night,
I cook with the other women
then lay down but do not sleep.
I rub the salt crusting my eyes.
Some tell stories by the fire,
tales we've all heard before.
They laugh, then grow quiet.

A traveler reported a Salt Sea
to the south. Though in water,
you can die, these waters save you.
If you release the hold on your breath,
these waters accept but do not
absorb you, and as if to remind you,
for days, the taste of salt remains.

I lick my lips. And know it is true.
I'm left awake. Time, too, is salty,
and I'm a drop of that sea.

II.

Long before pen goes to paper (or fingers to keyboard), before impressions form and constellate, before what emerges to reveal itself as having poem-potential, the poem begins. It is a long story. Before I could sit down on a winter morning—an image hovering in my mind of a scene with a young woman lying on her flat-roofed home—I needed to be the kind of person in whom such impressions would occur. What relationship to the Bible would lead someone to spin-off from its stories? What kind of writer would adopt another's voice, rather than one's own?



After college, I was adrift in a self-defining project. All those values talked (and talked and talked) about in late-into-the night sessions where we solved all the problems of the world needed to be aligned with the lived structures and routines of my life after college. After about a year, I came to the end of my work for *The Cable Guide* as a “customization editor,” which meant I devoted all skill and subtlety my English degree developed in me to ensure that the ads for one regional cable company appeared in their edition and not the one for San Luis Obispo. Having saved up my vacation time, I took two weeks off for very different pursuits. The first week, I spent traveling, including a few days with my poet-cousin, Kate, in Mendocino, California, who introduced me to the work of Denise Levertov, Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*, and Robert Bly's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke—influences that shape my imagination and work decades later.

The next week, I went on a 7-day silent retreat at the Christian Brothers' retreat center. I was well acquainted with the place. Periodically, I would attend retreats there as part of the Aspirancy Program, the outreach and formation efforts of the Christian Brothers. All through college, I met monthly with Brother Richard, my spiritual director, and at least once a year gather in Adamstown with the others for a retreat.

This would be my first extended retreat on my own, my first silent retreat, and my first experience of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Developed by the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius Loyola, these exercises use Christian contemplation to read the Bible or other sacred text (for me, it was the Gospel of Mark), and prayerfully imagine into the stories, thereby being led into meditation in God's presence. I've practiced other forms of the ancient method called *lectio divina*, and they all allow us to participate in and receive teachings from the text in ways that go far beyond "studying" them can.

Despite a regrettable, though brief, period of fundamentalism in college, the meaning of the Bible has not been fixed and determined. The text was first liberated for me by the teaching that the Bible emerges out of the Holy Spirit's on-going revelation within the community (and for the most orthodox, this still means the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope), opening the possibility that further revelation that is not recorded in that document may be given. For example, the ascension of Jesus is described in the Acts of the Apostles, but the Assumption of his mother, Mary, into heaven is affirmed by sacred Tradition. I was raised in this teaching, and only when confronted by fundamentalist Protestant interpretations did I know what it was or how to call it.

Since college, my understanding of the Bible has broadened even further, allowing for a mythic understanding. The Quaker thinker, Howard Brinton, says that when we engage sacred texts this way, "we are not so much concerned with historical validity or rational consistency with our scientific or philosophic outlook as we are with the inner significance of history, myth, and symbol. Symbol is a language of religion." We seek this "inner significance" through metaphor.

I can't say with any precision how all this influenced the writing of "The Salt Sea," but I'm sure the poem is built on these foundations.



I carried Denise Levertov's collections from the 1980s, *Candles in Babylon*, *Breathing the Waters*, and *A Door in the Hive*, with me for years. From them, I learned her practice of "organic verse," as opposed to a nebulous and utterly subjective "free verse." I also sensed her spiritual evolution, one that allowed her to write "Annunciation," a poem that imagines "the scene" which we all know from paintings and movies: "the room, variously furnished / almost always a lectern, a book." The event is the arrival of the angel Gabriel to announce to Mary that she will be the mother of God. In Levertov's poem, things go differently. Into the room rushes the announcing angel "on solemn grandeur of great wings." Levertov begins with the details that are available to us all, as in all *lectio divina*, but her imagining leads her to a fuller appreciation of the person of Mary, the woman, and the poet is able to counter the tradition.

We are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Levertov's characterization does solidify an understanding of Mary as a woman of distinction not only because of being chosen by God but also because of her choice, something each of us shares with her, in our common "humanness." In doing so, she also manages to re-characterize God, as well. This is no divine rapist, as in the Roman myth of Leda and Zeus, when he is guised as a swan. This God waits, deferring, in a way, to human choice.



These examples prepared me to select from the shelves of some used bookstore a title that may not appeal to others: *The Gospels in our Own Image: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Poetry Based on Biblical Texts*. There's enough in that title to put off whole segments of the reading public. But if each term were a circle in a Venn diagram-poetry, contemporary poetry even, Biblical texts, and the idea that these texts could be made "in our own image," there I would stand in the open space where they all converged.

In his introduction, editor David Curzon says that "All religious traditions develop a literature of imaginative responses to their sacred canon and interpretive embellishments of it." He cites the recent attention to the ancient Jewish practice of *midrash*, noting that it was this tradition that led him to his first anthology.

Curzon presents a passage from the Gospels and then a poem or as many as 12 that respond to it; some counter-argue, some embody or extend, some refine or correct. I immediately recognized T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," in one of the wise kings' voices, "A cold coming we had of it." It relates the story from their point of view, the encounter leading the speaker to questioning, not conviction: "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?" I had read it aloud to a roomful of Penn Staters in the run-up to Christmas years before. Eliot's poem planted in me the seed of an idea: how can faith in these stories also include profound doubt at the same time? Perhaps that seed prepared me for Brinton's teachings.

Another formative idea came from this book. Each Biblical scene or story or even a single verse could give rise to multiple approaches, divergent responses, alternative interpretations, and a mixture of tones. Poems originated from a range of cultures and languages and from across time. Reading more and widely introduced me to the community of writers; this revealed to me that Primo Levi's experience in Auschwitz would lead him to respond very differently to the Annunciation story than Levertov (not in the anthology) or Sylvia Plath (who is). Both Plath and Levi committed suicide.

Perhaps, like these texts or any texts for that matter, my own experiences could be interpreted and responded to in a variety of ways. Life does not impose a fixed and determined interpretation; its meaning evolves over time and shifts its iridescence depending on perspective.



After college and prior to grad school for my creative writing MFA, I would read on my way to work. I drove from the outer edge of Philadelphia up to Bucks County, and I'd have a collection of poems by Rilke or Merwin or Kinnell on the seat beside me. At red lights, I'd open it, absorb a line or whole stanza, then as traffic crept along, I'd tent the book on the passenger seat and savor the image, idea, and phrasing.

Once I landed at Bowling Green, in the glacially scraped flatlands of northwest Ohio, I walked everywhere. And having plucked up a review copy of James Wright's *Above the River: The Complete Poems* from the pile at the *Mid-American Review*, I went back and forth to class, reading. It took some getting used to, reading and walking, but it's amazing how quickly you can get the knack. That's where I came across his poem, "St. Judas" for the first time.

This bit of midrash picks up the Biblical story in the first line: “When I went out to kill myself...” and the sonnet goes on to recount what could cause betrayer to become saint. Quite a lot of terrain to map in just 14 lines. Seeing the suffering of another person, Judas forgets the scenes of that day and runs to the stranger’s aid. Dropping his rope—his intention to kill himself—the speaker “ignore[s] the uniforms” to tend the man. He knows he is “banished from heaven,” but he acts on his compassion, his deep fellow-feeling. Suddenly, though, he recalls the events—and his role in them—that occurred in those scenes: “I remembered bread my flesh had eaten, / The kiss that ate my flesh.” This makes him feel skinned alive, “flayed without hope.” For those of an orthodox turn of mind, is that enough contrition? What amazes me in Wright’s vision of Judas is how readily and completely his character expresses his love and care for another, a stranger. He embodies the parable of the Good Samaritan, and so earns his sainthood.

Such an imaginative twist on a story so entrenched in its telling and meaning stunned me. But it also taught me the power of creative transformation, how a poem can, through empathetic imagination, draw the foreign or other close. It takes a deep identification to speak for another, or presumption. But isn’t that what all playwrights do? Isn’t Shakespeare a poet speaking in any number of voices, identifying with delicate and innocent Desdemona in one scene and then with dastardly Iago the next? Good writing expands a sense of self. Like a deep inhale, it expands the permeable membrane of the self to include even the betrayer, the villain, not for mere entertainment but for insight, revelation, communion.



“It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being—and in some instances, even an inanimate thing—brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one’s own self, *and* even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe...And *both* can be induced” (Roethke 40).

By the time I hit grad school, Theodore Roethke had become a mentor, what Vera John-Steiner calls “a distant teacher.” She explains an “intense and personal kinship [...] results when the work of another evokes a special resonance in them” (54). I certainly had experienced that “resonance” with Roethke, and Levertov, Rilke, William Carlos Williams, and other poets. I’ve never spoken of this bond in terms of “kinship” or family, but of “lineage,” in the sense of Zen transmission from teacher to student, transmission that is not bestowed upon the student as much as awakened in the student.

What Roethke awakened in me was this “sharp sense of the being,” which is not a clinical “observation” in order to gather descriptive details. It is a relational dynamic, an arc of energy humming with recognition. And in that heightened awareness, we can pitch lyric language at greater tension, or as he advised himself in his notebooks: “Make the language take really desperate jumps” (*On Poetry*...76).

The idea that resonant moments of expanded identification could be induced was an opening for me. It deepened my apprenticeship lesson from Rilke (who got it from the sculptor Auguste Rodin) that the artist should not go about mooning and waiting for inspiration, or sitting in coffee shops talking about books and writing. A writer is someone who writes. But here, Roethke is talking about a much more subtle discipline, one that borders on the religious. In fact, he parses his previous statement to say that the identification can be brought about “by intensity of the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are part of it and it is a part of you” (40). He cites Rilke going to the zoo to observe the animals in this spirit, a practice that resulted in Rilke’s “thing poems” collected in *New Poems 1907 and 1908*. These were collections I read on my way to work, in Edward Snow’s

brilliant translations. I also practiced this kind of observation, this way into making images in language; perhaps sensing the lines of influence converge added to my sense of finding my lineage.

The feeling of being one with the universe was also familiar, from my spiritual disciplines and traditions. Roethke says it is the “first stage of mystical illumination...the sense that all is one and one is all” (41). To have the myriad objects and welter of experiences cohere in meaningful relation is a profound and comforting sensation. Both the intensity of seeing and the mystical relation to all things, Roethke says, “can be an occasion for gratitude” (40).

All this leads back into poetic practice, too, because the experience is “accompanied by a loss of the ‘I,’ the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence” (41). Having one’s sense of self shifted “to another center” allows for empathic imagination to draw the other close, but it also invites holding the personal at some remove, allowing for poems that are personal but not strictly autobiographical. Roethke speaks of the “protagonist” in some of his longer sequences, as if it were a character in fiction, and yet so many of the images and symbols emerge from Roethke’s life. He was seeking a certain amount of distance in order to “be true to what is most universal” in himself (53), which may operate in this other center, not in the facts of one’s biography.



What do I know about being nearly abandoned for being pregnant? About being sent away from home or walking into the hill country of Galilee? What do I know of being a God-bearer? Only what I can imagine.

And that is enough.

III.

Theodore Roethke’s line “In a dark time, the eye begins to see,” reveals how allowing ourselves to become accustomed to the dark actually allows us to begin to make use of whatever light there is to discern shapes. Anyone who has looked up from the bright screen of their device only to realize they can’t make out the faces at a restaurant table knows that lag. It becomes a perfect metaphor for the growth that is possible after or even because of any “dark time.” Roethke’s poem reflects Roethke’s life and so it includes fear of madness, the death of the self, and the anguished fight to discover and assert one’s identity.

Baffled by the meanings when assigned to read Roethke in college, especially “The Lost Son,” I took diligent notes. Still, something in them drew me back and still does decades later. Like music I’d turn up and enjoy even when I couldn’t even make out the lyrics, I think his poetry’s “soundtrack,” their tone and rhythms and sonic textures as well as their imagery were compelling enough for me. I “got” enough from them to enjoy them, and following that enjoyment I re-read them again and again.

More than enjoyment, I needed “In a Dark Time” as a young man. In it, I had that miraculous sensation of having another person—a stranger, even—speak of my own experience. Reading someone else’s words, I could feel and understand my own life. I felt known and understood, a sensation that is sorely lacking in most people’s lives. The “I” of the poem could be Roethke or myself; so I read myself in its urgent fear, how I too had felt “in broad daylight the midnight come again.” I startled to realize how I too heard “my echo in the echoing wood.” And, even though I couldn’t tell a heron from a wren, Roethke’s correspondences between the natural images and personal struggle were familiar. I nodded in my reading, pausing at the line, “A man goes far to find out what he is.” Having one’s anguish confirmed by another is not compounded and made worse by knowing there are others who likewise suffer; instead, this relieves the anguish because some part of our pain is feeling alone in it. Perhaps that is why I found so much hope in Roethke’s resolution:

A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.



If honesty is to be served, I didn't *want* to know what some part of me did in fact know: "The Salt Sea" is flawed: *roof/raft/mat* may please the mouth in the saying, but is the mind pleased by the image and idea? When drafting, I can get thrilled by linguistic cleverness and sonic texturing. Afterwards, in the flush of relief and success of a complete draft, I read to appreciate, turning over in my mind those nuggets of phrasing.

However: a niggling: that beginning isn't right. Like a bruise, I didn't want to touch it. Also like something stuck between teeth; the tongue returns to it so often the muscle aches.

"On a raft" and "under a river"? How can she be floating and underwater? She may be playing, but that doesn't even make sense.

