

Field Research: Poems

by

Thomas O'Brien

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English of the State
University of New York, College at Brockport, in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

2000

Field Research: Poems

by

Thomas O'Brien

Approved:

Stan Samuel Rubin

5/11/2000

Thesis Advisor.

Date

William Hegen

5/26/00

Thesis Reader

Judith Kibler

5/11/00

Thesis Reader

D. M. Hale

6/15/00

Chair, Graduate Committee

Paul D. Ingusoll

6/15/00

Chair, Department of English

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my mother and father, without whose constant and loving support I'd have never gotten this far.

I'd like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and for being a constant source of material.

I'd like to thank the staff of the English Department for providing me with an excellent education.

I'd like to thank Judith Kitchen for her patience, understanding, and insight, as well as for being a reader for this thesis.

I'd like to thank William Heyen for sharing his wealth of knowledge and his love of language, as well as for being a reader for this thesis.

I'd like to thank Stan Rubin not only for directing this thesis, but also for his generosity, compassion and understanding, without which this endeavor would have been impossible.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Field Research (Preface) | |
| Part I. Source and Precedent | 1 |
| Part II. Beautiful Lies and Ugly Truths | 14 |
| Works Cited | 21 |
| Field Research | 22 |
| and Red is | 24 |
| January 28, 1986, 11:38 a.m. EST | 25 |
| Driving in the Rain at Night | 27 |
| Dinner | 28 |
| Heft | 29 |
| Small Victory | 30 |
| Interrogation of a Dead Boy | 32 |
| Sweet Hollow Road | 33 |
| Four Food Groups | 34 |
| Caress | 37 |
| Walking with my Father | 38 |
| Garden Shadow | 39 |
| Fetch | 41 |
| Easter | 42 |
| January Park | 46 |
| Nicotine | 47 |
| Drifting | 48 |

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Pimple | 49 |
| Never | 50 |
| megalomaniacal waltz | 52 |
| In the Dark | 53 |
| Silk | 54 |
| Broken Acorn | 55 |
| Horseshoe Crab at Bergen Point | 56 |
| Cricket Hunting | 57 |
| Elegy for a Rabbit | 58 |
| Premortem | 59 |
| Storm Prayer | 60 |
| unperson | 61 |
| Time and me | 62 |
| Spite | 63 |
| Button in a Pocket | 64 |
| Song of the Night-Elf | 66 |
| Nighttime Ever Breathless | 69 |
| Dear Death | 70 |

Field Research

“To steal ideas from one person is plagiarism,
to steal ideas from many is research.”

~ Academic proverb.

Part I. Source and Precedent

T.S. Eliot says in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (Sacred 49). Eliot’s statement is akin to the notion that good poets borrow and great poets steal, and expresses a sentiment that I have long thought of as being at the heart of what it means to be a poet. I have read old masters such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Shelley, and learned from their prowess with verse. I have lingered over the experimentation of E.E. Cummings and T.S. Eliot and have likewise learned from their mastery. As much as I have studied the poets that have long since come before me, I have also tried to experience poets that are not as dated as the ones I mentioned above. Poetry is the ultimate expression of language, and as language is constantly evolving, so too must poetry. Hence it is not just the dead poets of the past that we must concern ourselves with, but we must experience poets who are more contemporary as well.

T.S. Eliot’s most well-known poem, “The Waste Land,” is, to say the very least, intricate and complicated. It is widely considered the masterstroke of modernist poetry.

While I enjoy The Waste Land for a wide variety of reasons, I don't enjoy it in the same way that I enjoy poems of a more unified construction. When I mention Eliot in relation to accessibility, I find that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a poem that is far easier for a reader to relate to, and is overall a poem in which the meaning is clear. By simply comparing the openings of both poems it can be seen that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" draws the reader in from the outset with clear images, while The Waste Land is readily prone to be disjointed and move in more abstract ways. First, let us look at the beginning of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.

(Waste Land 3)

Some of the language here is heady, but it is easy to follow. The night sky as compared to a patient under anesthesia leans toward a kind of abstraction, but a cloudy twilight sky does drift in the stratosphere like a patient drifts while under gas. The depictions of cheap uncomfortable hotels and greasy spoon eateries are real and concrete, as well as being indicative of decline in modern cities. Long, dirty streets that make you wary can perhaps be said to be like a “tedious argument” in that they seem to go on forever and they make you uneasy. The addressing of another character deftly draws a reader in, especially considering that the person addressed is not identified and is most likely the reader. This opening stanza presents us with a straightforward depiction of walking through lonely streets at the close of day to visit someone. In The Waste Land, we can see a different poetic approach at work:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Lithuanian, echt
deutsch.

(Waste Land 29)

Here there is less imagery and more abstraction. We are given the rebirth of spring but we do not get the visual image of life springing forth; rather Eliot gives a dry delineation of the events of spring. Then we jump to a short anecdote about travelling in Germany, which stands out from the detached descriptions of winter and spring by quickly becoming personal and narrative. This is followed by a quote in German, which roughly translates as "I am no Russian, I am Lithuanian, all German." While the language is fluid, the images are less succinct and tend to move away from comprehension.

