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Singing the Song of the Eunuch

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Singing the Song of the Eunuch

by

Andrew B. Sanderson

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

Master of Arts

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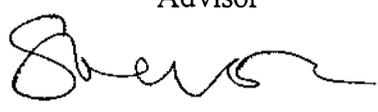
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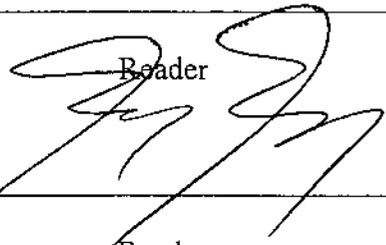
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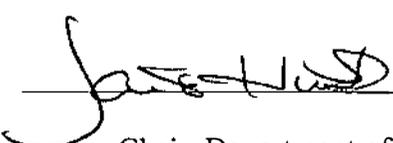
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Table of Contents

| The Prose | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Voice—the Question | 2 |
| Sanderson’s Four Axioms of Good Writing | 4 |
| Image | 6 |
| Form and Structure | 11 |
| Word Choice | 16 |
| Resonance | 21 |
| Finally—Voice | 23 |
| Works Cited | 25 |
| The Poetry | |
| Eunuch | 26 |
| Habit | 27 |
| Machines | 28 |
| Euchre Night | 29 |
| Songs | 30 |
| Scarecrow | 34 |
| To a Wasp | 35 |
| The Line | 36 |

| | |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Church | 38 |
| Taking Shutters Off the House | 41 |
| 17 ¼ Pounds Going into the Oven | 43 |
| Paeon | 45 |
| My Ex-Husband | 47 |
| In the Hands of a Careless God | 49 |
| The Prospector | 50 |
| Geometry | 52 |
| Costumes | 53 |
| Carp | 56 |
| River Georgic | 61 |
| The Spotlighters | 63 |
| Love Songs | 64 |
| Steps | 67 |
| Teacher's Pet | 70 |

Introduction

Critic Matthew Miller has said of poet Hayden Carruth's style: "[his] poetic improvisation does not mean the abandonment of form or rhyme, nor does it limit itself to any particular attitude or emotion...structure [becomes] a function of feeling." I believe that this is true of my writing as well, and I attempt to explore how this occurs in the creative process. In the critical portion of this six-credit thesis, I offer what I have called, for lack of a better name, "Sanderson's Four Axioms." I contend that poetic voice may be derived from an alchemic combination of image, form, word choice and resonance. Ultimately, I cannot offer much more than a vague suggestion for the exact use of these components—I can only contend that they be considered vital elements, in one degree or another—but all four axioms are reinforced and illustrated through the example of published poets, critical suggestions and the witness of my own poetry, which composes the majority of this thesis. In this latter section, I offer poems written in a variety of traditional and non-traditional forms that are set and focused on, primarily, the experiences I have undergone as a lifelong resident of Western New York in various capacities. Regardless of the particular topic, I attempt to illustrate voice in its various manifestations as created by attention to the above-stated axioms. Form is a critical component of poetry writing, at least from my perspective. In essence, this entire thesis is an essay followed by a series of eclogues that explore voice in both its stylistic and thematic manifestations.

Voice—the Question

“I say no land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing a race of singers and poems differing from all others, and rigidly their own, as the land and people and circumstances of our United States need such singers and poems today, and for the future.” Whitman posited this as fact in his essay “A Backward Glance.” We need voices to speak for us, to create our collective meanings, to identify ourselves against the formless puddle of ambiguity. Our times are awash with disparate voices, all singing, clamoring for an audience, the chorus of the damned heard by Young Goodman Brown in the woods beyond Salem. So how does one create a voice that can cut through this cacophony? How does one speak for oneself, let alone an entire group of people?

As always, Whitman himself gives us much good advice. From the same essay cited above, he candidly tells us that “If I had not stood before those poems [of past masters] with uncover’d head, fully aware of their colossal grandeur and beauty of form and spirit, I could not have written Leaves of Grass.” Whitman studied, he read, he paid attention to what had gone before and been said before; then, and only then, was he able to strike out for new ground. In the introduction to the 1855 version of Leaves of Grass, he told poets to, among other things:

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches,...stand up for the stupid and the crazy,...hate tyrants,...have patience and indulgence toward the people,...go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families,...re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book,...and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body. (11-12)

If this is not an entirely literal direction, it is one that is highly informative: live the life you wish to write about, and don't be afraid that your particular subject matter is unsuitable for poetic material—because everything is suitable for poetic material.

In searching for my own voice, I need only look to Whitman's words for guidance. In the following pages are poems that are reflections of me, the poet and the liver of life. You will find house painters and school teachers, intellectuals and dropouts, the lost and the found. I have tried to "stand up for the stupid and the crazy," and I've always gone "...freely with the uneducated" and the young and the mothers of families. Additionally, my voice is the result of a careful reflection on the masters; I, too, have stood in humble reverie at the feet of the greats. Even unconsciously, Whitman's is the path upon which I have frequently found myself.

However, the relevance of his advice is not absolute. Whitman also told us that the poet "Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost." This seems to be an echo of Emerson's sentiment, that "...it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem." Both men seem to say that a poem needn't worry about its form or its choice in language, merely its passion and urgency. If a poet is so moved by his topic, this will create the poem, it will forge itself of the poet's skin and lips and so forth. This is where I find myself in disagreement. (Interestingly enough, both Emerson and Whitman displayed a natural gift for the bon mot and characteristically hung their words on the inevitable form. They simply don't elaborate on *how* they do this, leaving the prospective student to make assumptions that the "metre-making argument" is indeed enough). It is my contention that the unique voice—the one called for by Whitman

himself—is the product of more than passion (although that *is* an integral part). Voice, as I understand it, comes from what I humbly call

Sanderson's Four Axioms of Good Writing

As a teacher of creative writing to high school students, it is imperative to stress the importance of simplification at the outset of a subject. Students of any age respond to simplicity, will open themselves up to the exploration of something that they don't perceive as being too complex, even if it is once they have entered. Therefore, I have developed what I lovingly call "Sanderson's Axioms of Good Writing." At the outset of the course, these four principles are delivered to the students in a Biblical fashion, if you will—as our points of reference, carved in stone, brought to Earth from atop the mount. My four simplified axioms are: 1) Image, 2) Form or structure, 3) Word choice or play and 4) Resonance. As in the classroom, some overview of the basic points is in order.

The first axiom speaks to the necessity of the concrete in writing. It is the importance, the dependence of the red wheelbarrow, it is the transience of petals on a dark, wet bough, it is the luminous candle that burns simultaneously at both ends. Eliot's objective correlative and Williams's credo that there should be no ideas but in things are the critical foundation here. Despite the fact—or perhaps because of it—that this is the most elemental of concepts, the foundation of 20th century poetry, this axiom comes first and receives the most attention at the high school setting. Teens love to write about love, but rarely see the need of attaching the emotion tightly to something physical, concrete or earthly. This axiom takes a lot of convincing.

Second comes form and structure. To differentiate the two seemingly synonymous terms, form—as I use it—refers to the external machinations of the writing; that is, whether we are dealing with a sonnet, a villanelle, a prose poem or a short story. Structure, as the word implies, is how the form is constructed. It is a parsing of the overall form to expose its stanzas, lines, rhyme schemes, meters or lack thereof. It is easier to teach form than structure, of course; sadly, this is where many English teachers spend their time in the perfunctory poetry unit, ogling over iambic pentameter, heroic couplets and other such mechanics. Even sadder, much of English teaching in general—as I, in a limited, anecdotal way have experienced it—is this, one element of the whole taken from its context. But I digress. Form and structure are nonetheless important.

Third is word choice and play. There is a direct correlation here with Axiom Two; axiom three is really number two, but microscoped. Single words and phrases make a tremendous difference in writing—it is the essence of Mark Twain’s oft quoted observation about the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Axiom three demands that the writer parse his own words and statements for clarities and obscurities *and* that he knows the difference between the two. This is Galway Kinnell’s poem about blackberry picking in which he glories over obscure words: *squinched* and *broughamed*, all to make his point about the rarity, the occasion of both blackberry picking and the appearance of certain words and the pleasure inherent in both.

