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Travel for Agoraphobics

John Allen Berry

University of Southern Mississippi

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

TRAVEL FOR AGORAPHOBICS

by

John Allen Berry

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2013

ABSTRACT

TRAVEL FOR AGOROPHOBICS

by John Allen Berry

August 2013

Travel for Agoraphobics is a collection of fifty poems accompanied by an introduction. Using both traditional and experimental forms, the poems are in conversation with each other about loneliness and isolation in an age of technologies designed to bring us closer together. The introduction addresses the influence of other writers and the process of writing and revising.

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2013

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A Dissertation
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Approved:

Angela Ball

Director

Rebecca Morgan Frank

Charles Sumner

Linda Pierce Allen

Susan A. Siltanen

Dean of the Graduate School

August 2013

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INTRODUCTION

Galway Kinnell once stated, "To me, poetry is somebody standing up, so to speak, and saying, with as little concealment as possible, what it is for him or her to be on earth at this moment." This is what I hope to do in my own work. I want to record for my readers what it was to grieve over the inconsolable loss of a friend. I seek to come to an understanding of the world that I find myself in, and one way that I do this is by taking on the masks of the characters I explore so that I can view the world through a sort of blind. I want to try to look at what terrifies me, see it with a fair amount of humor. Others have pointed out to me that there is grief in many of the poems in this collection. I would be the last to argue with that assertion. I'm still attempting to understand and cope with losses that haunt me. By writing about them in my poetry I give myself, and perhaps my readers, a safe remove from which to face grief. I initially wanted to say that these poems were somehow my gift to the world. That, to use a polite term, is balderdash. I write selfishly. I write angrily, fearfully, sometimes cowardly in an attempt to deal with what I find most embarrassing, confusing, and painful in life. On occasion, I write about what is beautiful, too. Most of the time, however, I write because I'm running scared and trying to hold myself together. It's not a pretty thing that I do, but maybe if I'm good, or at least competent, the end result is something musical.

I, on occasion, half delude myself into thinking that I'm writing to make the world's load less. Again, that is balderdash. What is a writer but a dictator, a narcissist, a snake oil salesman driven by his own hunger and fear? I write because it's a way to make people listen. I write because it is the one semblance of control that a poet

has in the world that would strictly speaking grind him up for fodder. My poetry is the mask I hide behind to look at things that I can hardly bear to see. Personas bend to my will. And though I am not a jazz artist, I use Jazz as a vehicle for thoughts and feelings

Let's talk about Jazz for a moment. Growing up in rural Alabama, I had maybe once read a story that mentioned Billy Holiday, but beyond that my experience with Jazz was limited to the opening theme of the 80's "Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer" television show. I knew Jazz when I heard it, but beyond that I knew nothing. However, my freshman year of college I became acquainted, quite against my will, with the world of Jazz. I took a part time job at the campus radio station that played Jazz during the day and Rock and Roll at night. It was my hope to work as many shifts as possible, including news, Gospel, and Jazz, in hopes of gaining the experience I needed to ingratiate myself with the management and work the rock shift. Day after day, after chapel and after lunch, I would sit up in the booth spinning the LP's and the new technological wonders, CDs, of such artists as Jelly Roll Morton, Art Blakey, Diane Schuur, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis (we could play "Bitches Brew," but being a conservative religious college, we couldn't say it on the air). Over time, just as my mentor Dr. Hayes said it would, the music began to grow on me. I began to notice structures, phraseology in the placement of the notes. When Bird Parker would blow his saxophone in conversation with the piano, he created not only a rhythm, but a mood as well. He could lift the audience, and then bring them right back down again. For example, when a chanteuse, like the Brazilian singer Astrud Gilberto, lent her voice to a classic like, "The Girl from Ipanema," she used not only the words themselves, but the shape of the notes to create a picture of the girl winding through the streets, breaking the

hearts of men whom she never even noticed. To be a part of that, to look briefly into that world that I had no contact with other than the music I was playing, turned what was originally a means to an end into a passion.

This passion is what I hope to reflect in the piece "WJBS FM." The voice of the disc jockey is my own in as much as the DJ is not a part of the world he speaks of, but rather an observer looking out on it. He is a maestro, summoning up this world: observing it, commenting on its residents, but not judging them. He is the soda jerk in Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks"; he is Prospero conjuring the storm; he is the Stage Manager in "Our Town," telling the audience all about the people they'll meet there. Most of all, he is a desperately lonely voice reaching out to the elusive community of night people who, like him, seek the solace of company when most of the world has gone on to bed. He is me, sitting up there in a booth all those years ago, dimmed lights, and a roomful of records at 91.5 WFHC on the FM dial, experimenting with a mask so different from my own narrow, bookish face.

