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# Man Hours: The Construction of a Poet

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Man Hours: The Construction of a Poet

By

Kevin Gardner

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A creative thesis submitted to the Department of English of the University of the  
State of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Masters of Arts

October 4, 2010

Man Hours: The Construction of a Poet

By

Kevin C. Gardner

APPROVED BY:



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Advisor

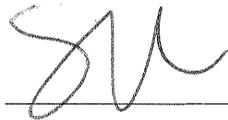
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Chair, Department of English

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*Man Hours: the Construction of a Poet* is a collection of Kevin Gardner's work designed to display the creative tools acquired in pursuit of a Master's Degree in English, with a concentration in Creative Writing, at SUNY Brockport. This thesis attempts to take a close look at Gardner's work in an effort to showcase these skills. As a more seasoned student of writing, significant and extensive life experience plays a key role in this collection. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, along with years of working in the construction industry, has influenced this collection in ways that supplement elements learned in the classroom. It is also the author's attempt to examine and present these influences in a way that shows the blending of life experience and higher education to create poetry that has meaning while appealing to a broad audience.

## Man Hours: The Construction of a Poet

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## Man Hours: The Construction of a Poet

A lifelong career working as a carpenter has demonstrated the importance of craftsmanship. Just as in the days when bending nails was my trade, it became obvious early in my writing career that more knowledge equaled more tools to add to the tool box. Different poetic forms lay side by side with different poetic devices in the box always at the ready to be used to create good poetry. Built with a craftsman's eye on the intricacies of a well built house and a full tool box, *Man Hours* is a collection of my work that demonstrates a blending of influences from life in a rural farming community and the works of modern and contemporary American poets.

One of the most significant tools acquired over the last four years is the idea that the physical form of a poem can work with, or against the meaning of the text to create a meaningful poem. Prior to studying at Brockport, purposeful attention to form was limited to stanza creation and working the wording of lines to create meter and rhyme. There are several poems in *Man Hours* that use form to enhance the reading pleasure for the reader. The first poem of the collection, "The Poet Fights the Wars That Can't Be Won," is also the first example of the use of a strict form.

A sonnet, "The Poet Fights the Wars That Can't Be Won," was written to express the idea that poets should be the ones that speak out against injustice, "Write

all wrongs, denounce the world's decay" (Gardner 29). While the poem asks the poet to accept this responsibility, it also notes that the effort might be futile, "Neil Young still cries about the damage done. / The Poet fights the wars that can't be won" (29). The sonnet form works in two ways with this poem. First, it creates lines that metrically are memorable. The intention was to create lines that can get stuck in one's head like an old song. The closing line, "The Poet fights the wars that can't be won," is meant to resonate the message that while the effort might be futile, the work must continue. Second, the sonnet form works to establish a connection with poets of all ages. Poems written in specific classic forms not only display a mastery of word usage, but also pay homage to poets of all times. For instance, that this poem is a sonnet suggests that it is not only the job of contemporary poets to point out injustice, but that it has been the job of poets since the beginning of time.

While there are many poems in this collection that work with line breaks, and stanza breaks to develop the meaning of the text, probably the poem which correlates form and context is the poem, "On The Way Home from the Metro Center." Written as a narrative tale, form is used deliberately in this poem to denote change in scene. From the very beginning form takes a front porch position in the poem. The first stanza is written as a haiku. This haiku is meant to suggest a poem that is working in

the narrator's head as he is journeying home from the Metro Center. The frustration of the poet is evident as the poem quickly shifts into a fantasy and travels to Florida.

The form of the poem through the Florida sections is deliberately random tending only to break when the subject matter breaks, for example:

Maybe I should just

Leave the Brown Dirt Diary

with old blind Charlie,

and move

to Ocala where I could get a job

teaching high school English

to the heirs of the Confederacy.

I could expose the glory

of the comma,

and of Tim O'Brien, and maybe

that there English sonnet feller. (75).

The first stanza in this excerpt suggests the idea of leaving town. With the thought of giving up the Brown Dirt Diary, the implication is that the narrator is going to give up writing poetry. The second stanza puts forth a destination and a possible career change, and the third, two divergent authors that are taught in high school. These stanzas are of differing lengths.

The center of this poem sees another shift in form when the narrator decides to go to Key West. At this point the poem deliberately shifts into three line stanzas for the duration of the vacation trip on the island:

I would drive to Key West  
spend Christmas break  
walking down Whitehead

---

Street pausing to pet  
the cats before settling  
at Joe's to drink rum

and talk fishing  
with the rest  
of the high school

English teachers including the gray  
haired lady in the floppy  
black hat from Ketchum

sticking to the claim that she heard  
the shot but thought it was a book  
dropping, or a bottle rocket. (75).

This excerpt demonstrates the concise three-line stanza set that is designed to pay homage to Ernest Hemingway's writing style. It is through the lens of the quote from Hemingway expressed in the epigraph at the beginning of the poem that the narrator sees the haiku. He decides that it is shit, and it moves his mind to this fantasy adventure, only to wind up ultimately again sitting in the car on the way home from the Metro Center waiting for the light to change.

While form is the foundation onto which a good poem is built, life experience is the framework. The one thing that a poet can bring to his work is his own life experience. A writer who can look at his own life and draw those moments that demand inspection with honesty brings something new to the world of poetry. If

nothing else, the writer's honesty puts forth a new perspective. Several poems in *Man Hours* reflect the life experience of the writer. These poems attempt to look at an individual, and a specific moment of time. These moments have stuck in the memory of the narrator and are revealed in these works.

One example is in the poem "*For M.*" This poem got its start as two conversations that occurred within a week of each other. One was at the First Presbyterian Church in Albion where weekly AA meetings are held. A man was waiting outside and asked me if I knew Bill W. I later learned that Bill W. was the nickname for Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, and that asking for him is a way for a new member to find out where the meeting is being held. The second conversation was held with a friend, who, while having dinner and drinks informed me that she had gone off the wagon that night after a year. Her response was, "I hate that damn wagon;" the line that inspired the rest of the poem. The title "*For M.*" was originally written as the epigraph under some now forgotten title, but was made the title shortly after completing the poem when it became clear that this poem was clearly written for 'M.'

One of the central themes that pervade this collection is the writer's attempt to show the reality that surrounds his life, living in rural Western New York. Even after fifty years of observation, it is difficult to write about the experiences of others and

feel credible when the writer was raised in the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition. Years of living with, and observing migrant workers and others that farm Orleans County have provided a lot of images. There is a story to tell, but working within the framework of honesty, it didn't feel right to present these images as a white man who had never hoed a row. It was in this environment that Activity Jones was born. It is interesting that some of the most honest words and observations of the collection come in the form of a female farm worker.

From the very first poem in the series "Activity Jones and the Brown Dirt Diary," Activity Jones is positioned as farm worker, "Frayed in Farm-soiled sweatpants clipped, / at the muck packed knees," (37). She is described as wearing second hand clothes, "...her favorite denim jacket with the sleeves rolled up, / embroidered Alf on the back," (37). These images combine to create an individual that is a common sight in Orleans County. The fact that this is the extent of the description of this woman exaggerates her commonality and displays the idea that these people are really invisible to the rest of the world, unless they are perceived as flaws. In this case, all that is seen by the majority of the world is a poor dirty woman in old clothes.

