

4-18-2011

Some of the Parts: Poems and What They Can Do

David W. Yockel Jr.
The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses

Repository Citation

Yockel, David W. Jr., "Some of the Parts: Poems and What They Can Do" (2011). *English Master's Theses*. 93.
http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses/93

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmymers@brockport.edu.

Some of the Parts: Poems and What They Can Do

by

David W. Yockel Jr.

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

Master of Arts

April 18, 2011

Abstract

“Some of the Parts” begins with an introductory essay that focuses on my personal poetic vision as well as discussing my belief in the operation of poetic language. It starts by exploring the path of my graduate study and goes on to work through the mechanics of denotation and connotation, among many other poetic devices. It shows my belief in the immortality available through poetry’s attention to specific moments in life.

The three sections of poems were written over the past two years. The themes are set up to flow into and out of each other, between ars poetica, nature and beauty, and my choice of forms: anaphora, list poem, etc. I hope that the order of the pieces works well and ultimately colors my poetic aesthetic correctly and exhibits the import I place on the smaller “parts” of the human condition.

Table of Contents
Some of the Parts

Introduction	p.1-17
Section I	18
Birthday Balloons	20
Tovah	22
Sheboygan	23
Dogs Without Bones	24
Olé	25
Feathers of Instinct	26
Yellow	27
Work That We Do	28
Tangled Kites	29
Anna	30
Mother Tongue	31
Bunny Ears	32
Pawn	33
Classic Barroom Poet	34
Section II	35
The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of	37
Background Bach	38
Hot Town Hurdy Gurdy	39
Washboard	40
T-Monk	41
White Fish Woes	42
One Over Par	43
Turtle On Its Back	44
Couch Cushions	45
Assorted Things	46
A Walk in the Snow	48
I Ain't From Minnesota	49
Saddle Rocket	50
Henry Miller Told Me	51
Section III or A momentary thaw in February	53
Science of the Real	55
Zieg-How	56
The Dark, Loud Hour	57
All Employees Must	58
Pound for Pound	59
Appalachia	60
Camera Obscura	61
La Purisima	62

God Save the Crooked	63
The N Train	64
Catching Up	66
Rain, Sleet, or Snow	68
Somewhere in the Middle	69
Like Paint	70
Hot Off the Press	71
Works Cited	72
Works Referenced	73

Introduction

I began my graduate studies at Hunter College in New York City. I had just made the decision to focus on writing poems. I could say that it was the fleeting nature of experience in such a megalopolis that made me want to catch particular moments, or that poetry seemed to be the perfect medium for my sense of perception and attention. In truth, poems were the only pieces that I could actually *finish*. I had excelled in literature analysis as an undergraduate student, but was looking for the chance to create.

I took a seminar on Walt Whitman; before the class began I had simply envisioned him as the “old gray poet”—the face of American poetry. But, ultimately, it was Whitman’s fervor, *passion*, and unpredictability that enamored me. The preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* still resonates with me and influences the way I think about the power of poems and what to expect from an audience. Whitman writes, “Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. Not in him but off from him things are grotesque or eccentric or fail of their sanity. . . He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key” (8). To Whitman, the poet is a regular person with heightened sensitivities. Poetry is not in the poet, but in the things of the world. But it is the poet’s responsibility to apply the “true” significance of things. Through the poet the rest of the world can see. The poet is empowered to judge the importance of the “diverse” reality that we engage with everyday. And poetry’s onus is to be a means of

access to the meanings of life; poetry clarifies the myriad problems of existence. Whitman does not believe poetry can save the world; but poetry can produce sublime landscapes. It dreams of the better world. Emerson discusses this “dislocation” from God, in his 1844 essay “The Poet.” The poet’s job is to re-attach things to nature. Different relations—metaphor, simile, and other poetic devices act much like a hammer, or even better a hoe to break and mingle the earth before planting words and images like seeds in the fields of heaven (Emerson 227). Poetry, in this light, can be seen to give meaning to the world as well as *find* it: the former like sowing and the latter like the harvest. As a young student of literature, I was drawn to transcendental themes such as these: Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau were and still are huge influences.

I ultimately made the decision to focus my attention solely on writing poetry. It seems to me that the medium has the necessary power, the immediacy to reconcile reality through metaphorical devices. We poets cannot, as much as we may desire, dissipate, destroy, or dismantle the operations of power or rewrite the pages of history. We can only hope to read between the lines that are so easily separated. Dogma and discourse, religion and government operate only because people have faith in them. We must create a new iconography; we must rename the sublime. The same way that power operates and propagates ideology through political discourse, poetry can reveal truth in experience by breaking apart old, overused connections and replacing them with fresh, new associations. With the help of the Poet, the world can clean the surface of reality’s dirty mirror, and ultimately see “what it is.” By

constructing a new, polyphonic poetic aesthetic, language can erect a new platform of perception. And with a new sense of perception, meaning begins to show its face in the hills and on the street corners.

To discuss poetry is to discuss the operations of language: what the words are *doing* on the page. *What* the poem “means” is not inconsequential to the reader, from the Harvard literati to the community college dabbler, but the *meaning* of the words can only begin to be explored when you are fully aware of their function. Like John Ciardi, Billy Collins, and many others before me, I believe that *how* a poem does what it does is a far more interesting question with more fruitful epiphanies.

The *how*—the syntax, the juxtaposition of words, rhyme, alliteration, and other poetic devices—*informs* the *what*. The connections, emotions, memories, images, etc. that the language of the poem evokes creates meaning. And the more skilled the poet, the more interesting the connections and the more multiple the meanings.

When Billy Collins, in an interview with Dave Weich, for Powells.com, was asked what was most interesting to him about poetry, he responded by saying “instead of asking *What does a poem mean?* I try to substitute the question of *How does a poem operate?* or *How does it get from one place to another?*” He says he attempts to begin a poem in a particular, recognizable place. The operation of the poem becomes where and how it eventually travels to somewhere *else*. Instead of putting emphasis on meaning, Collins switches the focus to the specific movement of the poem. This

recognizable “place” that Collins refers to is an attempt to “orient” his reader within the very specific context of the poem.