There are many poets from whom I draw inspiration in my attempts to record my understanding of the world. From the work of Lucille Clifton, I learned the importance of voice, and came to understand how a writer can find poetry—right behind you as it were. Clifton was once quoted as saying, "I am an old black woman, and I write like one." This exercise of poetic voice is certainly evident in her piece, "Homage to My Hips," where she states: "these hips are big hips/ they need space to/move around in./They don't fit into little /petty places. These hips /are free hips./They don't like to be held back." Clifton didn't have to go far to find subject matter, but what makes this poem so astounding is the way that Clifton boldly celebrates the wonder of her body. She is not

embarrassed, nor is she demure; she is proud. This poem is a reaction against the preconceived notions of the body, and societal standards for what a woman should look like. Clifton refutes all of these. She boldly states that she is not what society suggests she should be, and she's proud of that. If your society won't make room for me and my hips, the poem suggests, I'm going to take them elsewhere. This is a poem that exudes freedom. The poet says I'm not going to be tied down and forced into your mold; instead I'm going to make my own way. I'm going to create my own space where I can move and breathe. Don't you pity me because I don't fit into your standard for what is beautiful. I can bewitch a man just the way I am. She writes boldly and proudly with a voice that she has earned.

I was reminded the importance of writing in an authentic voice while working on a poem that does not appear in this anthology. I attempted to write in the voice of an aging jazz musician who is facing retirement with declining strength and little more than his union pay to rely on. The problem with the poem is that I had not earned that voice, and could not mimic it properly. Though the ideas were there, the voice did not sound authentic. Some research and one amazing Sonny Rollins concert later, I still couldn't begin to represent the man I attempted to create properly, and the poem will likely never see daylight again.

I have come to understand that it is far better to write from my own voice and experience. That is not to say that I do not create characters from time to time, but they express truths that I have come to know and understand. Dorianne Laux and Kim Addonizio, in *The Poets Companion*, encourage poets to try on the personas of other characters, write as someone else, but what comes of these experiments are the poet's

own thoughts and ideas, although presented in the voice of the character. In my poem "Ritual," for example, I create a common man working his job in corporate America, as ordinary as tap water. However, when he alters his usual path to work one morning and trips and falls, tearing his suit pants, he abandons reason and retreats into superstition and ritual to appease the gods for his transgression. I'm neither a white collar worker nor am I particularly superstitious, but I did have an accident that came as a direct result of altering my path to the Liberal Arts Building one morning. That small incident gave me a bit of insight into how superstition works. We take the same path to work or home every day for perhaps months on end without incident. Subconsciously, we begin to succumb to the routine; we are comforted by it. Or perhaps we wear the same shirt to every home game of our favorite sports team, and they win consistently. Then one day, we alter our path by a single street, or our shirt is dirty on game day and we can't wear it, and disaster strikes. We have a minor accident, the team loses, suddenly cause and effect are misappropriated, and we decide that the real reason for our misfortune is that we broke the ritual. The idea that a simple change can alter the course of a day or sequence of events was terribly frightening to early humans, and for all our technology and understanding, we haven't abandoned that suspicion completely. My poems engage the terror inherent in the idea that there are capricious and cruel forces in the universe against which we have absolutely no defense. The poems I craft are my attempt to make sense of these forces, and as Jack Kerouac once said, "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion."

I would couch my work, perhaps most comfortably, in the Confessional school. The so-called "Confessional" poets (who didn't necessarily appreciate this label) express

an honesty and courage that I admire. Berryman's *Dream Songs* are especially courageous, exposing thoughts that most people politely decline to express. The emotional nakedness of his desires and hungers rises from the page and causes me to look at the aspects of myself that I keep hidden, perhaps even from myself. In "April Inventory," Snodgrass expresses the seemingly lecherous thoughts of an otherwise decent and respected man grappling with age and declining virility. He bravely invites out into the open the primitive, often embarrassing thoughts that we keep locked inside ourselves.

Perhaps the greatest influence on my own writing, however, is an all but forgotten Southern poet who hails from my home state of Alabama. Upon graduating from the University of Alabama's MFA program, Everette Maddox moved to New Orleans to teach in the creative writing program at Xavier University. It was in New Orleans where he achieved his greatest notoriety and success. It was a dear friend's assertion that my early work was similar to Maddox's that first got my attention. Reading his poetry and attempting to emulate him started me upon the path that eventually led me to pursue a degree in creative writing.

What strikes me about the work is the brutal honesty and the sparseness of his verse. This is most strongly demonstrated in the case of the deceptively simple poem, "Things I'd like to do, Preferably Before I Die." The poem is crafted in the form of what has come to be known in popular vernacular as a "Bucket List," wherein he states:

- A. Get Suzy
- B. Get drunk
- C. Write some poetry.
- D. That's all

E. Wait a minute,
wait a minute,
wait a minute.
one more
summer storm
would be nice.

On the surface, this piece seems quite ordinary, arguably un-poetic. It reads like the "to do" list of a drunken lecher with poetic aspirations, but after the first occurrence of item "E" the poem begins to turn. The repetition of "wait a minute" communicates much more than mere hesitation. By causing the reader to pause, not once, but three times, Maddox creates a space between the early items on the list and the ribald humor of the poem's tone wherein the poem begins its crucial turn. The final lines, "one more/ summer storm /would be nice," reveal to the reader that we have misjudged the poet's character. He is not merely some drunk to be at best laughed at and at worst ignored, but rather a vulnerable entity who seeks to create, love, and experience life before it ends. Within its modest borders contains five of the major themes that poetry so often deals with: love, bacchanalia, writing, nature, and most prominently, death, which does not appear in the body of the poem, but overshadows it from its place in the title. The beauty of this poem immediately touched me. However, it was not until I was preparing to teach it to my English literature students at Wallace State Community College that I fully understood the complexity of the work. This poem directly influenced one of my own, the first one published in print, entitled "Strange Weather." Although not a part of my work at USM, I include it to demonstrate the scope of Maddox's influence on my work.