I do of course realize that The Waste Land is trying to do new and innovative things with language, while trying to utilize that innovation to capture the fragmented essence of modern society. However, the clashing images and thoughts make the reader force his or her way into what the poem is about. While it is true that poetry shouldn't be so without complication that it doesn't require the reader to think, too much convolution can rob the reader of the pleasurable experience of poetry on an aesthetic level. "The Waste Land," as I said, is a poem that I do enjoy, although it is less pleasurable to me than a poem like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Meaning no disservice to the great poets of the past, I have come to realize that, try as I may, I cannot help but like some poets better than others, despite their significance. I have to say, then, that there are certain poets who have influenced me more than others.

The quiet reserve of William Stafford has always impressed me. His ability to conjure a feeling is unrivaled. "At the Bomb Testing Site" is an excellent example of his skill with language. This poem explores the impact of testing of nuclear bombs on something as small as a lizard, while at the same time contemplating the ramifications of the test:

At the Bomb Testing Site

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,
watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.

It was looking at something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.

Ready for a change, the elbows waited.

The hands gripped hard on the desert.

(Stafford 110)

The poem starts simply, with a lizard in the heat of the desert, anticipating an unknown and perhaps unknowable event. The second stanza came across to me as a subtle metaphor for the shortsightedness of the bomb makers and the government that is ultimately responsible for the unleashing of atomic weapons. I say “subtle” because Stafford never rants and raves; he simply uses direct language that is akin to everyday speech. Then, in the third stanza, he looks at the seemingly desolate landscape of the bomb tests and parallels it to the lizard bracing for the impending blast. Here too is a subtle metaphor for the effect felt by even those most removed from the bomb and the war at the detonation of the first atomic bomb.

As in all of Stafford, this poem has a quiet voice that refuses not to be heard. It doesn’t shock or shout. It simply calls attention to itself with direct language and a command of subtle phrasing. Stafford, as always, makes us feel and think by employing an easy flowing lyric style.

Sylvia Plath has a way with words that I find incredible. The way she is able to take something as simple as cutting herself and turn it into a host of different things is amazing. As with many of her poems, “Cut” exemplifies her ability to pull together simple yet stark imagery and language and make it powerful:

Cut

For Susan O’Neill Rose

What a thrill –

My thumb instead of an onion.

The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.
Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Red coats, every one.

Whose side are they on?

O my

Homunculus, I am ill.

I have taken no pill to kill

The thin

Papery feeling:

Saboteur,

Kamikaze man –

The stain on your

gauze Ku Klux Klan

Babushka

Darkens and tarnished and when

The balled

Pulp of your heart

Confronts its small

Mill of silence

How you jump –

Trepanned Veteran,

Dirty girl,

Thumb stump.

(Plath 13-14)

The cut is represented by many different images. The flap of skin is a “hinge” and a “hat.” The blood flow is “plush,” perhaps as in carpet. The flap is then a “pilgrim” being scalped by an Indian and the blood flow is now a “turkey wattle,” a rolling red carpet. Soon it is a million Redcoat soldiers.

Plath is deft at using painful imagery and description of sensation to create a feeling. Having become the homunculus of legend, the blood cannot be stopped by pills or by the bandage. The finger, having opened the door to pain, is a kamikaze, a saboteur. The bandage is a controlling force of ignorance, like the KKK. The pain and the blood are pushing forth to confront the silence of the bleeder’s life. The heart, the suffering victim, confronts the “mill of silence,” which, in the guise of the pills and the bandage, attempts to stifle the pain, to conceal knowledge of that pain, and reduces the heart to “balled pulp.” This confrontation causes the owner of the heart to “jump,” forcing her to acknowledge the pain of her life.

“Cut” represents Plath’s amazing ability to deal with complex emotions and explore the ways we deal, or refuse to deal, with them. Unlike Stafford, Plath calls attention to her subject. Whereas Stafford whispers, Plath screams.

Billy Collins is a poet I have come to admire. His poems speak with an intense voice that is casual at the same time. His poems also stand or fall, each on their own merit. I have always been impressed by poets who can write poems that are charged, in and of

themselves. The individual strength of these poems is amplified when they are collected into a book. Collins' Picnic, Lightning is a collection of poems that range from the witty, to the laugh-out-loud funny, to the very serious. Each poem has a spark, a wholeness, which makes it complete unto itself.

Billy Collins also makes leaps in his poetry that are risky, yet they pay off. He also blurs the line between truth and fiction. Take, for example, a poem like "Fishing on the Susquehanna in July":

Fishing on the Susquehanna in July

I have never been fishing on the Susquehanna
or on any river for that matter
to be perfectly honest.

Not in July or any month
have I had the pleasure – if it is a pleasure –
of fishing on the Susquehanna.