The setting of this poem is also crucial to the understanding of the work. To the world, Wal-Mart represents the pinnacle of a consumerist society. Activity Jones

encounters processed foods and cleaning products that are placed in the piece to represent the frivolity of our society. These products, Taco Bell frozen dinners, Brawny paper towels, and cans of 'homemade' stew are representative of all processed products that have been proved to be detrimental to our world, but are still coveted by Activity Jones. Even though she works on a farm, and has access to fresh food, she still sits in the store aisle and feels poor because she cannot afford these items, “imaged with the idea that if there were more/ than one dollar and forty-seven cents/ in her left front pocket,/ she would not be hungry” (37).

But there is more to Activity Jones than meets the eye. This is where the Brown Dirt Diary comes into play. The diary is intended to show that there is more to this person than just a poor dirty woman wandering around Wal-Mart. Behind that public image is a thinking person with a measure of creative intelligence that makes her unsatisfied with her lot in life. It is with this thought that she expresses the voice of the author. Activity Jones is observing her environment and questioning the meaning of her life. The name, “Brown Dirt Diary” has two functions. First, it is the description of the diary itself, brown suede, and the second is the recognition that these are the observations of a lifelong farm worker, a written record of a life of working in the brown dirt. Although she has spent her life working the fields, she

constantly questions whether there is more to life. At the end of “Activity Jones and the Brown Dirt Dairy,” she writes:

“All day long”, she writes, “I work the fruited plains; at night I soar  
into the starred and clouded sky and with José  
Cuervo’s aid, seek out the purple mountain's promise.

God shed his grace on me.” (37).

Written in the middle of Wal-Mart, Activity Jones uses the imagery created by the great American anthem “America the Beautiful” to question where her piece of the American dream lies. She works hard in “the fruited plains,” and believes that she is chasing the dream, which is presented by “the purple mountain's promise.”

Surrounded as she is by the mass marketing of unnecessary products such as paper towels and frozen meals, this statement should be read as frustration. She works, she believes in the dream, but why isn't it there for her? In the end, she asks God's help.

This observation continues with the second poem in the series, “Reckoning on the Snow.” With this poem the reader gets some insight into her home life. We learn that she has a man in her life, “Jose' rumbles in the back end love room,” (49). As another growing season comes to an end, she contemplates the meaning of that, and

the fact that it means that her lover is going home, “she watches and knows that this is a day of leaving,” (49). Written in a tone that is meant to be early morning, contemplative, she writes:

“As I stare upon this snow covered harvest done  
horizon”, she writes, “I can imagine life  
in peace; with only one question,  
What if this is heaven,  
And I’ve been too drunk  
to tell?” (50).

With this statement she invokes the lyrics of John Lennon’s ballad “Imagine,” and with the images of life that suggest that heaven and earth are all encompassed within the individual, she not only admits that maybe her life isn’t so bad, “I can imagine life in peace,” but also offers to the reader the idea that she drinks too much, and knows it, “what if this is heaven, and I’ve been too drunk to tell.” The influx of alcohol abuse into these poems is not meant to display the evils of alcohol, but rather to show that alcohol use, and possible abuse, is a major part of the lives of those that perform manual labor in our society. The question that should be raised: is the alcohol abuse created by the environment in which Activity Jones lives, or is the alcohol the

contributing factor to her inability to achieve what she believes to be the American dream? These poems provide no answer.

The presence of alcohol abuse and manual labor is a theme that is prevalent throughout the collection and is displayed prominently in the title poem, "Man Hours." "Man Hours" is poem that does a lot of different things. Written as an elegy to my friend Bobby, "Man Hours" is a poem about a man who spent his life working as a construction laborer and died as a direct result of alcoholism. This poem is written in his voice. It is Bobby who drinks at lunchtime, buys a six pack for consumption on his way home from work, and spends the day in and out of the dirty porta-john smoking marijuana. The poem also looks at ideas presented by popular culture of the working man, either as the ultimate good guy or the rebel who is living the American image of anti-hero. Bobby expresses this best in the stanza, "I stare at the feature that portrays me as a hero, or maybe an anti-hero because I sweat for a living, but the truth," (67). This stanza suggests that there is an image of the working man out there, but it is false. The truth, at least in Bobby's eyes, is a life that is filled with beer, and dope, and dirty porta-johns.

Life experience does not only exist in the working world or the somewhat negative world of alcohol abusers and poverty stricken farm hands. The framework that is life experience also drives the idea that encountering a person or situation is

fodder for creating poetry. Several poems in this collection include meditations on people that I have encountered in my life and know truly little more about them than what is included in the poem. The best example of this is the poem, “Blue eyes, the teacher, and Robert Frost.” This poem, written during a Writer's Craft class lecture, is about a fellow student in the next row. From the observation point one row over and two seats back, there were only some basic things that were learned about this girl. One, that she was a teacher. She was forever working over her lesson plan, or grading homework before and during class. Second, she liked Robert Frost. As part of the memorization exercise that was assigned, she chose “The Road Not Taken,” which was the same poem I selected for the exercise, and the one thing that created the momentary connection that led to the poem. The third observation was that she had incredibly blue eyes. This final observation led to the poem's title, and to a poem that is about those blue eyes:

Would that I could be your husband,  
lucky bastard,  
or your sunglasses,  
bought at Wal-Mart for \$4.99, plus tax,  
or the rear-view mirror in the  
used ash-gray Chevy Malibu.

You know, the one with the exhaust leak  
that Monroe Muffler cannot ever seem to find.  
No matter.  
For me  
it is the eyes. (35).

This defining stanza begins with the line, “would that I could be your husband,” and appears to be stating the desire for love, but as the stanza continues, one notes that the speaker wants to be either the husband, or the pair of sunglasses, or the rear view mirror of the old Malibu. These three seemingly divergent images are all designed to show things that come in contact with these blue eyes. The fascination is not with the girl, it is with the eyes of the girl, “For me // it is the eyes” (35). The lines from Frost’s great poem are woven throughout the work first to symbolize the only real connection between the girl and me. Second, the Frost lines are included based on the popular understanding of the poem as an inspirational call to go in an independent direction. The decision to focus on the eyes, foregoing any desire to get to know the girl, created an image that will live on unsullied as it might be by real life. With this in mind the only real way to end the poem was to echo the ending of Frost’s poem, “And that has made all the difference.” (36).

Another element of my life experience is the importance of faith. Belief in God and Jesus Christ has been a cornerstone of a life that has seen its ups and downs. A lifetime of faith, however, has led to the belief that the most interesting facet of that whole story is the humanity of Jesus. That Jesus was a walking; talking human being, subject to the same wants and needs as the rest of us are a key focus in my writing about Him. This thought combined with my interest in that finite moment in time that deserves observation, has led to two poems in the collection, “The Next Morning,” and “Sunrise.”

These two poems take two hugely iconic events, the birth and death of Jesus, and find a small moment that must have happened given the human nature of the events. “The Next Morning” works with the birth story and looks at the inevitable morning after, “As the breaking sun erodes the telling star,” (58). With the lines,

In the distance the fading bleat of the herd is the only reminder  
of a visit by the shepherds  
and the little boy with the drum still sleeping on the other side of town  
unable to remember  
what the angels look like. Maybe it was a dream. Passing  
the gates of the city, a man looks out over the flock unseeing. His mind still  
in the events of the night

before he works with fervor to comprehend while never losing track  
of the lamb. (58)

The image that is evoked is one where the night has passed, the Angels have gone,  
and speculation begins as to what really happened. The shepherd's are moving away  
from the city to rejoin their flocks. While all are trying to grasp what happened, they  
all are moving inevitably forward into the next day.