Question that opening image: sleepless girl sneaks up onto the family's flat roof— on her back, gazing up. The dark of the sky. Stars speckling the whole field of vision—more than are visible now. The depth of her seeing. The "bend" of it, the "arch" of it. *The bowl of night?*

Is she playing games in her imagination, like kids do closing one eye then the other to make the physical world jump back and forth. Does the image change when she imagines she's on a raft? *It occurs to her.*

How would she *feel* recognizing a river above her? Like a fish? In danger of drowning? Is she awake because she's troubled? *She's practicing. Agreeing to what reality offers, what her imagination is creating. Choosing. She chooses.*

The Salt Sea (Version 2)

Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah...(Luke 1: 39)

The whole territory of night curved over me,
over all the village houses, over
the animals asleep in their pens,
and over all the people
asleep on their mats. I would lay on the roof
as on a raft. There I'd scare myself
thinking of all that water
and all who drifted soundlessly below.
To startle myself back, I'd stare up again
at the white river of stars and invert the world:
we were all afloat, all survivors,
all inheritors. The world was wondrous,
a place for imagination, for dreams
to play themselves even in waking.



In his essay “The Taste of Self,” the poet Stanley Kunitz calls Roethke one of the “superior order of poets” (88) as he analyzes “In a Dark Time” stanza by stanza. Kunitz says the poem is “a lyric process” that seeks “to convey the sensation of the torment of identity” (88). His observations about the images, word choice, and paradoxes in the poem opened up not only what the poem is suggesting about the struggles to claim one’s own self, but how the language itself is part of that struggle and claim.

In the end, though, Kunitz says the poem’s “mounting intensity” only succeeds through three and a half of its four stanzas. He questions the very resolution I found so rewarding. The stanza starts with another paradox, gives a natural image for the soul’s agitation, and then pivots into the ending.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

First, Kunitz questions the grammar of that rhetorical question, but more importantly he questions the tone. “I am more concerned with the clinically analytic tone, which jars on the ear that has been listening to a stranger music” writes Kunitz (94).

There, feel it? There’s the demand of craft: a poem is not a cardboard box, a container to pack content into, a vehicle to convey ideas. Later I would learn about fresco painting, where colors are mixed directly into plaster, and so the image is not *on* the wall; it is *part of* the wall. For a poem, the meaning is part of the grammar, tone, music; craft means that all the elements of language are arranged to evoke meaning, not simply deliver it. Denise Levertov: “Form is never more than a *revelation* of content” (13).

Kunitz goes on to question the final lines as well. He admits that his own antipathy to religion may be at work, but the ending is not—to use the term bandied about in creative writing workshops—earned. “I am not wholly persuaded by the final couplet, superbly turned as it is. It may be my own deficiency that leads me to resist whatever seems to smack of conventional piety, but I cannot agree that anything in the poem prepares me for so pat a resolution” (94-5). He is pointing out a complex element of the craft. When form reveals content, it is seamless, whole, coherent. But if there are gaps—variations in form that don’t align with variations in meaning—this is felt as unpersuasive or unearned. Creating the positive sensation involves a great many layers of consciousness and structures of language, and the result is a convincing wholeness.

There’s a persuasion a work of art works. But it does not argue by claims and evidence and the binding of logic. It appeals to other regions than reason. This sensation of “being convinced” is more apprehended than comprehended. And as a sudden realization of a whole, a coherent accounting for the relations of all the parts, all the relevant detail needs to be present, and it needs to be vivid. The arrangement of those parts needs to suggest the whole, but not give it away. A poem’s meaning is not a single statement, to be filled in on a blank line, and it’s certainly not restricted to what the author intended. However, a poem does not mean anything anyone wants it to. There is a net of associations, an arc of energy, that catches readers and writer, and it emanates from the language. The feeling of being caught up in and suspended by that net is what convinces.

And I had my first instruction in all these ideas when I had to admit that Kunitz was right about “In a Dark Time.” Little in the poem sets us up for the speaker to suddenly take action, to climb. What occasions him not only

to enact the will but to surface from his fear-pit? What enables the spaciousness in himself—after being so crowded with self-conscious anguish—to recognize the Other-who-is-within?



Once the name of the Dead Sea was listed as Salt Sea, I knew my ending.

Days on the road, imagine it: walking through desert wind, the heat being pushed around: travelers' eyes would be crusted with dried tears, lips ringed with dried sweat. The taste of salt on the skin.

But when I sent a friend the poem, she said, "I'm not quite convinced yet of the inner changes, from childishness to . . . what?, that Mary has experienced."

I had established the conclusion before arranging the elements of the poem, and the result was unpersuasive. The deficiency is not merely technical, more than a matter of character development, of pacing the reveal. It's a deficiency of what the poem is really about. I discovered that the whole had too many possibilities to it, and the details arranged meaning into too many shapes.

I knew I needed to discover what were the central concerns and movements in the poem. And to learn that, I needed to return to the images themselves, to the journey she was on, and let the words and the worlds emerge from them. I had to listen, not to my original ideas or experience, but to the language itself. It would spark the next insights, if there were to be any.

My friend also questioned the opening images, suggesting, "you might begin the salt imagery with the night sky in the first stanza, where the stars might appear to be salt on a dark cloth, say."

This led me back to other sources.



Dead Sea, aka Salt Sea.

Lot's wife, looking back. Etiology as punishment. Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed for immorality, the woman turned into a pillar of salt for nostalgia.

Valley of Salt. Places made barren, as if sown with salt.

After Elijah rides his chariot of fire into the heavens, the next Biblical prophet, Elisha, performs his first miracle: purifying a well. With a cup of salt.

From the Latin *salarium*, what a person is worth in salt: salary.

Covenant of salt.

Infants were rubbed with salt. Good health.



The Salt Sea (Version 3)

Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah...(Luke 1: 39)

When I was a girl, just months ago,
I'd lay on the roof as on a raft.
Under me, I'd feel the world sway.
The whole cloth of heaven billowed
over me, curving over my village
and all its houses, the people
tucked up inside, asleep on their mats.
I alone was awake, and I'd wonder
if those who look back become salt,
what are we who look ahead?
For days, with the others, I walked,
walking away from home,
but looking back. Hot wind passed over,
whipping my headscarf, I hunched
under it to protect my eyes,
cover my mouth, hide my skin.
I was so childish as a child, believing
nothing could change, thinking what
I expected to happen would happen.
Now I know: the future is not mine,
maybe it never was. When overshadowed,
I was sure, but sent away, heading up
into the hill country, the world feels
dry, barren, and the future's a voyage
without shore, and with the others
I tack into it. We stop for the night.
I cook with the women, who laugh
how young I am, how smooth my skin.
I serve the meal but do not speak.
I lay down but do not sleep.
I rub the salt crusting my eyes.
Before me stretches night's vast territory.
Bright travelers trace a brief path
then are gone. I remember a pilgrim
once reported a Salt Sea far south.
In its waters, he said, you float
if you release your breath. The waters
accept you but do not absorb you.
They do not kill you but save you.
The only one awake again,
I gaze into the sky. The prophet's
cup of salt has poured out
across its dark fabric, enough

to rub a newborn with. *Neither death*
the words return to me
nor miscarriage would come
from its waters. I am a boat
with two passengers. I place both hands
on my belly and listen. The animals
shift and stamp in the moonless night.
On my cracked lips, I taste of salt.
The only one awake, I'm not alone:
I'm a drop of that sea. Dark as it is,
starlight pours through me, small as I am.

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It Was Dawn in Salonica, Too

At around 2 am Angie was sitting behind the open bar when a taxi stopped in front of Café Papaya. A guy stepped out, went straight to her, said, “Pour me a *tsipouro* and pour one for yourself and come and sit down with me,” and, quickly turning around, he sat by a table in front of the bar’s gazebo, next to the only other customers: two couples of around fifty who had just begun their meal of beef soup, Greek salad, tzatziki, and chili cheese-cream.

Motionless, he gazed at the deserted harbour. His hair was short and grey, his lips fleshy, and he had small, grey eyes. Some long threads from the cut-off sleeves of his shirt dangled onto his strong tanned arms.

Angie filled three quarters of a small glass with *tsipouro* and a tall one with water and ice, put them on a small round tray, walked out of the bar, and served him: “*Stin iyia sas.*”

“Miss. Pour yourself one, too. On me. And come and sit down with me.”

“Thanks, but I’m working.”

Four customers arrived. Three lads, one girl. The guy remained motionless, except for his unblinking eyes that followed the young people as they walked under the lemon trees, in the middle of the large terrace, ten tables or so to his left. Once they took their seats, his eyes darted back to the harbour, his thick lips puckered, and he had his first sip of *tsipouro*.

Angie took their order. He had another sip.

When she returned to her bar, the guy half-turned and peered over his shoulder: “Miss. Pour yourself a *tsipouro*.”

“I told you, I’m working.”

“I ask you to come over and keep me company and you say, ‘I’m working’? You’ve got no respect?”

“I’ve got respect. But I’m busy. When I’m not busy, I might join you.”

“Ah... Right. Let’s see.”

He reverted to his previous state. Cross-legged, he moved his head slowly, scanning his surroundings, until finally he peeped to his right, at the married couples, and his lips puckered.

“Angieeee!” a female voice called out from within the café, and Angie got up and sauntered towards the source of the voice.

The guy smirked.

The waitress walked out holding three plates of spaghetti carbonara in her one hand and a tortellini in gypsy sauce in the other, served the lads and the girl, returned behind her bar, poured herself a *tsipouro*, and sat down with the guy. She sat at the chair that was between the guy and the couples.

“Here I am,” she said smiling.

The guy made no response.

They drank their *tsipouro* slowly: Angie alert, scanning her customers, the guy’s eyes fixed on the harbour.

“Let’s have some more,” he said, and when Angie brought some more, the guy leaned in the direction of the married couples: “How’s the soup?” and quickly sat upright, gazing ahead.

The waitress's eyes met with the eyes of the couples, and the guy smirked. She moved her chair in order to obscure the guy's view of the couples, but the guy leaned to one side and, avoiding her block, said to them, "You put plenty of pepper there, eh? I see, I see...."

The couples kept their eyes on their soup, the guy's pupils moving from one wife to the other: "You like pepper, don't you?" and, once again, he looked towards the harbour, motionless, his lips puckered.

The husbands looked at Angie and Angie shrugged her shoulders, and the guy turned to the husbands and said that *they* should make sure that they eat the cucumber in the Greek salad, all of it. After that, he smoked a cigarette while the couples sipped their soup in perfect silence.

The couples paid and left, Angie cleared the leftovers, and sat back behind her bar.

The guy looked straight ahead, utterly motionless.

She lit a cigarette; he scanned his surroundings. She grabbed two small glasses; his lips puckered. She poured *tsipouro*; he smirked. She sat with him: they didn't speak and drank till their glasses were dry.

Three cars pulled up in front of the café. Eight men in their twenties and thirties got out and sat at one big table under the trees, across the terrace.

"Got to go," she said.

"Fuck them. Stay with me."

She laughed; he sipped his drink.

Order taken, she returned to him with more *tsipouro*, and he turned to the table of eight, screamed, "YOU ARE VERY HUNGRY, AREN'T YOU?" and back to her: "I'm a PAOK¹ fan, from Salonica."

And she, to him, aware of the customers' stares: "What are you doing in Kavala?"

And he, to no-one: "Constantinople must become Greek again. The whole of Byzantium must become Greek again. We must fuck the Turks. All Turks."

"I don't mind Turks. I mind my locals. There's something wrong with me."

"Got it," he said, and, turning to the table of the eight men who still stared, he shouted: "When your food is ready, make sure you eat all of it!"

Then they drank more without talking, them two and the table of eight.

"Angieeee!" a female voice called out from within the café, and Angie got up and sauntered towards the source of the voice and served the table of eight.

She sat back with the guy and he turned to the eight men: "Oh, I see... You *are* hungry," and straight back to her: "I went to Constantinople when we played Galatasaray. I had a picture of Atatürk with me. When we entered the stadium..." he paused here, a big grin rose on his face, "...I made a hole in his mouth and stuck my cock in and shouted at their fans, 'Come and suck it, Mongolian cunts!'"

"Did we win?" she asked.

"We?"

"I support PAOK, too," Angie said.

¹ PAOK is a professional Greek football club.

“You don’t support PAOK,” the guy said.

“Don’t I?”

“No, you don’t. You just say you do.” He smiled. Angie smiled, and brought more *tsipouro*, and the guy, towards the eight men: “Take it easy with the food. Take your time. Don’t *panic*,” and back to Angie: “I’ll tell you what my ideology is.”

“Tell me.”

“My ideology is that no-one should work. That’s my ideology.”

“I don’t mind working. But my locals make me feel uncomfortable. There’s something wrong with me. Or with them.”

“Fuck them. Stay with me.”

From time to time the table of eight asked for more drinks, and then a few more customers arrived, and each time Angie had to leave the table the guy darted angry glances at the customers and said that they should respect a young girl who was trying to enjoy a glass of *tsipouro*, and time passed like that.

As usual, a large number of customers came when clubs and bars closed. Now the guy cast his eyes over the people as they arrived at the café and swore at them the moment they stepped onto the terrace. No-one sat under the gazebo, none said anything back, everyone avoided his glare.

There were two or three tables waiting to order food. Having been verbally abused by the guy, they didn’t dare to look towards the waitress.

“I’ll be back soon,” Angie told him. She went into the kitchen and came out with a man of about seventy years old. They stood by the bar and Angie began talking and pointing at tables around the terrace and the old man kept nodding. Then she gave him a bunch of notes and some coins, and the old man took hold of the tray.

She sat with the guy.

“I’ve got a son,” the guy said. “I don’t know where he is. Maybe he’s still somewhere in Salonica. The last time I saw him it was dawn. Like now.”

“But it’s not dawn now.”

“It was dawn, like now. He was lying on a pavement, in a busy street. He was sleeping or he was dead, I didn’t check. The needle was there. I put some money in his pocket and told him, ‘Good luck, friend.’” He downed his *tsipouro* and finished it.

“Hang on,” said Angie, and she brought a carafe of the strong alcohol. While she poured from it, the guy turned towards the whole terrace and shouted: “Oi! What’re you eating there? Soup? What soup? Turd soup? Nice. Enjoy your turd soup, bastards,” and straight back to Angie: “Don’t worry, miss.”

“I’m not worried.”

Customers came and went, the old man struggling to keep up, but never asking Angie for help. Only, sometimes, he looked towards her, with a smile.