It is through this initial orientation that he focuses our attention on something tangible, and from here our journey into the poetic can begin. Let us look here at a particular instance: “Night Letter to the Reader” begins Collins’s book *Nine Horses*. The title itself is a great example of how he connects intimately with the reader. I will posit a close, analytical reading of the first stanza showing how he brings us along with him on this sojourn into the new.

I get up from the tangled bed and go outside,
a bird leaving its nest,
a snail taking a holiday from its shell, (5)

Collins starts us in the most intimate of places, his bedroom. Not just his bedroom, but his bed. The bed is “tangled.” The speaker wants us to know that something is in disarray. Aside from the frazzled state of his actual, tangible bed, we are immediately enticed to make the connection that our speaker is himself “tangled.” There is something that has gotten him up, out of bed. It can be assumed that he has not slept because of the description of the bed. He has tossed and turned, there is something on his mind that he wants to share with us. Not only does he get out of bed, but he takes a walk outside. The speaker, though, equates his mixed emotions as a familiar state of mind. The metaphors that complete the first stanza—the “bird leaving its nest” and the “snail taking a holiday from its shell”—move us from a comfortable, protected place to a new, unknown space. The bird that takes off from its nest and a snail that emerges from its shell are animals that are preparing for the act of movement itself.

Collins successfully, in three simple lines, has already taken us from a recognizable place, struggling for sleep, to an unexplored space, “outside.” The shifting from a zone of comfort to an unidentified one is, paradoxically, the orienting principle evident in the first stanza.

Collins’s task, as any good poet’s, is to employ language with the intention of enriching his reader with a deeper understanding of humanity. Every poet’s strategy is unique, but I agree with Collins in believing the more surprising and unconventional the path, the far more illuminating the “destination.” Every word becomes a railroad tie and the unrelenting poetic application of language becomes the clicks along an endless train track.

In no way do I mean to assert that poems need ever to come to any “destination” or “answer” or “understanding.” But I do feel, as Robert Frost does, that a good poem or good poetry can “end” in a “momentary stay against [the] confusion” (Frost vi) that is life: the traveling and movement that Collins creates, and any poet’s particular form, style, or craft finds order, however transient, within the chaos of their existence. Great poets explain the world. Meaning is not absent, it is subsequent. But how, *how* does a poem *mean*?

Harvard professor and poet John Ciardi chose to tackle this question in his aptly titled book *How Does A Poem Mean?*. The book begins its very logical analysis by explaining that a word, in a poem, in a conversation, is always more than a dictionary definition. This may seem a sophomoric proclamation but it is an integral one. The multiplicity of meanings inherent in language is a vast store of the raw

material for poems. This conversation will inevitably lean towards a discussion of connotation and denotation, but the ways these “meanings” interact with each other can be innumerable.

Connotation, the idea or *meaning* suggested by or associated with a word, is, according to Ciardi, synonymous with the “feeling” of a word. And these feelings create in the reader a sense of the word without confining it to a specific “definition.” While denotation, a sign or symbol that relates to a very specific meaning, is more of an “identification.” Denotation could be thought of as a word’s dictionary definition. The interplay between these feelings and identifications is where poems become *poems*. Poets actually change the denotations of what they write. This interaction, these verbal paradoxes, is what Ciardi calls the “performance” of the poem. This performance is not necessarily “intended” by the author. A poet’s intention is merely to create a linguistic space where this interplay can take place. The performance of a poem is not something the poet does; the words and their meanings, implied or identified, is acted out by language itself and by an open minded, attentive reader. The poem makes the human experience it is describing “more” by this strategy of reenactment or “performance.” This performance is acted out with the knowledge that the reader, nor the poet, can ever know “everything” about a word because meanings share “living” relationships. Language, like life, evolves, and evolution is unpredictable. This uncertainty becomes one of the more productive aspects of the poem, or performance (Ciardi 663-712).

Besides connotation and denotation, or more precisely, because of them, a word is within itself, a history (Ciardi 712). Etymology is not exactly what I mean, although that does play a part in a word's story. The denotation may stay similar throughout a word's development, but the connotation(s), the feelings ascribed to certain words are constantly changing. Poetry is *poetry* when connotation and denotation are happening simultaneously. The performance—the poem's *poemness*—is contingent upon the reader being aware of the multiplicity of these connotations. Also, the more labels, or “denotations” associated with a particular word adds to the impressiveness of the piece. A good poet's charge is to allow space for this “uncertainty” to become an opportunity for interpretation. What the poet *means* to say is ultimately immaterial; the reader is the one that ascribes “meaning” to a poem based on the context, syntax, etc., provided by the author. Therefore, the construction of an affecting piece of poetry is one interested in creating a strong foundation for systemic uncertainty. This is why it is of such import to begin a poem in what Collins calls a “recognizable place.” The more, for lack of a better word, *accessible* an image, the farther a poem can travel. If it is easier for a reader to “enter” the world of a particular poem, the larger the subsequent, contingent world, created by the poem's performance and the relationship of meanings posited within the given stanzas can become. The larger the choice of labels, or denotations, can only increase the amount connotations, or “feelings” attached to the words, and the more idiosyncratic and successful the poem.

Word choice and poetic devices are only part of a poem's operation. Form may be of most import. I was immediately drawn to Whitman's free verse. It seems almost like *the* American approach to poetry. Form within freedom. Along with Whitman, Charles Bukowski has been a huge influence in my writing. His lack of classic "form" and his seemingly "unliterary" approach to writing creates a certain paradoxical space that works for me.