Strange Weather

It once rained toads over Scotland,
Snakes over Memphis, Tennessee.

Two Hotels in Washington State
Once collided during a flash flood.

A woman in Syllacauga, AL was struck
by a meteor!

Granted, it caught her on the bounce.

So is it too much to ask,
on a lonely stormy night,

for lightning to strike twice?

In this short piece, I borrowed Maddox's framework of the simple list. I chose a collection of seemingly unrelated meteorological oddities, events that demonstrate the strangeness and randomness of the natural world. The events are documented, and decidedly unique, although it is with a judicious measure of humor I point out that the woman from Syllacauga was not directly struck, so perhaps that event is a bit less magical. The final lines of the poem are a supplication; they are a plea to whatever forces that dictate the events of this magical world. What I am asking for, as indicated by the use of the adjective "lonely," is for these forces to allow for that magic to occur yet again. What is implied within the final plea is that these capricious forces could grant the magic of meeting and falling in love, an event as common and yet at the same time unusual as a lightning strike, to occur once again. Like Maddox's piece, the poem's strength rests in the turn, which takes the reader out of the humorous portions of the poem and delivers the seriousness of the message with a fair measure of surprise.

During my time here at the University of Southern Mississippi, I have benefitted from reading the work of a number of other writers, poets to whose work I

might not have otherwise been exposed. I have learned much from Phillip Levine, who provides in the closing lines of his work "Gospel" something that I had struggled to communicate for years, "How weightless/ words are when nothing will do." I find myself drawn to Levine because, like me he often tells stories in his poems.

That is not to say that I am averse to experimentation, or that I take a dim view of the work of my colleagues who derive truth through the musicality of words and lines. These poems, which derive their meaning from sound, are amazing to me and feel like a sort of alchemy that I have as yet been unable to achieve. I am in awe of the work of the modernist poet Gertrude Stein, whose experimental poetry calls attention to language more than content, much like the Cubist painters of the early 20th century call attention to surfaces more than to representation. Her emphasis on the specific words of her poems and their individual meanings is astounding to me. I recall hearing a quotation about her famous line from "Sacred Emily," which reads "A rose, is a rose, is a rose." Stein's goal in this work was to return meaning to the word "rose," which had, in her estimation, lost meaning through constant use. Stein's argument was that the word was sufficient in itself to contain roseness and that focusing on the word forced the image into the reader's mind. How powerful are the tools of the poet's trade, even though, as Levine stated, they are at times insufficient. In workshop, I came to understand how focusing on the words and sounds can draw out the truth of the poem in a way that focusing on a narrative simply cannot. However, I find myself following the edict I once found scrawled in the margin of a Victorian Literature paper I had written in the earliest days of my return to school: "Make it Mean." Though I am interested in making music, I am most interested in making meaning.

Of course, I have not always sought cohesiveness in my work. As a beginning writer, I had a strong attachment to my poems, and every line and turn of phrase was sacred. Altering the piece at all was unthinkable. As a result, my work suffered from deep sentimentality, awkward rhythm, and triteness. Over time, I learned to hone the work, to cut out what does not fit, and that a line, no matter how clever or witty, must sometimes be sacrificed for the greater good of the poem. Well, so I thought. In the workshops here at the University, I have come to understand that editing cuts much deeper than line edits. As Dr. Ball reminded me, Robert Frost stated "no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." I came to understand that the poet must sometimes sacrifice obvious meaning in order to preserve music and truth. I no longer see myself as the defender of my own poetry, but rather a gardener. If the work is to blossom and grow, to reach its full potential beauty, judicious cutting must take place. On occasion, the plant must be cropped down to the stem in order for it to grow properly. Cruelty is not what makes the gardener cut, but rather kindness to potential beauty.

I have chosen to call my dissertation, *Travel for Agoraphobics*. In many of the works contained in this volume, I have attempted to capture the spirit of the times. These are days in which so many various means of communicating with one another are available, and yet these same technologies serve to isolate us from each other. For example, the titular "Travel for Agoraphobics," explores a romance in decline, played out through a series of missed calls and voicemails. The central conflict of the poem, loosely based on personal experience, is one member's love for travel versus the other's agoraphobia. "Love Among Linguists," a prose poem written for Julia Johnson's Poetic Forms class, explores the awkwardness and humor inherent in the ritual mating dance

that men engage in while trying to woo a woman. The dance becomes particularly discomfiting when the suitor is overmatched. Another prose poem, "Self Portrait," is a somewhat manic representation of the way we are force fed pop culture, news, and weather in densely packed bites.