There was a bit of *tsipouro* left in the carafe when two policemen approached, one middle-aged, stout, with a thick moustache; the other in his early twenties. As soon as the guy spotted the policemen, he began panting. Thick veins bulged on his forearms and biceps as he grabbed the arms of his chair and squeezed them. His lips

puckered. And when the policemen went to take a seat, the guy jolted off from his chair and screamed: "GO FUCK YOURSELVES, YOU FUCKING PIGS," then sat back and turned to Angie, breathing heavily: "Don't be scared. I'm here with you. I'll clean up the mess. Don't be scared, miss," and cocked his eyes forward, the panting dying down.

"Come again? What did you just say?" the middle-aged policeman said, standing a yard diagonally behind the guy.

The guy got up, turned around, and pushed his face into the policeman's: "Watch your tongue, pig."

"What's your problem?"

"I'll fuck you, slime. Pig."

"Calm down or I'll take you to the station," the policeman said, stepping back.

"You think I'm scared of you, cunt?"

"Calm down or you'll be in trouble, mate."

"I'm not your mate. I'm not friends with pigs. Pig..."

The policeman walked away and sat with his colleague five tables away – diagonally behind the guy's back.

Smiling, the old man served the policemen chicken soup, and then, without being asked to, he refilled Angie's carafe with *tsipouro*. They drank half of the carafe while the guy kept threatening the policemen that he would take from behind their mama-pig and baba-pig and suggesting that they should top up their plates from the toilet bowl. After each insult, the guy turned to Angie saying that she shouldn't worry, that he was there for her, no matter what.

The policemen left and many other customers left, and he and Angie looked straight ahead. Far away in the darkness of the sea, lights from the returning trawlers shone.

"Don't you like watching the trawlers returning to the harbour?" she asked.

The guy made no response.

"Or do you prefer it when they sail away?"

No answer.

Time passed with the guy insulting the few remaining customers, while Angie ignored the guy and the customers and looked ahead, doing what she liked the most during her night shifts, watching the lit trawlers returning, imagining.

By the time the first trawler moored, there were no more customers left in Café Papaya, and now it was dawn in the small town of Kavala.

"And now it is dawn in your big city, too."

The guy stared at her as her lips gave an ironic curl.

More trawlers moored. Two Egyptian fishermen crossed the cobbled street and sat under the gazebo. One was blond, handsome and young, same age as Angie maybe, with big green eyes, the only one of the Egyptians in the harbour who had blond hair. The other was older, similar age as the guy.

Seven Greek fishermen, captains and second captains and *lambadoros*, sat by a table in the far corner of the terrace.

The guy fixed his eyes on the Egyptians, who ordered hot coffee.

When their coffee was served, the Egyptians began talking in their language.

“This is Greece. What’re you doing here in Greece?” said the guy.

The older Egyptian looked down, but the young, blond one, cast a stealthy glance at the man who had addressed them.

Angie caught the eye of the young Egyptian and motioned for him to remain seated.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the blond Egyptian, the guy turned towards Angie and sneered: “All foreigners must go away.”

Then Angie spoke. “Now, look. I know these guys. Leave them alone. They aren’t policemen. They aren’t the locals. They are the weak ones, like you.”

“Oh, come on now, miss. I’m just teasing them.”

“They don’t like to be teased. They are the weak ones, like you and me.”

“I won’t do it again.”

The old Egyptian raised his coffee mug, had a sip, put it down. The guy raised his glass, his lips puckered, had a sip, put it down. Angie raised hers, had a sip, waited; the blond Egyptian raised his, had a sip – they put them down together.

And then the guy gave the finger to the young Egyptian. He did it in the most vulgar way, common amongst Greeks and Arabs, and, winking to the blond Egyptian, he said: “Fancy a quickie?”

The Egyptian rolled his big, green fierce eyes at him and twisted his hand with a motion that said, “What’s your problem?”

And Angie, to the guy: “What are you doing now? I told you they’re good lads, didn’t I?”

“OK, OK.”

“Don’t mess with them.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did such a thing. Pardon me, miss. I won’t do it again,” and, crushing the cigarette butt, he gave the finger to the blond Egyptian again, and the Egyptian dashed at him and grabbed him by the throat with such force that the guy’s chair tilted backwards: “What you want?”

The guy didn’t move, his small grey eyes stared at the big green ones without any sign of emotion, as if he was looking at the harbour and out to sea.

Angie got up and ordered them to separate and the Egyptian let go of his grip.

From the far end table, three Greek fishermen strode over and took hold of the guy and pulled him to his feet and pushed him with such force that he fell four or five yards away, on top of a table, crushing it. Before the guy could raise himself, the fishermen grabbed him again and pushed him further away, and then again, until he lay next to the road, on the pavement. They prepared their fists, but the blond Egyptian held back the Greek fishermen: “No, Angie said no, if she said no, she must know.” Everyone returned to their tables and Angie behind her bar.

And the guy stood up, his shirt torn beneath the breast pocket. He walked to the table of Greek fishermen and stood there, staring at them.

“Go away,” they said. “Go away.”

But the guy didn’t move.

A fat captain raised his voice: “We’ve been watching you for some time now annoying the Egyptian lads. Now we tell you to go away. Piss off to wherever the fuck you come from. Why don’t you go away?”

The guy stood there, staring at him.

“We’re telling you to get the hell out of here. Why the fuck don’t you go, eh? Why don’t you just walk away, nobhead? Piece of shit? Cunt? Tell me why?”

And the guy stood there. Staring at him.

The fat captain stood up and, as he did so, his chair fell backwards. “Oi! Get the hell out of here, don’t you get it?”

And the guy stood there, silent, motionless, utterly motionless, in front of all the Greek fishermen, looking straight into the eyes of the fat one.

The fat man pushed the guy.

The guy tottered back two steps.

All seven Greek fishermen stood up.

The guy stood still against the violence of their eyes.

And they all laid their hands on him; and the guy fell. He fell without noise, silently. “Go, go away.” He stood up, didn’t move. And the fishermen tossed him aside and he fell onto tables and chairs. “Go away.” They yanked him to his feet, and he stood on his feet, his face bloody. “Just go. Don’t you get it?” They pushed him; he bounced off a tree trunk, fell down. Stood up. “Just go away.” He didn’t. Fists and elbows and boots lashed out. He ended up in the middle of the street, doubling up, panting, his small grey eyes never closing.

Angie made a phone call. The Greek fishermen returned to their table.

A taxi came; the guy stood up and got in.

The taxi left.

Now it was quiet in Café Papaya. The Greek fishermen resumed their conversation and Angie had a friendly chat with the blond Egyptian.

With a nod, the old man took her to one side, his old eyes sparkling: “If he wasn’t drunk, he could have done it.” He handed the tray back to her.

She cleaned the mess, returned behind her bar.

A taxi stopped in front of the café and the guy stepped out, went straight to the open bar, said to her: “Get me a glass of water.”

“If you promise you won’t do anything stupid with the glass.”

The guy was glaring at the Greek fishermen: “I’m checking them over. Got to remember their faces. I’ll kill them. Get me a glass of water, miss. I promise.”

She poured water into a glass and handed it over to him.

He drank half of it, tossed the rest to the floor, and stared at her, through dirt and blood: “Is it still dawn in Salonica, miss?”

“It will always be dawn in Salonica.”

He bowed at her. Then got into the taxi, and never returned to Café Papaya.

Merry Bees

Phil leans on the kitchen counter spilling coffee grounds everywhere. He knows Rhea's going for her run and wants to remind her there's stuff to do, like making coffee. "I'll have the coffee ready when you get back," he shouts at the coffee maker. His beard is patchy, and he touches it.

Rhea hears him loud and clear as she pulls on a pair of blue velvet jogging pants. Her straight bangs frame her face like a tall narrow window. In the tiny room with the poster bed she pumps out fifty jumping jacks, stretches each calf for five seconds, and steps down the short hall to the kitchen.

"Phil?" says Rhea. "That's one pot already and it's not even lunch." She puts the crumb-speckled margarine in the fridge and floats out the side door.

Phil grunts.

Cold and clear, the winding gravel road crunches, crunches. Rhea jogs toward the green house and the old lady isn't out to wave. Just before she reaches the main road to town, she flinches. The dog looks like a pit bull. A raw strip-steak of tongue hangs out sideways. Two brown eyes wobble in the middle of its wide face. It lunges like a squashed frog down the middle of the road, looking through everything. It whines and shakes its head, stumbles, jerked along by an invisible rope.



Charles stops at the gas station a mile from the turnoff, fills up, buys the customary twelve-pack for Phil and for the first time a bottle of red wine. Charles is skinny with pronounced kneecaps.

In the familiar gravel driveway, Charles jams down the emergency brake and stares at the brown, cedar-shingled cabin. There's an upside-down broom on the front porch and some old newspaper caught in a bush. At the front door, Phil meets him, leaning on a cane, the curved handle painted like the beak of a toucan.

"Come on in," says Phil, a phrase as tired as he is.

Phil turns his back and shuffles through pockets of cold to the clutter of the dark paneled family room. Framed photos of their mother lean against the walls. A cheap gas heater jammed into a corner glows bright orange, hisses. The room is hot.

The local news chatters. The dryer in the kitchen tumbles something with zippers. Charles smells cigarettes, old bacon, a vague sour of dirty carpet. "Where's Rhea?" he asks and eases onto the dumpy couch. His back aches from the four-hour drive.

"You get a haircut?" says Phil. He reaches for his menthols and thumbs down the volume.

"Yep," says Charles. "You doing okay?" He leans forward and grimaces, remembers the beer and wine in the truck. The keys in his pocket poke his thigh. Phil looks pale, has a cold sore.

"How's the wife, Megan? Back to work yet?" Phil grabs a red lighter off the little lamp table, sparks it a few times. Except for her weight, Megan looks a little like Rhea. He picks up a soup bowl full of butts and ash and spits in it.

"No. Still holed up." Charles fingers his curly brown hair. "You by yourself today?"

"I wish." Phil shifts his sore hip and coughs. He inhales an inch of his cigarette. "Rhea's left, been gone an hour," he says, even though it's only been half that.

“Where to?” asks Charles. The weatherman wears a Santa hat. “Down to forty tonight,” says Charles to himself. He looks at his watch. The TV flickers.

Phil hears the clock ticking, feels water in his ear.

The smells, the zipper tapping in the dryer, the TV, the pictures leaning against the wall, Charles’s lower back hurts like hell. He leans forward, scooting to the edge of the flattened cushion. The photo collage of little Amy is still missing from the wall. She’d always had the bluest veins that ran along her jaw and neck.

“You need something?” asks Phil.

“Need to stretch.”

The front door opens, scuffling sounds, and a slam. A layer of fresh air rushes down the hall and fights with the heat in the den. There’s an awful racket of something being killed or dying.

Phil makes a face.

Rhea shouts for help.

Charles recognizes her voice and scrambles toward the racket. He stares at Rhea who is kneeling. In front of her, an emaciated dog charges the door, yapping, delirious, scratching up the floor. Rhea hovers over it, rubbing its back in long slow strokes. Her sweatshirt lifts and Charles is stunned by the smoothness of her skin.

Phil mutes the TV and strains to hear from his recliner. The wall clock ticks. It’s slow and needs a new battery. He grips his cane.

Rhea soothes the huge puppy and glances back at Charles, her eyes filled with hurt. The puppy stops clawing at the baseboard and stares at the brown paneling. It works to breathe. Its scabbed tail-stump wags. Charles moves closer, aroused and confused, leans forward, and his back gives. He goes to one knee and his hand glides to Rhea’s shoulder for balance. She pulls away, and he looks back. Phil is propped against the wall, expressionless.

Rhea knows Charles is staring at her exposed waistline. She’s about to tell him that Phil has been threatening her, threatening himself again. She fears she’ll never see Charles after this visit. She feels like he deserves her somehow, to do with as he pleases. Phil should be dead. He’s a ghost that smokes, drinks beer, and watches TV.

Phil watches Rhea put her hands beneath the dog’s chest and lift. It goes limp like a cat. He says something about a dog being in his house and she ignores him. It’s time for dinner, and he wonders if Charles forgot the beer. He’s still pissed that Charles brought up the lawnmower crap after Amy’s accident. Charles or Megan should’ve been able to hear her yelling, gurgling—something.

Phil withdraws to his room. He rings the bell for Rhea. She brings him a bowl of leftover popcorn. She tells him not to spit in the bowl. His underwear sags. He pushes a lit cigarette into the dead scar on his chest. She closes the door and hurries to the kitchen where the dog is yowling.

Bread soaked in milk, macaroni and cheese, and a thing of applesauce, the dog eats it all. Charles leans against the cluttered counter with his arms folded. There’s nowhere to put the dog in the two-bedroom cabin and instead of relaxing after it’s eaten, it moans. It never stops moving. Its nails skritch the linoleum. Charles ponders the wine in the truck. He poses it to Rhea as a question—“I’ll go to the store and buy dog food. While I’m there, would you like some wine?”

She squats in the floor and holds out her hands to the puppy. She can’t afford to take it to the vet and neither Charles nor Phil have offered. “Wine gives me a headache,” she says. She waits for him to suggest some tequila or

maybe some vodka. She knows some good recipes. She'd like to get drunk, get Charles drunk, and get Phil drunk, too. Maybe he would shoot himself again.



Back from the store with a bag of dog food, Charles blocks the miserable dog in the kitchen with an upside-down laundry basket. It can jump over but doesn't.

Nobody is hungry and leftover spaghetti sits on the counter. The microwave is busy for a minute or two. The dog circles, its nose to the floor, lapping at imaginary crumbs between moans.

Phil leans his elbows on the tiny kitchen table. "That dog needs to go out," he says. "This spaghetti's cold."

Rhea closes the fridge hard. The dog hunches and a burst of mushy brown spatters on the floor.

"Goddammit, Rhea!" Phil catches his knees on the sharp underside of the table.

Charles drops his spoon. His cell phone is ringing. It's Megan.

The dog steps in its mess, barking in slow motion.

Phil is cursing, stomping out of the kitchen, kicking the laundry basket. His cane pounds the floor like a hammer.

Rhea pulls her hands away from her face and watches Charles open the side door onto the little redwood-stained deck that leads down to the yard. A swift cold breeze pushes in. Charles is on the deck, calling, whistling. The dog slinks toward Rhea.