I am more likely to be found
in a quiet room like this one –
a painting of a woman on the wall,

a bowl of tangerines on the table –
trying to manufacture the sensation
of fishing on the Susquehanna,

rowing upstream in a wooden boat,
sliding the oars under the water
then raising them to drip in the light.

But the nearest I have come to
Fishing on the Susquehanna
was one afternoon in a museum in Philadelphia

when I balanced a little egg of time
in front of a painting
in which that river curled around a bend

under a blue cloud-ruffled sky,
dense trees along the banks,
and a fellow with a red bandanna

sitting in a small, green
flat-bottom boat
holding the thin whip of a pole.

That is something I am unlikely
 ever to do, I remember
 saying to myself and the person next to me.

Then I blinked and moved on
 to the other American scenes
 of haystacks, water whitening over rocks,

even one of a brown hare
 who seemed so wired with alertness
 I imagined him springing right out of the frame.

(Collins 7-8)

From the very first line, Collins tells us that he has never experienced what he is talking about. But it is the experience of never having had the experience that makes it interesting. Billy Collins has not lost hold of the importance of the imagination. The kind of departure from reality that can be seen in Collins is a version of truth that is as important as the truth found in creative nonfiction and fiction.

Collins is also a master at reaching to the reader in his poems. Each poem is alive, whether it talks about the hat passing out of popular style or is a more referential poem that meditates on Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (not to mention the abbey itself). Some are clever and witty, like "Victoria's Secret," while others are more reserved and serious, like "Musée des Beaux Arts Revisited." In each one Collins puts enough of himself in the poem

to make it work, and yet leaves room for the reader to get in. The collection then becomes a series of poems that play off one another, yet stand wholly on their own.

These are not the only poets that have influenced me. In fact, I'd say that every poet I have read has in some way had an effect on my poetry, even if it was to make me aware of something I did not like. These poets – Eliot, Stafford, Plath, and Collins – are the ones I feel have challenged me most and inspired me to try to make my poetry live up to some quality in theirs.

Part II. Beautiful Lies and Ugly Truths

Once, my roommate and I stayed up late, well past dawn in fact, discussing the existence and nature of God. He, as an agnostic, challenged my notions and got me thinking about some of my beliefs.

We discussed whether God, assuming there is a God, could allow all the suffering in the world. We discussed war and all the loss and pain brought by it. I had an uncle, my father's brother, who died in the Korean War. He was the pride of the family, an athlete and a scholar, one of few in my family to go to college.

He left school to fight in the Korean War, voluntarily. He never came home. I have never been sure exactly how he was killed. I have never been able to risk hurting my father by asking him to relive the hurt of losing one of his brothers. I know that the loss to my family was devastating. I never knew him.

We also discussed whether this possible God could allow physical suffering and illness. My aunt, on my mother's side, died after a long and painful battle with cancer. She was a sweet, gentle, woman who suffered long before cancer. Her husband, my mother's brother, was for many years an alcoholic. She stayed with him and he credits her as one of the reasons he was able to fight his addiction. She has seen, as many families of alcoholics see, several of her children go down the same road as her husband. This too she endured. Sometime in the early 80's she developed skin cancer. It was treated, but it left her skin and muscles sore. Over many years the cancer continually metastasized, making it much harder to fight. Through the better part of the 80s and up until 1991, she went through varying cycles of chemotherapy and surgery. Each time the cancer came back. Finally, on June 26, 1991, after being painfully ill for so long, she died

in her sleep.

Not long after the conversation with my roommate, I was talking about these things with my devout mother, when my nephew happened to be listening from down the hallway. I asked my mother, “Why do you go to church every Sunday?” From behind me with all the sincerity and innocence of a seven-year-old came, “ ‘Cause Mommy says so.”

* * *

Poets do in fact “steal ideas from many,” as my opening quotation has researchers doing. Simply put, as I have heard professors say for years: good poets borrow, great poets steal. The length and breadth of poetry comes down to us from those who came before us. Poets, by necessity, have to take from the world and make it theirs. For some, it is the art of telling beautiful lies, and for others it is the means to convey ultimate truth. But, and there is always a “but,” it is also both these things at the same time. In his book Walking Light: Essays and Memoirs, Stephen Dunn has an essay, “The Truth: a Memoir,” that does something similar to what I did above. He recounts a number of stories that are partial or complete fabrications. Dunn goes so far as to pirate the true story of his friend. He admits to having told the story of his friend’s near-deadly experience during a snowstorm in a cornfield in Minnesota, as his own:

I’ve told this story for years, and only one thing is wrong with it, if it in fact constitutes a wrong. It never happened to me. I left school that day as soon as classes were called. The snow and wind were bad, but not prohibitive. I arrived home forty-five minutes later than would have been normal, and spent the weekend happily snowed-in with my family. It was my friend Al Zolynas who got lost in a cornfield. It was he who was saved

by a farm couple, lovely people with whom he became friends. He spent one night, not three days, with them. Over the years I've added little touches of verisimilitude, like wishing to sleep in the snow. After all, the story is mine now. I've claimed it for whatever dark needs. Surely it could have happened to me, and something in me wished that it had. I've always desired to enlarge the life I live, only occasionally through deed.