It was his almost biblical proclamations throughout "Song of Myself" and the other poems in *Leaves of Grass* that I fell in love with. He and Bukowski both have a sense of arrogance within their writing. It was this stance, this faith in self that attracts me to both men's poetry. Both implement free verse, but Whitman does use certain poetic devices that have found their way into my work.

Whitman's use of the list poem (different but not unrelated to anaphora) is something that I have chosen to employ in a lot of my work. I have written list poems, but it is lists sprinkled within verse that has come to be part of my personal style.

For example, in "Song of Myself," Whitman writes:

The pure contralto sings in the organloft,
 The carpenter dresses his plank. . . . the tongue of his foreplane
 whistles its wild ascending lisp,
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanks-
 giving dinner,
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm, (37)

and so on and so forth. But in my own work, I tend to use the listing device more like this:

We are lent cold sores and gangrenous limbs

facial hair and crooked toes
 earwax and armpits
 heel spurs and saddle bags
 crow's feet and yeast infections
 chapped lips and vitiligo
 lockjaw, psoriasis, rotting teeth.

The list is still being utilized, but I try to speed up the language. The profit made from listing is hopefully a more attentive reader: the listing is the poet saying "Think about this. It is important." And it is consistent stylistically. This consistency allows the reader to enter the poem more easily. It is a recognizable form.

Whitman's use of anaphora imposes an emphasis to the verse. In rhetoric, an anaphora is a device that consists of repeating a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighboring clauses. I have chosen to use anaphora in my poetry at times because of its oratorical resonance. Here is a small example from a poem of mine entitled "Birthday Balloons":

They
 hold the pin
 that will burst
 your universe
 with a quick, disdainful poke.

They
 are women
 are drugs are
 frigid New Year afternoons
 are misspellings
 crossed out
 are sitting awkwardly on the floor
 in the middle of a room.
 They are scraps of paper headed
 for the basket.

This excerpt shows my use of the list and anaphora simultaneously. It is my attempt at an original style or voice. A voice worthy of an audience. The poet is standing at an invisible podium. And he is speaking in a driving rhythm, therefore increasing the emotion and even the validity of the poem. The repetition works as a chisel, grinding the point home. Anaphora is almost political in its syntax. As a poet, I do not posit any concrete political ideology, but to assert new “truths” it could help to mimic a certain type of legislative discourse. The reader, of course, has the opportunity to derive their own verdict. Anaphora is blatantly used in political, persuasive rhetoric and works to sway mass opinion. Poetry shows us that truth is an opening of an idea not the end of the conversation.

Albert Hofstadter paraphrases a concept discussed in Martin Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” when he said: “The voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings” (x). It is not my desire to assert new laws; the “truth” I search for as a poet is the activity of tearing down the veils of deception, removing the mask to see what is essential to us as human beings. The “truth” is what we have forgotten; it is what has been pushed out of our consciousness by the ramblings of politicians and the heads of marketing at global corporations.

If we cannot “save” the world, we must attempt to alter our relationship with it. These poetic devices that Whitman and many others, such as Allen Ginsberg, have employed are used in political speech; they are effective. So effective, that they have bled into my work. The difference between the State of the Union Address and a

poem is that poetry invites multiple meanings. It is an opening, a widening of truth's landscape. Truth is not static; rather it is violently traveling throughout reality. Poetry can slow down its pace. It can allow readers, and the poets themselves, time to enumerate the truly important things in life.

I write because I have to. Just as one must breathe out after breathing in, words are my exhalation. The world comes in and poems come out. I write to better understand reality. I search for spiritual, emotional, and ethical truths. And when history or culture or religion doesn't offer the answers, my work will look to provide some solace from the chaotic and paradoxical human condition. I write to become History, to live forever on the page with the help of shaped language. Poetry, to me, is a tool to increase the circumference of reality's reservoir, to add to the volume of available drinking water because we are dying of thirst.

Charles Bukowski once wrote, "I don't know if the world can ever be saved; it would take a tremendous and impossible turnabout. But if we cannot save the world, then at least let us know what it is, where we are" (42). In his poetry, Bukowski is unvarnished. He sees the world and tells us "what it is." There is no sublime poetic landscape; his language is tough and aggressive. It is just this "no holds barred" attitude that first drew me to his work. His novels and short stories are posited as "unliterary" texts. It is just this style that I connected to as a fledgling writer. His poetry is written in the same vein. He is not trying to save the world. He would probably say something to the effect that his writing is the regurgitated world; he would be sick if he were to have swallowed it.

Although I love Bukowski and owe him for much inspiration as a young poet, I do not completely agree with the quote above. I don't think that the world can be saved by a poem, but in the act of telling "what it is" and showing readers "where we are," we are given a slap in the face, a wakeup call of sorts. We must find new ways to engage with the world—the reality that has been constructed with the discourse disseminated by those in positions of power—we can offer new visions of spirituality. We cannot physically alter our landscape, but through poetry, through art we can make our lives whole, make them our own. Poets put a price on the world. It is our charge to produce an estimable value of existence. They are the true interpreters of truth and beauty. Emerson writes in his famous essay "The Poet:" "God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe" (220). God has already done his job; it is my responsibility to translate the world's perfection to the rest of its inhabitants. By creating new relations and reutilizing stale, overused symbols, new facts become available to the world through the voice of the poet. The poet, therefore, through appraising the divinity intrinsic to the universe, enhances life, improves upon the Art that is existence. As Emerson goes on to say, "we participate in the invention of nature" (231).

When I was introduced to Billy Collins and, recently, to Robert Bly, it was almost like I was a catamaran and their poetry was the wind in my sails. Both speak to themes important to me as a poet: writing about writing, the importance of the reader. It was Collins's accessible and permeable language and Bly's attention to the mundane and minute that ignited something in my work and in my life. And both,

ostensibly without much effort, have the genius to rearrange and upgrade truth by putting together some truly original poetic relations. Both seem to understand the importance of metonymy/synecdoche: metaphor broken down to the bare essential—everything is everything.

