

Some of the Parts: Poems and What They Can Do

by

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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.

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## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

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