Finally, there is Axiom Four: resonance. This is simple. Care about your topic as a writer or you can never expect a reader to give a damn. Resonance is the murky, often anecdotal sea from which the writing finds its genesis. Resonance is primeval

emotion. Resonance is the “metre-making argument,” it is the love for all things, be they animal, plant, mineral or human being.

All four axioms must ultimately work together, as one. In the course of a class, we examine our own work, our peers’ work and the work of published professionals with these four criteria as guides and measures. And—this is what all of this is aiming at—a true arrival at all four axioms working in tandem is also the arrival of voice, miracle of miracles.

With this preamble out of the way, I would like to turn some attention to the poems gathered in this thesis and examine the way in which my own set of standards has created the distinctions of voice in the individual works. While it has been my goal to exhibit all four axioms—or, perhaps, it would be more appropriate to say that I have tried to cloak the workings of these axioms into a seamless, fluid whole—in every poem, I will, for the sake of brevity, focus on individual axioms at work in certain poems, rather than tediously try to highlight all four traits for every poem. The educated reader will be able to make their own assumptions and inferences about axioms in poems that aren’t mentioned. That is the goal, anyway.

Image

If you’ll recall that Sanderson’s Four Axioms were formulated with brevity and simplicity in mind—things that appeal to most people, but tentative teenagers particularly—then it is immediately ironic that things get considerably more complex on closer inspection. The image in poetry ought to be of utmost simplicity. All you have to do is create a picture in the reader’s mind, or at least that is what most literature book

glossaries contend. But any fool can push the button on a camera and make a picture—create an image—it is the artist who finds the appropriate image, points the camera just so and thereby exposes the hidden dimensions of the thing.

I like to believe that my poems are accessible, first and foremost. Billy Collins, in the introduction to the anthology of poems called 180 More, discusses the idea of accessibility further, but he posits that the word “accessible” ought to be substituted with the phrase “...’easy to enter,’ like a building” (xiv). That is to say, every poem should have a clear point of entry, a place at which the reader can orient herself before being led by the poet into what Richard Hugo would call the true meaning of the poem. And it is the initial image or set of images that establish this kind of familiarity, this feeling of ambience. Poets such as Collins, Hugo, Hayden Carruth, B.H. Fairchild, Kim Addonizio, and indeed Whitman himself, have demonstrated time and time again that a poem need not be fantastic and foreign in order for it to reveal fathoms of nuance and knowledge. Sanderson’s first axiom is concerned with this.

Take, for example, my poem “The Line.” The triggering instance in this ekphrastic poem is a photograph by Sebastio Salgado entitled “Rest Period.” A triggering moment doesn’t—couldn’t—get much more elemental than this. The photo is centered on two pairs of feet propped up on the dashboard of an unfinished car, a car that is clearly only one of many on an extensive assembly line. In my poem, I allowed the first few stanzas to summarize the photo in such a way that the photo becomes a nice supplement, a curio, but not essential to the writing. “...I remember it all like a/photographer took a picture and hung it in the//black and white gallery of my head.” It is a shameless acknowledgement of the photo, but it also introduces a third party—what

was the camera becomes the poem's speaker, someone who can narrate something to the reader. In this case, something he remembers, or, specifically, Salgado's photograph. There is accessibility here, a doorway, if you will, into the lens of the camera to look on with the narrator. The poem quickly moves beyond the plain facts of the image, however, just as Hugo says it should. There is the narrator's rumination of the vital necessity for practical jokes in the workplace, itself something that starts as a confidential chuckle between friends but quickly veers into a plea for change, a cry from the fluorescent-lit monotony of years on the assembly line, an observation that the cars are free to leave but the people are not. Therefore, practical jokes provide the impetus for coming back to work each day. This is a concrete poem, a simple poem, maybe, but one through which the reader is carefully moved, like a car on the line that is slowly transformed by each passing couplet.

"The Line" is, of course, a dramatic monologue, a form that may not immediately lend itself to concrete imagery in the way that other forms might, lyric poems in particular. But it, as well as "Songs" and "Carp" work on a principle codified by Edgar Allan Poe. In his "Philosophy of Composition," the poet described a long poem as "...in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects." He uses the immediate example of Paradise Lost to illuminate his point—that, according to Poe, nearly half of Milton's opus is prose, or "...a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, inevitably, with corresponding depressions." Poe is making the case that a poem—or any piece of writing, really—should by necessity be brief, condensed, able to be read at one sitting in order to preserve the overall mood and tone intended by the author. This accounts for the definitive brevity of Poe's own work. I agree with him to a

certain extent; it is easy to lose the delicate thread of an author's intent when you have to continuously stop and restart your perusal. But I think that even a shorter poem—something the length of “Songs” or “Carp,” say—is, in many ways a succession of poetical effects with some non-poetical writing inter-stitched between them. In the case of my poems, that poetical effect is imagery.

“Carp” begins with Head, a loosely defined composite of a speaker, inviting us to bear witness to the fact that someone he—and, by implication, we—know. Outraged, the speaker outlines his offense: spear fishing on a flooded set of fields without a license. The initial irony is that the fish have swum over the banks of irrigation canals when they flooded and won't be able to get back into the main channel once the water recedes into its banks again, leaving the fish in water that will quickly evaporate into their dooms. The second, punctuating irony comes when Head is confronted by the DEC officer, a man who knows him. It dawns on him, as the officer talks about his good life and we match that against what we know of Head, that he *won't* get a ticket unless he takes what little power he has and subverts the officer's authority. So, in a sense, the poem works through layered irony. However, it is still the image at the core. The first dozen lines or so serve as a proem of sorts, a way to bring the reader in *medias res*. Then a series of brief but, I hope, strong images: the flooded fields, the floundering carp, the recollection of bringing a lover here and the strongest, central image—the idle daydreams of two post-coital lovers imagining their getaways from the muck to an unattainable place of culture, Italy. Some lesser images follow this, all building to the final lines. The officer has finished his optimistic narrative and asked Head for his:

...and I looked
 at the mud and the blood from dead
 fish on my hands, felt the boy
 getting restless beside me like
 kids do and I thought about carp
 drowning themselves on air like
 they had some kind of choice
 about it...

It was my intent to culminate the essence of the entire narrative into these lines, right before Head decides to tell the officer off. The irony in the poem is the boxer's series of feints; the image is the loaded roundhouse that delivers the impact. Image delivers the weight in all my poems, such as they are. As Pound tells us, "...the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object." The carp are symbols, of course, but they are concretes that are "...not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk."

The masters have set the way for much of this as well. Some of my narrative energy is inspired by Edgar Lee Masters; a poem like "Abel Melveny," from his crucial Spoon River Anthology illustrates this nicely. From the first person intro and the noun-heavy imagery that is immediately evoked—"I bought every kind of machine that's known--/Grinders, shellers, planters, mowers,/Mills and rakes and ploughs and threshers..."; Masters immediately establishes an intimacy in the concrete. But he allows the images to morph, to become symbols of his empty life, very literally, in the final two lines: "I saw myself as a good machine/That life had never used." This is the kind of trope that points towards both voice *and* meaning; my work is filled with many examples of Abel Melvenys, characters ruefully looking back on past brightness and past darkness.

Form and Structure

This is where I enter into a humble but adamant disagreement with Whitman and Emerson. Form and structure are essential to the voice in the poem, and a decision to have no form is, of course, a decision for the form of formlessness. It is a shame that this thesis contains only “perfected” writings and not the trail of rough drafts, scribbles and dead ends that have led to these more polished pieces. It would become painfully obvious to the reader of this thesis how indebted I am to the discipline of molding my poems to form and structure for whatever level of competency is apparent. Very few of the poems in this thesis are without some degree of form or structure. I contend that, after the central image is determined and established, there is nothing more essential to the writing of an effective poem than the proper coupling of that image to an appropriate form. Sometimes I have created my own patterns; other times I have looked to and borrowed from established poets. As Pound advises, “Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it.” I have followed this advice closely, if unwittingly.