This collection represents the work I have done here at USM, and the growth that I have experienced as an aspiring poet (as Louise Gluck suggests we should be called). I see myself as a keener for the dead, a comedian, pointing out the inherent humor in humanity's foibles as well as my own, and an art historian of sorts. Through each of these masks, I attempt to comment on the life that terrifies and confounds me. My work is a means of escape from what I can never completely elude, and so must try to approach in writing I hope in time fully to realize my aspirations to become a poet, but in the interim, I will keep trying.

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WJBS FM

Good evening, my friends.
Insomniacs, late shifters,
refugees from last call
you're listening to WJBS,
your source for Jazz, blues and soul.

It's 2 AM, time to pay the tab,
turn out the lights,
and pull that special someone close
if only in your dreams.

If "the Thrill is Gone," like Chet Baker said,
at least you and Billy Holiday can
commiserate over the
"Ghost of Yesterday."

I know who you are, Night Hawks.
I can see you through my telescope
looking out my studio window,
roaming the indigo streets.

This is your time, our time,
my children.
We are the night people.
dreamers that the Sandman forgot.

I see you, last call hopefuls
clutching at gossamer strings
hoping they're strong enough
to last 'til morning.

Back alley lurkers
by the stage door,
selling paradise by the pop
to help the new Birds fly.

The boys in the band
haggling club owners,
making time with accommodating
ladies for bed and breakfast.

You working girls,
heading home to the kids,

on too sore feet,
home before the cocks crow.

Good night, my children,
we the night time nation.
This is WJBS, 91.5 on your FM dial,
here's a little "Lullaby of Birdland"
to sing you to sleep.

A JAZZ DICTIONARY

Dixieland - A group of horns laughs at the oppression and heat of New Orleans and death.

Big Band - Your grandfather's Hudson rolls through the countryside with Glenn Miller as the Hays Code curtails Busby Berkeley.

Torch Song - Love has been somewhat unkind to Nina Simone.

Experimental

Jazz - The drum kit falls down a flight of stairs; the horns, looking on, scream.

Cool Jazz - Chet Baker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane exhale.

Piano Jazz - Marian McPartland longs to interview Thelonius Monk as Jelly Roll Morton begins another stroll.

BeBop - One of Charlie Parker's more interesting mistakes spawns a new movement.

A FAN

The *Live at Montreaux 75* really represents his best work. He was really smokin' that go round, he and the other cats were truly on. I got to see him at the Blue Note a while back and, well, he swung like a rusty gate, way past his prime. Charlotte told me I was too harsh, told me that she didn't think it was as bad as all that. She wants to get it, but never will. She doesn't love Jazz the way I do, doesn't understand that it exists only in a moment, and once it's gone, there's no way back. I know, I know, it was a nice gesture, taking me to see the show and all; but give me my collection

of sides any day over these has-beens tours. Like that moment when a side man told Charlie Parker to "BLOW!" That was the essence of Jazz. Something happens and it can't be recreated. I want that experience, like love, that perfect moment frozen in time. Nobody else can do that, not these days. It takes a special kind of fan to understand what that moment is.

THE MAN IN THE BIG SUIT

I came out of the darkness, no. To be accurate, the darkness became me, like a shadow coalescing at the edge of the stage door light. I do like to make an entrance, performance is half of selling. Black Brooks Brothers, hanging loose like a flag on a still day. Then I see him, the mark. "Hey Joe Below, I've got a proposition you might be interested in. Used to be a horn player myself. I was good! So good the bandleader kicked me out." Then I sigh like it still hurts, and look all shy-like and say. "I was just too pretty for His taste."

"I'm not much interested in business. Got a set to do."

Tough kid. So I attack his vanity. "Yeah, another set for 10 drunks and a lost tourist, you sure hit the big time. Naw, son," I say, patting the breast of my jacket. "What I have to offer you is

magic."

"I ain't interested in junk."

"Boy, don't snap your cap, I ain't talkin' about China White." I love the straight shooters. So I say to him, "I have a proposition. Trade you something you've got for something you've always wanted."

"How would you know what that is?"

Hooked. "Son, I've been watchin'. Since you got your first horn you wanted to be one of the swingers. Used to pretend like you were on stage at the Red Drum. You've got the chops. You just need what made Bird fly, made Baker blow, put the smoke in Dinah Washington's eyes; I could give you that, for a fee."

"Bird's dead, so are Baker and Dinah. Gone before they had to be."

"You wanna be a Sparkler or a Roman Candle? Only brief flames burn bright, you wanna live forever?"

"All I want is to be seeing your back as you slide down that alley there."

I snorted. Heh, tough sell, but I've got him. Just a matter of time. "Suit yourself. I'll be back when you're ready to play. Everybody plays eventually." Then I turned down the alley and the shadows sucked me up.

LOOK FOR THE SILVER LINING

In a hotel in Amsterdam,
a battered trumpet case sits
askew on a luggage rack.
Rumpled bedclothes,
white horse in the mirror,
reflected; stifling room.
Toothless, grimacing, he
wanders to the window,
this man on his way back,
coming home again.
He raises the sash, a
swan takes flight.
A late spring fall.
Curtains billow into
the evening, May 1988.