As the poem ends, it is understood that the next day is no different than any  
other. The image is of a new father in a very normal act has been out seeking to  
provide for his family,

The barking of a dog announces the return of the father stepping  
around bales of fresh straw,  
and a half bag of barley to reach the feeding trough commandeered,  
and filled with swaddling.

From his travels he brings a loaf still warm from the oven  
and news  
of the census, of a large caravan from the east that appears to be  
headed in their direction. (58).

In keeping with this theme but on the other end of the spectrum is the poem, “Sunrise.” Once again attempting to capture a moment that must have existed, this poem looks at the first Easter morning. In this poem, Mary, the mother of Jesus, knowing that she is going to have to tend to his body in a few hours, is restless. Unable to sleep she remembers, “The events / of the last week force weariness / from her mind. She cannot forget” (73). All the events are remembered both good and bad; the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Arrest, the Trial, and most vividly the Crucifixion. One only need to have experienced the death of a loved one to understand the angst of Mary as she waits to go to Jesus' tomb, “her shadow / falls over jars of spice / neatly placed on the white / linen the night before” (74).

This attempt to capture that inevitable but unwritten moment in time is carried through into other poems in the collection. Another notable example is found in the poem, “A Single Sheet of Paper.” In this piece, the poet attempts to imagine the moments in time from which the great American poet, Elizabeth Bishop, created the poem, “At the Fishhouses.” Working in direct conversation with “EB,” the attempt is not to engage the poem itself, but rather to create a connection between two American poets. Bishop creates great images of the docks, such as the scene that surrounds the fish houses where she encounters an old acquaintance with which she has a

conversation, “The old man accepts a Lucky Strike. He was a friend of my grandfather” (Conarroe 40).

There is no attempt to suggest that the poem “A Single Sheet of Paper,” is in any way the account of what really transpired. As a writer, it is easy to imagine the events that would lead up to the images that are included. One can imagine Bishop stopping at the docks to buy some fresh fish and running into the old man. One can imagine the poet’s eye capturing the images, such as fish scales covering everything “with creamy iridescent coats of mail” (40), and storing them away for another day all the while ruminating on the next piece. One can easily make the leap that with the imagery created by the inclusion of the line “I used to sing him Baptist hymns” (41), it is quite possible that she is looking out over a rural scene of “dignified tall firs” (42). This might be on a Sunday afternoon, having returned from church, and having just finished a lunch of fish, perhaps leftover from the trip to the dock the day before, grabbing a sheet of paper and beginning to write what ultimately winds up as the poem, “At the Fishhouses.”

Great poetry is also created to engage in the conversation that continues between poets writing today and those of the past. “A Single Sheet of Paper” is just one example of this. Another example is the poet's attempt to connect with other great American poets, most notably with the dean of American poets, Walt Whitman.

It is important to recognize that it is impossible to consider one-self an American poet without acknowledging the influence of Walt Whitman.

It is the workingman's America as created by Whitman that is reflected in the collection, *Man Hours*. The connection should be seen as more of a kinship with Whitman than an attempt to imitate. Whitman's images of America and the working man are the ones with which the collection most relates. But these images are brought as much from life experience as from Whitman's work. This suggests a kinship of American experience. Though written generations apart, it is easy to make the case that the America of Whitman's time shares as many similarities with modern America as it does differences. The Whitman poem that best displays this idea is "I Hear America Singing." Written during a time of war and assassination, Whitman creates a poem celebrating the good that is in America. Several poems in *Man Hours* attempt to express a similar patriotic theme. One example is in the poem, "Beyond the Blindness of Memphis," Lines like "cloaked in the mighty sales pitch of the great declaration" (Gardner 45), and "...self-evident child of Monticello" (45), seek to establish the idea that this poem and its ideals are rooted in the American tradition. The best that is America is also replicated in the last lines, "Allow the voice of a million marching men to ring, / and rise above my humble words, / with liberty and justice, *Someday*, for all" (46).

Whitman's poem "I hear America singing," also pays homage to the working man. The American songs that he hears are the sounds of America at work, "each one singing his as it should be blithe / and strong" (Whitman 11). Working with the same idea, many of the poems draw from the poet's pre-college career, and examine the working man at the turn of the twenty-first century. The poem "Man Hours" is an examination of the working man, and when placed in the context of the Whitman poem, can be seen as a celebration of the modern working man.

Robert Frost is the American poet that has had the most influence to *Man Hours*. Directly referenced in the poem "Blue Eyes, the Teacher and Robert Frost," his influence is much deeper. Inspired by the 'be your own person' message of the great Frost poem "The Road Not Taken," to pursue poetry as a vocation, it wasn't until that pursuit that I learned the full nature of that poem. Frost's influence grew. Frost originally wrote that poem as a joke commenting on a friend that literally could not decide which path to take when they were on their daily walk. The further away from the intentions of the writer the piece got, the more the poem took on a life of its own.

It is only through the participation of an active and intelligent readership that this transformation could take place. While the intentions of the poet are important and the poem itself is interesting, it is clearly a part of Frost's poetic project. Only

with distance, and a reader bringing his or her own experience to the poem, can this transformation occur. As scholars we can interpret this poem in both ways, but someone reading poetry for pleasure might not know the writer's intentions, and therefore infuse their own. This is the mark of a great poem, and the level of achievement to which every poet should aspire. One should be willing to reveal ones' intentions, but should not expect a poem to work only with the intentions known. In fact the poet should celebrate that the reader has read their work, and found some meaning that connects them to the poem bringing pleasure.

All of the poems in *Man Hours* were written with specific intention. Love, friendship, death, the act of writing, and social justice are all themes that have provided inspiration. Some of these works, when read by others without knowledge of the writer's intentions, have seen the poems in different ways. Ways that have enlightened the author, and caused him to look at his own work in different ways. The poem "Marigold Lane Four Years Later" is one of those poems whose interpretation by the reader's experience was different than intended. The poem describes the scene in which we laid my mother to rest weeks after the funeral. The images that fill the poem are central to that idea. There is a Civil War Colonel buried nearby, and the man who was the original Macy's parade Santa is in the next row. All are laid to rest on Marigold Lane. The ceremony that surrounds a funeral was gone

and all that was left was the family, the funeral director, workers from the cemetery, and my mother's cremated remains in a plastic container. It was a rainy day, and while sad for us, just another day of work for the funeral director and the cemetery worker who graciously gave us space and time to say goodbye.

What this poem has become is one that is about death, and saying goodbye. When read in a workshop, I was pleased to find that that universal theme prevailed. What was surprising however, that some read the poem as a goodbye to a favorite pet. It was disturbing at first to see a loved one's burial interpreted as a pet funeral, but in retrospect, I can see that as the poem's success. The poem is about death, and about saying goodbye. The reality of that interpretation was that the poem was interesting enough, and the general theme was well enough displayed that the reader worked within their own experience to place the images. In this case, the youthful reader's only connection with the idea of death and burial had to do with a pet.

Another poem that was less successful in this way is the poem "*For M.*" Readers of this poem saw the images as trying to create a western image. In some cases the references to alcoholism were completely overlooked in an attempt to make sense of these images. Perhaps this is a poem that speaks to a more specific audience, and the final editing decision before including this poem in the collection was to let it stand as is. It is the hope of the author that for those who see their struggle in these

images, it will bring some comfort. *M.* has stated that she has read it several times, and found comfort.