Take, for example, the poems dissected in the prior section: “The Line” and “Carp.” Each bears the influence of Hayden Carruth for form, particularly the everyman characters that populate his Asphalt Georgics. Consider these lines, the opening few from Carruth’s “Septic Tank”:

Well, everyone wants to know, of course, that’s
 only natural. If I was Ignatz
 or Polyphemus it’d be the same,
 you’d be hinting at me, like I was fam-
 ous or something, you’d be insinuat-
 ing this or that, and so on.

What is *vers libre* on the surface is, upon second examination, actually quite complex. The lines are a syllabic pentameter, unfailingly. The rhyme scheme runs *aabbcc*, etc. throughout the poem's entirety. And it needs to be pointed out that this is a poem of considerable length, 54 lines—all of it in this casual, invisible form.

Back to “Carp” or “The Line” or “Songs,” all dramatic monologues in this fashion. “The Line” is the most transparent in its form, with its rhyming couplet stanzas of approximate metric equality set off from one another. “Carp” and “Songs” both bury the rhyme a little deeper—these poems both rhyme, steadily, in an *xaxa xbx*, etc. pattern throughout. Not one of these three pieces works syllabically, like Carruth, rather, they attempt to maintain a visual and aural line discipline (more on syllabics soon). But, while rhyme is the center of discussion, it is important for me to mention that almost all of the poems contained herein exhibit some type of rhyme scheme. Many of the rhymes are slant and therefore textured into the structure, but the entire poem is nevertheless built around a certain pattern. This certainly influences word choice (discussed in the coming section) but it is also critical in providing a certain amount of compression and understatement in the poems. Again, to Pound, he tells us that “a rhyme must have in it some element of surprise if it is to give us pleasure, it need not be bizarre or curious, but it must be well used if used at all.” In my interpretation and implementation, this means: keep the rhymes subtle.

A second note on form is in order: the decision for the poem as a narration, either from first person or third person or omnisciently. Poet David Lee says that he wants “...to get back to the original traditions of what poetry and art are—storytelling.” I think that one thing Whitman did *not* do is tell the story of his beloved people. He ecstatically

sang their praises and listed their achievements in the continent-scoping lines of his litanies, but rarely—never?-- allowed them to speak for themselves. And yet the very foundations of poetry, as Lee tells us, lie in the story of Gilgamesh and the visions of Homer—stories. Familiarity is established in a poem when the reader can hang on to a few prose constructs, things like setting and character and even plot, as the language and imagery point towards the concerns of poetry. My poem “Steps”—itself one of the earliest poems in this collection—plays with this idea in a poetic fashion. I labeled each section of the poem after a principle of narration (setting, protagonists, conflict, etc.) in order to highlight the thematic issue; the quest for fame in the face of pending oblivion.

Other poems that are apparently free verse are “Scarecrow,” “Geometry” and “17 ¼ Pounds Going Into the Oven” (all three written in rhyming couplets) and “Eunuch” (written in the *xaxa* quatrains). Other poems are written in fixed forms: “Euchre Night” and “In the Hands of a Careless God” are both syllabic pentameter, Elizabethan sonnets, “Machines” is a syllabic villanelle, and “The Prospector” and “River Georgic.” The latter two bear the immediate debt to Carruth’s work in Asphalt Georgics. In his book, Carruth’s poems are often constructed of quatrains that syllabically read 8-6-8-6 and rhyme either *xaxa* or, even harder, *abab*. My poems are examples of either variation. To say that is challenging to write under such constriction is an understatement; these poems have undergone little revision from their first incarnations. The real trick is in word choice, discussed soon.

The final point I have to make about form has already been danced around—the appropriation of forms from other poets. Certainly, sonnets and villanelles and the like enjoy a long, often ancient, history in letters and are public domain. I am talking about

poems such as “Costumes” and “My Ex-Husband,” both of which bear the unmistakable mark of canonized poems. As to “Costumes,” the nod is to Yeats and his “Among School Children,” of course—if a reader didn’t happen to know that, I provided an epigraph taken directly from that seminal poem. And it is also quite obvious—if from the title alone—that “My Ex-Husband” is a play on “My Last Duchess,” by Robert Browning. In both cases, I wrote my poems in those particular forms first employed by the masters: “Costumes” in ottava rima and the other in rhyming couplets. Both Yeats and Browning wrote their works in iambic pentameter; I, simply unable to write true iambs, used my closest approximation, decasyllabic lines. Yeats’s work was written in distinct, stand-alone but thematically united stanzas—almost like small cantos—and I endeavored the same. In both works I used similar, though not identical, topics and merely provided a more modern (perhaps the better term would be current) take on them, with my own images and impressions. Writing such as this does enjoy a long history. Take, for example, Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply...” to Marlowe’s shepherd, or, more recently, Hecht’s “The Dover Bitch.” I aimed more in the vein of the former, rather than the latter, because I did not want to write a parody or even anything that could be misconstrued as such. My poem “Love Song” is an odd exception to this; it is a piece written as a class assignment, rather than something I created fully. The idea was to use many of the same words or phrases from a well-known poem—“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in this case—and write a new poem from the language of the old. A few of the phrases (“ragged claws,” “Michelangelo,” “mermaids” reaching “each to each”) give the whole game away to an educated reader, but this is yet another homage in a slightly different manner.

Appropriating another poet's form, even thematic concern and basic image is a tricky undertaking though; the risk is always there that your own poem will appear as nothing more than a diluted version of the original, a cheap knockoff. For example, with "Costumes" I chose to echo a great poem by perhaps *the* great 20th century master. If anyone is unsure of this, I even use lines from Yeats as an epigraph for my own. This poem had a long gestation period in my mind—from an observation of my students wearing dirty carharts and work boots to school, aping the apparel of their working class fathers and father figures. It seemed a strange thing to me, someone who had grown up in identical circumstances—my own father is a truck driver—and I even graduated from the same high school in which I teach, as it happened. It is always there, in the back of my mind, that I could have easily gone directly into the world of the time clock and the assembly line instead of the world of the necktie and the faculty meeting. And so it is that I've always felt like one of my students, and yet significantly apart—in more ways than the usual teacher/student relationship. This is where "Costumes" finds its inspiration; Yeats said it best with his line that tries to differentiate the dancer from the dance. There is no way to say it better than that—but he did not say all that there is to say on the topic, and he does not fully speak to me and my experience. Therefore, it seemed only logical to enter the poem with a strong acknowledgement of the past, but with an entirely different focus and set of images. It is also worth noting that Yeats, in his poem, moves quickly into the esoteric philosophy of identity, calling up myth as allusion. I, on the other hand, keep each stanza grounded with images of this world; the subsequent tone (mine is much darker than Yeats's) is, I believe, a result of this decision. "My Ex-Husband," molded after Browning, works in a very similar manner.

All in all, though, form is essential to my writing. Even the few exceptions to form in this collection (“Teacher’s Pet” and “To a Wasp,” for example) are playing with stanzaic leaps. In this, a theme is explored for a few lines before the stanza breaks and there is a leap to a related but different idea. While a loose form, it is form nonetheless. The constriction of form and structure paradoxically free the writing, forcing the writer to avoid the obvious next line for something that is often more surprising and, frequently, more illuminating. This brings us to word choice.

Word Choice

In my self-made axiom of word choice—one that includes word play; that is, the use of puns, the coining of vocabulary and so forth—I am mixed in approach. I believe Pound when he tells us that we, as poets, should “...behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music.” If poetry is indeed a form of music, then I believe it is the choice of notes—words—that the analogy is most exact. I happen to be something of an accomplished musician myself. The problem with Pound’s statement—and the root of my dilemma—is that he only uses the vague adjective “good” in describing the musician, not the style in which the player is fluent. As a classically trained pianist, I am well aware of the perfect harmonies in pieces by Mozart or Chopin; a single off-note in a handful of chords will utterly destroy a sonata. Every note is perfect; in some ways, poetry should be like this.

For example, “Habit,” an epigram that totals four lines, reproduced here, is illustrative of this point.

The cat learned cringing discipline,
 worried by a tattered book;
 now as I issue texts to teens,
 I recognize those looks.