Rhea looks up and sees Phil in the hall. He's holding the pistol. She doesn't bother to scream. Six shots tear holes in everything, followed by a kind of silence.

Shaking, Charles walks around the house and goes back inside through the front door. He staggers down the hall, steps over Phil, and turns on the TV in the den. He finishes a beer that's sitting on the table. There's a lot to think about.



One Year Ago

They were beads, souvenirs. Brightly colored Mardi Gras beads and Amy loved to play with them. It was early June and too hot to play outside. The cabin's two window units struggled, pissing streams of warm water to the ground every few minutes.

Charles and Megan had been fighting. She wanted to leave early, to get home with Amy and get to bed at a decent hour. Megan worked day shift. Two days with Phil were enough. He drank too much and was rough with Amy.

Charles was as ready to leave as Megan, but he lingered like always. He went to the grocery store and bought fried chicken for lunch. It sounded like a good idea, but gorging on the greasy chicken put everybody to sleep, except for Phil. The TV was off for the first time since they'd arrived Friday afternoon. The van was packed. They should've been on the road.



The beads were old—all the colors—merry bees as Amy called them, real beads from back in the day. Phil had remembered the beads and dug them out for her, a dozen strands he left hanging on the bedpost.

After lunch, Phil pushed the mower in the stifling heat, more out of spite than anything else. He was ready for them all to go, including little Miss Amy. He shoved the mower beneath an overhang of wilting yellow bells his mother had planted when he was a kid. Dirt and pine straw flew. He closed his eyes against the dust. A rock smacked the house. He was thirsty.

In the bedroom, Amy stood on the wobbly footstool at the end of the old bed. The fringe of a pull-up diaper cinched her waist like a cupcake holder. She tried to lift a handful of beads over the post, but it was too high. She frowned.

Megan stirred and opened her eyes. She saw Charles with his chin to his chest, drooling. She felt stunned, pulled from a vague dream. Cool air from the big window unit surged across the small room. Her heart scudded. A door opened.

“Where’s Amy?” said Phil. He was slick with sweat. A fine mess of grass and dirt streaked his legs. He popped a beer.

Charles snored. His head snapped up and down.

Megan struggled up. “Amy, honey?” she said. She stood and a blackness rushed across her eyes. She faltered and sank back into the chair. She thought she could still hear the mower. Phil standing there confused her.

Phil walked into the kitchen. He saw the crumbled shell of a boiled egg stuck in dried ketchup. “Amy?” Back into the hall, dripping sweat, he pushed into the bathroom. “Amy?” A smell of cheap soap. He pushed into the first bedroom. A smell of flowers. Then to the second bedroom.

Outside, Megan surveyed the porch, peered down between the two-by-fours. She saw weeds, cigarette butts, and a busted balloon. She looked to the road. The postman pulled his hand from the mailbox. For some reason they waved at each other.

Back inside, Phil pulled the bedroom door shut instead of opening it. He stared at his hand twisting the knob and then pushed.

The light in the room was purple, maybe mauve, maybe violet, maybe orchid, maybe mulberry. Phil tried to remember her name.

What Dogs Know

"I was comin' outta Dunkin's. It was one of those weird mornings when the full moon was up in the sky with the sun. Like it was night, except it was day. I looked up to see the moon. I was carryin' my coffee. He was in front of the door, just standin' there, like right in my way. 'cept I didn't see him. Bam! I bumped into him with my coffee leadin' the way. Spilled all over this dirty green jacket he was wearin'. I remember, it was shiny from all the dirt, like all the dirt of New York City had settled on it over the years. It looked like it usta be a nice jacket. But not anymore. And me, too. My whole arm burnin' with the coffee, like the lid on the cup says, 'Caution Contents Extremely Hot.' They ain't kiddin'. I don't know who was madder, him or me. We just looked at each other. No 'excuse me' or 'sorry.' Just stared at each other. Then we walked off, he uptown, me downtown."

Josie leaned forward and pulled her gristly brown hair, now slumping just below her shoulders, back behind her ears with both hands and let it go, allowing it to fall forward in front of her ears again. Her hair - appearing without thought to cut or style - accentuated her long, narrow face with its stretched-out, conical nose that resembled a bullet parked in the middle of it. She tugged on the white bedsheet, pulling it up to her chest.

"That's it?" asked the nurse, navigating the small room with quick, efficient steps, her rubber soles squeaking against the polished linoleum floor, her blue hospital scrubs hugging tightly on her large hips. She stepped on the pedal that raised the back of the bed and moved aside the bedside tray to put a thermometer in Josie's mouth. "It's dark in here. Let me open up your shades and let in some sun."

"Yep, that's how I met Johnnie," said Josie, as the nurse took the thermometer out of her mouth.

"But you went your separate ways. You didn't even speak. How did you end up... you know?"

Josie looked at the nurse and pressed her lips together and narrowed her eyes, as if seeing past the nurse and past the gray room with its shiny linoleum floor and the stock, catalogue furniture, into the recesses of her own consciousness. "Oh, I never thought I'd see him again, never even thought 'bout him. Then, about 6 months later, same Dunkin' Donuts. He was standin' in front again, beggin' for money. This time I saw him. He looked at me. I don't think he knew me. And I wouldn't've known him either if it wasn't for that coat. The same grimy, shiny coat. Yech. I looked at him. I said, and I have no idea why I even talked to him, that coat was just disgusting. I says, 'I don't have no money. You want this coffee?' He just says 'Yeah.' And I says, 'It's got cream and sugar, I hope you like it sweet.' Why I said that, I dunno. You'd think someone beggin' on the street wouldn't be too picky. I guess there wasn't anythin' else to say. I could've said nothin' I guess. I dunno. He just looked at me, like a 'Why'd you say that?' kinda look. Then, he just smiled, this wide, goofy smile. And his eyes lit up, like a light went on or somethin'. He took a sip, nodded, and said, 'It's good.' Then I stupidly asked, 'You ain't never tried Dunkin's coffee?'"

The nurse pulled Josie's pillow out from behind her, fluffed and patted it, and placed it back behind her. "Here ya go, hon. Lean back, be comfortable." She wheeled the tray back in front of Josie's chest. "That was awfully nice of you."

"Yeah, I go to that Dunkin's, not every day, but often enough. Sometimes I seen him, sometimes not. Sometimes when I seen him, I buy him a coffee. Not every time, mind you. But once in a while...most times, actually."

“Why do you think you did that...for him?”

“That’s what my friend Angelina asked me. I dunno. Just bein’ nice, I guess. He seemed harmless, not like a lot of people you see on the street. Maybe I thought I owed him one, spilling my coffee on him and all that. Jeez, his coat was dirty enough; now he’s got this other stain on it that he ain’t ever gonna wash off. And the smell. It was like when kids try to cook and they throw in all these things that don’t go together – like tomatoes and apples and cheese and mustard - and they smell up the kitchen for days. Angelina’s kids did that. They were havin’ a good time, though. We pretended it taste good, just so they wouldn’t feel bad.”

“Maybe you liked the way he looked,” said the nurse, smiling with a hint of mischievousness in her eyes.

“Nah. It’s not like that. He’s really old, y’know. He wasn’t much to look at anyway. In fact, he was somethin’ *not* to look at. Gray and black hairs sproutin’ out of his head and his face like the weeds you see growin’ around old tires and thrown-out furniture in empty lots. Couldn’t much tell what his face looked like. I knew he had these large, brown eyes with some of the biggest, blackest pupils I ever seen. I told him one day, I says, ‘If you don’t get yourself a shave, this is the last cup of coffee you’ll get from me.’ I really said that, no kiddin’. He just looked at me and grunted. If I didn’t know better, I think he looked kinda sad. I was surprised that I could say that. It seemed kinda mean, y’know? But I guess I wanted to see what he would do. He just looked at me and walked off with my coffee.”

“Listen,” said the nurse, her voice dropping low and conspiratorial, “I know the doctor talked to you about, y’know, your chemo. Have you made a decision?” The nurse stood next to Josie and leaned her hand on the top of the raised bed.

“Been thinkin’ about it, but I dunno...I dunno what I’m gonna do.”

“She wants to start it right away, to give you the best chance.”

Josie nodded, staring blankly. “Maybe I should ask Johnnie...I haven’t talked to him about it. He’d probably say ‘I’m no doctor, do what you think’s best.’”

“Oh?” The nurse paused and looked around the room. The cardiogram showed a moderate, steady heartbeat. The oxygen level registered normal. None of the monitors betrayed any malevolent presence.

“You look like you’ve lost weight; have you been eating since your surgery?”

“I think so. Maybe.”

“What about family? Anyone you could discuss this with?”

Josie winced and held her stomach.

“Pain bad today?” the nurse asked. Josie nodded and motioned for the nurse to lower the back of the bed.

“Don’t have no family. My parents...haven’t seen them in 10 years. My father...he started coming in my room ...late at night, sometimes wakin’ me up, though, after awhile I couldn’t sleep anyway. He said he wanted to comfort me. I was 12 when it started. I started failing everything in school. Couldn’t stay awake. My mom yellin’ at me every day. When I finally told her about my father... I was 16...she lost it. You coulda’ heard her in Jersey. She kicked me out. That was the last time I seen her.”

“Can the social worker reach out to anyone else to give you support?”

“There’s no one there. When I was livin’ on the street – after my friend’s parents got tired of having me around – her father started hangin’ around us more and givin’ me the creeps so I told him to fuck off – my friend

didn't like that so much and he wasn't too happy either – so when I was livin' on the street, I lost touch with everyone, not that there were so many to begin with.”

The nurse tucked the top sheet more tightly around Josie. She smoothed out the blankets, stroking them from each side of Josie's body to the edges of the bed. “You're gonna have to decide soon. Let me know if I can help.” She turned to face the door, taking a step toward it, stopping as she heard Josie's voice.

“After he walked off with my coffee,” said Josie, looking down at her blankets and laughing, “I didn't see Johnnie for awhile. But the next time, he was still in that coat, only it looked a lot worse. But he was shaven, well, partly at least. He looked like he had taken a broken bottle and scraped it across his face. He had patches of hair – not as long as they was before – and spots where I could see his skin, where his skin looked all red and scratchy, like he had almost cut himself or something. Yeah, and he was grinnin' again, that dopey grin, like he wanted to say ‘Hey, look at me. Have you noticed!’ I didn't know what to say. I mean, he did what I told him, sorta, I guess, the best he was able. I just smiled, went in and bought him a cup of coffee. This time I kept mine and drank it with him, right there on the sidewalk. I was standin' there when someone walked by and threw a dollar at my feet. I started yellin' at the guy, ‘Hey, what makes you think I'm beggin'? I'm just standin' here havin' coffee with my friend, like anybody else.’ Johnnie just looks at me and puts his hand on my shoulder, I dunno, to shut me up or maybe tell me it's all right. He looks down at the bill and I bend down and pick it up and hand it to him. And then we both start laughin' so hard we couldn't stop. We joked about doing this together, quittin' our jobs – which I had but he didn't, not then anyway – and makin' a livin' just standing there lookin' pretty.

“One day we started walkin'. I dunno who decided that, it's not like we talked about it or anythin'. Just him and me, coffees in our hands – which I had bought, naturally. We was walkin' up Amsterdam. I remember he said something, not the usual talk about the weather and the bums on the street. We was passin' a group of people with their dogs. Big dogs, little dogs, dogs that hardly looked like dogs. I mean, those dogs looked so different from each other, but they was all lookin' at each other, sniffin' around you know where, barking at each other, ignoring all the people. So then he says, ‘Look at all those dogs,’ and I says, ‘Yeah, I'm scared of dogs.’ And he says, “Why?” I says, ‘Don't know. Everything scares me.’ He started pointing, like he didn't hear what I said, or just ignored it, not like he was bein' rude or anything, there just wasn't nothin' to say. ‘Take that one and that one. They don't even look like the same kinda animal.’ And I says, ‘So?’ And he says, ‘How do *they* know?’ I just look at him. I dunno what he's gettin' at. And then he says, ‘How come dogs always know that other dogs, no matter how different they look, what size or what shape or what breed, are fellow dogs? How come dogs know that about dogs and people don't know that about people?’

“I never thought of that, y'know? We started takin' these walks, on Amsterdam, goin' uptown to 'bout 87th Street. Sometimes we'd walk west, near the river. Some days we seen a group of stray dogs, maybe about five or six. Walkin' together, stoppin' to sniff together. Once or twice, two of them would growl at each other. Johnnie would put his arm around my shoulder, knowin' I might be scared. He said he liked dogs and dogs were only mean if people had been mean to them. I asked him how he knew so much and he said he had a dog when he was a kid. I asked him about it, but he never wanted to talk about it.

“Those strays - we never seen them kick any of them out and leave them behind, no matter how nasty they got. When one or two stood up and started walkin' down the street, they all would get up and follow. Not like the leaders gave them an invitation or nothin' but everyone knew they could follow along if they wanted. He said dogs were like that. They know none of them could survive all by his self. They all knew that, if it was them, they couldn't either.”

“He seems to know how to make you feel better.”

“I think he was scared to do it at first, y’know, put his arm around me. So was I. I never had that from my dad...or my mom. I dunno why he did that. It’s not like I told him it felt good. I didn’t want him to get no ideas. But I think he just was bein’ nice.”

“How about him? Does he have any family?”

“He doesn’t talk about it. One day I was walkin’ to Dunkin’s and I seen him looking down at his feet and there was a girl, must’ve been my age, maybe a little older, talkin’ to him real fast, like the vein was bulgin’ in her neck and her eyes looked all bug-eyed and all. Her arms were flappin’ about, wavin’ and stuff and then she walked away. He didn’t even look up when she did that. Then he looked up and seen me crossing the street and looked all embarrassed and all. His eyes were wet. He didn’t say nothin’ to me, but one time he said that he had a daughter somewhere. Didn’t tell me nothin’ else.”



Josie wasn’t sure if it was day or night. She had been sleeping and the room was dark. She stirred with the awareness that someone was sitting on her bed next to her.

“You know, your pain’s getting worse and your blood levels aren’t good. If you’re going to have any chance, you’ve got to start chemo right away and, at this point, it’s got to be aggressive.”