I don't meet him
until Spring 2000.
Sitting cross-legged
on Stacey's floor
assembling a CD rack;
in the slow gloaming
of our brief interlude.
She puts on some music,
a flawed, angelic voice,

*Let's get lost, on a night
like this, let's get crossed,
off everybody's list—*

ALCHEMY

Give me Ella on a rainy night,
stereophonic tube amp,
none of this digital noise—
glass and internal light—
slight hiss of cue burn
and a slow 33 1/3 rpm.

Give me a small stage,
brick wall, solitude,
as Bird takes starts to blow,
slouching,
into revolutions in blue,
memories of you,

Give me Miles on the turntable,
our key of F
last fight,
China White,
boiled in a bent spoon,

And I will concoct my own “Bitches Brew.”

THE QUIFF

He shuffles a bass line up the street.
His Zippo a brush ride on cymbal,

He's mostly Gabriels and Ivories.
Sharkskin jacket, hip flask,

smokes Lucky Strikes,
naturally.

He calls me Billie,
some nights Ella, Nina, Sarah.

Says, "Play romantic like Torch Song,"
Blue dress slit up to my thigh

pearls and gloves, a Jazz Club dream.
Hey baby, ain't I good to you?

Says, "Play me in a minor key tonight,"
make him wail and moan, make him

feel the teeth of romance, the
bite. Make him cry me a river.

Jazz is sex, always hand in hand.
He calls me Jellyroll, Main Queen.

But like the rest he says,
"Baby, do Chet Baker for me."

REPRISE

This is before you met her.

She is someone else.
You are sweeping the floors
in another city.
The chanteuse is holding her feather boa,
the orchestra is tuning up,
the audience is seated expectantly
at candlelit tables.

You see her on the train,
or meet her at a party,
the beat of your hearts
is Art Blakey, Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa.

The fifth fight of as many days
ends with a door slam. Your bodies
no longer coax forth
Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn.

Now comes the diminuendo,
the dark, smoky voiced
Chanteuse inconsolably bemoans
promises broken, the residue
of sweet love rotted on the vine.

This is the conclusion of the fighting,
the words you cannot retract.
This is dividing the record collection
and separate apartments, this is
the empty promise to remain friends.

And now is the reprise.

You are sweeping the floors,
putting away glasses,
turning out the lights.

VALENTINE

I found your letter and I hated you.
your earnest non-cynical nonsense,
writing as if you'd never been cut.
I wanted to shake you until the
words fell off the page.

I found your letter on the sidewalk
it made me ache like I hadn't in years.
I wanted to wrap it around me
to put a club beat behind it
while a desperate 16-year-old girl
reads your words aloud.

I found your letter on the sidewalk
and I corrected your grammar.
Wrote "avoid hyperbole" in the
margins, "your not you're."
Gave it a D- and left it on
the sidewalk for you to find.

IN A CAFE ON THE SOUTH SIDE

On the way to my booth
in a café, I noticed the eyes of a girl,
maybe 15, maybe 16,
with that
painfully familiar gaze,

It wasn't me she was looking at.

It was the smug teenage waiter
whose close cropped blonde hair
meandered down to his chiseled jaw.

The world gets swallowed up
in this kind of longing.

That night in our bed
I drew my wife close,
buried my face in her hair,
inhaling her presence.

THE DISTANCE RULE

When performing this dance the man and woman cannot,
under any circumstances

touch.

Both must maintain a distance of at least 16 inches at all times.

Should the man, or woman attempt to bridge
this space,
he or she will be
immediately
disqualified,
and asked to leave
the floor.

Perhaps even,

the dancehall.

THE ENCROACHING DARK

On a pilgrimage to the place
where you fell to earth
I met a hermit who embraced me.
I fell headfirst into the blackness of his T-shirt.

He came down from his aerie
shambling and kindly,
asked me if I knew her.

I said,

"She was the sun,
her bright body,
not radiant, but like the great mother
until broken open."

His eyes, like healed wounds,
still and understanding, spoke
though we held our peace.

"And now?"

"Now is constant midnight,
everyone is monochrome. Their
nature clear in dual tones."

PARTICLES

I used to try to catch them in my hands
I could never sweep them up
though sometimes
I'd catch their messengers, trap them
in a jar, push away the darkness in my room
smear their tails across my forehead for luck.

How I feared their leaving. I tried once
to chase them, running to the end
of the block just in time to see them

pull the horizon over their shoulders,
until only a pink line lingered at the edge of town.
So I sat on the hill as absence

crept over me, prickling my shoulders
and the promise of hollowness
at the gloaming of the day.

GRAFFITI

Robert scrawled desperate graffiti on the wall of his building. A cry for help from a man who couldn't cry. Someone else, one of the funny ones, wrote something snarky underneath. He thought he was being funny. Robert took that as a sign. Realized that there was no help coming 'round the bend and it's only in B Westerns, the cavalry rides in. So he went up on the roof. He had a moment to notice how pretty the moon was before the concrete broke his fall.

A CONCRETE DEFINITION OF WANT

You think you know about want?
You think that Want is the thing waiting
on the candy aisle that refuses to coalesce
into something tangible.

It's an empty space in yourself
that you can't find the right
knick knack to fill.