Pound said that all parallels of music should be observed, and this particular example even conforms metrically in its predominately iambic structure. But it is the individual word that proved most problematic in writing this poem. “Habit” went through no less than a dozen drafts that I have saved, and, once the decision to make it an epigram was settled, it was the second line that drew the most attention. At various times, the verb “worried” read: “scolded,” “spankings,” “spanking,” “a spanking,” “at the cover of” and “punished with.” The adjective describing book was “ruined,” “spanking” or “paddled.” Some of these choices were obvious clunkers—they either clash with the meter or are simply awkward in their conception. But others could easily replace the choices in the “finished” version and the poem might feel just as finished, just as seamless. I settled on “worried” because it was subtler than the other choices, and therefore fit well with the subtle tone of the final couplet. Additionally, while I never worry much about veracity in the details of my poetry, I don’t want people to think that I beat animals. The fact is, it is the students who I feel have been beaten—figuratively—with books. That is what elicits such a negative, Pavlovian response from them. But I think it is a stretch to place a word like “spanked” even near the lines about students; it skews the interpretation of the poem in a far more radical direction than I want. This is *not* a poem about abuse, animal or child. It is about literature, and the choice of wording set up the most delicate of dances. I’m not sure that Chopin would approve, but I do feel that it’s very close. And, for the record, the choice of “tattered” for the adjective in the second line was much easier to determine—this choice simply came down to what sounded best.

But back to the Pound conundrum—since I am also a fan of (and active, guitar playing participant in) jazz and rock and roll, suddenly the necessity for the perfect note, or word, is significantly diminished. Certainly, if a song is in the key of G, the player should be, too. But in jazz and rock, it is often the introduction of off tones that often send the music in deliriously new, unexplored and ultimately satisfying directions. That is, sometimes it is the accidental note itself that determines the progression of the piece, not the other way around. This is true in my poetry as well.

“Paean” is my case study for this idea. “Paean” is loosely constructed in comparison to the other poems in this thesis, but it is also the only one that is directly, specifically about language. There is no intended rhyming, but the poem—with its central image of two radically different streams—flows in strict tercets, meant to suggest the two banks of a creek and the water contained between them. The language within is the unpredictable but nevertheless confined water. “Paean” began as a dramatic monologue akin to the others found in this collection, but the effect was not the same—I needed to get in there with the omniscient voice in order to properly make the juxtaposition between the two landscapes (more about this idea soon). Unintentionally, I found the simile in the 10th tercet that likens the leaning branches to parents above a basinet, and the basinet led me to Moses, and from there to the hopes a parent has for their child, or the emotionally resonant portion of the poem. None of this was intended in the original conception of the poem, but the language of writing it took over and dominated form and image. Quite a remarkable turn of events—the solitary word taking such a dominant role in an entire work.

This particular axiom, focused as it is on the particular, also umbrellas the all-important act of punctuating a poem. The proper placement of punctuation is easily as important as the choice in words. Some poets—David Lee springs to mind immediately—write poems that fulfill every category of my axioms, save this one. A poem by David Lee is often made problematic, obtuse, in its relative lack of punctuation, used to mimic the speech patterns of his typical narratives. And yet, I would argue that no one speaks without punctuation; withholding commas and periods in order to illustrate for the reader the fact that “this is being spoken by someone without much education” seems contrary to true respect for the speaker. Take the first five lines of Hayden Carruth’s “Phone,” from Asphalt Georgics, for example, and note the punctuation particularly: “Ruthie? That’s you? Well, how’s it go-/ing back there, good? Yeah. Look,/the reason I’m calling, you got/your ma and me all shook//with that last letter, see?” The commas and the question marks are vital to making the lines read like a conversation. The speaker in this particular poem is probably not an English professor—the subtle “your ma and me” make that fairly clear, but Carruth accurately avoids dumbing down his character by under-punctuating. Examining my poems will reveal this same attention to the placement of periods and such. One poem, “Geometry,” is purposefully written with no stop-punctuations in order to highlight the breathless motion of the truck on the highway and the men in their lives, but that is as close as I come to under-punctuating poetry. I think that this small thing makes a big difference.

Word choice is important in at least one other regard, however; when writing a narrative poem, particularly something like a dramatic monologue, the speaker must be considered very carefully. As Wes McNair says in his “Advice to Beginning Poets,”

“Poetry is meant to be spoken. Avoid writing anything you would not actually say in a reasonably articulate conversation.” This is sound advice for the writer of any poem, but it is amplified immeasurably when the speaker is not you, the erudite and eloquent poet. Added to that is the possibility that the speaker may be altogether uneducated, or drunk, or both. As a writer, you may have to completely disregard the second sentence of McNair’s dictum.

“17 ¼ Pounds Going into the Oven” takes a sidelong approach to this dilemma. The central narrative is told by a speaker who is watching another man who goes around repeating the same story again and again. So, in a sense, the poem is a framed narrative. Why do this? To bypass the drunken palaver that would no doubt be an issue were the principle person in the poem the speaker. Even though the actual speaker is in the bar and may be presumed to be drinking, as a poet you are freed from having to slur words and write obnoxiously or overbearingly. The ridiculousness of the situation can be expressed through the eyes of a bemused onlooker better than it could be through the enthusiastic words of the hunter. And a sly, subtle commentary can be built in that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. The final couplet is where the thematic issues settle. After hearing the long story about how big the turkey was and how unbelievably easy it was to kill it, and after the reader has been exposed to a string of images that can’t help but underline the sad futility in this man’s life, the poem ends thusly: “...but never, ever/has it been this easy. Ask him. Never.” I don’t know how else this poem could end and still achieve the same impact; the subject of the final lines becomes curiously and purposefully ambiguous. Has the hunt never been this easy or the hunter’s life? The wording makes this ending both possible and effective.

The second way to go about something like this is to pull back into the omniscient eye and remove a direct speaker altogether. Both “Geometry” and “Scarecrow” do exactly this. The triggering subject of both poems is an individual; a truck driver in the first, a mechanic in the other. The reader would not believe that either individual would use the kinds of words found in the poem, although I have pulled heavily from their particularized jargons in order to provide a certain amount of validity to the visions. For example, “Scarecrow” provides a litany of tools and parts that are strewn about the lawn, all name-checked, and “Geometry” uses trucker terminology, particularly that kind of language used at a typical loading dock. Pulling back, away from the subject allows the poet the ability to write with a full range of vocabulary—but I do suggest that this range include words familiar to the topic, if the topic is a person. And of course, if you’re writing about a human being—and I would contend that there isn’t a poem in existence that isn’t, ultimately, anyway, about a human being—then you’d better write with passion and fill your poem with the last of my axioms,

Resonance

Would it be a cheesy cliché to say that resonance is the heart and soul of writing anything worthwhile? And yet it’s exactly that. Despite the contrary evidence I’ve been stacking in this thesis, writing—good writing—is an intensely personal, emotional undertaking, nothing that can be or should be clinically dissected for reasons other than the edification of a struggling (or interested) student or disciple. Yet again to Pound, in his retrospect, he tells us that “Only emotion endures.” To return to the musical analogy, it is so often the crack in the singer’s throat as they struggle for a note that conveys the

passion, not the mastery of the note. When Dexter Gordon blows through his horn, simply exhales, defeated, through his horn in a final, atonal breath of resignation at the end of some dazzling minor-key runs, that is when you know for sure what he means and why you will listen again. It is the sonority of the minor chords in Chopin as they transpose into majors that cry for the glory of his lost and beloved Poland, it is the leer in the piano licks of Jerry Lee Lewis.

But to make it particular for poetry, I go to Rilke, who told the young poet in his first letter not to write love poems or poetry about trite themes or ideas, but rather to:

...seek those which your own everyday life offers you; describe your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and the belief in some sort of beauty—describe all these with loving, quiet, humble sincerity, and use, to express yourself, the things in your environment, the images from your dreams, and the objects of your memory (16-17).