Contemporary poets also add to the construction of this collection. Poets such as Campbell McGrath, Natasha Trethewey, and Cleopatra Mathis show that working poets are writing, and creating work that reveals the intentions of the author, but also stand on their own subject to the pleasures of, and interpretations of the reader. Perhaps the best of this group is McGrath. McGrath uses timeless poetic devices such as form, and intentional word choice as the foundation of his writing, and then writes about popular culture. In this way he has created poetry that is interesting to the intellectual, as well as pleasing to the casual reader. He has created poems that all aspiring writers should read, and advances the idea of poetry into the twenty-first century. The poem, "Runnin' down the Road," is an attempt to tap into this aesthetic, and create a poem that has a specific form, and in the way that McGrath's "Hits of the '70s," and "The Girl with the Blue Plastic Radio," tap into popular culture nostalgia, resonates with the reader. There is timelessness to such poetry that allows us all to not only relate to the poem, but to the idea of poetry throughout the ages.

After all of these elements are added to the structure of a poem, the one thing that ties them all together is the collection. Like the roof of a house, a well chosen selection of poems can create a collection in which the poems themselves interact

with each other. In this way the collection itself becomes a book length poem that covers the foundation, and the walls, and protects them from destructive elements. One of the poetic devices that I have most admired is a writer's use of references to other writers, or literature. In effect this creates a conversation between writers, and sometimes between time spans that allows for a constant conversation of poets. I learned early on, however, that while I like that idea of referencing other poets, and literary works, to do so just for the sake of this conversation is false to me. It was like doing this, was in fact only working with another poetic device, and not trying to engage in the conversation of poets. The decision was made early on to use those references only when they were honest, and to not be afraid to use references to my own work even though the references appear obscure. The result is that the conversation is as much with me as with other writers. Working in this way gets to know the poet, and reconciles him with the carpenter. It is only after this reconciliation that poems such as "A Single Sheet of Paper" have been able to evolve, and the poet/carpenter feels comfortable talking directly to a great American poet like Elizabeth Bishop, "I wonder if you ever/ felt the same way" (Gardner 86).

Years of experience working as a carpenter followed by years learning the craft of poetry have taught me that building a poem is not unlike creating the parts to a structure, and that when properly put together, these parts become like the building,

a whole. By combining life experience and working with the newly acquired tools in the tool box, from a carpenter has come a poet who understands that the attention to craft applies equally and in the same manner to both pursuits. The result of this is the collection *Man Hours*. With *Man Hours* I strive to take my place in the academy of American poets. In direct conversation with himself and with other great American writers and themes, this collection becomes the 'greater poem' and contributes to the American poetic voice.

## The Poet Fights the Wars That Can't Be Won

Write all wrongs, denounce the world's decay.

Searching for solutions to our plight.

Sing the songs and join us in the fray.

The time is here; the change is well in sight.

The Poet fights the wars that can't be won,  
waving at the windmills of the day.

Primed to paint the power of the sun,

Sonnets of spring spirit songs display.

The power of the pen can change the world,  
songs of substance overpower the gun.

Virginia Tech, your message is unfurled.

Tolerance the key to battles won.

Neil Young still cries about the damage done.

The Poet fights the wars that can't be won.

*For M.*

Have you seen Bill?

*Bill W.?*

Yeah, have you seen him?

*Last time I saw him he was on the wagon.*

Yeah, I was with him.

*Holding the reins.*

I fell off.

*It is hard to hold on.*

The side walls are slippery.

The worn gray oak seats  
are hard and splintered.

It hurts to sit.

*There are no restraints.*

I am always chasing that wagon...

*I think it's over there.*

I hate that damn wagon.

I want to drown it in light golden salvation.

*The grape? The grain?*

I want to scratch the sulfuric head  
of the kitchen match  
on its rough iron  
wheels and set the flaming stick  
to splintered benches.

I want to laugh as I imbibe  
standing twelve short steps away.  
Rejoice as years of faith and struggle  
light the sky and crackle with the heat of my passion.

*The grape*

And sing to embers that mock  
and glow.  
Devil's eye winking.

You say

You've seen it?

*Yeah, it's over there.*

And you say Bill is there too?

If It Is Five ●'clock Here, It Must Be Tuesday in California

And to the old black lady walking  
by your kitchen window,  
Tuesday is the day

she grabs the Regional Transit  
to the Safeway for bread and milk,  
and every other week a dozen medium brown eggs.

After which she walks over to her sister's  
where she will sit in the backyard around  
a small glass topped table,

play blackjack and sip Seagram's  
gin with a little tonic from unpretentious plastic cups  
while baking Tollhouse cookies for the Victory

Baptist Church until suppertime when the Pastor's  
wife will pick them both up in her new Sedan  
DeVille and they will all go to choir practice.

But today the window is closed, the curtains  
drawn, because you are here, and it is five

o'clock. We are in this New York back yard seated

around the small green plastic table in the shade

of the giant elm sipping gin

in glass tumblers, filled with tonic, nibbling

Tollhouse cookies and watching as an old black

woman carrying a white cloth shopping bag walks

up the street from the bus stop.

Papa

*“That's All We Do, Isn't It--Look At Things and Try New Drinks”*

The hills grazed on the horizon  
like white elephants that ferried Hannibal  
across the desert. Madrid-bound  
in an age when worth was  
nothing more than  
the body that worked  
with the books until the sun  
went down on three more jobs  
working to avoid the Department  
of Social Services. Waiting to be denied.

Frustrated, the man called Papa  
wound up at the Ebro station  
working to inebriate his poetry  
and invite white lightning  
elephants to return to dust  
where they dropped off his child.  
In the shadow of the white elephants  
the General dines on ivory plates  
while Jig and the American wait for the train.

Blue Eyes, the Teacher, and Robert Frost

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood*

I see you sitting at your desk, prepared.

Two rows over, one desk up,  
you sit and plan and listen and learn.

Always prepared.

What do you think

of Robert Frost?

*I took the one less traveled by*

Would that I could be your husband,

lucky bastard,

or your sunglasses,

bought at Wal-Mart for \$4.99, plus tax,

or the rear-view mirror in the

used ash-gray Chevy Malibu.

You know, the one with the exhaust leak

that Monroe Muffler cannot ever seem to find.

No matter.

For me

it is the eyes.

Blue eyes;  
Eyes so brilliant and so  
blue  
that the sky clouds as you pass.

In the bottomless crystal aquamarine of the Caribbean,  
Stingrays weep.  
Robins push the broken pieces of hatched eggs out from the nest,  
Revolted.

Blue eyes; blue,  
so blue that Angels rejoice,  
artists lay down brush and canvas  
in homage  
to a color they cannot replicate.

*And that has made all the difference*

Activity Jones and the Brown Dirt Diary

Like a foraging flock of inland seagulls  
descending on the man-waste smorgasbord  
of the modern macadam parking lot,  
Activity Jones plunges into the Wal-Mart world

-spend circus. Scrambling with the others to avoid  
being overrun by natural selection, and the end  
of the oil era, she passes into the post-modern  
neo-cathedral dedicated to mass consumption.

Frayed in farm-soiled sweatpants clipped  
at the muck packed knees, and her favorite  
denim jacket with the sleeves rolled up,  
embroidered Alf on the back,

Activity Jones flip-flops down each Wonder  
filled aisle, gazing  
at the Taco Bell frozen dinners and Swanson's  
cans of homemade beef stew,

imaged with the idea that if there were more  
than one dollar and forty-seven cents  
in the left front pocket,

she would not be hungry.

Stalled among the ultra-absorbent  
rolls of Brawny and lemon-scented  
oil based cleaning products,  
Activity Jones settles to the floor,

and from the blue jean pocket  
draws the brown dirt diary.

“All day long”, she writes, “I work the fruited plains; at night I soar  
into the starred and clouded sky and with José  
Cuervo’s aid, seek out the purple mountains promise.