(Dunn 135)

Dunn's story is a pirated fiction, which to his credit he admitted, much as I am doing now. I think my account of a conversation with a friend makes for a good read. It could easily be part of a memoir about my family. Except for the fact that it never happened. Yes, it is true that my roommate and I had an all-night discussion about God, but I did not tell him about my aunt and uncle, both of which are true stories. The ending featuring my mother and nephew is complete fiction. I have discussed God and the church with my mother, but I spun this one out of whole cloth. My nephew has never listened in on these conversations, as far as I know, and has most definitely never said anything if he has. Knowing my nephew as well as I do, I am sure that he would give such an answer had the story taken place as I created it.

It is these lies that poets create when we write. The world we create in poetry is not a reflection of the real world but rather a translation of it. If a poem about your mother works better, in terms of sound or image or some other aesthetic, if you say she was wearing a blue dress when she was in fact wearing a yellow dress, she must wear the blue dress and give the poem what it needs. The truth we create in poetry is not literal

truth. Facts are not the marble with which we sculpt.

That is not to say that any lie is acceptable. If you are to write about the Holocaust, or Pearl Harbor, or the use of chemical weapons on civilians during the Gulf War, or on any subject of that magnitude, you owe the truth to those that died. It is in this way that poetry occupies a tenuous limbo between truth and fiction. The bounds on poetry are ill-defined, the lines not clearly drawn. We have the ability to shape our view of the world, to adopt personas to expand our creative voice, but we must be wary of going too far and doing injustice to those our poems take in and make use of.

We are all of us delicate instruments collecting data. We take in all the world has to show us and report it, in our own way, to others. Some internalize the world and then create a world from that. This we call fiction. Some try to tell us of their experiences and comment on them in a search for meaning. This we call creative nonfiction. Then there are those of us whose view of the world is that it is an alchemical mix of fact and fiction. This is the realm of poetry. Heather McHugh talks at length about this in her essay "The Store," in Broken English: Poetry and Partiality. She says something that I think captures the essence of what I am talking about: "We enter into a contract of faith through which we are an other; we see things through his eye and stand in his place" (McHugh 10). She is making a parallel between photography and poetry that puts it better than I ever could. Poets are sense lenses through which people can experience the world. All the sights and sounds and smells, all the touches and tastes, all the emotions and feelings are projected out of the poet, via poetry, into the world.

I want the reader to be able to see what I see, to know what I know and have an experience of language along the way. Poetry is not merely the telling of stories, or the

broadcasting of thoughts and emotions it is language. It makes the words flow and sound. It paints the image. What I want, more than to convey the simplicity of an experience or observation, is to have the reader know it and feel it through the words I have chosen and the way I present them on the page.

I have thought about these things and, like any good researcher, experimented with them. I have written poems in rhymed couplets and stanzas and free-flowing poems full of internal rhythm and near rhyme. Sometimes, in emulation of the old masters, I try my hand at writing sonnets and formal poetry. Other times I try to experiment with the form of my poetry, and while what I am doing has been done before, it is new to me and, I hope, the reader. I try to have the words on the page lead the reader to the sound of the words, as they would be spoken. I think of poetry as music. I try to have sound and rhythm create feeling. Some of that music is harsh and staccato. Some is soft and relaxing. Some of that music is frantic and loud. At the same time I am worrying about choosing just the right word to say what I mean or to paint the scene. Did I go too far? Did I go far enough? I am personally not a fan of poems that need explanation. Poems must communicate something to the reader. Some do this by capturing an image, or by means of sound or by telling a story, or even by using these elements in conjunction. Even in poems as complex as T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, it is clear that despair and desolation are the focus of the poem. You may not always know exactly where you stand with a particular poet, but if that poet has done his or her job, you will at least come away with the feeling that you have gained something. In a letter to Franz Kappus, Rainer Rilke advises the young man towards the path to becoming a poet:

Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading

out its roots in the deepest places of your heart; acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all – ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: *must* I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a simple “*I must*,” then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.

(Rilke 18-19)

It is this that I think of most when I write. When all is said and done, I ask myself if I have done my job as a poet.