So I've done exactly that. While looking to other poets for inspiration, perhaps, I've mined my own life here, and those of the people around me. In these poems you'll find academics and burnouts, teachers and students, workers and unemployed folks. There are a lot of dreams, some attainable, some impossible. The images come from things I've seen myself or heard about or, sometimes, have completely imagined. At the risk of sounding corny, I hope, above all, that my genuine love and passion for whatever particular subject matter is apparent. And if there is a touch of sadness, a little darkness, in many, I would refer you to Wes McNair again, who said that "To have heartbreaking powers, the world must first break your heart. No poet ever said, 'You may enter my heart, but first wipe your feet and agree to behave.'" I don't know whether my powers are at the heartbreaking stage at this point, but I have yet to find a mat to lay before the door of my heart.

Finally—the Question of Voice

So is this how voice is taught? In attempting to answer this question, I may have discovered that I still don't know. It is my feeling that voice lies somewhere between word choice and resonance; that is, where the passion at the core of the poem directs the language to take it. But the language is often only as strong as the image that grounds it, and then the vehicle of form must be determined. How can a poem "speak" or "sing" while it is manacled to the shape of a sonnet or a haiku or some kind of rhyme scheme?

My answer may be a copout. My axioms work in a holistic manner, and that is why it is difficult to isolate the voice in any particular poem. When considering a poem like "Eunuch," it would be easy to make a list of all the solid images: repair manuals, a garage, a car, a church choir, a workbench, western highways. These things are not the voice. We could discuss the form: several quatrains of a subtle *xaxa* rhyme scheme, lines of similar length, a final line that breaks and plays with the tab key. Again, the voice isn't here. The word choice is at once clinical and detached while remaining very intimate; words like "logo" "amalgam" and "emasculated" sit beside words like "fondle," "underbelly" and, near the end, there are "oily tears." There are a few subtle puns, such as the line speaking of "donning overalls" beside the mention of an aubade, or poem of the dawn. Such inconsistency doesn't seem to speak of voice. The resonance comes from the coupling of all these things: a blue collar garage that becomes the scene of humiliation for a sensitive, artsy-type. I drew on experience in writing this, the feeling of being something less than manly if you can't fix your own car and have to take it to someone who can, someone who defines our culture's values of masculinity. But, yet

again, this alone does not create the voice. It is only when all four of these things are blended together that the effect is achieved: I'm whispering in your ear about escaping to a distant place of darkened rivers and fading signs, a place that will make anyone want to sing—the song of the eunuch or otherwise. I like to think that Whitman would approve.

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Eunuch

His poetry is the verse of repair manuals,
oil-stained, authoritative, terse, its meter
futuristic and formulaic, its nouns
amalgams of numerals and letters.

His garage engulfs me, a socket around a nut,
a red steel-tray toolbox that dissolves me into
its darkened stains, blistered belts, hanging tools
familiar and fantastic, calendar girls and logos.

My car begrudgingly allows him to fondle
its underbelly. I wait, emasculated, galled
with ineptitude, an inarticulate alto bullied
for singing sad aubades instead of donning overalls.

I will sweep this motor cluttered bench of
its cold sterile modern art and will,
as he rattles strange tools, carve poems
in the wooden bench top, poems to instill

gloaming images of pine-lined horizons,
bridges breasting blackened rivers, melodic
city names on fading signs. He'll weep oily
tears and beg me to sing,

sing

the song of the eunuch.

Habit

The cat learned cringing discipline,
worried by a tattered book;
now as I issue texts to teens,
I recognize those looks.

Machines

In high school I never understood why
we studied poetry when we could learn
about real things—machines—things that don't lie.

A motor—now that's something you or I
can touch, with logic, with nuts and bolts to turn,
a plan. There's rarely any guessing why

it works. I remember the first time my
hands got greased in an engine, like being born,
maybe, or baptized in machine oil. No lie.

Or maybe it was more like the humming high
of hearing an unforgivably fine
girl's words burn in your ears...And who knows why

she loves you? Who knows why your plans will die
inside her, plans that can never return
once the doctor's machine--the one she lies

under, with all the assistants nearby
as she cries—turns the doctor's face so stern.
And the only question you're left with is why:
why can't a machine have the heart to lie?

Euchre Night

Turn down that TV and listen up, now.
This place is a hog hole. Pick up those beer
cans, empty those ashtrays. You ought to know
I need room at the table. They'll be here

soon. No, it ain't the queen, but for Christ's sake
we can at least tidy up. Make sure those
paper plates get thrown away. Why not take
that bacon grease and pour it off somewhere?

We'll smell like a truck stop, but what the hell?
You've got an awful lot of your father
in you, staying up all night, drinking well
past common sense. But set up the euchre

deck for me. Tonight go sit at the bars.
I think I feel lucky for once at cards.

Songs

They come around the corner same time as
me and Billy did. Maybe we were too far
across the line, maybe it was them, but
they were on a motorcycle. We were in a car.
It happened so goddamn fast.

Jesus.

You ever drive down a road at night,
tooling along, something on your mind
or the radio's on and it's all just right
when out of nowhere there's a deer?
Right there on the side of the road,
looking back, thinking about stepping out?
And the way you try to stop, maybe hold
onto the empty passenger seat like
there's someone there to hold back
away from the windshield? And for
the rest of the drive you're kind of sick,
picturing splayed legs on the hood, the windshield?
Well, that's about how it was, except we
come around the corner feeling all
good—sure, we'd had a few beers after we
got off work that afternoon, we'd
finished a job and were gonna have
a few days off, so of course we partied
a little, plus it was the weekend I didn't have
the kid. I felt so free, so easy—
not that I don't love my girl, it's
just that I can't take seeing

the old lady. It always, always hits
me, you know, remembering how it was
when she used to get out of school
and come see me in my uniform
and we'd ride around for hours, full
tank and some beer and some ideas about
moving away somewhere.

Anyway,

we come around that bend and only
had a second to think before they
clipped the corner fender on the
driver's side. She was going over
backwards, I think, and it looked
like he was coming up in the air,
but then we were in a grease
and trying to stop and I hit
my head on the dashboard and
Billy just kept yelling "Oh, shit,
oh, shit, oh, shit." And then we
were stopped and running back to
where they were. The bike was on its
side way up there, radio going, you
could smell the brakes and the gas.
He was thrashing around in the
gravel on the side of the road,
he'd hit so hard there was a
gash in his belly, like an orange that
dropped and split. His T-shirt was all
balled up and his guts were pushing out
and of course there was blood all
over the place and he kept on moving

and trying to get up and saying
“Help me” over and over again. That’s
all he said.

Listen, I’m not making
much sense. We found her twisted
up in the weeds like a thrown deer
the highway boys come and take
away. People came, but I swear
all I remember is sitting in the
back of a sheriff’s car, the Mercy
Flight. But I knew he was dead before they
took him. The faces told me.

I keep thinking about the damnedest things,
though. How warm it was that day and
how long it took to get full dark.
All the shiny beer caps in the sand
and dirt alongside the road. How
the radio on that bike kept playing,
songs about summer, songs about night,
songs about love and one tire spinning,
spinning. Somebody told
me later they’d seen those two
go by that day, few miles from where
we hit. I guess they were going too
fast, not wearing helmets, hotdogging
with their hands off the handles,
her long hair waving out behind
like a long and skinny middle
finger at it all, like a song of warm air,
a guy and his best girl,

singing through the country,
songs that they used to sing
but have long since forgotten the words.

Scarecrow

In the driveway, no place to hide
from the wind except under the hood.
He points into the geometry
of his engine. "Alternator," he
says, beginning the checklist. "Fuel
pump..." Parts changed, he's left every tool
in his toolbox on the ground, on oil-bespattered
cardboard: wrenches and crumpled, tattered
rags, black-gunked sprockets, hubcaps filled
with greasy bolts, nuts, hex-nuts, piled
sockets and ratchets, a metal, steady
path like Hansel and Gretel's bread
crumbs, to a sugar maple where it sways, strains
almost, eviscerated, an engine on emasculating chains.
Pays to do things yourself. That's
what he teaches his boy when she lets
him visit, but for now, alone, his eyes
watch the path for hungry birds that would seize
each crumb and shake it into their gizzards,
leaving him alone in the empty yard.