“Doc,” and Josie paused as a wave of pain started in her gut and spread through her abdomen, going deep, penetrating into the very matter of her cells. She gasped and caught her breath.

“I’ll order a pump for you. I don’t think the meds are giving you enough relief.”

Josie nodded and breathed sharply.

“I want you to discuss this one more time with the social worker. I’ve given you my opinion, and I’m happy to discuss it more if you’d like.”

“It’s ok, doc, really. You’ve all done your best. It’s not so bad. It’s not like I have a lot of people who are gonna miss me.”

“What about...”

“Oh, maybe him,” she chuckled. “Maybe him. He won’t have no one to buy him coffee no more.”

“And I won’t have no shoulder to put my arm around when my little girl is scared of stray dogs!”

Josie and the doctor looked at the door, where the entranceway was filled with a large, neatly dressed grinning man, whose size could not hide the enormous yellow-brown stuffed animal he held behind him.

“Holy shit! You get off early?”

“Yup. Warehouse was slow today. Some of the ships got delayed.”

“I don’t want you to get yourself fired, all because of me.”

“If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have this job. I wouldn’t never even applied. I’d still be in the shelter.” Johnnie turned and looked at the doctor. “How are ya, doc? How’s she doin’ today?”

“She’s in a lot of pain, I’m afraid. I’m going to order a morphine pump so she can give herself medication whenever she needs it.”

“What you got there, a teddy bear? I ain’t no child y’know!” Johnnie’s smile quickly vanished and his face drooped like it was being pulled by gravity. “Sorry, here you come to cheer me up and I’m getting’ on your case.”

Johnnie smiled sheepishly and edged past the doctor, keeping his hands behind his back.

“I’ll leave you two alone. We’ll talk later today.” The doctor turned and walked out of the room, her heels clacking on the polished floor. In the hallway, a heart monitor beeped rhythmically at the nurse’s station where the nurses and therapists charted their notes and discussed lunch, and the wheels of a gurney squeaked as it ferried a patient down the corridor.

Johnnie reached over and flipped the light switch. Grinning, he slowly pulled out from behind him what looked like a mass of yellow-brown fur. “And this...is for you!” Josie studied the stuffed Golden Lab with calm intensity as Johnnie held it in front of him with both arms. She looked over the sheen of its soft fur reflecting the overhead fluorescents, its black button eyes and its mouth, which seemed ever so slightly upturned into a smile or, at least, a smirk.

“If you don’t like it, I can take it back,” said Johnnie shifting from one foot to another, as if his body was fighting with his legs to keep him in one place.

“No...no...put it right here,” said Josie, pointing to the foot of her bed.

Johnnie hesitated. “You sure? If you don’t li...”

“It’s ok, just put it there.” Josie looked at the dog without expression. Johnnie looked from Josie to the dog and back. The doctor,” said Josie, still looking at the dog, “she was just tellin’ me that I don’t have long to go, even if I did chemo, at this point, I might not have that long. She says I should talk to you.”

Johnnie lowered his eyes. “It’s up to you. I dunno, I just dunno.” Josie heard Johnnie sniffle and looked up.

“No, I’m not...don’t worry,” he said. “I jus...I never had to decide anything like this before. I never...”

Josie reached over toward the dog and abruptly winced and sat back.

“Does that hurt?”

“Yeah. A little.”

“Here, let me move it closer. Johnnie moved the dog to the side of the bed so it leaned against the metal side guard. Josie lifted her arm and petted the dog’s head.



Josie lay in bed with her head partially raised. A tube ran from a small black device which sat on her lap into her arm. An IV drip hovered above her with a tube penetrating her arm at another location. She rested her thumb on the trigger of the device, ready to pump another squirt of morphine into her arm - conditioned like a mouse in a behavior science experiment. She looked up at Johnnie.

“It’s gone too fast...too fast. Maybe I shoulda...”

“Don’t talk like that. There was nothin’ you coulda’ done. It would’ve just been longer and harder.”

“Maybe. But maybe it would’ve given us one more cup of coffee on that filthy street corner.” Josie laughed and shook her head.

“And maybe it would’ve made you too sick. Maybe we had as many cups of coffee as we were allowed. At least we had them together.” Josie slowly lifted her hand and put it on the back of the stuffed Lab.

“The lady from hospice...the other day...she said maybe I had three months, maybe three days. She said I should get in touch with whoever I needed to.” Josie laughed and shook her head again. She looked up again at Johnnie. “Well, here we are!”

Johnnie sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at his pale fingers, with their short-trimmed nails, and lightly wrapped them around Josie’s small, delicate hand and wrist, like a blanket carefully enfolding an emaciated bird.

“Did I ever tell you about Lucky, my dog?”

“Tell me.” Josie coughed, a grating, metallic cough, the liquid in her throat catching and violently expelling into her mouth. She swallowed and sucked in air, making a whistling sound,

“I must’ve been eleven. I noticed him limping. He probably was like that for a while, but it was the first I noticed it. He started comin’ in from his walks and pukin’ on the floor. Then he would lie down sometimes and just whimper. My parents never said nothin’ and I don’t know if they ever took him to the vet or anythin’ like that. One day, he was just gone. The gate in the yard was open. I put him there earlier that day. My friend from across the street – Jake – he come over to play with him and I guess he forgot to close the gate. Lucky must’ve wandered off. I walked for hours. I walked down every street and into every woods I could find callin’ his name, yellin’, cryin’. Even at night. It was fall, so my face got scratched up pretty good from the branches.” Johnnie reached up and lightly touched the faded pink streaks on his face. “It was cold. I was afraid of him bein’ alone out there. Alone and sick. I never found him. I heard that, dogs, wolves, animals like that sometimes go off to die. Alone. So they won’t be no bother to no one. They find some place in the woods, some place comfortable or somethin’, curl up and wait for it to happen.”

The moonlight penetrated the window shade, casting a yellow glow onto the white tiled floor. The gray walls, with their metallic protrusions – connections for oxygen, monitors, pumps and electrical equipment – luminesced and seemed all the more somber for it. He felt her shiver.

“Need a blanket?”

“Yeah, could you?”

Johnnie leaned over her, being careful not to put any pressure on her small frame, and pulled the edge of the folded blanket that was lying next to her enough to unfold it and pull it over her.

“Thank you.”

After a few minutes, he heard her say, “Open the shade,” softly, in a voice that betrayed neither pain nor despair.

He looked at her as if being awakened out of a light sleep. “Uh, ok...sure.” He stood up and walked the ten feet to the window, moving aside the wood framed, plastic-upholstered chair which sat ready for no one at this hour. Sitting back on the bed, she put her hand in his and he heard her grunt as she struggled to sit up. “Don’t,” he said, turning to face her, but she had already completed the motion and rested her head on his arm. He turned his head to look at the window, at the moonlight now being drawn through the glass, spilling onto the floor and advancing up the wall. The stars were out in a clear, black sky. Her breathing became labored, coming in short, staccatic gasps. He felt her head shift against his shoulder and he winced at the pain that she must feel, bestowing significance on each movement, no matter how small. He felt her head tilt up to face the nighttime. Then he heard her small, but clear voice.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

The Creative Process

Our lives are filled with the flow and disruptions of people entering and exiting, leaving their marks on us and carrying something of ourselves in them. Sometimes they, and we, stick around, mutually shaping each other. This emotional intimacy creates intensity and drama, which I try to capture through dialogue - much of it interrupted - action, and absurdist humor. I try to work with an understanding of the division between public and private motives and the dance we all do with each other as those forces play out intra- and interpersonally. What inspires me is the drama of everyday life, the “what if?” inherent in every situation, the larger ethical, moral and political implications of even mundane choices. I also draw inspiration from the works of William Styron, Allan Gurganus, Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, Isaac Asimov and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Great work is defined by riveting conflict - both internal and external, bold events and moral struggle, poetry in the prose, and choices that make me question my own values and decisions. I love creating and re-shaping a world that I inhabit simultaneous with my normal life. I love personifying the struggles that I and others experience in characters who seem to live and breathe as they act out themes bigger than themselves. And there is always the thrill of creating a story that will captivate, entertain and edify.

Hard to Get to the Ocean

(She wanted to go down to the ocean for some bullshit reason. I told her that it would be tough - the car needed work and my leg hurt too bad. So she attacked me. I attacked back. But I filled the gas tank and we went, barely saying a word to each other.)

When we got there, she got out of the car without even saying thanks. She was carrying a box of crap that she'd brought with, and she never gave any indication if I should follow. But I did. I wasn't going to wait forever. I punched myself in my bad leg to get myself going, and I limped down the boardwalk ramp to the sand, watching her far ahead of me, singing about something.

I caught up to her and she was in another monologue, probably something she'd recited all day. "To break apart," she said out loud. "Fuck the water."

She whisper-sang the poetry in the face of the massive, blue breadth. Her body shone through the fog of the sleepy seaside, cotton dress now a kite. "To run through this cold, furious world and to see the noise that always touched you. To learn the bottom of your depth and to compare it to the peak of your love." Her voice barely overreached the crash of the sharp water.

She turned to me. "We're not breaking apart, though."

"Good," I said, peering past her to see all the waves, rising and dying.

"If anything," she said, "We grow."

"Grow into what?"

(I remember when she held me up against the wall with only her forearm, telling me not to take pictures of her anymore. I dug my fingernails into her cheek and she didn't blink. Wide-eyed, she whispered to me, "It's not that hard to be nice, young man.")

"Many things. Things we can't imagine."

I fell in love with her mainly because she was beautiful. But I never realized that beauty comes in all different types and she was of the type that made me realize I was dead wrong about what beauty was. I was in deep. I could neither run nor shrink away from it. I just chose to be woven into her fabric. To rip her away would be to rip myself, and that's not something I want to do. It's tough to build yourself up as a real human with real standards.

I stood with my hands in my pockets and admired the ocean. I hadn't seen it in quite some time. I watched the waves form and thought of something to say in response to her statement, but it was perhaps better to just go with the flow of both her words and the giant water ahead. I was too tired to fight. I just wanted her to get this over with.

"Aren't you going to tell me what you would like to grow into?" She asked me, turning around as she clutched her box, ready to pop it like a balloon.

I decided to make a joke out of it since she had made me drive all the way here. "Maybe a butterfly," I said, watching her muscles tighten.

"A butterfly," she said. "How boring."

"Do what you're going to do," I said, annoyed. "It's a long drive back home and I have work early. We both do."

She watched me for a few seconds and I thought she was actually going to attack me again. She choreographs it a mile away. But instead, she went towards the water with her box and I became gripped with that stupid feeling of being in love with such a dangerous person. It's hard to spend your time with someone who simultaneously cuddles you during the worst panic attacks and also being the one who causes them.

(She's torn up my will several times. I try to tell her that this is for her just in case, but she doesn't want to hear that. I pushed her into the wall and she got a knot on her forehead, but her only response was, "That's why they invent makeup, dear. I'm not fucking worried about it.")

I could see her figure up ahead. She was kneeling now in the wet muddy sand, rummaging through the box. I leaned against a wooden signpost and watched the remaining few on the beach gather up their things and head elsewhere. It's amazing how you feel about other people until you actually see them. You feel nothing. You want to tell strangers that you are in pain and in love, but you don't like them or know them, so you don't care to cry out. You can fill a book with that kind of feeling.

She called out and her noise snapped me wide awake. "Come see this, dear. I think you will be happy that you know what this is all finally about."

I crossed my arms to shield myself from the ocean wind and came up behind her, the old familiar smell hitting me harder than any saltwater could. I peered down over her shoulder and saw the box of things I drove all these miles for.

(One night, she dreamt that she wasn't with me and that she loved every minute of it. In this dream, she was in the arms of someone else, their entire life nothing but just cold rain and light and silence. When she woke, she kicked my bad leg out of anger. When I told her that there was nothing she could do about her dream, she took a look at me and said, "I don't know, you've been lost ever since the day I met you." It was hard not to fight back that time.)

I couldn't breathe at first.

"What are you doing with those?"

She stood up, brushed the sand off her tan legs. I'll admit, she was gorgeous. Any man could have seen those eyes and fallen right to his knees for her. Any man could have looked into that world of chance and softness and felt compelled to give it a chance, just like I had. But behind it on the other side, there was an aimless soul who used her power in more than one way to inflict hurt on the both of us. I should know. I was her documentary subject.

"It's okay," she said.

(I can't tell you how many times we turned up the CD player or the TV to mask the sounds of our battles. I can't tell you how many times we fell on that hardwood floor. I can't tell you how many times we hit the wall. We never learned to whisper and we didn't think of ways to escape our anger. We just didn't. Learning is hard.)

"I think we need to go home," I said.

"No," she said. She picked up the box and grabbed all of my painkillers. I can't believe she had brought a big box just for them. She could have fit them into her pocket.

"Yes," I said, grabbing her wrist. She dropped them in the sand. All of them. Everything I need to deal with the fucking bad leg she gave me so many years ago.

"You don't need these. We can find other ways to help you."

"You're the one that needs help." I tried to grab them but she wouldn't let me. She tried to say something in

my ear, sweet-like, to get me to calm down, but I shook my head away and pinned both of her arms back. It was hard to do it on one leg. It was hard to do anything. The water, so serene, laughed at us.

“Get the fuck off me,” she said, seething. I was sure the few on the beach heard us. If they were watching, they got their free entertainment.

(This is how the fun starts.)

“Get in the car. Don’t make an ass of yourself. There’s other people around. And by the way, you’re fucking crazy. Let me get them.” I tried reaching again but she dug her nails into my thigh and I went down a bit.

“And what do they know about us? Tell me, what do they care about this, about us?” She wrenched herself free from my grip. I was losing my strength. My leg throbbed and I got suddenly exhausted and I just didn’t care anymore. I didn’t want anyone to call the cops on us again. We had gone over a month without that, a new record. I didn’t realize I was crying and so I just shrugged, held out my hands.

“Go ahead, might as well. Do what you’re going to do. Say whatever you need to say,” I said. “If you think love is gonna fix what you fucking started, be my guest.”