But one day a door will close,
a light will switch off,
you'll stumble around finding
the furniture with your toes.

And that one thing you never
wrapped your arms around
will become the ache
in the phantom limb
you can still feel,
not touch.

ESTRANGED

We are apartment bedrooms,
second story walk-ups, town houses
late night calls, speciously valiant
rescues from mediocre villains.

We are hotel rooms in Memphis, clubs
in Birmingham. Nashville Mediterranean
restaurants, and polite conversation
during social engagements with

respective significant others. We are masked
post dinner criticisms that conceal petty
unacknowledged jealousies, the subterranean
canaries to our seeping insecurities.

These herald our coming failures, unnoticed
in the pauses and glances of our current lovers.
We are consoling phone calls made and
received at the terminus of our distractions.

We are magnetic collisions that end in repulsion;
opposing fields drawing together, pushing
apart; concessions to affectionate forbearance;
promises of continued familial amity.

We are promises, with caveats, held in reserve,
Confederate war bonds irredeemable, in attic trunks.
Earnest in desire, but worthless in capital,
we are lost to history as new unions emerge.

EXACLY WHERE AND HOW IT HAPPENED

In the Kidron Valley
after the rebellion of Absalom.
in Paris
during the Belle Epoque.

on celluloid, in Morocco,
the lighting very good,
and there were hats, fog,
and a Lockheed Model 12 Elektra.

Tuesday in a small
Southside apartment.

without warning.
screams.
Spoke in modulated tones.

resignation.
Things said.
A glass smashed
quiet as Monday.

But always a rhythm.
The constant boot click of heels
on cobblestones, as one
strained to hear.

WHEN YOU LOSE YOUR LEFT HAND

Lock your woodshop.
The cleaning will wait until
you are stronger.

Your wife will
wear your ring beside hers
bond still unbroken.

Wrap the hand in velvet.
encase it in a mahogany box
Press it close to you.

Grieve over your
abandoned bongos
your stick shift Camaro.

Sprinkle it with salt,
the petals of Asphodels
the light of a Harvest moon.

Bury it as deep as one hand will dig.
In the night, when it returns,
mottled, dirt beneath its nails,

pay it no mind
when it comes knocking
appalling your friends,
rest it on your desk, pen inserted.
Tie it to the brim
of your touring cap.

THE ART OF SURVIVAL
IS FORGETTING

In the morning, emerge from shelter:
the ruined jacket she bought you
for a door curtain,
your carry-on as pillow,
scraps of old love letters
stuffed between tree limbs,
insulating against the wind.

Unencumbered
prioritize what next:
find fresh water source,
then food, then people.

Un-write,
the pen sliding backward
across the page.

Open your fingers
let slip
every tangled scrap
you want most
to embrace.

Cut the mooring lines
to her mouth, the working
of her jaw as you fed her
a single, cold, grape.

To the rainy mountaintop
where promises were made.

TRAVELING BY NIGHT

The first night, speeding through the dark,
 blasted on caffeine and over the counter speed,
 He loses himself a little.

As his eyes begin to strobe, he slaps himself,
 Hallucinates giant rock creatures in the median, voices of lovers,
 fill the cabin with accusations, promises and lies.

“Mardi Gras with you this time”
 “You never write anything for me”
 “You’re the only one I want.”

Stumble to the night manager’s desk,
 exchange shrink wrapped for your protection banter,
 vague well-being that accompanies the perusal of
 a hallmark greeting card.

He staggers to the elevator.
 In the room he pries apart the sheets, collapses into semi-doze of MSNBC.
 Wakes at 3 am/at 5 am/at 7 am. Coffee, pre-packaged remedy for mini-comas.

Sleepwalks through the day’s meetings, fantasizes about the drugs that rock stars
 get...
 the ones that drown the roar.

Night falls and he’s still standing.
 He dines in the city. Walking distance from his
 not-home room, desk, bland distribution of lamps, odd chair.
 Channel line-ups confuse him as he doesn’t sleep.
 Finally, he takes to his car; funny how rentals
 are always better than your own.

heated seats,
 the knobs still on the radio, digital readouts of speed, mileage, pulse
 rate,
 respiration... driving unfamiliar streets, the car syncs with his bio-
 rhythms.

streetlights slip by like neon tubes, feet glide over the road
 a magnet on steel, flip on the cruise control
 at last, blessedly, sleep.

NIGHTHAWKS

There's no door here,
Just me and Eddie and all our sins.
This time of night, this place?
Good as any, I suppose.
After all, being by yourself
isn't the same as being alone.
To be truly alone, you need
somebody around to define
just how alone you are.

Take Eddie, here. He's always alone
which was part of the appeal, I guess.
There is something so irresistible
about wanting to get inside of that space.
I wanted to warm it up for him,
our cozy little refuge.
I got through door number one, and two,
but that man is all locks.

I desperately wanted to be close to him,
so I followed him here. Now we're--
Not exactly together,
or alone, but miles apart.
The biggest locked door of all.
It's coffee and cigarettes from here on out.