God shed his grace on me.”

## The Full Measure

Scarred,  
a dark green canoe launches  
from the pine-lined northwest  
bank of the Oak Orchard River. As the tiny  
craft streams under the open bridge, the Travelers  
scull into another world. Slowly  
paddling, the sky turns bleak, as threads  
of lightning caress the clouds.

The tallest oak is struck.

As the mighty tree tumbles to the ground  
flames fill the sky and press to the water's  
edge. The air lingers as the gray smoke  
blends with the starless sky and fiery  
embers burn into the steaming bark.  
Red sparks shimmer crosshatched backs  
of the martyred, shackled to the branches.  
The bank overflows  
with screams as leather strips burn  
nine tails into flesh, and passions ring out charring  
the memories of the noose  
into the branches. The fire burns.

The black man yearns. The coiled cord earns.  
Struggling to return to the bridge, the Travelers  
fumble through the smoke  
and in the darkness, the wounded  
green canoe pulses from its mud brown prison.  
Paddle to water, the Travelers seek to atone.  
With a loud crack the answer splinters  
hickory and the blade  
flows towards an empty copper sea.

Let Us Not Wallow In the Valley Of Despair  
*Elegy for a friend*

Awash in the afterglow as wave after wave collapses over the silent beach,  
in slumber a pale yellow orchid floats to the sun.

Free the prisoner from the ethereal tomb.  
Shivering on the moss covered beach, we awaken

the wrinkles of meteoric experience, and gray  
the white fluff that covers

like the snows covering the volcanic  
peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro.

Our 21<sup>st</sup> century Mc-mansion reality  
means absolutely nil to the Great Preacher

who reaps what we sow, and then returns us to dust.  
We buy, we sell, we teach, we learn,

we grope in the darkness to find  
the truth that mankind does indeed have the power

to make my childrens life better.

As the tiny plane ascends the snowy summit

we see that the Greatest Generation

has done nothing but pay lip service to human progress,

heeding only the ancestral need to exploit.

And the hopes and dreams born on Yasgur's farm are now aches  
and pains in the joints of a society that just can't help itself.

Martin was right- did we really think that we could stop  
violence with violence?

Carry this with you, and we will bury this with you,  
as we realize that final goodbyes

are still fading like the orchids into Lake Ontario sunsets long after  
the silvered head is lowered into the resting position,

the white silk is gently tucked under the hands,  
and the polished pine lid is closed.

## Beer is Only Rented

It resolves the biggest fear of an empty page evening  
to fight the foul stench of the blank white peace  
of poetry bound paper. Worked over  
with the black pen, maybe blue.  
Foul with the naked words of old masters

and shrouded in the new wave expressions of master-bound wannabes,  
stinking with the strains of country music retro rhymes.  
rank with post primary promises of another New Deal.  
Break with me. Run with me into the wall, going in one end  
and out the other. Beer is only rented.

Run to the instant gratification of the porcelain vessel  
mounted on the sharpie stained waste wall.  
Future flame quenched by a middle-aged  
bimbo. No pain, no pain.  
But the foul stench remains. And the sheet recklessly unfulfilled.

Do hops open the middling mind to higher opera?  
Or dim the phantasm lights of captured creativity?

## A Million Feet

In my dream I am on the porch.  
Wood worn Oak Orchard monument to a century  
of facing the great lake  
seated in one of two creaking rocking chairs of reed and pine.  
Reed and pine and flecks of green,  
green with the years of trial and love,  
green with the fruits of industry.  
Green with the power of unity.  
Green with the incomparable delight of two.  
Green with the safety of the world's redemption  
    found on the shores of Lake Ontario.  
Green with the presence-comfort of a lifetime together.  
Sit you one, those two green chairs, and dressed.  
Looking as to the beauty of a woman loved.  
Dressed as you feel in floor length cotton  
and topped by Harry's Bait Shop brown.  
So seated, we rock.  
Hand in hand as the sun paints the evening's close  
for us.  
But dreams are dreams and green is green  
and Harry's is long gone.  
Reed is reed  
and pine is pine,

and all are a million feet away.

Beyond the Blindness of Memphis

*We hold these truths to be self-evident. -Thomas Jefferson*

Dear God, Hear

my prayer. For man, for all man,  
 for me, hiding in the worn walnut pews  
 cloaked in the mighty sales pitch of the great Declaration  
 sheltered from the albino aftermath,  
 knee-bound before You. ***We shall overcome.***  
 Grant this humble servant, this White  
 soiled son of the Garden, self-evident child of Monticello,  
 the unalienable power  
 to pursue peace. Honest, shackle-free, peace of the  
 everyman soul. ***We shall overcome***  
 Provide me, pro-  
 testant believer,  
 piqued in the pursuit of happiness.  
 the fullness of the phrase

One nation under god.

Indivisible. ***We shall overcome,***

When the children of the Edmund Pettus Bridge,  
 with bewildered tears,  
 and weary, heard it all before voices  
 ask why,

open my ears, open my eyes. *Someday*  
Beyond, far beyond, the Amistad and the auction block,  
beyond the blindness of Memphis and the back of the bus, beyond  
my White Anglo-Saxon Protestant existence. *Oh, deep in my heart*  
Beyond the pleasures of Plenty, that American Wonderbread McDream.  
Holier-than-thou, he stands face to face with Wants' dusky shadow,  
and shrugs his broad shoulders. *I still believe*

Deep in Memphis, bursting with a dream,  
burdened with the heaviness of history, *we shall overcome,*

Allow the voice of a million marching men to ring,  
and rise above my humble words,  
with liberty and justice, *Someday*, for all.

Amen

Briar Markings of the Empty Sage  
*Foretelling this empty vessel.*

Undetectable lies the occasion  
to once more grant voice.

Who falters with a twisted touch  
that stumbles over the 'k' and the 'd'  
aching to play in Peoria.

Who thinks this whole idea  
is excremental hogwash  
and wants to see it gone. Three  
years into new peerage, they say,  
"you're nothing like my father"  
I take it as a compliment.

Here's the deal. I am not like her  
father, or your father. Or my father.  
Seated in the big green La-Z-Boy  
waiting his turn.

I turn my faulty digits towards mankind,  
fretful about the paycheck, and the ashes  
of the 401k burnt to the ground.

The reality is that my scarred  
fingers are drawn to the type.  
Juried before the black gowns,  
peddling the k's  
and the d's one by one, my time  
in front of this old machine is gold.

Still, I would like to earn my due.  
I too, don't want to cost  
while I spit in the face of all  
that I have known.

## Reckoning on the Snow

Like the Indian summer warmth that ascends  
from the depths of frost covered October mornings  
Activity Jones rises from the queen size Sleep  
City mattress. Shivering towards the rented  
kitchen at the other end of the Salvation  
Army arranged sharecropper's existence,  
she fills her Hello Kitty coffee mug bought  
at the Presbyterian rummage sale  
last august. One half Maxwell House,  
three scoops of pure Cane; top it off with Cuervo.  
Bored, she stares out the window tasting the first drop

of the new day. Flip flops shuffle towards the unlatched door.  
José rumbles in the back end love room. Past the empty  
cans of Busch on the laminate living room table,  
Activity Jones migrates across the farm soiled shag  
opening the door to the unnamed  
expectation end of another season. Anxious,  
she inhales the spiritual wonder of a flurry covered morning.

Silent as the first Eden. Soft as the fresh fall air;  
she watches and knows that this is a day of leaving.  
Sensing Jose's arousal, she reaches into her housecoat pocket,

and retrieves the brown dirt diary.