In organizing this collection I have found it useful to try to have the poems play off one another in different ways. Quite often I find myself grouping poems of a similar theme together. Poems about love and longing seem to find themselves in one area, poems about nature in another, poems about family in yet another, and poems that are observations about the world around me occupy still another. Despite the fact that I have grouped them in this way, I feel that I have arranged them so that they inform each other and the collection as a whole. Sometimes I want several poems of a like theme or mood to follow one another in order to develop a sense of the variations in that theme or mood. For example, “January Park,” “Nicotine,” and “Drifting” comprise a short span that deals with themes of lost love and develop a mood of loneliness and longing. Other times I will have poems of contrasting mood or theme follow one another to give a sense of reflection as to how they influence one another. For example, “Broken Acorn,” “Horseshoe Crab at Bergen Point,” “Cricket Hunting,” and “Elegy for a Rabbit” represent a section that looks

at man and his relationship with nature from different angles. "Broken Acorn" and "Cricket Hunting" depict man being influenced by nature, while "Horseshoe Crab at Bergen Point" and "Elegy for a Rabbit" depict man considering his influence on nature.

I call this collection *Fjeld Research* because I feel that we are all in the business of learning, and my poems are my report back to the world which has been my teacher.

Works Cited

- Collins, Billy. Picnic, Lightning. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP, 1988.
- Dunn, Stephen. "The Truth, a Memoir." Walking Light; Essays and Memoirs. New York: Norton, 1993. 133-43.
- Eliot, T.S. The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism. London: Methuen, 1980.
- . The Waste Land and Other Poems. San Diego: Harcourt, 1930.
- McHugh, Heather. Broken English: Poetry and Partiality. Hanover: UP of New England, 1993.
- Plath, Sylvia. Ariel. London: Faber, 1965.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. Letters to a Young Poet. Trans. M.D. Herter Norton. New York: Norton, 1954. 17-22.
- Stafford, William. The Darkness around Us is Deep. New York: Harper, 1993.

Field Research

If, in my wide tie
and too small shirt,
with all my bull weight
heaving breath,
I stumbled up
and asked you
who you were,
would you tell me
or would you,
looking strangely at me,
walk away with
agile lack of grace?

And later in the day
would you,
looking to the other
who knows
the is and was of you,
speaking of the bull-man
huffing questions,
want to confirm

the answer

you didn't give me?

and Red is

and Red is a radio tower blinking
against the November sky,
and Red is the candy stripe whirligig
of a barber's pole,
and Red is a bloody mouth
after a fight,
and Red is my girlfriend's toenails
when I paint them,
and Red is a clown nose left behind
in a dark circus tent,
and Red is fur
on a fresh road-kill deer,
and Red is a mad crayon
foaming at the color.

January 28, 1986, 11:38:00 a.m. EST

Whispers and giggles bubbled
in the hush of Mrs. Goldstein's
classroom as we huddled
in the blind-drawn darkness
waiting for history to unfold
on a twenty-five-inch screen.

We watched in amazement
as pillars of white smoke
rumbled Challenger and its cargo --
Scobee, Smith, Resnik, Onizuka,
McNair, Jarvis and McAuliffe --
into the bright blue winter sky.

As they rushed skyward,
pulling our dreams
with them into the future,
our hearts lifted with six astronauts
and one brave teacher
we all knew as Christa.

As we chattered our awe,
our excitement,
the room became bright
with the rise of a terrible hungry sun.
We all took the same breath at once,
as if the explosion had consumed the air.

In that confused, frightened silence,
we watched Mrs. Goldstein
wither in her vinyl chair,
tears streaking her white shirt.
She was suddenly older.
We all were.

Driving in the Rain at Night

The streets are slick with rain tonight
as smooth runnels of water
trace the lines of age in the pavement,
a black marble table top,
beautiful yet slippery and treacherous.

The red glow of the ambulance
reflecting off the shards of glass
mixes in brief flashes
with the blood of bodies
with broken faces.

Among the dead and dying
the siren cries
the echo and reecho
of mechanical mourning
in this silent city canyon.

Dinner

You watched with growing horror
as the farm hand lowered
the long, silver pole to the back
of the young steer's neck.

You turned and buried
your head in my shoulder
as the shot dropped
the steer to the floor.

You clung hard to me
when the body
thumped hard
on the ground.

Later, the day over,
by candlelight we ate steak –
cooked rare, delicious
brimming with blood.

Heft

This heavy cage
of fat and sloth
hides a man
who peeks through the bars
and lets himself remember
his younger,
thinner
better days.

He longs
for that half forgotten dream
of running free
and climbing trees.
But then he sinks
down into the world of
bacon double cheese
and snicker pie.

Small Victory

By the time I catch sight of white
letters on a red jersey it's too late.

The first hit blacks my eye,

exquisite purple swirls of pain.

The second hit breaks my nose,
with a dull wet crack and a spray

of bright red on the lockers.

The kick rakes a cleat across my ribs
and drops me breathless to the floor.

They look on and laugh, waiting
for me to beg or cry or scream.

Half blind and streaked with blood,

I slowly pull myself to my knees
and look at number 38 standing
over me as I lick the thick and

salty blood from my lip.

He looms, smiling down at me.

With the last of my strength I

turn to him, knees scraping tile.

With as much breath as I can muster

I look him in the eye and spit.

Interrogation of a Dead Boy

Was it worth it?

You and your friends chasing him?

What did he do?