To a Wasp, On Destroying its Nest with Insecticide, July, 2005

The wasp returns to its ruined nest
and hovers, floats on stinking currents
of poison, its complex eye
eyeing the poison-soaked paper of its labors,
the curled queen stilled beneath it
in the lie of an easy death.

My hand labors yards away,
scraping flaking paint chips
from weathered brick walls, a
cautious eye always on the bereft
wasp, aloft, nostalgic near the shambles
of its nest,

away,

back,

away,

uncertain,

a man in his car

driving through the desolate hazy
neighborhoods of youth, radio off,
listening only to slow windshield wipers,
oblivious to the astounding hand
at work so blatant and near.

The Line

An Ekphrastic Rendering of "Rest Period" (photo by Sebastio Salgado)

Oh, yeah, I remember it all like a
photographer took a picture and hung it in the

black and white gallery in my head. Me
and Mr. Morris'd come back early

from lunch and were headed back down
the line and he smacked me sharp, one

of those backhands on the arm that'll
pull you up quick. There they were, all

lovey-dovey in the front seat of that
new sedan, feet up on the dash like some fat-

cat boss kicking back on a stack
of our money. Mr. Morris. Who doesn't like

(deep down anyway) to watch somebody
jump up scared? Picture it: quiet library,

crashing book, or, boring old lunchbox,
rubber snake. I tell you, that's what makes

this job tolerable. Something happens to
a man doing nothing but threading nuts and screws

all day if he don't have something to smile
about, something to wait for while

the clock knocks away your time slow
and steady. Anyway, Morris looked so

damn wicked right then, his expression,
you know, that I had to look back again.

I think that's what I got in my head.
And I'll never forget it, the line dead

at lunch break and those two propped
up without a care, maybe they hoped

something'd go wrong somewhere and shut
down the line longer so they could keep dreaming but

I know it didn't, nothing ever went
wrong with that goddamn line it sent

car after car after car after car
down it and on into the breezy yard

while all of us were still there, we stayed
day after day after day after day

and so goddamn what if they took a nap
and dreamed about anything else, an escape,

and I'm pretty damned happy we
made those two jump up scared. It was easy.

Church

Instead of going to church that morning
we were out poking around in the under
brush, in the yellow grass and leaves, following

a blood trail that'd make you wonder
how in the hell that deer kept up and
running with blood dripping after,

like drops of oil from some second-hand
busted-up grocery-getter. And as we
pushed through the pines, circling beneath the tree stand,

(never impressed by the outright agony
that deer must be enduring, shot in the ass,
listening to the awful choir, the approaching harmony

of our voices)—far more impressive to us
the determination that deer had to find
a place, alone, to blend into its last bed, to watch as

the trees faded to silence around it. Mind
you, we were all thinking about the bar, our church, about
driving our trucks out of the woods, one behind

another, and pulling into that parking lot
with all the other ticking-engines, the rusted
fenders, mud-spackled sidewalls that

distract your eyes from the busted
glass, the sagging mirrors and dinged-up hoods,
the neon bumper stickers that trust

you know your drivers' logos. Oh, and how good
that first beer would taste inside, the eager faces
of people getting into the sauce earlier than they should,

but, Christ, it's a *holiday*, like Sundays
are supposed to be: sweating beer glasses, the race, all afternoon
to sit and forget about the Monday through Fridays.

And when the tires hum around the track, a tune
better than any hymn you've ever heard,
all at once, in monotone, a one-note chant, legion,

there's nothing it compares to, no word
can do it justice, and every car is new,
un-rusted, their frames fast and perfect around the curved

track, perfect like the memory of the first car you
ever got laid in. And the wrecks, the cautions—when
else do you ever look on a miracle? Tell me how you

can see a crash and not think of the resurrection,
the fire crews cutting the harnesses like rolling aside
a boulder, the driver waving in all directions,

“Look at me—I'm alright—I could have died
in flaming rubber and gas, but I'll get a better car
and have at it again next week.” And we tried

not to think too much about this, there
in the woods, blood trail tracking into the dense
trees, like an un-nostalgic history. We were being led far, far

from church, from the bleeding present tense
into the tangled past, the catastrophic future, searching for our own
leafy bed to watch, to wait for, the woods to fade into silence.

Taking Shutters Off the House

Carnival music drifted up the hill,
up the street, arcs and loops,
volume and nuance, a major key
that blended into the melody of sharpened
dead bolts and staccatoed window locks.
I had worked in dread all afternoon
of the bees that must skulk
behind the shutters, like the carnival
workers that surely lurked in the bushes,
plotting their way into our houses,
biding their time, envying us
our money, our women, our immobile lives.

Imagine, then, my surprise
at the bat, clinging to the face
of the brick behind a shutter, awakened
from an easy sleep by the sudden,
impossible light. I recoiled on the
reflex kindred to the one in the bat:
a hand up, begging imagined mercy
and a step back on the ladder;
it waved an awkward arm over
its head like a shawl and pulled itself
further into the corner of the window frame.

The bat's retribution seemed certain—
it would swoop into my unprotected face
and force me from the rungs to plummet
into ghastly doom, an inglorious sprawl

at the edge of the flowerbed.

But, instead,
it only tried to rewrap itself
in the hammock of music, to return
to its dreams of dancing in the cool
evening skies, arcing and looping
with the unheard air of mosquitoes
and heat lightning and moon flowers,
while the neighborhood hunkered
in close and palely lighted rooms.

17 ¼ Pounds Going into the Oven

Ask him. Or don't. He'll tell
you one way or the other. He's spilled

more Old Milwaukee from those cans
than you'll drink all day; that shuffle's a dance

he's doing, cocked off his ass, a smoke
in those perma-greased fingers, dirty jokes

pushed out of his head by that bird.
Listen: here he goes, always the same words

to describe things. The radio'd been
going all night, just he and his boy sitting in

the yard at a bonfire, swigging beer,
poking the coals, telling stories he'd swear

were true. So, anyway, they forgot to kill
the radio—it played all damn night—but still

he got up in the morning and left with
his shotgun (no way in hell he had both

eyes open) and didn't walk but a hundred
yards from the house when he heard

something—look, he acts it out—stopped,
looked, saw it, bugged out his eyes, but popped

off a shot and that settled that. Seventeen
and a quarter pounds *going into the oven*,

do you hear that? *Going into the oven*,
a big old slob of a Tom that was a chick when

he quit high school. Unheard of. He
keeps on saying that. *Unheard of*. He's

hunted turkey for twenty-five years, brung
them home to wives and girlfriends, hung

them from the big maple in front of his
trailer, mostly when he was unemployed or when he's

supposed to be working, but never, ever
has it been this easy. Ask him. Never.

Paean

“There ain’t any fish in that stream,”
he says, and I can see him catching
for the clutch in his language, his words

grinding gears, grating against my tie,
against the patch of his nametag, the
line of dictionaries on the windowsill,

their covers riprap to the impossible
stream of words inside. “I mean,
there *aren’t* any fish in that stream.”

His tattooed arms clutch the edges
of the too-small desk on which he rafts,
palely staring into the rapids, at the boulders

reared by this parent/teacher meeting.
“He don’t give a damn about reading or writing,
only stumping up that dirty old creek in his

mucklucks. There’s a few sucker
fish up there, bottom feeders, ugly
big-lipped carp and whatnot, but...”

But my mind has smoothed into its own
soft eddy, slow drifting pollen-dotted water
embanked by rocks and leeks and phlox.

Bluewing olives emerge as midges,
blurped up by rising brown trout
that leave gentle ripples in the black

bottomed water. The curriculum of
current quickens and spinners lift
from the riffles in mortal flight,

attempting swishing branches that lean
into the stream like parents
over a basinet, ready to launch

their babe towards the bulrushes, certain
their child will rename the world
in a language yet to be spoken.

All this before the creek bends back into his
words, emphasized, no fish in that stream,
a finality, a song like the snap of a closing book.