“As I stare upon this snow-covered harvest done  
horizon,” she writes, “I can imagine life  
in peace; with only one question:

What if this is heaven,

And I’ve been too drunk

to tell?”

## Insomnia

Like a Rockwell blanket of snow,  
Still lies outside  
my silent window

and slumbers without me  
and shuts dreams of untold verse  
or being dragged one leg at a time into the abyss.

I watch as the still green sugar maple  
confines my view, shakes from north  
to south like a metronome lulling me back

to the comforts of my mattress. I hear tick,  
tick, coursing through the radiator  
in the far corner. Warming.

My mind wanders to the new Craftsman  
hammer bought when bending nails  
was my trade, and how it would tick

the same way when hanging  
from its metal holster always  
at my side, and how it would ping

when the sixteen's were struck just right,  
effortless. Entering the pine.  
And how it only took four hours of

rainy afternoon to reduce  
the dull shine to the same dark  
gray that filled the sky.

As it lies dormant  
in the basement, I stare out this window,  
wondering where those days went.

My mind turns to the man walking down  
the street towards the railroad tracks.

Marigold Lane Four Years Later  
*For Joan*

Among the autumn-leaved limbs  
of the oaks and the antique pilings

of the elms unspeaking, marble  
sentinels rest as season changing

rain colors the stone marker one dime  
at a time. The light face goes dark.

Granite displayed memoirs  
populate this silent subdivision. More

and more his past is  
planted in this tract.

The sun was shining that day,  
the soggy air blossomed with fall's

ending, wet grass and fresh dirt  
that was neatly cut from the ground,

and hidden behind the big black stone  
of her new neighbor, a century in

this same spot. Joined by the Colonel,  
and an earthly Santa's remains.

On unsteady knees, he lowered the black  
plastic box into the spade-hewn hole,

wondering with one last farewell,  
if it was made by Tupperware.

She would have liked that. Around that hole,  
filled with goodbye, he prayed.

with his children, he prayed, as a worn  
out man in a brown Carhart jacket

leaned on his spade  
and gossiped with the undertaker.

So Long Luke Jackson

Somewhere over the rainbow  
the balloon pilot still stands behind  
the curtain, and with a wizard's will  
searches for a way to be God,  
while the rusty tin man is drawn  
by the ruby slipper adventure  
across the yellow bricks  
by the horse of another color.  
Evil is still defeated by a bucket of water.

Andy and Barney still sit on the front porch  
eating Aunt Bea's apple pie,  
while Otis sleeps off his sin;  
the keys to revival still hang  
within arm's reach.

While Luke is waiting for an answer  
from the Old Man.

Waiting,  
waiting beyond the yellow bricks,  
waiting outside the Emerald City, past Mayberry  
to the fine. Civic Retribution for the illicit  
act of not dropping the metered quarter.

Working to absorb pipe wrenched revolution.

Absorb the worth of one man's drunken

attempt to behead society

one parking meter at a time.

Absorb the unanticipated burden of Carlin's

seven deadly words.

This is Americana.

## Still It Falls

Fresh washed summer drizzles off the window sash,  
gathering in the downspout,  
gathering with the gray squirrels  
braced for the stampede  
to the curbs of Clinton Street  
each drop migrating back to the great lake.

Mother of Existence, do not weep for me.  
God Our Fathers, no tears,  
for on this morning I gather no moss.  
Weeping for an earth given by God  
to the unrepentant, dead set against  
the color green.

Washed as we are, baptized by summer rain,  
tempered by an August morning that shimmers  
with a sliver of orange cracking the night sky's hold  
and grows out of the waters of the mighty Ontario.

Waiting once again to feed the brook  
that gives rise to peaches and tomatoes  
and sweet corn, and small rivers  
that surge past my window.

## The Next Morning

As the breaking sun erodes the telling star  
in the eastern sky, the soft cry of a newborn baby is heard.  
Nestled into the silent murmur of mother's prayers he wakes  
to a world that doesn't know it has been changed.

In the back of the room a single brown and white cow lows,  
  
patient as the innkeeper eases her discomfort  
into milk.

In the distance the fading bleat of the herd is the only reminder  
of a visit by the shepherds

and the little boy with the drum still sleeping on the other side of town  
unable to remember

what the angels look like. Maybe it was a dream. Passing

the gates of the city, a man looks out over the flock unseeing. His mind still  
on the events of the night

before he works with fervor to comprehend while never losing track  
of the lamb.

The barking of a dog announces the return of the father stepping around  
bales of fresh straw,

and a half bag of barley to reach the feeding trough commandeered,  
and filled with swaddling.

From his travels he brings a loaf still warm from the oven  
and news

of the census, of a large caravan from the east that appears  
to be headed in their direction.

The Wind Blows Wherever It Pleases

*-To John M.*

We used to sit  
at the scarred wooden table in the shadow  
of the greenhouses, in broken webbed  
chairs pitching quarters into shot glasses  
drinking cheap beer and smoking cheap  
cigars embracing that doubtful year  
bordered by adolescence and independence,  
resolved to witness for ourselves America's  
backyards and working dives.

We were going to beat that old van around the country  
until we ran out of money and then work  
the greasy spoons washing dishes, or flipping burgers  
until we had earned a full tank of gas and bag  
of bologna sandwiches. Our days spent ruminating  
under the Arch, or scaling Muir's mountains.

Evenings spent drinking cheap beer  
and smoking cheap cigars.  
Talk would be about watching  
the Christmas sun rise over the nude  
beach in Key West, or how it felt to stick

our fingers in the bullet holes  
in the great wooden doors of the Alamo.  
And the year would come and go  
and the jobs would come and go  
and Maine and California,  
and cheap beer evenings would come and go.  
And the scarred wooden doubt would remain  
in our rear view mirror.

## The Countless Minor Scenes

*That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain  
-A. Lincoln*

So the story is one of two men, serving together in World War II, which is not say that these men were great buddies during their time of service, but rather to suggest that they were serving in the same part of England at the same time, performing similar duties. Although neither can say for sure, it is not unreasonable to believe that they met on the boat, on the way home from that epic struggle, as it is true of The Sailor, that he is a gregarious type that would have actively sought out those weary travelers that were conquering ship bound time with playing cards and bottles of beer.

A friendship of common experience would have been embraced and in that spirit it would have become knowledge that home for each was Western New York. As the trip ended they might have said 'let's keep in touch,' and went their separate ways. On July 4<sup>th</sup> 1945 these men would have met again as The Sailor was planning to marry the Nurse Of His Dreams and in need of groomsmen.

The Other would have traveled from the Chautauqua hills  
to help his ship mate friend.

Fast forward to 2006 to, of all places, a Denny's. Resting  
on the side of Route 60. On the outskirts of the Other's  
hometown and these two men once again were met. Six decades  
had passed and Both had been leathered by the joys  
and sorrows of a lifetime. Talking as they did, enshrouded  
by the fog of memories-most-forgot, or passed over for better.

All-encompassed in a different lifetime. We were but stick-figure  
diner-seat witnesses to experience shared  
only by The Sailor, and the Other.

Through their eyes we that shared the pleasure, and seated  
at this table were treated to both points of view,  
and shown gun turrets, runways and barracks,  
an airplane crash, a long cruise back to the states.  
Through their eyes we were invited back  
to a warm summer day in Somerset.

Fast forward yet again to today, and I, a young  
man, standing in front of you. There are no such memories  
buried deep in my forgotten lifetimes, and the experiences foretold  
can only be known from the second hand. But The Sailor  
sits today in his usual Sunday morning seat.