I aspire to bring to the readers' attention the true power of poetic language. I am not trying to "save the world" but I do intend to alter it and our perception of truth. Human insight is inseparable from the technicalities of poetic devices. The operations of a poem allow us (poet and audience) to transcend time and space. And in this new dimension, language is the key. It opens the doors to endless opportunities for meaning. Form, syntax, and metaphor (traced far enough back through history, etymology shows that all words began as metaphor) are building blocks for the new library of the mind. In poetry, I will assert that the *moment* is where the meaning lies. It is in every breath, every gust of wind, and every grain of sand. The minute, the mundane, and the seemingly ordinary will be revealed as the true entrance through the grand gates of ultimate enlightenment.

My love for Billy Collins's work, my recent infatuation with the poetry of Robert Bly, Bukowski's unfettered honesty, their seemingly "simple" way of creating poetic structure and their veridical poetic *performances* have inspired a belief in my ability to chisel a new and exciting *anti-metonymical* approach to poetry.

Some may say, a bold statement of aesthetics, but by it I simply mean that my poems will travel from small to large. In no way do I mean to assert that I will not make use of metaphor or metonymy in poetry. Exactly the opposite is true. My craft

will guide me to and through these proliferations of language and I will see fit to use them according to my greater project: to pause the incessant tape of reality for selected moments in order to give some meaningful explanation. Like a director interspersing commentary on a special edition DVD, I mean to point out to the reader that they can see the whole through the parts. When I say “anti-metonymical,” I am discussing here metonymy’s reductive nature when it describes the vast oceans of the earth in a word like the “deep” or the force that powers all life as “God.” In my poetical world, the sum of the *parts* is greater than the whole. In fact, some parts, some moments in life alone are greater than the whole of our human condition.

Poetry is made, not by recording reality, but from selecting from it. Again, this selection conveys the intrinsic importance of the moment. One could also say that writing a poem is much like taking a picture. If that is so, then Robert Bly is one of my most beloved photographers. Bly, much like Collins, is loved for his accessibility and his ability to communicate the titillation of poetic expression to a general audience. Bly is grounded in the temporal. The immediate experience is subject in many of his poems. In his book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, Bly shows again and again his talent for aggrandizing the minute, especially in the poem “Driving To Town Late To Mail A Letter:”

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.
The only things moving are swirls of snow.
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron.
There is a privacy I love in this snowy night.
Driving around, I will waste more time.

This beautifully simple, five-line poem, expresses a *need* for the mundane. It suggests that the speaker suddenly realizes the meaningful taste of banality. It is a slap in the face as “cold” as the “iron” of the mailbox. And despite the speaker’s recognition of the importance of time, he is willing to “waste more” of it; because “There is a privacy” he loves in the particular “moment.” The amount of time is not important to him, only the immediate experience. Bly uses extremely well-placed and simply drawn images to conjure the feeling of solitude in his reader but also astonishment at the simple pleasures of the natural world. These images, while built on a steady foundation, leap from one to the other, taking the poem where it needed to go. These “leaps” are very similar to Collins’s discussion of a poem’s moment, or the way it travels to new and unseen meaning.

Heidegger writes,

“Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means” (75). Bly and Collins understand this perfectly. Truth and originality springs from the courage to take poetic leaps. In the poem above, Bly isn’t taking a huge jump from “privacy” to one’s relationship with time, but it is a connection that is effectual in its seeming simplicity.

I try to “leap” from image to image in my poetry, and I have found that the more chances I take, the better the finished project becomes. Through artful and attentive revision, the poem can always be necessarily grounded.

I also find similarities between my work and Bly's in the use of alliteration. In an interview, Bly said "Most good poems have repeating sounds." I agree.

Alliteration brings a rhythm to a piece. The reoccurring sounds give the poem a musical quality: they are like hits on a snare drum. Much of Bly's early poetry, especially his prose work, display this attention to the poem as a musical event.

Ciardi writes, "The poem . . . is forever generating its own context. Like a piece of music, it exists as a self-entering, self-generating, self-complicating, self-resolving form" (769). This infinite context of poetics lifts its language to a metaphysical state. Language is literally *above* the physical qualities that it describes. And like a "piece of music" it stands outside time and space. The moment that a song is played transcends even the life of its originator, just as a poem exists on a page long after the poet has put down his pen. The work is incessantly informing itself (with some help from the listener or reader, of course) and despite its context, the sea of language is so deep that its bottom can never be reached. The words stay afloat in any situation.

Jane Hirshfield writes "Shaped language is strangely immortal, living in a meadowy freshness outside of time" (8). This immortality is what every artist strives for. But because of our own mortality, the "moment" becomes all there is and all there ever will be.

I will finish this introduction with a quote from Oscar Williams in his introduction to his anthology *Immortal Poems of the English Language*. "A poem is immortal not only because it continues to be read by generation after generation of

readers but also because each sensitive reader, having once experienced the poem, absorbs the experience and continues to feel it always, and further, because a true poem expresses an immortal human truth” (9). It is the way the winter wind can make you dream of the innocence of your youth, or the fruity fragrance of an olive brings you to the coast of Crete. Time will have us all eventually. But if we sing the right tune, and choose the right moment, we can live forever.

I

Tovah

Between you and the Tao
I can't get this smile off my face.
And the coffee-drinking, clean-
shaven poet in me thinks
about the meaning
of your name.

The Hebrews never knew how good
God was, only I do, now that I
have held your feet. Walking
through first snowfall, I see the last leaf
being abandoned by

a Japanese Maple
while Hashem drags a rake and I
pick a pencil from my pocket.
He flicks the dying stump
of his lit Monte Cristo
into the pile

of purples and browns
while the late November wind pants
cigar ash onto my small composition
notebook. The page is fresh
and the words I write are nothing
compared to Him or you or the snow.

Sheboygan

Another prayer is manifested
in that buzz before dawn.