HEARTBREAKER

Long before you can even form the line
she's done with your crap.

she's got a story of her own,
etched across those eyes
like river stones scoured by every
grain that's swept over them.
every disappointment
tugging the corners of her full lips
downward.

You haven't seen the photo, the one where
she already has an ancient tired gaze.
Where, even though she's only 10,
she's already seen too much.
That Peggy Lee, "Is That All There Is?"
Stare. That Talullah Bankhead Less than meets the eye."

A decade in, She doesn't read fairytales,
Or *The Babysitter's Club*. Nabokov is more her taste.

THE CARTOON WIFE

They say it's the small things.

First there was that piano plinking
when she blinked.

The Jazz drum solo when we made love.

Mostly, it was her basic misunderstanding
Of human physics.

After she smashed my hand with a sledgehammer,
she was oh so apologetic.

She thought I'd flatten out, throb, swell, and inevitably
return to normal.

After that, we were happy for a while up until
she pushed me off our balcony.

The next week, while she was out shopping,
I quietly sold the anvil collection.

When I tell you I did it out of self-preservation
I'm not being histrionic.

Ladies and gentlemen, I love my wife.
She looked peaceful there, sleeping,

as I crept to our bed, clutching
in my remaining fingers, an eraser.

THE STATION MASTER

In the front yard
of my house,
down by the tracks,
I plant a railroad spike
along with asphodels.

I want to lure her home,
or at least feed the other
restless souls,
gone under the wheels.

Most nights, I have company.
An old hobo floats
through my house,
complains of no wine.

Sometimes when the mood
shines just right, we sit on the porch,
sing old Irish songs, talk of
trains, women and other
slippery things that eluded us,
that elude us even now.

SIMULACRA

With the ringing of the Nokia
my plans for defenestration
go right out the window.

The rules of our
game do not dictate that
I answer-

only that I be there to.

In a few hours
I'll phone
her voicemail,

leave her something
appropriately cryptic,
to make her squeal:

*Bernie quit the band,
Karen's coming for Richard,
Tonto has taken his last beating.*

I take a blown up photo
of my fifth story view
and hang it over the window.

The phone stops convulsing,
I key in the access code,
wait for the recording.

IT'S ALWAYS THURSDAY SOMEWHERE

The hardest thing is the old habits.
Neural pathways where "road closed"
signs haven't gone up yet. Turn by turn
directions to where you shouldn't go.

You call the phone company
because no one's calling.
The operator picks up
just ahead of irony.

But the horrible truth is, you are
fine. After a punch-drunk two years
or so, there's a sense of peace; a Zen-like
absence of self that is completely self.

The box arrives on Thursday, full
of relics and sweaters. It's
from the girl you are not attached to.
You don't need that box, that girl.

WHAT IT'S ABOUT AND NOT ABOUT

This isn't about hands, she says.
No, letting go isn't about that. Nor
is it about slow uncoiling time.

It's not about the gallery show,
at the now empty Five Points store front
where we'd spend our Friday nights.

This is about that beautiful receding
something walking away and away and away
as you're pulled the other direction.

Your mother's firm hands half-lifting you
from the ground as you stare.

*Please, I want to go after that shiny blond
girl, fading in the white tank top, flip flops,
smiling still, down the boardwalk into evening.*

I've told this story to myself before.
how they always walk away, how I can never
run fast enough, never break loose,

Even at age two

I understood longing, wanting,
and losing ground. *This isn't about
arms*, she said, slipping from my embrace.

No, it's about forgotten Florida, empty galleries,
returns and exchanges and the durable
myth of intransience.

LOVE AMONG LINGUISTS

She tells me in Sarikoli that many of the world's languages are dying. I, smiling, always the romantic, reply in Leonese that I hadn't known that. I ask her in my passable Istro-Romanian if she has read the tragic Judeo Italian poets' treatises on love in a time of hopelessness. She replies in Chuvash that she really isn't in to poetry. I chastise myself under my breath in the fading Sarwa dialect of Botswana for my foolish notions. She raises an eyebrow and asks me in quite good Oblo if I know any other African languages. I proudly reply in Luo, that in fact I know quite a few. She laughs and tells me in Bikya that my Swahili is proof that there is only one remaining speaker of Luo, and I am clearly not him. Looking to change the subject, I summon the waiter in the Oceanic language Amtō. He arrives promptly and tells me that, in this part of Asia, and particularly in this exclusive restaurant, if I want service I'll have to speak Lom. I suppose that is only fitting, considering the quality of the Sumatran coffee. Turning to my companion, the waiter compliments her in Bonerif, tells her eyes are beautiful in the all but lost Mapi language, and asks her what she's doing later in Saponi. She smiles and tells him in Tandia that he just might be her type. He replies in kind, that now she's speaking his language. Given that there are only two speakers of Tandia left in the world, I ask for the check in my broken pidgin, and she and I sit in a long, awkward, silence, having nothing left to say.

SHADOW PLAYS

Bodies stretch to grotesque proportion
against the cave wall, aping hunter,
hunted in their ancient duel.

A scrim descends, shadow puppets take the stage,
embracing like combatants, they move
in tandem, rise and fall in mimicry of life.

Filmmaker's "flickers" wave fronds before Fresnels
simulate flame on quarry walls, telling of
society returned again to the cave.