My Ex-Husband

After Robert Browning and "Sleeping in a Bar," 1935, photo by Weegee

Yes, that's Frank, my ex-husband, slumped over there in that photo. Funny: whenever I remember Frank, it's this photograph that someone took, really just for a laugh, that I see first. And then others follow: him sleeping on our wedding night, just so perfect in the moonlight from our window, propped up like a body on a pillow at a funeral home, his hair sweaty, his breathing slow, his hands flat, the sheets he lay on rumpled, creased, so I smoothed them out (but he never woke up). Those days, without a doubt, were like the sweet days of April, everything fresh and wet, the daffodils as new and as welcome as the first time we met in the library near my home. I worked there and he came in smelling of aftershave and mechanic's soap. I love thinking of him in there; he was looking for a book for his mother by Browning. I thought it was for him, but when I finally knew different we'd decided to see each other that weekend. And, oh, those days: always music and dancing, finding ways to make a minute alone, and then we were engaged, married. My father gave me away six months before he died. We rented a little bungalow that Frank tended

to; he patched the plaster and painted the walls,
stopped leaks in the sink after working all
day. He was always so good with his hands.
He started drinking, though, and the day stands
out clearly in my mind when it really
began: I'd been pregnant. Lost the baby.
We cried and cried and we tried it again,
but there wasn't doctor or handyman
in this world that could help us. Another
pregnancy, another chance to smother
those proverbial embers between us.
He enlisted when the war came; that was
that. Soon enough I fell for your grandfather—
miracles never cease! I remember
Frank, though, from time to time, and his sunken
head on that table, dreaming his drunken
dreams of children he'd never have, the end
coming closer, a rude bouncer whose hand
is just out of sight in that old picture.
But maybe he dreamed he was a fly, sure
that he could sit nice and comfortable
on top of the beer's foam like a royal
magistrate of some sort, just certain that
he could escape the trap of beer going flat.

In the Hands of a Careless God

"...their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste." --Deuteronomy 32:35

These goddamn spiders, these daddy long legs—
what the hell? They sit there on the fascia
boards of the eaves like they're some kind of big
shots, maybe cringe a little bit when the
brush comes through, all loaded up with latex.
I used to try and dust them away, but
now I just blast them—watch as the wind takes
them down the face of the house like tinted,
floundering dust. They make it through the fall,
but there's no helping them once that paint dries.
And you keep on working while the paint speckles
your hands, your arms, your body, your face,
alone, up high, the day sliding steady, slow,
across your body. Your whole life below.

The Prospector

Fifteen rings on his cross-cut bole,
 he tells me that writing
 poetry sucks, that it's a whol-
 ly stupid and pointless

exercise in futility—

 Not in so many words,
 sure—but the height of vanity.

 All I've asked him to do

is to truss up a sagging hai-
 ku, to take an indi-
 vidual still from his mind's eye
 and describe it in the

most vivid terms he can muster.

 I want to tell him that
 he's probably—no, make it cer-
 tainly—right about the

vainglorious pursuit of writ-
 ing. Readers are prospect-
 ors, with their hands plunged into bit-
 ing mountain waters, pull-

-ing up pans filled with stones, inspect-
 ing carefully for a
 flash of something precious, expect-
 ing the next dip in the

bracing water to reveal treasure. I am therefore interested in what his poem says.

I will toss his words a-

round the pan of my brain, listen to their sounds, look for any thing I can spend from his mental gravel, then, no doubt,

toss it all back into the stream before I quit for the day, penniless for sure but dreaming of a golden dawn.

Geometry

Confined in his cab, alone, fighting
the sunrise driving east, the sunset driving
still, a long way from home even yet,
every mile a handful of change that
drops on the last mile, pennies
in the ledger for each minute he's
cloistered with the CB, the radio,
the monotone of engine and motion, from Buffalo
due east to Albany, due south into PA,
west again across Appalachian highways, the day
driven away before turning north again,
a perfect rectangle he's traced, a shape drawn
by two trailers, thirty wheels, one hundred
tons of compressed cardboard unloaded
pallet by pallet at backdoor loading docks,
by emptied men on forklifts who stack
each skid carefully, inevitably, a pattern
calculated with no room for deviation,
these men with tattoos, hangovers,
nightshifts, coffeekbreaks, forty years
to trace their own triangle from home
to work to the beer bars to the time
clock, as week stacks on week, stacks
unload, hollowing out the trailer, but none
will notice how the forklift entombs
itself, its driver, how it vanishes inside,
is forgotten, vaguely missed, something that's died,
before it rebirths, pre-weighted and then
back into the box, again, again, again.

Costumes

*O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?*

--from "Among School Children," W.B. Yeats

I.

In the classroom they wear the clothes of work:
ruined jeans spotted by oil and dirt and blood,
Carhartt jackets and heavy-soled boots, like
the uniforms of somber-faced men paid
by the hour to drive and repair and make
the things so forthright in the schoolboys' minds.
And so, to them, I'm more boss than teacher,
a man for whom they work with little care.

II.

How coarse to think of class as industry,
though the case has been made before: the neat
lines of desks, the ringing bell's efficiency,
knowledge built like a car that passes straight
along an assembly line, the facts we
teach but nuts and bolts turned until they're tight
enough—and then we send them, shiny, proud
into puddled streets that rust and corrode.

III.

Their faces, though, untouched by worry or sun,
pimples and smooth skin where whiskers will grow,
are like mirrors in which I see my own
face at seventeen; how was I to know
that the future is like loose paper in
the rain, unmarked, crumpling where the wind blows?
A tale not even told by an idiot,
but by how the pages are collected.

IV.

And parents know what youth must learn themselves:
the aching body, the withering face,
the multiplying pill bottles on bathroom shelves,
the knowledge that if childhood is a place,
it is one from which none return, our lives
in finite motion down fading highways.
This is the trap into which children walk,
giddy to heave their heavy pens and books.

V.

Eager, they are, to punch the clocks and earn
their pay for Friday nights, freedom in bars,
sipping drinks they order by round in turn,
telling stories about their rattling cars,
their boss at work, the humble truths learned
from the toll of sweat and physical labor:
that nostalgia is the cruelest poison
added to bottles of beer, wine or gin.

VI.

And so we blur, the motion with the dance--
we remember our formal proms and balls,
the mundane transformed by glitter and bright paints,
tuxedos and long, delicate gowns, all
to build the illusion that Kings, Dukes and Princes
may be crowned from mechanics and manual
workers; that we may dance with constellations,
once, before the lights shine on our oblivion.

Carp

Look here. You see this? Right here
at the bottom of this ticket, the
signature. Mmhmm. Smitty, that
rotten touchhole, miserable son of a
bitch, you remember him? He didn't
graduate with us all those
Junes ago—he was a year or
two behind. Now he's all rose
water and wine, if you know
what I mean, what with his
uniform and his badge and
that leather ticket book in his
hand. I'm down there on the
flats, right? Down there where all
those fields just turn into lakes
when the snow melts and the canals
come over their banks dirty
and muddy, milky almost? I'd
brought my boy down there with
the canoe and we let it glide
us around those shallow lakes,
the sun warm, but not too warm
to make it all stink yet, smooth
riding—you know, not doing no harm,
unless you care about the dumb
ass carp that get caught out
in the pools in the fields when
the creeks go down some, about
the most pathetic things you'd

ever want to see. Sometimes
those fish are practically
dragging themselves through slime
and mud in the field with their
damn backs coming up out of the
water like some kind of shark,
and you know a few more hours and the
sun'll do the rest. Happens every
year, sometimes more than once. And
about every time, see, since I was
in high school, anyway, me and
somebody's gone down there and
floated around, easy like, rich
on our own private lake, away
from our troubles, our lives and such,
with a canoe and some beer
and a spear for those fish that
ain't got a chance. In high school
I'd go with my brother, if he weren't at
the farm milking. Then I met
Cheryl, and me and her would go,
on a date, I guess, and get so many
of them damn carp and have so
much fun we'd always end up
laying there naked in the canoe,
letting the wind kind of rock us
all nice and we'd talk about going to
Italy and doing this same thing in
those boats—gonederlas, I think,
that they got over there, with the guy
to push us around and sing, we'd drink

wine instead of beer and look at
paintings in museums.