The topography of the night
answers with a similar vibration.

And I, the lion and the prophet
have been strategically placed

here

to interpret the mumbling earth.

Just as a truck driver drops
his cargo in Sheboygan

somewhere the deacon serves his sermon
 flags are flown
 dancers pirouette
 school bells ring
 the baker cuts his thumb

 the drunk gets drunk
 the poor are poor
 friends die

and insomniacs roam snow strewn streets
smoking cigarettes and sobbing
looking for Shiva until the sun shines

while I sit in deep conversation
with the stars and the black sky.

Dogs Without Bones

The nightly news
tells of fires in the ocean
and a world where dogs
can't have bones.
There are underground
cities where people live
without ever feeling
the wind. Subterranean
madness is shoveled
like red hot coals
into a nation's engine;
Legions of locomotives
cross continents carrying
leads for the morning
broadcast.

Olé

To lock the doors.
 Pay the bills.
 Tuck the kids into bed.
 Stock the fridge.
 Ready the ink.

To find a decent barber
 or play chess
 please a woman
 cook a Porterhouse to a perfect medium
 figure out the sepia setting
 on your new digital camera
 pick a Greeting card for Mother's Day

to keep the shower curtain
 from touching your leg
 look in the mirror
 shave
 floss
 clip your toenails
 talk to heaven and elsewhere is

to awake
 cheap leather boots sinking
 into slivered sand
 in the middle
 of some sold out arena
 in Barcelona
 holding nothing
 but a sweat soaked pillowcase
 as the bull snorts
 and rents the orange earth with its hooves.

Feathers of Instinct

I know that walk
the walk of shame
Racing form rolled up in hand
arms flopping back and forth
wishing you could whip 'em in
but you can't.
You just go back to the bar
next to the OTB and drink
two dollar drafts
spending the tender's tip
on the next trifecta.

I know that walk
the hungry walk
the pecking order
the dirty feathers of instinct
the boring pigeon life—
pigeons that wear
tattered trousers
and holey orthopedic shoes
bending down
picking up
tickets that were
torn and tossed
to the tile by luckier,
richer birds.

Yellow

It is feathers flying out of a Persian's mouth.

It is the belly of a bully.

It is one of those dirty cardigans that Cobain used to wear.

It is the sun in Helsinki.

It is corn on the cob dripping with Country Crock, dashes of Morton's and freshly cracked black.

It is hollandaise smothering a rack of lamb on an Easter table.

It is jaundice.

It is a tortilla from an Authentic Mexican restaurant.

It is dried spots on toilets in bachelor pads.

It is an autumn moon.

It is the used filter of a Camel Light.

It is a forgotten toenail.

It is vomit.

It is bleach.

It is my teeth.

It is electric.

It is sympathetic.

It is cautionary.

It is phlegm.

It is bile.

It is human.

Work That We Do

Writing
is mowing the lawn
every second Tuesday.

It is shoveling snow.
It is getting your hair cut.
It is emptying your mailbox.

But

sometimes
your wife has a cold beer
waiting for you after
you have trimmed the hedges
on a Saturday.

The barber gives you a nice tip
on a horse.

The flakes are light and you throw
snowballs with your children.

Tangled Kites

I think of rewarding both my tongues,
one in my mouth and one in my gun.
Goodbye last kiss; goodbye cruel day:
the bars, the keys, the warden, and the way.

All my fingers, both my eyes,
the beer is cold; the scotch is dry.
You're a traitor; you are doubt.
"The subject runs," the poet shouts!

"Am I saved,"
he repeats to himself
"or am I given away?"

The final curtain never closed,
all the prayers on stolen scrolls.
The director of this small town order
whispers to an empty stage, playhouse even colder.

Preparation is overrated—nothing but hype.
It is flying a tangled kite.

Anna

I have lived through many shades of red.
I have been tired like the old and lonely cardinal
that visits my Norway Maple. And Spent
like a Confederate flag.

But the other day I heard your favorite song
on the radio and remembered your twenty-first
birthday party that night in Queens.

That strapless, satin, rose-colored dress
you wore. Your cake—
Red Velvet.

I wanted so badly to be wrapped
in your fabric, stitched in your shade
with a needle as sharp
as a perfectly folded bow tie.

Mother Tongue

She has a tongue like a circuit breaker.
It sparks when tripped.
Fireflies stutter around
in her throat and flicker
like faulty speakers spouting
muffled cracks.

Her eyes: dim bulbs,
saving energy for more
demanding illuminations.
Nostrils flare and lips smack
when words become currents
electric language must be up to code.

Stories fall from her mouth
like lightning bolts, whole weather
systems swirl around her neck.

She turns to the west
and spits out the sun
like the shell of a sunflower seed.

Bunny Ears

Faith's a bitch.

You can't
see her

but

She's right beside you
holding up
two fingers behind
your head

while Fate

fidgets
with the flash.

Pawn

Death is nothing
but a pawn
broker. We borrow our bodies
against peace of mind.

We are lent cold sores and gangrenous limbs
facial hair and crooked toes
earwax and armpits
heel spurs and saddle bags
crow's feet and yeast infections
chapped lips and vitiligo
lockjaw, psoriasis, rotting teeth.

But kissing that space behind
your lover's ear
is worth

the disappointing realization
that Death gives us
nothing
when we return.

Classic Barroom Poet

The universe is
a cocktail
napkin.

Wet

with the salty suds
of long-bearded gods
sipping, spilling
and saying
not much at all.

II

Background Bach

The coquette sits in the parlor,
as clean as an angel,
playing the piano,
waiting for her strapping, old
man to return from the courthouse.

She picks a piece
neatly folded within the bench
and plays a funky Bach when he
enters with new laws
under each arm.

After dinner, he takes it out,
a radiant spool of Indian silk.

He sits and she spins.
But neither can quite thread the needle.