She stared at me. I wished we were smarter. Not so much younger, but just smarter. She knelt in front of me and wiped my tears away with her dress. I held her hand and kissed it. Can’t help it. It’s instinct. She stroked my cheek with her soft fingers and then broke away. I didn’t want to watch her do this, so I turned and watched all the garbage float and fly around in the dead reeds. She recited some other bullshit poetry and then with a heave, she threw all of my pills into the water. I squinted and saw the pharmacy labels gleam in the dusk. An ugly reminder of my body, left to be judged and cast in light by things that are so much better than us, in every shape possible. It made sense in a twisted way.

A few seconds after, she softly said, “Do you want to watch for a little longer?”

I told her that I had to get the car warmed up.

I looked at her and she nodded, murmured something.

I asked her to repeat herself.

She said, “I know it’s hard to get here, to where we’re at, but it’s always worth it.”

“What is?”

She swallowed the coastal air and said, “You know...just this.”

She didn’t know what she was talking about or what she was doing. Lost just like me, like so many others. I walked away, back up the ramp, to where the car was parked. I got in, started it, and waited until she decided to come back home with her punching bag. She opened the door, smoothed out her cotton dress, and asked to stop somewhere to get a soda for the way home.

(Other people had looked on us over the years and judged us, I know. Others may have thought we were a good idea and said to others, “We saw this really pretty couple earlier, they looked so happy”. If I had both groups of people in the same room together, all sitting at the same table, I would have agreed with both halves. I would have said a beautiful speech and I would have sent them on their way. And they would know nothing of pain and of love. Of knowing what it’s like to be on edge and that you can’t walk, but knowing that any step will be your last. And possibly most favorite.)

That Horse

It was like being on a horse and trying to lead another horse and the other horse didn't want to follow or didn't know how or had other things in mind.

It was a foal, a colt, then, look, it was a horse, but you'd turn your back and where was it?

Back there around those rocks, down that gully, up along the creek in that low spot in the shade lying down, looking nowhere at nothing, not even grazing, just thinking, not wanting to come out...crab-walking sideways, head pulled sideways, knees twisting, haunches tightening, dropping its head and slipping loose and getting away again and summer becomes fall and fall becomes winter and one year becomes the next and the one after that.

Meanwhile this horse could clip clop, it could trot, it could run, it could do everything but never when it should and always when it shouldn't.

You're on your own horse and that's good and bad, good because it's a good horse and does mostly what you tell it and bad because horses are horses and there are things they can do and things they can't.

Oh, stop thinking about what they can't do because it won't help one iota. Good advice, but go ahead and try, see if you can stop thinking when you tell yourself to because even if you can there's this other horse and whether your horse is worked-in, trained, strong, all right, ready to get going every morning, that other horse, the one you're supposed to be leading and getting somewhere, isn't any of those things, and you don't know what it is going to do next and neither does he.

Three years, five years, fifteen years leading that horse, a great big strong lost-in-his-own-mind kind of a horse that isn't ready and if you're making any progress, it's sure not clear to you.

This might never end, leading that horse. You can't lead it, you shouldn't lead it, how about that? You should never have tried. It would have found its way at the same rate of slowness and gotten where it was going without your tugging, worrying, backtracking, wondering, realizing you weren't getting younger and the horse back there might not have to do a thing to outlast you. You might wear out, you can't believe you're not worn out, you are stunned you're still going way beyond any conceivable measure of endurance you would have attributed to yourself or been able to imagine twenty years ago, is it, or no, twenty-five? Or whenever...like never...life can't be this way, you on a horse and this other horse with its eyes, its mind, its single purpose a kind of ambulatory hibernation that mimics movement but not where you're going because you've lost track of where you're going, you're not going anywhere, just trying to go, getting up, climbing on, holding the lead rope in your hand, feeling the resistance, the back pull, the drift thataways followed by the snort of complaint, bitter and fed up with you.

You don't know how but you're not giving up. There is the horizon and that is where you are heading. It could be a mountain range or the supine face of a clock clutching noon or a raised vein in the map of the land. Who cares? Somewhere, it's somewhere, let's go, come on. You yank, that horse you're leading rears up, you almost lose your seat, you wrap the rope twice around your hand, which is almost a piece of rock now it's been clenched into a fist grip for so long, and you yank again. Can you do that all day? Do you have to? Still?

You don't know, and that's the truth. You have no idea. There was a time when things that began came to an end, but that time is gone. You've been at it so long you wouldn't tell anyone what you're doing, think you're doing, or failing to do. It isn't effable, can't be said, the horse you're leading can't say it either, but in one long wheeling haven't-we-been-here-before glide it almost seems like things have awakened backward and that horse is at your

shoulder, that horse is a little ahead of you, that horse has some kind of idea where it's going and look at the ripple, the gloss, the toughness, the no more testiness, the getting up first and let's get moving look it gives you in the morning, the more miles, more miles in the afternoon, the horizons under its feet one after another like railroad ties, rhythmic and relentless, building speed, iron horse, chugging horse, what a horse, look at that horse, see it pulling away, you wondering where it's going but it knowing it's going somewhere, what a horse, how much you love that horse, that horse is your life, you've given it all you have, you thought it would make it, you never stopped believing, you wouldn't give up never never never but when, who knew when, who knew it would be now or like this seeing it make its way out there, big, strong, determined so you can just sit a while, it's all right, sit a while and feel the untethered freedom and weirdness of being older than you ever thought you'd be but not all by yourself, that horse looking back over its shoulder, summoning you, inviting you to come along now, saying it'll be easier, count on me to lead the way.

Cemetery with Whale Bones

Point Hope, AK

Wooden crosses slim as harpoon shafts
built tall so when the snows return
post and bar can still be seen above the drifts;
the fence not actually intended to keep anything out,
but to mark the yard where the departed
have been sown in the soil
of indifferent fields.

In the Arctic summers,
the wild grasses also reach high,
desperate to catch the circling sun.
How the wind sighs through their stalks,
plays bone notes as if recalling
the organs they once cradled:
a heart the size of a baby grand,
which, in turn, housed eerie songs,
and the coveted bristles lining jaws
of mythic immensity,
apparatus of going out and coming in,
music for mates, krill for anima.

In the glare of the midnight sun,
the bones gleam white.
Winter darkens them to driftwood,
but all year long, they are alien,
a clutch of monoliths plucked
from their ancestral home
to guard the dead that fed on them.

It's been said that, long ago,
we made a deal with certain creatures:
if we partake of their meat, their spirits
will be allowed to live on
in our flesh.

There can be no loners here;
an entire people sustained
on shared fat and cups of seal's blood;
so much consumed raw,
slabs of protein barely heated over the flame of a blubber lamp.
Sometimes, it feels as if loaves of flat bannock and
the occasional tuber are the only things
that separate us from the sea-dwellers.

The ancient name for this place means "forefinger,"
for the goddess whose digits became
the first walrus, seal, and whale.
Queen of the underworld, she gives or withholds
as she will. Eventually, we all become sacrifices
served on a bed of ice.
See how she holds the dead in her bare fingers,
the frozen earth her palm.

The Submersed

he dons wetsuit and helmet
and is fed, steadily downward,
into the brown maw of the Ohio.

this slow immersion, inch by
umbilical inch, layers of rubber
girding flesh from sixty-degree water;

forty feet and the pressure mounts,
the weight of the river insistent upon
eardrums, spine, heart,

but his focus must be the work,
on what must be done to maintain
bridges and pipelines, to mend the hulls of ships,

murk and helmet fog render him blind
beyond the end of his stinger,
where a tungsten electrode burns, fusing

metal to metal; a life of arcs and currents,
governed by breath and steel, dankness and spark,
his tools almost as elemental:

bag, compass, knife, rope. attracted
by the light of his torch, fish swarm,
bass and sauger, walleye and bony gar.

if they wander too close,
he gives them a jolt, and once, as he finished a job,
he turned to find himself face-to-face

with an immense blue catfish,
five feet long if it was an inch, 140 pounds,
grown monstrous on sups from silty bottoms.

nothing from these waters can be eaten.
in two hours, he must come up,
three dives per twenty-four hour period,

and he will go twice more. he would dive
until he no longer understands the language
of the sun, until walking feels like drowning

and the descent feels like deliverance.

Reflections on My Craft

My writing process is constant. I'm not religious, but I like how the Bible says that God is interested in even the sparrows, or how Blake said, "to see a world in a grain of sand, and eternity in an hour." To see every action and occurrence as an event, every detail a flourish. I think to really live is to pay attention, to find inspiration in the multitudes. With a constant influx of material flooding my senses, I have learned to be very flexible. I can compose either on the computer or with pen and paper. I can work alone or in a crowd. I can write in the morning, evening, or afternoon. No matter what I am doing, you can be sure that I am always arranging words in my head.

Of course, I do have preferences. I like pens better than pencils. Any good pen will do. I pilfer them whenever possible, though I buy Pilot roller balls or felt-tips, and I prefer lined paper because my hand writing is big and ungainly. I have also discovered extra narrow ruled legal pads, which I absolutely love writing on because it keeps my writing smaller and I can fit so much on one page. I free write and journal—I journal in regular diary-type books, and my Free Write files are done on computer. I am compulsive about compartmentalization—I have a separate journal for dreams, and one for regular journal entries. I have small "thought" files for notes on individual projects. The Free Write files are sort of a general dumping ground/storage site for whatever my brain may happen to cough up, or I go to the Free Write files when I lose my focus and need to babble. I make lots of lists and keep calendars—reading lists and writing to-do lists. When I submit to magazines, I have discovered that random submissions are better. I write down a bunch of titles and draw them out of a hat. When I try to pair my work to a particular magazine, I always get rejected. I subscribe to Word of the Day emails and keep a "Good Word" file. I save news and magazine articles for story ideas.

When I write at home, I like to have the whole floor to myself. My husband goes to his man-cave, and I put on my headphones and listen to music full-blast, and pace back and forth. (We call it my "stomping time.") I love music loud enough to damage my inner ears, all kinds of music. I like to soundtrack my stories. When I work with my co-author, it's like comedy improv. Some of the characters are more him than me and vice versa, so we bounce dialogue back and forth off each other. There's a lot of laughter. If we get stuck, we break for snacks, or take walks together, discussing plot points and character motivation.

I do not abuse substances, but I suffer from migraines. I experience prodromes, and strange sensory disturbances that occur up to 24 hours before the migraine hits, as well as palinopsia. Sometimes, it induces something like a euphoric state. I see auras and tracers. I smell funny smells, like something burning, or rotten meat, or get tastes in my mouth, like mint or pepper. Some of the medications I've taken over the years for migraines have been very interesting—one preventative gave me intense, vivid nightmares. The emergency pill I take now to stop a migraine once it starts makes me loopy, off-balance and giggly. I also meditate, which can also produce an altered state of consciousness. But overall, I'd say for me, writing itself is the drug.

Śūnyatā

Backlit by night
I say goodbye
to a silent clock
that witnesses me
making my way
taking chance
from a new hour

I seek understanding
in empty hands
in the letting
go of sand
trying to drink
the new day
by respiring the old

At a crossing
I memorize the water
for writing
in the waves
or the signatures
of wind in sand
growing as I hollow

Tanka: Evening Star

The rise of Venus
before any hint of moon
in the dark chamber of sky—
the heart is squandered
on unattainable gods.

Moon or Sun: Reflection on Craft

It comes as something of a shock to realize that in February 2018, it will have been 50 years since I committed to the craft of poetry. Words had wanted me since I was 10 or 11 years old, and I had experimented with prose and poetry by somewhat unconsciously modeling what I had been reading. But I decided in 1968 that, if I wanted to be a poet, I would have to 1) commit to writing daily, 2) commit to rewriting after a few months of allowing each poem to sit fallow, 3) commit to being an art student who sits before the masters and draws like and from them, and 4) commit to learning the craft thereby. I have largely lived up to that commitment, except that there was a missing decade when I lost faith and/or grew too busy with the other parts of life.

As I lived out this compact, I took two paths: The first was, let us say, that of the Moon, which reflects the light given it by the form of another. So, I tried out Petrarchan and Elizabethan sonnets, Ghazals, ballads, haiku, blank verse, ballads and so forth. I studied assonance and alliteration, falling too much in love with Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas in my young romantic years. I tried out Symbolism and Imagism, Minimalism and visual poetry. I studied rhyme, half rhyme, metrical feet and sprung rhythm. And I tried on many voices as a mimic might before evolving my own within the echoes from and within the conversation of poets. When I read my poems, I still hear the echoes of and see the shapes from many other poets and hundreds of other poems—and that is fine.

The second path was that of the Sun that makes its own light and shadows or, if you will, an organic form that seemed to grow from what the particular poem needed. Why did each line end with a particular word? Enjambed or end-stopped? What was the right diction here: solemn, oracular, snarky, spare, prosaic, simple? Would I be guided by standard syntax or allow it to be bent reaching for the unsayable? Would a word morph into a different part of speech or stay still? Let the poem seemingly decide.

Over time I found that what worked best for me was mostly the path of the Sun influenced by all I had learned by the Moon. One of the poems published here, “Śūnyatā,” was first written by hand in my journal, then after a few weeks revised evolving in shape and word choice, its stanza pattern or verse paragraphs being somewhat imposed to foster meaning or double it. Without having learned my craft and tried on many forms and styles, I do not think this would work as well for me.

However, I still like to be contained by a form from time to time, and have lately once again been using English versions of Japanese and Chinese forms such as the Tanka, “Evening Star.” I do not read or speak Chinese or Japanese and so must rely on translations to give me a sense of how a form might actually work: For instance, where is the break between the image and the turning to implicit meaning? This is also fine, since I am not trying to mimic any longer but find ways to keep striving for the impossible. I do find that being contained to a form often explodes meaning I had not intended. Certainly, learning the form and craft is vital, especially when straying from or even violating the,

I say this last because my definition of poetry is, “Saying in words that which cannot be said in words.” Therefore, every poem is an attempt that fails. But it can get nearer. And the failure may be beautiful. I suppose I am too Classical for those who want utter freedom and formless form and too Organic for traditionalists. But this is my Tao of poetry, the Way that has worked for me. I leave it to each reader to decide if the tracks left behind in my poems are of the Moon, the Sun, or the Shadows. To mix in another analogy, I am discontentedly content that my craft keeps getting honed and that the shavings are as useful as the finished cabinets.