Did he walk on the wrong side of the street?

Did he look at you funny?

Was it just that he was smaller than you?

And when you caught him on that guy's front porch,
was it fun to beat him?

Did it make you feel big to break his nose
and bloody his face?

Did you laugh when he cried?

Did you hear the door open?

Did you think to run when the man came out?

Did you see the gun?

Or were you just so cocky that the gun didn't matter?

Of course, you won't answer.

You went and got your face blown off.

Sweet Hollow Road

As they wait on the line,
they idle and glare.

With an audible click
the light goes to green.

Shrill smoke
peels from their tires
like mechanical brimstone.

Mike tries to hold on
down the whiplash curve
but in that hot second
between fuel and fire
Jimmy is faster.

Out of the dark
bright as the dawn
come the high-beams,
a foghorn sound bellows
but nothing can stop
the scream of steel on steel,
the wet crunch of bone.

Four Food Groups

Meat ~ *For my Family in California*

Packed in coolers
stuffed in carry-on bags,
the cold cuts are ready to go.
Uncle Jim takes the roast beef,
Jimbo the ham,
and Aunt Debbie has the salami.
They gather their tickets,
their bags and their meat
and board the plane for L.A.
A cooler can make New York
last a little longer
if you pack it right.

Dairy ~ *For Chris and Marc*

A pizza slice
goes down nice
with a chocolate shake.
Salty cheese and sweetened milk

make the strangest combination.

A sundae for dessert;

two kinds of cream

iced and whipped,

rich, thick and full of sugar.

Fruits & Vegetables ~ *For Sue*

I ain't no Popeye,

don't give me none

of that spinach.

Salad? Please,

do I look like a rabbit?

Cauliflower, Broccoli,

Brussle sprouts?

Bitter weeds,

You can have 'em.

Hey Eve,

I'll take that Apple any day.

Give me just a taste

of that sweet forbidden fruit.

Bread ~ *In Memory of Ellen Secor, Devoted Wife, Mother, and Baker*

One cannot live on bread alone

so she bakes cookies:

sugar, oatmeal, chocolate-chip,

ginger snaps, and macaroons.

On the table is fresh baked love.

Have some with a glass of milk,

it sure beats bread and water.

Caress

My mother's hands,
rough from a rough life,
hit much harder
than any belt or spoon.

One to hold, one to hit.
Carefully efficient,
never closed or brutal,
three slaps a proper sentence.

My mother's hands,
gentle in her way,
held more softly
than any I have known.

Tender in the wiping of tears,
the stroking of hair,
firm in the pulling closer,
trembling in the letting go.

Walking with my Father

His Mets have lost at home again.

Queens is angry as it mopes away.

He leads me through complaining streets

with a smile,

and buys me a pretzel.

Garden Shadow

In Memory of Aunt Debbie

Laugh as the weed germinates,
killing the rose
with maniacal roots,
infecting her soil
with innumerable
strangulating
hydra-heads.

Be of good cheer
when her leaves fall away
as they dig out the clusters,
the life-stealing tangles,
that eat and eat
and eat away
from deep within.

Smile as she preens
her last dying petals
trying not to let you,
the ones she nourished

by pushing you into the sun
and pooling the rain for you,
know how much it really hurts.

Just hold her in the light
and give her your water
as her shadow slowly fades
in the garden.

Fetch

At the far end of the yard
where the pines make noon shade
a shadow leaps into the air,
becomes a dog,
and chases the ball I used to throw.

At the edge of sight,
a ghost of motion,
he briefly brakes the shade.

He sniffs the soft dirt hump,
turns his panting gaze on me,
then wags his tail,
barks once
and disappears.

*Easter**In Memory of Aunt Katherine*

I.

Three decades of children,
two dogs and a cat
careen through her house,
with thundering steps
that shimmy the walls
threatening her glass figurines.

Very uneasy,
this reed of a lady
sits by the TV
knitting a doll.
Every so often
she stops the mechanical
clicking and tickling
of needles and thread
and calls them each over
one at a time.

The girls all get Barbies
in hand-knitted dresses

and bonnets like those
worn by prim southern belles.

For the older boy, trucks
with real working lights
and engine rev noises
when pushed on the floor.

The younger boy gets
a stuffed Snoopy doll
crocheted and smiling
its little yarn grin.

II.

Out in the kitchen
Polska Kielbasa
is boiling in pots
while up on the counter
seasoned with cloves
a glazed ham,
awaiting the oven.

Softly she skins
the russet potatoes

and cuts them in quarters
perfect for mashing
except for the few
divided in eight
she's saving for roasting.

She flits like a hummingbird
from counter to closet
flanked by her daughter
and sister and nieces.

To some she gives china,
to others the linen
so the table can be
properly dressed.

Then like a blur
she is into the fridge
grabbing greenbeans and corn
which she passes behind her
for eager young ladies
to wash and prepare.

III.

The ties are all loosened
as well as the belts
and the dresses exchanged
for comfortable slacks.