Hot Town Hurdy Gurdy

I hear what sounds
like raucous applause
somewhere in the distance—
hot water
running
through old, red pipes—some
awesome cotillion clanking
and humming inside those tubes.
Tiny debutantes feasting
on plump, purple grapes
and basted pork.
French street musicians hop
around with Hurdy Gurdies
as they sit
frozen in this warm world
with lapdogs barking in tune
with the stringed instruments.

The applause approaches
as a flood.

The god of red pipes
is angry with those throwing
lavish parties, too sozzled
to think of the tiny people
in the starving streets.

I touch the tidal waves
burning a quarter-note
in the palm
of my hand—a birthmark,
an establishment of credentials
to gain access
to this small, hot world
of pocket-sized Papillons.

Washboard

I've been yawning like a Humpback Whale
as it rockets to the surface
of the sea, singing and swallowing
seaweed and krill.

I've been breathing like a washboard being abused
by a slave in Louisiana.

I feel like a cracked dam that slowly floods
a motionless earth.

I am digging like a worm, hooked
on dirt and darkness.

brightening my teeth with bleach
and gargling warm salt water

because this itch in my throat
has stopped my singing
and I can't sleep
without a song.

T-Monk

It is autumn inside of me.
The afghan colors of the horizon
like low tones humming under my skin—

the same key played
on different chords.

I am no jazz pianist
but my fingers make music.

Exchanging solos
with the Monk, he making bread
with dazzling e flats—sliding up
and down a scale he was born to outweigh.

He heats a little Latin stew
inside a Dutch oven of dropped D's,
slowly simmering until

it boils
all I do is stir
while he turns up the flame.

He is spicy; he is savory.
He is whatever the wind can sing in summer.
Wild and tamed within an eight count.
August at applying notes
for every color on a changing Maple.

White Fish Woes

The smell of fresh *merluzzo*
filled my grandmother's small
kitchen.

The rancid white fish cooked
as I filled up on sesame sticks
provolone cheese and cream
soda.

Lent is only forty days
but
real Christians never eat
meat on Fridays.

Growing up
I hated fish.

I think that was a very big
disconnect with me and the big guy
upstairs who is choking down
Filet Mignon and sucking 18-year-old
Scotch every day of the week.

One Over Par

He is bogey for the course,
driving a rented golf cart
off the nearest cliff.

She uses
everything but household cleaning products
but she has drunk a bottle of Listerine.

We are the heavy clouds getting higher
as the ground draws closer.

Our mothers and lovers are crying at the edge
where we have left them.

But we lick our wounds and look
for a way back up
to the next tee.

Turtle on its Back

Things are backwards and it feels
wrong but good
like shooting up
with a dirty needle.

The addicts are setting up
the intervention.

The mechanics have you
changing oil.

The boss asks his assistant
for time off to visit a dying
aunt in Sacramento.

The stupid things
we used to do
turn into exciting, cautionary
tales that we repeat—
not for an audience
but for ourselves.

But everything still dissipates
the lead
the ink
the fuel
the passion
everything
but the worry.

Doubt shows
its egg-white face
again and again.

So
buy it a one-way ticket on
a train with no bar car and sober
up before the sleep you need
jumps the tracks
running off with every dream
you've ever had.

Couch Cushions

I turn my pajamas inside out
and lay my head on a pillow with words
where feathers should be.

Where lunch lines and lost loves go.
Where chivalry and tea parties are thrown
 away.
Where rainbows end and rain begins.

There is no leprechaun.
There is no gold
only the sediment
of dreams—millions of pennies
thrown into the murky well water
of disregarded wishes.

I wear the same pants everyday
and all the change
I had has fallen
out of my pockets.

Assorted Things

O the life
 I lead.
 My therapist, Doc Williams,
 wrote a script
 telling me to pay
 attention to things.

O the life
 of things.
 Small, independent
 literary publishers
 with nicotine addicted
 office managers
 and a vice chair
 whose name
 is
 Boo.

O the life
 of this poem
 generated by fingers,
properly prescribed
 medication
 and the song "Neighbor"
 by Band of Horses
 off their recently released album
Infinite Arms.

O my arms
 the right one a little
 longer than the left
 stronger and quicker
 to light a match
 or open a beer
 or hit the space bar
 and Enter

O Enter
 the chants of young suburban
 wildlife picking through
 the piles of leaves pushed together in fenced-in yards

smelling and finding the smaller piles
of dried-white shit that Jack
your roommate's five-year-old-barky-black mutt baked.

Enter night

Mirtazipine

and a Coors Light.

Sheets stained with acrylic paint and black ink

a mattress with spots of urine

left over from that pill phase.

Enter day

and a period.

A Walk in the Snow

An infant winter sky is growing
gray with mindless clouds.

Ornate streetlights make up
for the starless heaven.

I trudge from sidewalk to open road
in elephantine winter boots

as slow as slush, peregrinating
along an undisclosed path very much

like the Christmas lights lazily hung
on a lonely bush by some lackey husband.

Of course, there are the simple, classy folk
with fake, plastic candles in every window.

I make a turn into the westward
wind. For a moment, the flakes

ripen into stars and I was traveling
through a new galaxy at outlandish speed.

I suddenly found myself
back where I began. I picked up

a handful of flawless snow
and packed it in my mouth.

It was like eating a million suns
and I was home.

I Ain't From Minnesota

I come from a flour
city. My body is dough
mixed with water
from an eerie canal—no
longer a route; its ports
simply the names of towns.

We dredge ourselves in a history
snapped, captured, and framed
by some guy named George.

My grandmother's grandmother's grave
lies beneath a weeping willow, a holy
sepulcher. Its shifty shadows cool
the stone above a great orator
who broke from bondage
only to gain the final freedom.

As we all must.

Midtown has been destroyed
but echoes of elevated trains
and brothers playing trumpets
still hang in the air
like a premature "I love you"

The seasons here are as long
as the shore of some great lake.