I thank God everyday for this cross-Atlantic encounter and for Denny's.  
Filled with the knowledge that this encounter  
is not the exception to the rule,  
but rather could be seen as the rule,  
and can be told by similar men, from the first battle,  
to those seated before me this morning, I thank God for them also.  
So here it is, on this day when it is the entire nation's  
privilege to offer prayer-  
for those who will never leave the fight for liberty,  
or the farms of Pennsylvania, for those who will never leave  
mud filled European trenches, or the big beach, for those who will never  
leave the humidity of Asian jungles or the arid desert sands, for those  
who did not make it to that boat,  
I can stand here unashamedly grateful.

Meditations on a Bottle of Merlot

Rudy said that he has to go to work tonight.

Rudy said that his mother is the purple dragon queen.

Rudy said that if I give him a dollar he will give me a peek.

Rudy said that the guy

outside my window

is selling crack.

Rudy says the cops know.

Rudy says the milkshake is supposed to be green.

Rudy says that Dancing Derrick is messed up in the head.

Rudy says he was named after the two Nazi

soldiers that arrested his parents.

Rudy says he was at Birkenau the day before

the allied soldiers arrived and watched as the purple dragon

queen walked into the crowded chamber.

Rudy says that it was nicer than my second floor apartment.

Rudy says that he will be President one day, and that he will  
make Dancing Derrick his running mate.

Rudy says that red bicycles go faster than blue.

Rudy says Poland still cries.

## Five Dollar Deity

Descending from the clattering  
school bus, Activity Jones stares  
out at the furrowed field as the mud soaked  
road side shoulder claims the virginity of the new  
yellow boots bought at the Dollar General  
for \$8.99. Like a well worn saddle  
the Alf coat sits on her back and grudgingly accepts each drop

falling from the gray April heaven. At her feet, the wicker  
bushel brims with the pale green infantile beginnings  
of next summer's roadside produce section. Slowly  
as worn vertebrae are stretched to the break, she moves  
one planted seedling at a time,  
sowing towards the end of the day.

As the noontime rain busting skylight  
breaks through the morning cloud, she sits  
on the bright orange water-filled igloo. Eating her lunch, she  
finds the brown dirt diary. Washing  
down the still cold Chef Boy-R-Dee with a swig from the flask, she writes--

"God is not in heaven, she  
works for five dollars

a bushel.”

Man Hours

*For Bobby*

From my dusty brow a single drop cuts a path of clarity into the bifocalled lenses  
covered with the grime of the day's labor.

Stain-dyed t-shirt sweat-stuck to the back broken by time behind the rake, and yellow  
rubber boots covered in concrete

slowing my progression as I draw the grade and the cement floor newly laid turns to  
gray. It's Friday.

Lunchtime means a cold draft beer and the aging lingerie model behind the bar,  
finding time the ultimate trowel.

The dust finally settles on the K and K, my pay dissolves into a six pack,

a smoking Garcia

and a Slice.

I drive

Drive to the open field where life is projected onto the outdoor screen and cars parked  
as if seated in the Rialto.

Sequestered in my private viewing booth, surrounded by the bottle and the bag,  
through the haze

I stare at the feature that portrays me as a hero, or maybe an anti-hero because I sweat  
for a living, but the truth

is that the new day begins

with the ham sandwich left at home,  
with the cooler filled with Budweiser,  
with the One-Hit Wonder emptied one  
puff at a time in the porta-john  
that hasn't been cleaned since the job started.

## Forgone Pines

*To Liz, Sarah, and Matt*

Like Orion retracing  
the missteps of the nocturnal sky  
I stumble through the shadows  
as the uncertain seethes  
into the stillness of my sleep.

As the black shadows turn to gray  
and the pinks of dawn arrive, I consult  
with the Great Preacher seeking  
the conciliatory pardon that my sins  
will not be passed to the three.

Blessed are the three that as before me lie  
new growth pine, seeking  
Orion's footprints. Suffering the cold  
of winter, the winds of spring, the heat  
of summer, only to hold their green  
when the rest of the world drops its leaves.

Tomorrow is the fertile ground  
into which the saplings are planted  
amongst a thicket that arises and seats

itself in the audience. As Orion once again  
takes his leave from the nightly  
stage, yet again  
I ask for life  
giving rain to the saplings.

## The Sixth Evening

Like the sea-worn figurehead of a harbored frigate catching a smoke  
between voyages

Activity Jones leans against the burgundy paint-chipped door post  
of the Olde Coach Inn.

Half spent cigarette in one hand and Sunrise in the other,  
she talks

with old blind Charlie whose last image of Omaha Beach  
resonates

still turns his head to gaze as shadowy night-lit Harleys  
rumble past

only to be stopped by the glowing red light suspended  
in the intersection.

As she pulls the last drag from the cheap reservation  
cigarette

the red smolder agrees with the hanging light and the tail-lights  
of the rumbling Hogs.

Bathed in the streetlight's fluorescent glow she waves  
as the black helmets

turn back to the task at hand. Grabbing Charlie

by the arm she steals back into the stained  
air of the bar

and bar stools defended by the Alf coat, a cell phone, a pack of Seneca's

and a pile of cash  
harvested from the automatic teller across the street with the EBT  
card that came  
in the mail that morning. Ordering one more Sunrise, she reaches  
for the brown dirt diary.  
As the young bartender with bad teeth and a Celtic cross  
tattooed  
on her left breast sets a new glass, she adds another swizzle  
to the overflowing pile  
and writes,  
“as the seventh Sunrise is drained...the day of rest arises.”

Sunrise

On her bed she stares

at the ceiling, the quiet  
of the night unforgiving.

Her left hand resting on her heart the silent room

is filled. Thump-ump,  
thump-ump, thump-ump.

The events

of the last week force weariness  
from her mind. She cannot forget. The cheering

crowds, the palms.

In the darkness a sad smile.

Surrendering

to sleeplessness she rises, cup

in hand, stands

in the doorway. Grieving as dark give way

to gray, and morning states its case.

In the dusk she remembers, night

in the garden, crack of the whip,

resonant ring of the hammer as nails

were driven through flesh. She remembers

the screams. His voice

“take my mother home,”

and once again the tears flow. Her son

arrested...condemned...destroyed.  
She stares into the cup  
as two small tears drop  
to the dusty threshold remembers  
that it was from the upper  
room. Was it the one  
he used? They all look the same  
stacked in the corner. She turns  
as a new day burns in  
to the room, her shadow  
falls over jars of spice  
neatly placed on the white  
linen the night before. It is time  
to go. Startled,  
she jumps as voices call  
“Mary...”

On The Way Home from the Metro Center

*The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in shock-proof shit-detector.*  
*-Ernest Hemingway*

The winter snow melts  
maples into midnight air  
the slippered muse stirs...

Aw—who am I kidding?

Maybe I should just  
leave the Brown Dirt Diary  
with old blind Charlie,  
and move

to Ocala where I could get a job  
teaching high school English  
to the heirs of the Confederacy.  
I could expose the glory  
of the comma,

and of Tim O'Brien, and maybe  
that there English sonnet feller.

On weekends I could tend

bar at the Seaside Lounge  
located in the new Days Inn  
on the edge of Route 75,  
only 6 miles from the airport  
(free shuttle service)  
and nowhere

near the sea.