The couch is now covered,
as well as the floor,
by family exchanging
family tales.

She finally sits
with a drink and a smoke,
surrounded by those
she has gathered together.

All raise a glass to her –
good ol' Aunt Katherine
Grand Dame of the family.

Even babe Jesus
up on the mantle
is smiling for her.

January Park

Sitting on that cold ordinary swing

with you on my lap, we made summer.

The dirty snow left by last week's storm,

melting thick and opaque toward the drain,

was soothing as it ran.

Our breath burned in white clouds.

Contented in that January Park,

we made our own July.

Nicotine

Let me pull back this pine branch
so I can see her,
and him.

She's wearing his ring.

How it shines.

I can almost hear her laugh.

I remember her lying on the futon,
white sheet
covering her long curves,
and how her too-big feet
stuck out.

She smiled when I touched her hair.

I wonder if she kisses him
like she puffs on that cigarette,
sucking him in like nicotine.

Here she comes,

I'm gone again.

Drifting

The world beyond
the window blurs
as thousands
of white moths
fall dying to earth.

Windblown,
brushing gently
on the warm glass,
they become soft tears.

I feel your
Florida breath
over my shoulder.

Looking back
only the empty room
stares blankly at me.

I wonder,
is it cold where you are,
now that I am warm?

Pimple

I pulled a pearl from my arm,
smooth white, soft to the touch
but not quite round
like those farm-grown necklace pearls.

This was a wild pearl,
clumped and misshapen
formed by happenstance,
the irritation
of a mote of dirt
in the clam flesh
I have closed myself into.

It left behind an open wanting mouth.

You took the pearl
in with your lips
then kissed the hurt,
soothing and wet.
It burned to seal the wound,
this strange exchange of gifts.

Never

I never felt the sharp
cold knife slice my skin
letting warm life flow over it.

I never swallowed
thick and viscous
liquid pennies.

You never bandaged
my bleeding wrist
as the eager blood soaked through.

You never feared
the tiny red drops
would stain the cream carpet.

We never rushed
to the emergency room
to have my hand stitched closed.

I never gripped the triage table
as the doctor pulled the needle
and thread through my skin.

They never laughed
as I walked through the halls,
my wrist bound in gauze.

I never cursed those stitches,
my lack of nerve,
nor you for stopping me.

I never held the knife again,
tracing the line of thread,
praying for courage to return.

Oh, and I never thanked you.

megalomaniacal waltz

I'm the night's sweet music and
you're enamored of my dance.
With each calculated step
you match the cadence of my waltz.
All the world has stopped and
time can not keep time with us.
Our hollow laugh like cold dry wind
echoes off the hardened earth.
Not snow but jealous shadow falls
as our forms eclipse the sun.
So, tell me your secrets
and I'll let you see
the innermost workings
of my grand design.

In the Dark

We are close in the dark.

The dull hum of the locusts
in the summer's warmth
pulses as I wish we could.

The house is quiet,
the others have all gone to bed.
Only we two friends
lie here awake.

I can taste your breath,
full with the flavor
of Burgundy wine.

I can smell your skin,
fresh with the scent
of lilac perfume.

Content to be near you,
yet wanting so much more,
I clutch the pillow,
soft as I know you must be.

Silk

Watch the spider
hang his web
upon that dark
corner of the house
just so
to frame
the moon
riding high
in her October sky.

He weaves
the lines to catch
in rainbow beads
of midnight dew
the concentric circles
of her corona,
a halo within a halo.

All his work
to catch, briefly,
a fragment of her beauty.

Broken Acorn

How hard must you have hit the Earth
to crack your rockish head?
Or did someone step on you
as you lay dying from the fall?

Between the cracks I see
the aging brown of rot.

What a miracle it is
you managed not
to lose your hat.

Horseshoe Crab at Bergen Point

Out along the rocky sand,
far from the fishing poles on the dock,
I found an up-turned horseshoe crab
pulled into itself against the sun.
I poked it with a stick.
Its legs and stinger blindly raged as
I pressed the hard point,
twisting slowly,
until at last I knew
the armored flesh would give.
I felt the crab clench back in,
the imminent stick at its chest.
I took a deep breath,
feeling the ocean swell around me.
Then, gently, I pushed the crab
into a retreating wave
and watched it sink
back into the water.

Cricket Hunting

At night

in the grass

trying to find

but never finding

the pizzicato violin.

For where you are

is where they are not

and there you are alone

in this abandoned field

with ten thousand crickets.

Elegy for a Rabbit

As the clock bells ring noon,
the chill fall air grows still
and the rabbit lies dead in the weeds.

His fur is undamaged,
smooth brown
with soft white beneath.

His eyes are open,
liquid black pearls
staring blankly into a tree.

The tree is alive with a murder of crows,
their caws split the air
in a cacophony of anticipation.

Soon the crows will eat his eyes.