We walk for miles
looking for a safe place to swim.

Saddle Rocket

I wish I was a Kodiak bear
at home in Alaska
along the seventy mile stretch
of the Sadlerochit River
adroitly snapping salmon
as they struggle upstream.
White sunlight cuts the landscape
like a Samurai's sword.

And when my belly is as full
as a traveling businessman's Samsonite
I will curl up in my cozy hibernaculum
without worry
for my dreams will be big and uninterrupted.

For Sam.

Henry Miller Told Me

The best way
to forget a woman
is to turn her
into literature.

But this her
my her
for today anyway
does not belong on bookshelves
nor canvases hung on trendy coffee shop walls
or in my dreams anymore.

She is a frozen flower—a fake
carnation.

•••

In the end
you were nothing
a lighthouse with a broken beacon
bone missing its marrow
campfires without sing-a-longs or ghost stories

You the dog and I
the timid trainer being walked while you pulled
and pissed to mark
your mysterious territories.

You and a child eating eggs
scrambled with melted American cheese and ketchup.

I outside
smoking a cigarette on the stoop without an ashtray.

•••

You
are not a book
you are an empty, bare, lonely binding.

In the end
we were nothing

an echo

a bouquet
left hanging on a freshly painted porch.

III

or

A momentary thaw in February

Science of the Real

Art

is just about

the most important thing

Humans do.

Zieg-How

There is a monument made
of what looks like papier mâché
on the interstate going west.
The hundred-foot-tall Native
American stands stoic, his right
arm raised, palm facing the earth.
He resembles some Seneca Nation
shaman with Deutschland sympathies
a red-skinned Paul Bunyan
with a torch instead of an axe
burning a pile of books
higher than the rising gas prices.

But really he is pointing travelers
to a nearby reservation
where they can purchase
unstamped, untaxed, illegal
cartons of cigarettes
and save money at their religiously
calibrated pumps so when *you buy*
a gallon of gas, you get a gallon of gas,

He has no current political agenda
yet sometimes when I drive by
I see small men with smaller
mustaches standing beside him
looking up in admiration.

The Dark, Loud Hour

I am an avid eater of edamame,
The salty pop of pods like little dancing
Buddhas on my tongue.

I want to burn my fingers on the sunset.
I want to eat the rotten moon.

I am lactose intolerant and swallow
Pints of Ben & Jerry's
and wheels of brie for breakfast.

I am a pill popper
a drunk
and an inspiration to my family.

I am in love with Midnight, the dark, loud hour
that gives us the wails of the homeless and the mating
cries of streets cats.

I am a sloppy songwriter
picking chords with pennies
and forcing rhymes.

The dark, loud, hour between now
and another sunrise,
twilight and dawn making love.

This slowly moving earth rotates
with the vibrations of crickets and toad croaks
crying to me—someone always looking
for a little more time
to write
the perfect sentence...

All Employees Must

When you know which
towel dispenser dispenses
towels faster and more effectively
than the others
in the restroom of a particular bar,

you have been there too often.

Alcoholism can be fun
but cirrhosis is not.
Those with OCD are not having fun
and though ironic
washing your hands for forty-five
minutes before you can leave the house
every morning can lead to some
serious dermatological complications.

Most drunks don't wash their hands anyway.

Pound for Pound

Spring comes in like a Cesarean section,
forcibly cut from winter's womb.

It seeps slowly
into the atmosphere
lacing the sky
with capillaries, pink and purple.

A beaten boxer on a wobbly stool
has a broken nose and blood, red
tears drip like soft April showers
changing lilies into roses.

Appalachia

Somewhere in Pennsylvania
there are statues in rivers
and fountains
in hilltop cemeteries.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania
there is a Bible College where misguided
teenagers go to fill a void left by absent
parents and unlocked liquor cabinets.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania
steel workers sweat out
Rolling Rocks and go home
to teething children.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania
farmers' wives cut apples
with paring knives and bake
pies left to cool on the windowsill of a local Porn store.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania
the moonlight
is just as severe as stiff
Appalachian moonshine.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania
a tree shivers in that moonlight
and a rabbit finds a hole

as everybody dreams of waking up
on the shore of a calming sea.

Camera Obscura

Clear nights make me claustrophobic.
The stars wink at me like death.
They are tiny holes poked into the Camera
Obscura that is earth and the image

of myself is fuzzy. I stand with my toes
in the water while the clumsy, climbing
moon raises the tide. Everything is upside
down so I stand on my head while looking

at the mirror of the sea. My eyelids hurt
from squinting, but I see a man without edges
mingling with the space surrounding him.
I have been in this box for far too long

I am running out of air.
I need to punch a hole in the sky
just to catch
my breath.

La Purisima

The grass has been growing
for a thousand years and I am
going to the top of the hill
up a sinking, sandy path.
Nearby rattlesnakes hiss
like an ancient battle cry.

Above me, like God
had placed it in the earth
with his thumb and forefinger

I see a tall, wooden cross
a crow as black as arctic shadows
resting on its peak.

I dream of dead soldiers who strangle
the living while they sleep.

The devil has the voice of many
waters.

God Save the Crooked

There exist in corners of clean cities
dark and dirty alleyways
that lead to damp, descending
cement hallways hailing certain
dangerous little men that scurry
underneath the earth like roaches
in a Long Island City apartment
when the light comes on.

Only these men, these filthy insects
own that building on 21st Ave.

These men have built up the busy cities
by burrowing beneath
us, the beautiful, bustling bumblebees
in our open-air-honey-starved hives.

The N Train

A man on the subway
 wearing dark sunglasses, sports
 a wrinkled, faded-blue Polo shirt.
 He wears a thick, unkempt
 brown beard. I could tell his eyes were closed
 behind his imitation Ray Ban's.
 His head was tucked neatly between a hand rail
 and a window: a contemplative position.