Why Do I Have To Remember?

I remember
the war
long ago
faraway
a wooden grave marker
the snow and the wind
the frostbite
why do I have to remember?

while I was lying sleepless
a cat brought me a little dead mouse
left it by my bed
and went away

Reflection On "Why Do I Have To Remember?"

Some time ago, in the middle of winter night, I found a little dead mouse by my bed. Evidently, my old female cat killed the mouse somewhere and brought it to me. I was touched.

A cat has nothing to do with what war does to human body and spirit. But I was able to feel a sense of mercy and compassion. Whether such feeling is an indication of salvation or damnation is difficult to discern. I wrote a brief draft immediately. Then I modified it several times. It took about a year.

A Moment with Early Spring as I Climb the Stairs

One plum tree in the side yard has rushed
itself to white, a thrust of blossoms spilling
off the edge of space, as the view fluffs
and springs, hits itself across the face
with color and the full picture of one
white flower rounding itself up to two
and then four. The algebra of spring
leaves me dizzy as I work to subtract
my winter fog, and let myself learn to
trust addition, lean into numbers again
even if multiplication is beyond me.

There are times when such haste and spent
energy make sense. Common wisdom
favors caution, but I carry threads
of rebellion, thin as a spider web
these filaments of risk. Decked in
her splendor of pre-Easter white,
unconcerned about storms, the freeze
and divided hours of night when
blossoms might suffer, she throws
sap and her dreams out on the ledger
of this season. She is my mentor,
heroine of March, a life I will extend
my reach to bring toward the light.

Reflection on Process

Poems for me begin always with an image, a line that shows up in my head, often when I am walking or looking out the window of my office. So I connect poems with pen put to paper in the journal I write each day. When I look back through my journal, eighty-two volumes over the last twenty-four years, I find these moments again and retrieve them, like coins from a wishing fountain. Sometimes they sit for many years before I return to them, sometimes it is only a few days before the idea calls to me and I look back to what I was thinking, experiencing, seeing. In recent years, as I have reflected more and more on this process that brings me poems, I have found myself staying with the first line or image on the page and pushing myself to a draft of maybe ten or twenty lines. When I look back through journals in this way, I can pull that draft out, consciously move from draft to the formation of a full poem. A few of the images stay, sometimes a whole line, but I think of it more like sculpting where the final product emerges, keeping the texture of the original, but not much else.



Gilmore Tamny, Untitled Image 4353

Said the Analyst to the Analysand

Do not expect gratitude
from your bad posture.

Your grim tongue has soured
all the report cards.

Why must you always
be bolstering

that waxy beehive
of envious bluster?

Why must your love songs
all sport a coat hanger

around their necks? Why
must your upstrokes wobble so,

your future waste itself
in puddles on a floor

in serious want of matte
polyurethane? Stop blaming

your obscurity on broken
fingernails. Stop thinking

your mother wanted anything
more in your trophy case

than her own blue ribbon.



*William Crawford,
Metallic Street Sculpture,
Artist Unknown,
Winston-Salem, NC*

At the Library

Outside, behind a cupola,
a rash of steam is weltering
from fractal to parabola
and though the cold is sweltering,
the steam's a gold tarantula
wolfing the setting sun, and smeltering
webbed ore for hammered nebulas.

Stiff orange, almost neon, the letters
above the library's doors emblazon
its name with harsh precaution.
Inside, we read how all our betters'
sheens have blurred from brazen
days and bruited gold encomiums
to the wool of their wet bellwethers.

The moon's a thicker crescent now
than when it slithered from the snow.
The cold's a better blister when
our grasping glisters its own end.

Reflection: On Psychoanalysis and Writing

The benefits of psychoanalysis for a writer's craft have more to do with helping a writer to understand motivation, with clearing away obfuscation in the pursuit of a theme or subject, in the delineation of character than with enabling a writer.

But it is also, sometimes, the prodding of a psychoanalyst that dislodges a writer from complacency, smugness, or fear; fear of rejection—or notoriety.

Of course, the contributions of a psychoanalyst in helping a writer to achieve stability, to acquire normal work habits, to relieve depression or anxiety, or to focus on tasks, cannot be underestimated.

But what if a psychoanalyst is wrong? What if her or his negative judgment about the work ends up suppressing a vital creative urge, or steers the writer away from the idiosyncratic and innovative direction the analysand was heading in in the service of pleasing the psychoanalyst's own aesthetic? Hopefully, the analysand will have developed enough inner strength to resist any wrongheaded advice.

Very few writers enter psychoanalysis with the principal goal of improving their writing. The motivation is usually more urgent than that. But perhaps, as a side-benefit of a successful psychoanalysis, a more self-directed, more attentive, more attuned analysand will find the undertaking has strengthened the hand and the determination.

As the Dogwoods Flowered

The day before, spring rains had been torrential.
This morning, the clouds hung low,
and lingered above the hills, clinging
as if they found leaving unbearable.

Behind the hills, I sensed, but could not see
the peaks of the Pisgah forest.
Beneath the cloak of the clouds,
birds continued to call well after the dawn;
in larger numbers than the morning before,
their songs came to us from every direction.

Tree limbs sagged and dripped;
some drops fell singly with audible taps
like the beginning of a drumroll;
some, in miniature bursts, like rain itself.

The dog stopped for long sniffs;
the scents from earth were rich, pungent,
ripe, heavy with spent promises, long in story.

Along the switchback to the river,
trees were aligned in columns,
the tallest as if to support the vault of a cathedral.

Pin-point yellow cups and stellate blue
speckled the blanket of green and muted brown,
under the white lace canopy of the dogwoods.

Water, clearer than the air, rushed beside us
down storm drains, culverts, and clefts,
then raced to the river. The river was high
and had crested above the banks;
white caps bobbed on the surface.

The great blue heron had abandoned
his duty post in the middle of the stream.

This morning was a morning that in ordinary
course would go unremarked and unremembered
until the next miracle.

Walk over, I must tell Maurice that I just learned about his cancer.

Reflection on “As the Dogwoods Flowered”

This poem began about a year ago as a letter to a friend named at the end of the poem and to his wife. I was trying to give them a picture of my day up to point I wrote to them. I also offered whatever help they were willing to accept. When I finished the letter, I realized it was virtually a poem, full of the images of the clouds, hills, birds, woods, dog, flowers, road, rushing waters and the river of my morning. And that I had remembered that morning, initially unconscious to myself, infused with the foreknowledge of the letter I was about to write, and filled with presentiments of departure, wonder, grief and otherness. But also with awe, notions of continuity and connection, as well as renewal. Put in a prissy *literati* way, the letter was the “subjective correlative” (forgive me, Professor Eliot for twisting your words) to that morning’s walk. Put in still another way, it was, at its core, *art trouvée*, discovered like a piece of haunting driftwood among the seaweed.

Later letters I sent him were more chatty, completely non-naturalistic and pathetically upbeat. In the initial letter as well as in the derived poem, the sequence of the walk from near the top of the hill, down the switchback and then to the river provided the order for the images. Geography became chronology.

The first letter was put aside for some months; and then drafts of poems went through five or six revisions for consistency in images, diction, language, tone, gesture and implication. By so doing, I had hoped that the reader would have a revelation similar to mine, namely, with the last line, suddenly to realize that the previous lines of the poem were a prayer.

Maurice died 10 days before this narrative was written.

Forced

"We live in a time when the "I" the perpendicular pronoun ought to blush, but there is no way around the self no better arbiter and witness."

He insists that my poems use *I*,
that they speak for me and for me

only. What a world of monstrous
babies he supposes, full of endlessly

clamoring selves, unable to imagine
shared anything, the *I* of i-phones,

selfies, and confessionals, no place
real unless *I* am in it, my emoji,

thumb up or down. And why, too,
is it always a man telling me

my *we* doesn't include him,
that my *we* is soapbox when *I*

have been squeezed inside his
forever, obedient pupil in a milky

surround, shuttered and opened,
weeping, according to his will.

Nods to Greatness

Scarlatti crossed himself at each mention of Handel, the peer about whom the seraphim seemed to dance more brightly. To those on higher peaks, I also raise tribute, laureling them with glossy boughs or lighting fires, hoping they can see themselves in my columns of smoke. Daily, I gather scraps for the burning, tending the embers through long nights, and fanning them again come morning. Like Scarlatti's fingers across his heart, my gesture invokes deity, nods to the spirits shaken from the page, taps an offering.

But what if I've gotten it wrong? What if, instead, Scarlatti's *segno de la croce* was to keep the great ones at a distance so his shoot could catch more light and thicken at the trunk? Sometimes that's also how it feels, the already-said, the chiseled perfection on its plinth, looming while my own forms squat, divot-pocked. To give my newborns breath, I'd ward off august phantoms with a hex—why, I'd take a mallet to them. Sometimes you have to look away, swiping the past to the floor with a crash, pretending that you are the first ever to hear the muse.

The Poet Musters

Tara, tara comes my little fife a-piping.

I beat my drum. I lift my standard,

hoping for your face at the window, a thrown favor.

Tara, tara! I march to do small battle,

to tilt at shadows, strays, cud-chewing cows.

Later, I'll return the way I came,

perhaps my capfeather or a button lost,

my shoe unsoled, but limbs still

threaded. Pause in your usefulness then

and kiss my scratches, even

if I must point to where. I will immortalize

the curls that cling to your flushed

cheeks, your affectionate glance,

not unmarked by pity.

Craft Reflection

My poems emerge from a daily practice of writing. I write both before and after my work day as an adult ESL teacher. My work draws its inspiration from a variety of sources—perhaps I see something of interest in my Facebook feed—a news story, a photograph, or a painting. A poem might arise over an interaction I had with a peer or a student. It could emerge from something I witness during my commute. It might grow out of a dialogue with a poem or novel I am reading. I may respond to a prompt from a poetry site on-line. Occasionally, I collaborate with other poets.

I find the formatting of a poem determines both its language and content. A boxed poem differs completely from a prose poem, which differs from one in couplets or triplets.

I revisit poems each time I send them off to a new journal, reading them through to catch typos, to examine whether the line-breaks or the form itself are doing enough work. I may rearrange lines, make deletions, change verb tenses, or even scrap a poem completely.

I prefer not to edit to critiques, but rather be my own critic. I've found that readers' suggestions alter my voice or my intentions overly much. If a poem fails to communicate, either I'll tinker with it, try a very different audience, or I'll scrap it. When I have tried to rewrite poems according to others' specifications, however, they feel monstrous and alien. I lose my sense of parentage.



William Crawford, Zulu Wire Basket, Charleston, SC, Market

And I Go Back to Writing Poems of Love

And I go back to writing poems of love,
with half will and fractioned heart.
There are walls to scrape,
then to paint;
Other words to keep
those roads gone down,
rail tracks rolled by.

 this perhaps shall take time
I am not willing to give.
Some old wounds put away
in forgotten ways of writing,
unkempt untouched for months;
and that cold glass I have placed between
 mind and mind
to keep thoughts away,
to keep memories from leaking,
 seeping
 through.

and then this coming home to verse;
coming home to writing poems of love.
The nomadic life
 on the otherwise,
There is still there that;
and the option of travelling.

Reflections

Words are my best friends. Always have been. Ever since childhood I have curled up with a book or a copy to read or write whenever life has confused me. And life has confused me a lot. Still does. So much that happens - war, racism, gender inequality - seems illogical. But instead, emotions were called illogical. I was branded over-sensitive. I was taught that only by overcoming emotions could I become strong. I didn't exactly understand this logic. Yet I tried to do away with feelings. This eventually went on to express itself in bipolar and borderline symptoms. Mental health is a taboo topic or a joke in India. Fifteen years ago this was more so.

Since emotional expression was looked down upon, I would write. I would write poems and stories since I was a kid. I would paint and direct little plays. I would sing and dance. In my heart I felt that art was the only hope. In the midst of all illogical violence, the only thing that made sense or could hope to make sense was art. And so I would write write write. When I couldn't sleep for nights and nights for years and years, I would write blindly, pouring any and everything I felt on paper. Words and notebooks were my dearest confidants, guides, mentors, gods, and protectors.

For a long time, despite being regularly published in newspapers and book collections, I couldn't acknowledge that I was indeed a writer. Even when my solo books of poems and stories were printed and launched I felt shy and awkward. I pretended to be incredibly confident. I flashed my brightest smiles. Inside I felt so scared and unaccepted. Over the past few years, with meditation and positive affirmations, I was able to appreciate and approve of myself.

My work deals with this repeatedly - the journey of looking within and recognising the demons dwelling there and growing to become a broader soul. My words echo the madness I keep battling, the rise and fall of severe emotions in high frequencies. Art keeps me sane. I need it like air and water. I need my best friends.

Farm to Market

See how the grass grows
the wind blows
windrows of the grain that dries
or gravel on the subgrade
waiting for the skip loader
the gradechecker
the stringline
and the paving spread
soon there will be a fine line
a ribbon of concrete
with ditches beside
taking the runoff through the sluice gate
into the fields
where the crops wait
the crows fly
to feast on the dry grain
before the combines lower
the cutter bar
and load the stuff
take it to the silo
the freight train
the flour mill
sift
grind
blow wind blow
outside my window
hotcakes inside
cooked on my gas stove

Reflections on Craft

I'm always looking for ideas – poems, fiction. My mind scans everything every day – conversations, the news, commercials, things I see. For this poem it was the words of someone who was talking about one of our generals involved in sending the aircraft carrier near North Korea. Someone said in the news, 'General XXXXX will show Kim Jung Un how the grass grows.' I thought that was a great image, a great metaphor. The idea behind it was that the general would show Kim Jung Un a thing or two about war and military confrontation. This image resonated in my mind. After a week or two I thought about writing something down with this thought as the first line, not knowing where it went. I like the word 'windrows'. As a former construction superintendent, I'd have the blade operator windrow gravel so we could load it out. Crops are also windrowed. So I followed this image, using crop windrows and gravel windrows to demonstrate that they are similar. The gravel windrows are necessary to build a concrete road. I mentioned some of the tools to build a concrete ribbon of highway – stringline, paving spread. But the concrete highway catches the rain as runoff and sends it to the drainage ditches, which in turn, sends the water to the make the crops grow. So one windrow sort of helps the other. All of this is in a poem that celebrates practicality. I use short words, practical adjectives to describe everything. At the end, I bring back the wind image and use 'window' to sort of counterpoint the 'windrow' image at the beginning.