I want to bury the rabbit,
cold flesh into cold wet dirt,

but who am I
to give to the worms
what is left to the crows?

Premortem

Face down in the black earth,
where barren trees cast
twisted patchwork shadows,
lie the bones:
not a perfect bleached white
assembly
but a disjointed
 yellow
 heap.

This thick pitch dirt
has swallowed all
but skull
 spine
 hips.

Here in the dark heart of the woods,
the gap-toothed smile of the
vertebrae
hides some sinister
 Cheshire
 Cat

And I wonder what dark soil waits for me.

Storm Prayer

One great gray cloud,
upon which lightning danced
in frantic pirouettes with rain,
so thick it washed away the world,
ate whole the moon and stars.

Trees shattered
at the whim of wind,
falling in
black and white slow motion
of old time newsreels.
Nothing could come after this.

I sat alone in my room,
a hypnotized and trembling

Neanderthal
crouching in the dark,
fearing an angry God,
or gods.

And illuminated in that
sinister raw electric light

I prayed to any god that would hear.

unperson

I walk among you invisible.

When I vanish from the crowd
no heads will turn to
look at the sudden empty space.

I walk in silence.

My heavy boot heels click
the knowledge of my passage
yet none notice the source.

I am faceless.

In mine you can see
everyone you've ever met
but no one that you know.

I am the man who does not exist.

I shall remain until I pass from
obscurity into infinity
into whatever lies beyond eternity.

Time and me

Late at night when I can't sleep

I get to know time intimately

and wonder if time is conscious of itself.

If it realizes the lopsided way it doles out its favors,

giving the mountain eons to craft

that perfect niche for the eagle

to lay its eggs,

giving the mosquito hours to suck

all the blood it needs

to lay its eggs.

If time is aware it has not told me.

On those long nights,

when I am all too aware of time,

I ask about these things,

but time doesn't answer.

Time is forever silent,

its actions speak for themselves.

Spite

For 27 years a man let his house fall
into the hands of drunken teens
carousing with stolen beer and rocks
so his wife, who ran off with another man,
couldn't get her share of the profits.

Odin wanted only whole bodies
for his horde in Valhalla,
so the Vikings lopped off limbs,
littering fields with dismembered corpses
only to shun the enemy from paradise.

Button in a Pocket

In a quiet corner of heaven
far from God's throne
and the bustle of
angel, saint, and prophet
is a closet.

Neither hidden
nor obvious,
it is wonderfully unspectacular
in the cool recesses
of God's workshop.

Its perfectly plain door,
creaking old dark wood,
opens upon a
long forgotten coat.

Simple and unadorned,
this heavy black coat
has lost a button
that now resides in the pocket.

On days of discontent
God sits in this coat,
in this closet,
stroking this button.

His thumb glides along
the smooth texture
of its ebony roundness
until he is relaxed.

In the cool dark
of God's closet
an old button
holds the fate of the world.

Song of the Night-Elf

Döckálfar: Black elves; known as tricksters in Teutonic mythology.

Also known as Dark-elves or Night-elves.

- Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend

I. Arise at Twilight

I shall walk out among you at close of day,
when twilight casts shadows on the wall,
and I will be shadow.

Perhaps tonight I will amuse you.
I dart in and out through the crowd
and weave my dance as I flit,
changing partners
as a hummingbird changes flowers.

Perhaps tonight I will scare you.
I hang back and stalk you,
a hoarse raven that croaks your fatal entrance,
suggesting a threat with every motion,
making you cast a wary glance
over your shoulder.

II. Whispers

Let me tell you of silent rivers
running quick and cold
across my soul like icy spiders,
harsh currents that erode
with predatory hunger.
Still waters do indeed run deep,
but shallow currents roll hard and fast.
The surface of the stream,
full of life and bright
with playful sunshine,
hides the cutting scars
the water presses hard
into the stone that shapes it.

III. Night Symphony

Run and hide, run and hide.

Fear the hollow loon cry wind,
my solemn chorus.

Beware the trees that slowly sway,
my misplaced metronomes.

Shun the crickets that accompany me,
my pizzicato violin.

Hide in your bed from my music.
Pretend not to hear the macabre melody
that hunts for you by moonlight.

Nighttime Ever Breathless

Nighttime ever breathless, waiting.

Darkness, ever so degrading.

On the street, in the light,
something more than rotten.

In here, in the dark,
quickly now forgotten.

Here now in the blackness

they strip me of my face

and so now by moonlight

I take another's place.

How I hate the darkness

for well I know my role

yet nothing could be darker

than the hate within my soul.

So they come to me at nighttime,

ever breathless, waiting.

How I hate the darkness,

ever so degrading.

Dear Death

Dear Death,

The fruit is on the table.

Tell God the mangoes are for him.

Sorry, but the devil took the cherries.

Mother has a message for St. Peter.

It's on the cover of her cookbook.

(She'll need it back by Thursday.

to bake for the bazaar.)

By the way,

take the dog with you.

He died last night and needs walking.