Of course, on the N train, at half past
 five, heading north, to Astoria, the man
 could have simply been tired from a long
 day at work.

But there was something
 noticeably different
 about this man.

He was a dreamer. He wouldn't miss
 an opportunity to conjure visions
 of rivers flowing with top-shelf vodka

or being a rock star
 or learning the Tango
 true love
 or keeping his teeth as he ages

clarity
 peace

the colorless nothing
 the happy void

the unnamable sensation that our body loves
 and our minds fear
 because of its incalculability.

The hair on my neck was attentive.
 The bumps on my arms: geese rising from a gully.
 My ears became vacuums.
 My skin, a garment that my muscles and organs

had discarded. My brain expanding like a balloon, floating
as the moon does through the shifty clouds.

I opened my eyes, lifted my shades
to my forehead to see my reflection
in the window,

flying

amongst the tiny skyscrapers below
as the train elevated,
emerging from its own black hole.

Catching Up

A plastic bag clings to a branch
of a leafless tree in early winter.
Like a translucent weathervane
it catches the wind.

But presently it holds the light
of a faint and distant star
acting as a kaleidoscope
for stubborn sparrows
that can't seem to smell
the season of the South.

It catches cool, thick air
from the Gulf Coast.

Small grains of sand
from the floor of the Moab.

The scent of bamboo
from a boat afloat
in the Indian Ocean

Fairy dust from gift shops
in Provincetown.

It has captured its share of snowflakes and prayers.
It has been ravaged by the harsh Western New York elements,
yet it is an example of persistence.

Strong in its lifelessness. A symbol
of a wheezing man slowly climbing
to his fifth floor walkup.

The tree is death holding onto
a spiritless body. No decay—just sporadic
shifts in usefulness.

But the bag is never empty.
At times it holds kisses blown
by a loving mother miles away.

Spectral
dust and confectioner's
sugar swept up by
a baker's apprentice.

In the December days
it holds enough heat
to warm a small spider.
In the damp nights:
icicles the size of an elf's
pinky toe.

It keeps
its balance. Recycled from
some light fixture or candy
wrapper. And it remembers
the last time it was held by
a human hand.

It swings like a pendulum
in an old Grandfather clock,
holding on like an acrobat
gaining momentum with each tick,
balancing on the unseen string
with nothing but hard earth below.

But now
tonight
it holds God's one-lunged breath
the infinite invisible
and my pen.

Rain, Sleet, or Snow

An archer draws a bow.

A sailor lifts the anchor.

The clowns step on the gas of their tiny clown cars with their huge clown shoes.

And dogs bite the mailmen.

The arrow falls short of the target.

Mutiny is imminent.

And nobody laughs anymore.

But the gas bill always gets delivered.

Somewhere in the Middle

In my dreams
I find the other sock.

In my dreams
I floss.

I don't break
the key off in the lock.

There is dog shit
in the refrigerator.

I am watching
network television.

My penis is just as big
as it is in real life.

I'm fat.
I'm lazy.
I am unloved.

It's when I'm awake
that I fantasize
about beautiful women pleasuring me.

When I'm awake
I hit the game winning homerun.

I chip in,
for birdie,
from twenty yards off the green.

I win
the Pulitzer.

I'm awake when
I search
for dreams I never had.

Like Paint

I am waiting for you
to make me smile again
to change winter to spring
 one to two
 without to with

 with a diamond tiara and skinny legs
 with a dynamite laugh and crooked teeth
 tattered sweaters and flats without stockings

I am waiting like paint
 for your dry humor and wet lips
 to kiss me back into the game
 to turn me like a top
 and pick me up when I stop spinning.

Hot Off the Press

I want a stray dog
to call my own.

I want to write Krishna
a letter and stick it
in between the cracks
of the wailing wall.

I want a banana milkshake
after a swim in a dirty lake.

I want a woman
to tattoo my name
in her mouth.

I want to plant
a row of azaleas with eyes.

I want an easy chair
with a wagging tongue.

I want nine senses, not just five.

I want to quit smoking.

I want God's breath
to smell like the morning paper.

Works Cited

- “An Interview with Robert Bly, Part 6.” *robertbly.com*. 17 January 2011.
<http://www.robertbly.com/int_6.html>
- Bly, Robert. *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1962. Print.
- Bukowski, Charles. *Portions From A Wine-Stained Notebook (Uncollected Stories and Essays, 1944-1990)*. Ed. David Stephen Calonne. San Francisco: City Lights, 2008. Print.
- Ciardi, John. *How Does a Poem Mean?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959. Print.
- Collins, Billy. *Nine Horses*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2002. Print.
- Frost, Robert. *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Random House, 1944. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1971. Print.
- Hofstadter, Albert. Introduction. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. By Martin Heidegger. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1971. ix-xxii. Print.
- Weich, Dave. “Powells.com Author Interviews: Interview with Billy Collins.” 2004.
<http://www.powells.com/authors/collins.html>.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1959. Print.
- Williams, Oscar. *Immortal Poems of the English Language*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1952. Print.

Works Referenced

- Bukowski, Charles. *Play the Piano Drunk like a Percussion Instrument until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*. New York: Ecco, 1979. Print.
- Bukowski, Charles. *South of No North*. New York: Ecco, 1973. Print.
- Ciardi, John. *Ciardi Himself: Fifteen Essays in the Reading, Writing, and Teaching of Poetry*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1989. Print.
- Collins, Billy. *The Trouble with Poetry*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959. Print.
- Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979. Print.
- Kaufman, Walter. *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York: The Viking Press, 1954. Print.
- May, Rollo. *The Courage to Create*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975. Print.
- McKuen, Rod. *Stanyan Street and Other Sorrows*. New York: Random House, 1954. Print.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1934. Print.
- Sherman, Stuart P. Ed. *Essays & Poems of Emerson*. "Language" p. 13-17. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1921. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Other Writings*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993. Print.