I would wear a red vest  
and serve piña coladas  
in fake coconuts to Judy Jean  
in the really short green dress,  
who told her husband

she was going to the movies  
with Millie Farquhar, but is seated  
next to his brother who drove  
down from Tallahassee. All the while

slipping rum and cokes to the redheaded  
girl that sits in the front row  
of my senior honors class with the smile  
that makes me understand Nabokov  
a whole lot better.

I would drive to Key West

spend Christmas break  
walking down Whitehead

Street pausing to pet  
the cats before settling  
at Joe's to drink rum

and talk fishing  
with the rest  
of the high school

English teachers including the gray  
haired lady in the floppy  
black hat from Ketchum

sticking to the claim that she heard  
the shot, but thought it was a book  
dropping, or a bottle rocket.

I would spend New Year's Eve  
on the 'walk with the one-man  
band in the pork-pie hat

across from the Naval Park  
blowing Bob Dylan  
out of the harnessed harmonica,

picking Lennon's chords out  
of his guitar, while beating  
the snare with a new pair

of redwing wing tips  
on blackened plywood.  
On the way home I would stop:

Fort Lauderdale Reunion  
at the Seaside Lounge,  
under the bridge that carries  
Andrews Avenue over Cypress Creek

and nowhere near the sea.  
I would reminisce with little Art Ashton  
who taught me  
the first rule of the working world  
is that the boss is  
a son of a bitch. T.J. Spline  
who taught me redneck.  
And ol' Bob Hoffrogge  
Who taught me that craftsmanship  
is  
patience.

I would spend the evening with my brother  
at the Southport Raw Bar  
on the edge of the Intercoastal,  
a stone's throw from the sea.  
Surrounded by nautical wheelers,  
and forty year old pirates  
drowning plates of raw  
littlenecks in German beer.  
Cold green bottles sweating  
rings into the scarred table.

And as the morning sun rose  
from the Atlantic waves,  
I would guide the white Buick  
with the broken  
air-conditioner onto the Sunrise  
Boulevard ramp to I-95 pointing it north.

Setting the cruise not stopping until  
I reached the New Smyrna Beach rest stop  
where I would bake in the late-morning sun  
attempting to Starbuck the plaintive cries  
of my hung-over mind. Sitting,  
back to the sea, on the concrete and plastic,  
I would remember

that night, on my way home from class,  
when the snow combined with the lights  
of the street and the tops of the trees dissolved  
into the night sky, and I sat waiting  
for the light to change wondering  
if another poem would ever come.

Iron Rails '76

- it's 2 AM

I am a little bit drunk and more  
than little high --

standing on the splintered deck  
of the abandoned train station, monument  
to days gone by, testament to the price  
of progress, dowager bride of the New  
York Central, with Jack Shaw.

New kid in town  
Ziploc bag of homegrown in his pocket  
drinking Miller ponys -- sent to explode  
on the unbroken iron rail when emptied.

Jack

Who held down the bass line  
while I attempted to find Brian Wilson  
high notes, at the top of our lungs  
in search of Barbara Ann.  
Five steps ahead of the police.

Jack

Who roamed the line of scrimmage  
and ate up entire offensive lines  
like cheap cheeseburgers,  
tossing ball carriers into the iron rail  
just to watch them explode.

Jack

Who tried to kill me twice our senior year.  
Once with a drunken Cougar donuting  
through the intersection  
pin-balling off mail boxes-- 80 in a 30.  
Once with a 12 gauge blank  
Shelled-- held to my chest.

Click

Jack

Who followed his brother into the Corp.  
and was rewarded with a dress blue scar  
behind his left ear. He says  
that on that day he felt the iron rail.  
He knows what it means to explode,  
but can't remember much else.

Jack

Who, when the police pulled up, was sitting  
on the front porch, alone,  
waving at the past. With a Ziploc bag  
and a half full bottle of Southern  
Comfort. He was a little bit drunk and more  
than a little high  
holding down the bass line  
still searching  
for Barbara Ann.

## Runnin' Down the Road

Sometimes I like to piss in the woods, I think  
as I pull from the rest stop back onto I-95  
just outside of Jessup, Firestones spinning

as I adjust the citizens band that never talked  
to me. In my '73 Pinto with imitation  
vinyl steering wheel cover and a Genesee Cream Ale

bottle cap stuck in the gear-shift knob. I turn up the volume  
just as the Eagles begin singing about that hotel in California, and rest  
my arm on the open window as I aim for the Florida line.

"Take it easy," Glen Frey sings as I spot the "Welcome  
to Florida" sign. "Take it easy," Don Henley agrees in harmony  
as I pass the billboard promising that the only strip club slash

laundromat in all of northern Florida is three miles  
off the next exit. I thrust my fist out the window.

"Take it easy!" I agree. "I'll take it any way I can get it!"

I was there you know, in Winslow, or maybe it was Albion,  
on the other side of the street. I saw the girl

in the old pickup and dreamed

that she was lookin' at me, but I was thirteen  
and wore glasses and my parents were in the five and ten,  
buying new PF Flyers and a Mr. Coffee for the cottage

and I didn't even own a guitar. Ten years later  
all I owned was a Pinto, and an 8-track player, mounted  
under the dash, and a CB radio that never talked to me

and a worn plastic cassette of the "Eagles" with the playlist  
peeled off the back. Ten years later as I crossed the Florida  
--Georgia line Glen was telling me to lighten up, while I still could

and I couldn't help but wonder if I was looking for a lover  
that wouldn't blow my cover, or looking  
for a lover that wouldn't blow my brother.

## Bringing It Home

As the orange-gray dusk settles on the empty  
field and the cabbage is boxed and stored,  
sorted in regal rows in the ancient barn,

Activity Jones stands amongst the transient  
harvesters in the shadow of the wooden  
warehouse. She smiles and with religious

intent follows the path of the pint bottle  
as it moves from one hand  
to the next, its dark brown contents fading

at an alarming rate as the farmer emerges  
from the front porch with a worn cardboard  
box overflowing with small envelopes filled

with the week's wages. With her left sleeve  
she wipes her fellow workers  
from the lip of the bottle, laughs as the last

drops fall from her chin, and tosses the drained  
bottle into a rusted steel barrel. When her name  
is called, she gathers her small harvest, and after

storing it in the inner denim pocket turns  
to the old blue bus elegantly rumbling  
on the other side of the driveway. As she

prepares for another trip to the World  
-Spend Circus; she opens the brown dirt diary.

“From the seed hopper,” she writes, “to the harvest bin,  
We reap what is sown.”

A Single Sheet of Paper

*To EB*

Like a judge seated  
at his bench looking down  
upon the accused, in bright white robes  
it glares at me with contempt,  
and dares me to sully its garment  
with my pen. I wonder if you ever  
felt the same way. I see you  
standing on the dock as the sun goes  
down wrapped in woolen warmth,  
Lucky Strike in one hand it's long  
ash curling towards the ground like a dying  
fingernail. In the other hand wrapped  
in news of the day, news of war, and of peace,  
of peace, and ads for Kenmore dishwashers,  
a fish entombed in its own destiny, its rainbow  
hidden from the poet's eye. Casually  
you chat with the old family friend

who spent his whole life  
preparing for the catch, and will until the day  
prayers and his remains  
slide into the sea  
his rainbow forever lost  
to an unsuspecting world until  
that Sunday afternoon after church  
when you were seated  
at your table overlooking the garden,  
the bony remains of lunch pushed  
to the side surrounded by a glass  
of Merlot, and a pack of Lucky  
Strikes, a book of Observations  
opened to Moore's grave. Pushed aside  
for a single sheet of paper  
you begin,  
"although it is a cold evening..."

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