Course, you
know how all that worked out. My
boy probably got started there, too,
and this was the first time I'd
had him to come with me since
the split. Well. We had a fine
old time out there once I convinced
him it was fun, an Indian game,
to paddle up slow and have one guy
in the front with the spear up,
looking for fish around the reflection of sky.
And we were out there a while,
I don't really know how long exactly,
but the sun was going down and
the shadows getting cool, so we
nosed on back to the edge of
the field where we left the truck.
And of course that goddamn Smitty
was there, that snooty suck-
hole, just waiting for us to come in
where he could talk to us. He
says, "What's goin' on today,
fellas," eyeing us both, 'specially me,
and I go, "Nothing much, really."
And of course he asks about the spear.
So I told him—I don't care, I already
told you I done it for years—
and he tells me I need a *license*
to spear fish, a goddamn permit

to go and have some fun with those
fish about to die anyway. No shit.
So he wants to see my ID and
I want to argue a little but the boy's
there, so I'm cool and show him
and he looks and makes a little noise
and asks me if I remember him.
I didn't at first, but he said
he used to play JV when I was
on varsity, they used to call me "Head"
on account of my big one, and
I kind of started to remember.
So he gets telling me about
going off into the Marine Corps
and being stationed in Africa somewhere
and doing all these things, coming
home and going to college on the
GI Bill for free, maybe even *making*
money while he chased around the
fine asses of college girls and
graduating with a degree in biology
or ecology or whatever and
landing this sweet job with the
DEC. I just listened till he said
"How 'bout you, Head" and I looked
at the mud and the blood from dead
fish on my hands, felt the boy
getting restless beside me like
kids do and I thought about carp
drowning themselves on air like
they had some kind of choice

about it and I knew he wouldn't do
anything to me for spear fishing unless I
looked him in the eye and said: "Fuck you."

River Georgic*For Shannon*

Do you recall that day, my dear?

Floating down the Hudson,
High summer, black water, the clear
Light cast from the high sun?

Oh, how I missed you, how lonely

I felt with you so far
Behind—and frankly I don't see
How you could fall so far

Back; maybe you hit an eddy

When I rushed through a chute—
But there you were, away from me,
Distance beyond dispute.

The river moved us along at

The same speed, of course, so
What could I do? That seemed like that.
I couldn't stand it, though,

The thought of our separation,

Our journey divided
By nothing more than smoothly run-
-ning water; heart and head

both predicted ample time to

come when the river would
be rough, the rocks that would try to
capsize you if they could.

Not today. I decided right then
That I would wait for you,
Ulysses, I was, to your Pen-
-elope—then again, you

could perhaps make the opposite
case. Either way, I gave
that river just a little bit
of what the Greeks would rave

about: that is, a good strong arm
and an effective plan.
The current fought with alarm-
-ing vigor, but the man

won out on this occasion, as
you know. And, oh, what re-
-lief, to watch you drawing near as
I held there. Towards me

You drifted on the silent wa-
-ter, and I grabbed your cool
foot before I sank back in the
wonderment at how fool-

-hardily, how singleminded-
-ly I had battled each:
the river and the awful dread
of floating out of reach.

The Spotlighters

Breaking the darkness at the edge of a killing frost
with spotlights and headlamps, illuminating
the crumpled paper of lone corn stalks, drifting
between the fields they would never hunt, just
beyond the black water of the ditch, in a hedgerow,
they found it—the dead buck. The bony arc
of an antler rose from its thrown form, a stark
beacon to make them stop, reverse, and throw

open the doors to rush into the open night
and feel the heft of its head, ignore their own shadows
that futilely flit across the collapsed brown body.
The lolling tongue mocked their lack of foresight,
no saw, knowing this, too, would sink into the fallow
and unforgiving field, into weeds yellow and thorny.

Love Song*After a poem by T.S. Eliot*

“It’s ridiculous,” she says, cautious
but glad to start the swell
of her memory on waves
blown back, seaward, from the beach
of the present. “But every time
I hear that silly love song,
the one about Michelangelo,
I think of how he lingered,
in the hospital, the high sentence
pronounced. They’d found an abnormality
in one of the chambers of his heart.
Each day became a scene
from a tragedy. His part
was Prince Hamlet, maybe,
but we both played the obtuse
audience, watching a progress
of soliloquies and setbacks,
enraptured but helpless.
Sometimes we’d think he’d grow old,
that the meticulous advice
of his doctors, the attendant lords,
if you will, would prove itself
nothing more than a false lead
in the script.

But that’s not it at all.

That is *not* what I mean at all.

There was no script, no novel plot
twists, no grand story of resurrection
akin to Lazarus or John the Baptist,
not for him. The women, the nurses,
simply came and went, settled
his pillow, served me cup after cup
of deferential coffee with powdered
creamer and plastic spoons. Near
the end he was mostly asleep,
always tired, so I'd sing
that love song while combing
his white hair, tried not to notice
how thin his arms and legs
had grown, how the peach
had wilted in his cheeks.

Sometimes,
he'd wake and talk about the beach,
mermaids, he said, sea-girls,
singing, their voices wreathed
in red and brown seaweed, lovely.
He said they reached, each to each,
like the figures in the Sistine Chapel,
angelic, with majestic hands
and striving fingers.
But when he'd try to swim out
to them they'd turn and grip
him with ragged claws and try
to hold him under to drown.

‘So they weren’t angels,’ I said,
but that wasn’t it.
That wasn’t what he meant at all.”

Steps

1. Setting

A rope is only as spectacular as
the objects to which it is tied. That's

not something that ever crosses the mind
when looking at, say, a tent, its flaps tightened

down serenely with gentle cords beneath
an oil-painting-worthy oak tree. No, these

are the kinds of things that only come
to mind when the rope is a bridge from

one side of the cragged gorge to the other,
and the gorge is filled with gray-dawning Niagara.

2. Protagonists

All that need be said is this:

We all sway o'er groping abyss.

3. Conflict

Because the graveyards hold more recollection
of my ancestors in their windy memories
than I do in my watery brain.

Because my name in the paper
 is worth more bonnet-hooded blushes
 than a nosegay of daffodils.

Because my name will be a star
 in the minds of distant offspring,
 a beacon in the past.

Because my father died in
 work clothes, the field unplowed,
 cows unmilked, garden unhoed.

4. Complications

Delicate, delicate the steps
 across this gorge. Once be-
 gun it's over; the slightest lapse
 in concentration be-

comes the beginning of the long
 flailing fall. One foot foll-
 ows the other. The ends are gone
 at once, the cries and calls

of either side dissolve in cleans-
 -ing mist; the fog moistened
 cord pulls as long as river runs,
 a path without an end.

Each step is a tender kiss with
 faith, each breath is a count-
 down as balance dances slow with
 tedium, a romant-
 ic pairing that sways and lurches
 with the ever changing
 music of schools and streets, churches,
 the tableau of being.

5. Crisis

A rope is a rope, of course, but
 its infinity blurs from above
 until you realize that what it is
 you're seeing is a train that moves

relentlessly into the horizon, a
 train of endless, identical cars.
 Each window is filled with the
 face of one unrecognizable from afar;

one cannot be told from another,
 though you try, the oblivion
 into which all vanish astounding
 you, shaking your balance when

it becomes clear that the cord
 upon which you make your voyage
 is but one strand of an embracing
 net into which all must plunge.

Teacher's Pet

It is talk of procedures and paradigms,
a data-rich portrait of the way in which
No Child is Left Behind. Graphs rise like monoliths
on an ancient horizon; pie charts withhold
information in their fat bellies, individual
slices cut out and served on the dessert plates
of the margins—the margins where I've
been doodling intricate triangular patterns to
rival the finest stained glass artisans of the
High Renaissance.

Voices lull me
into an easy lethargy and I follow the
twist of my looping pencil in a few tight
circles around my favorite spot, that place
near the dinner table from which I have
a vantage of the clumsy hands. The steady
drone of inflected voices offers something
as soothing as a ticking clock set in my
youthful bed, its incessant rhythm
reminiscent of my lost mother, the nostalgia of
bustling teats.

But my ears perk
at the shape of my name in the air. More
tones follow, enough to make me nervous
and whiny, longing for that door to open and
release me to the young ones in the other room,
the young ones so obedient to me, so
responsive to my tricks and love,
so eager to please.