What Stands

“And if blue is an illusion what will become of innocence.” - Federico Lorca, Autumn Song

Where lake tells of delicate lean
Beyond itself,
Blue pasture of all things
There or not.

Depths never touched,
Ecstasy of fin and
Quick death.

It goes on forever.

What the eye sees is blue sweep,
Cousinage of sun.

You have never measured it,
True vision or rippled plane
Of mirage.

What then of innocence's
Claim?

That too uncertain as rain
Over a terrain of dream,

A cry in the night,
A hand lifting from carnage,

Rage of war overshadowing
The pleas of children below
Shriek and blast of
Bombs too numerous
To count.

As simple a thing as
Blue of sky and lake
Fallen into doubt.

Reflections on Poem “What Stands”

Long a reader and admirer of Lorca’s poetry, I still remember the first time I read “Autumn Song.” Somehow strangely the two lines above got into my mind and wouldn’t let go. I returned to them many times over months, perhaps a year or more until gradually I knew I wanted—needed—to try writing a poem around them. Nothing worked, and I gave up; then in time lines began to emerge out of the mist of what some call the “pre-poem” stage.

Lorca wrote this poem in 1918, the final year of World War I with its enormous devastation and slaughter. I had a relative who had been in France with the American army and as a child I had read the many letters he wrote home to his parents. Probably in some way this figured in my commitment to Lorca’s poem.

His bringing together the color blue and innocence seemed striking in some manner I couldn’t at first resolve—just that something was working on my imagination as a strong undercurrent pulling me along. Slowly slowly more lines formed until one evening in quiet of night I believed the poem was finished.

Even so, I continued to work on various lines and the imagery. The part on innocence was the biggest challenge. At the end I had shortened the poem by 6-7 lines, a sometimes painful cutting.

Beholding

For Chris

How to sophisticate the beholding?
To write of shadow, splendor, and doubt?
Witness the wound, the unbound wound.
Resolve not to mock humanity.

Your faith may fluctuate,
like everyone else. You may have
cold spots and blind spots,
a collision of creeds and confessions.

Be bold. Don't let sorrow jar your throat.
Find holiness even in the darkness.
When blood and bones cry out,
invisible scars liberate a blaze of light.

This is the Work

1. A Dance

Like a balloon floating overhead the line comes. Then you invite the line for a walk. To discover what it holds you dive in. You hunt the good. Revise towards a passionate syntax. Spinning weaving coupling. Until you've got a livewire. Like cattle bones and coke machines.

2. A Rant

A smart sassy syntax. A wayward splash. All that jazz mantra: blast past scars. grasp the abstract. wrath. draft a blank canvas. ransack grammar. gnaw banana. defer cemetery. prefer repellent. rent the dress. wed well. extend reverence. visit twilight. list sin. spin trinity. spit pills. stitch infirmity. inflict dignity. scoop morning. copy glory. sword forth. succumb. hunt truth. unplug stuff.

3. A Break

A thesis in a box. A handful of Farmscape copies. Readings in Prairie Lights, a local wine bar, and a house on the Underground Railroad. Four temp jobs. No office with a view, no house with a view. Two-thirds of a medical settlement gone. A hunt for sanity. But suddenly, like a bugle reverie, brewing coffee, a blonde 3 lb. doxie, a poem clears the opaque. And you laugh at the simplicity.

Greenhouse

no other emigration was left
but inner exile
the cold was a myth the night
a defect of the eye the bird
hovering over the polyethylene dome
wasn't a bird

we nested in the inside edge
of the glass
someone already said
everything a long time ago

animals adapt to their surroundings
skin adapts to its surroundings
fables dissolve
 with water
in their surroundings

Aviary

we reconstructed the bones
with iron bars
we retrained tendons and orbits

as if looking were another form of moving
the muscles of flight
unanchored

language is elastic
the body has finite
memory
our tongue stopped being an owl
that tires of the light
at noon

Little Consolation

“Loneliness is what happens at the end of any story, including this one...” -Larry Levis

The iridescent shimmer of an oil spill in the garage
is the scale of an angelfish.

Or is it the face of a girl,
the only high school dropout in her town,
after she decided to go through with the abortion?

Or is it sadness itself, sometimes difficult to see,
like the mirage of heat rising from the sidewalk;
there, if you look at it correctly,
then not there, then there again?

Or the place where little consolations,
like sunlight striking a loved one's pupil just right,

dilute?

And what can you do when the little consolations dissolve,
when you pull the blankets over your head
and only feel the heat from your breath?



Windy City

The Chicago headlines read:
Thirty-two wounded and nine dead.
Another bannered summer
triggered with gun smoke,
and goods stirring in hoods.

Wild rounds zipping from behind
tinted glass. The mayor holds
his sword tight, rests its steel tip
on statesmanship.

He knows chrome Cutlass Supremes
come at night. Colossal dreams fade
into devil blue paint schemes
and unending traffic light.

The rain finally comes to cool
the dead and slow the lead
that runs deep in marbled chalk,
of blood lines red.

Bystanders read again and again,
about lions stalking gold saints.
I slowly move my eyes back
to my coffee black, back into my
smoking cup ensouled.

Dance

I'm not watching my step.
Down to zero speed
I trace perfect droplets
with fine-tuned pencil tips.
Smoothing off usual angles
my breath lifts me in mid air.
Unperceived I rise vertical
yet keep moving
light with vibration
like the octopus the sun dries
(open bell, wide concavity)
like the octopus spread
against a glass wall
in robe of tiny bubbles
drawing hieratic curves
for the visitor
she loves (arabesque
of apparent immobility).

Vision

Darkness falls on the lake
while
squatting on narrow stones

we stare at the horizon
seeking our share
of revelation. No more

than a shard. Single star.
Or a fishing boat
sliding ashore

(sound of human voices
smell of algae
oars slammed on wet sand).

Absurd Here in the Open

It is ridiculous to think oneself ridiculous
for sloughing off obligation, even the obligation
to console. To do so or not, to say things
intended to help despite the certainty nothing
will help, to turn away & leave the other

to isolation, final truth, silence, to take
any step is folly, is it not? Or if not folly,
presumption, no? Or is all of it a mistranslation
of the Portuguese I'm reading, the Portuguese

aphorisms that compel assent, sayings whose verbs
corkscrew beneath broken shells on the shore
where no one walks, where pure

speculation can *be* pure no matter
how insistently the ghost-hordes whisper
nor how false the Euclidean proof.

Colors

The color wants to be yellow,
the color blackbirds make
when at last they sing.

But there are other colors, too:
the color of my father's tie
as he lay inside the casket,

the color of want in May,
a girl's bronze body tipping
toward a wildflower field.

Sometimes we imagine colors
that never existed. Sometimes
she says a word to me,

a word I can't define, floating
from her crimson mouth,
a mouth I've never kissed.

Now she resides in a black-
and-white movie, the blue
of her clothes the blue

of its sky, unseen. Everything,
perhaps, is imagined: love
and the love we never have.

Choosing Sides

Cieszyn straddles a river
like a hopscotch line
between Poland and the Czech Republic—
arrogant, perhaps, to plant a foot in both
countries, or just confused, like you

who cross one bridge to find
that now *e*'s have circumflexes
and the Polish you struggle
to pronounce morphs into new letters,
new foreign phonetics.
Just across the river,
 what's more unsettling:
being handed a Czech anti-heroin brochure,
or seeing *v*, which doesn't exist
in the Polish alphabet?

In a town on the brink of two nations
you absorb stares of disdain,
reminded that here your American-
born color is a gold smear
on a white tablecloth.

You've forgotten that
your immigrant parents were bullied,
or the first Chinese Americans
faced sneers after crossing an ocean
to arrive on the West Coast, luggage in hand.
Your ancestry already

 bridges the Pacific.
Now you've straddled the Atlantic
to step into Poland with two suitcases
and a tongue that mangles the crisp
language. Maybe Cieszyn can't decide
 which country it prefers.

But *cukrárna* is Czech for Polish *cukiernia*—
you buy a chocolate croissant,
and later can't remember from which side.



The Jekyll Tree, Jim Zola

From The Garden of Eden

Ernest Hemingway's unfinished novel, 1986

I've seen the guillotine
on the Boulevard Arago
at 0500 and heard the thud.
Not the whisper that sounds
like a scream, when the blade
is drawn up in its sheath.
Other Parisians, awake and
lining the Boulevard Arago
like trees, I didn't see—
just the guillotine wearing
a nightgown of fog at 0500.
I heard the thud but not the final
hiss of breath from lips
parted the way the Rue de la Santé
splits from the Boulevard
Arago. I've seen the guillotine.

The Etymology of Fracture

These thoughts occurred because my Word-a-Day
calendar taught me “rescind,” or because later
I watched a man struggle to pin against his
windshield a shade that threw back the sun.

Scindere in Latin: “to cut” or “to split.”

“Rescind” takes away; extinct siblings
“prescind” and “exscind” also carved an absence
where some presence existed. e.g., Watching
that man outside battle his sunshade, I prescinded
from a meeting where the topic was millennials,

how they are the most connected to devices
but the least to other souls, how multitasking
murders efficiency. I am guilty of my generation’s sins,
incapable of exscinding my smartphone from my palm,
of preventing my focus from striking a surface

and scattering. Why do we lose some words to the obituary
of time, but others persist? *Scindere* is etymology and not
a judge of what is lost, cut off, taken away.
Forgive me my trespasses and fractures.
I cannot mend an absence I don’t understand.

A Woman, A Man

A woman will admit you to her office,
but only if you spark her without scorn.
Do not try to mend her with tape.

A man will admit you to his marriage,
if only by dumbwaiter,
because he is on a quest for fantasy.

A woman will try to smudge her complexities
with the cloak of makeup,
but in a continent of a freckle is a disguise.

A man won't try to conceal his complications;
he's hoping he'll be endeared in elephant jewels
and lifted from the pet shop he's constructed for himself.

Madman

You wear, and proudly,
The shirt you inherited
From your father and his father before him
And the valuable values
And indispensable middle terms
You polish every night
So none of your sons will question
Their shine and glimmer
Pass it on, pass it on
They say the way they say
'The sky is blue'
And you believe it
And you'd believe it had they said:
The sky is black
Or red
Or not important
Because you do not need to look up
For answers
Are always, always in your hands.
You create them.
You could have created them
Had your hands been free
From polishing old rusty things.

Night Bird

I ask for nothing
of this land
that has given me everything

I loved and hated its men
found my Adam he fled with a bodybuilder
as soon as I gained weight

I sought God
and in his place found knowledge
I discovered a home in my body

and since then
moved from place to place
without desires

this is my way
my destiny does not depend on luck
I am the night bird
foretelling death in its song

Stay Because You Want to Stay

One more night
I wait for you to do more

& say less. A night of learning
that not all comes back to me.

One in a series of dusks
when not everything arrives

when time does not catch up
to the clock

& the heart does not wither.
It just tires.



Fabrice Poussin, Sisters (right), Options (below)



There Was Crime

There was crime
in your eyes,
piercing truths gallop
in the air like absolute nonsense.

Your absence, a precise trauma.
There were litanies, erased,

deleted invocations, maps,
ashstorms

that still hurt my lungs.
Patience was happy with impatience.

You tried the calm,
but committed the crime,

in your eyes, your pupils.
You don't need to explain.

An old adios
is never forgotten.

A Menu

Found in a dusty box
full of trivialities. . .

I recall that chill day
the gray rain, deserted square
Carolingian gloom
of a blue-stained cathedral -
and such a splendid lunch!
Colorful menu, faded
inscribed by chef Gérard
a souvenir à la carte
of gastronomic joys
savored through each reading:

*Le gateau de foies blonds
baigné d'une sauce au jus de truffes
Les six huitres chaudes
aux filaments de légumes*

Succulent poetry...

*Les queues d'écrevisses pattes rouges
à la nage au vin du mesnil
Le suprême de canard Rouennais
au cassis*

. . .hymnal for the devout soul
of an old wanderer
graying like the stones of Reims.
And I enclose myself
within its champagne pages
so as not to forget
to taste all the syllables
of every printed word
still waiting to be devoured.

When a Lobster Is

dropped into a pot of boiling water
by hands with as many fingers as it has legs —
is this hell? what crimes did it commit on the ocean floor?
whom did it betray and why? a corporate takeover, midnight mugging,
a slew of unkindnesses, added up over the years that were infinite
and now lie swirling at the bottom of stainless steel,
reflecting back its own dissolving eyes, it's reddening claws,
three pairs of antennae sending a message through the bubbles and into the air
I didn't mean any of it, at all,
may the lord lobster god almighty forgive me everything

I Ate the Dog

I ate the dog that drank the sun.
For heaven's grace, a sorrowed moon
In the smoke-ridden hills of Oklahoma
Where they planted Geronimo
Beside the firing range at Fort Sill.
I rode the black horse below the wind
In the wide gaze of the infinite.
I appeased my despondencies among
The flowers of the west domain
And my conscience saw double
Pierced beyond dog-eating pain.
Cochise came and helped me cook
The dog until the flesh fell off
Its gleaming bones. Night mist wrapped
And lifted us, showed us idols of times
Where White Eyes made Apaches hang.
A curved cross stood alone in the desert
In the whiteness of the virgin sand
In midget tempests whipped to plumes.
The dog drank from a mescal jug.
His eyes burned, quivering.
"Do not weep," I said, in Chiricahua
Dusk. The mountains wide and far.
His dog tears and his sleep failed
The road walked straight towards
Slabs of granite in the golden peaks.
He went down meekly with one blow.
His shadow cast yonder over humankind.
Cochise and I cooked him to midnight
Squinting beside the fire under mesquite
Until the tender flesh fell away
Sheered like petals from his white bones.
Then we stood and looked to the east
Where weathers of loneliness and the sun
Stretched gilded in the growing dawn
We ate the dog that drank the sun

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John Repp

Richard Robbins

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ISBN 000-0-00-000000-0



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