Celluloid plays, shadows on a screen
wonder returned again, reflections of
ancient dance, the hunter and the lover,
born of the fire behind.

RITUAL

After 1,036 consecutive trips
along the same route to work
Shaver alters course by three feet,
catches his toe on an loose cobblestone ,
falls in a cascade of papers and
divine retribution,
landing in a penitent heap
at the foot of the stairs.

That night, naked
under the light of the moon,
he will offer up his torn
and bloody-kneed suit
to the flames on
his backyard altar.

ONE NIGHT IN THE CITY

Tonight I'm in a land where pachyderm Buicks
roam the city streets
where it's always, always night.
Up on the third floor of the Acme,
behind a smoked glass window is a desk, and
a banker's lamp, Bogie with his roscoe and
fedora awaits the arrival of a twist with gams
that will get her away with murder.

Somewhere out on the docks,
a good man is going bad,
an impossible choice is being made,
a Palooka is getting clapped across the noodle
with a sap, while up the street a skirt
is getting sozzled on giggle juice because tonight
her man is the guest of honor at the Sheriff's Ball.

Here it's always 1942, a dark suit, and quick,
tough, mouth is all that a guy needs to get by.
Here the black desk telephone
takes calls only from Butterfield-8.

Across town, a bindle punk wanders out
onto the street looking for a chippy to pass the time.
Robert Mitchum listens out a window
to Veronica Lake's heels click out of sight.

BEFORE THE END

Before the end comes, janitorial services will suffer.
Paper towels will be at a premium. Santa will leave
cryptic messages for children like, "I'll be back for
the plump one." FM radio will play only early
Barry Manilow. The trains will run on time.
The girl you wanted to talk to on the subway will return;
you'll fall deeply, madly, in love; just when you think you'll
spend what's left of the rest of your lives together –
she'll leave and you watch the end of the world all alone.
Just as the planet disappears into a blinding light, you'll
think to yourself: "Yeah, that's about what I expected."

SELF PORTRAIT

I'm handsome, but not enough. I'm old fashioned, but not enough. I'm too hip to things that aren't hip anymore. I'm roundly despised and universally adored for nothing. I'm reviled for what I am perceived to be, my perceptions are preconceived. My conceptions are imperceptible.

When the wind blows I am introspective. When the sun shines I am incorporeal. I am nothing that you would carry home to meet the folks, I'm a wrong number scribbled on the subway walls of Pompeii. I am an enigma to puzzle masters, left on voicemail to be answered and ignored in the order it was received. I am the dust under the wheel that spins encrypting chronicles of the world's end. I am Sanskrit read on a Kindle that holds the secret volumes of my birth, rise to power, sojourn in the desert, wanderings in the barrens of Eden under the flaming sword of its guardian, the last of silence locked in Fort Knox, surrounded by blue grass and Jaw Harp confessions by avante garde Jazz masters of a future age.

She is a whisper in a back alley brawl resulting from an argument between Lewis Braille and Marlee Matlin, mediated for a moment by Helen Keller. The Phoenix Suns descend into the ashes while Dell Employees speak of Pterodactyl sightings. One asks "Ain't they extinct?" to which the other replies "Naw." She is broken down into binary, a cipher of age-old mystic intelligence, the nonsensical ramblings of the Internet prophets, speaking their wisdom and secret formulas for sensual salvation in ecumenical Esperanto.

LOSS FOR WORDS

Something misplaced here,
hidden within the private jokes of elevator operators,
scribbled on the back of a Pompeiian Merchant's bill of lading.
Atlantean Graffiti might hold the solution,
Or some dusty volume in the Library of Alexandria.
Perhaps Sappho's lost fragments,
the incantations of Juaneno prophets.

ALABAMA CAVE MOVIES

Years ago, there was a post-apocalyptic film called “The Ravagers” filmed in my old home town of Huntsville, AL. It concerned the survivors of a Nuclear War—eking out an existence in a massive cave— which Huntsville had: an abandoned limestone quarry. The room and pillar, method created an artificial cave, which provided the perfect setting for the film. The crew were either not willing to build a fire in the caves or thought it impractical. Either way, locals were hired on to work as “Flickers.” Their job was to wave tree limbs in front of the artificial lights to simulate the flicker of a campfire against cave walls.

The film starred the late Ernest Borgnine, Richard Harris, and Ringo Starr’s wife— Her name was Barbara Bach, I think—in an un-credited role. It’s an awful film. Horrid. However, the band Kansas filmed footage for Burt Sugarman’s late night NBC program, “The Midnight Special” to support their album “Monolith.” That video was actually pretty good.

AMERICAN FILM 365: FILM NOIR
THREE IMAGES FROM "THE THIRD MAN"

Note the solitary man: Joseph Cotton.
Trapped in a labyrinthine tunnel, backlit,
a silhouette against the gray, every visual element designed to emphasize his aloneness.

Noir always happens on the fringes of a city.
Could be, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, this one is Vienna.

Note the hero's posture:
Terrified, man against unseen force,
hulking, long-fingered, lurking.

Who is he running from, underground,
in the sewers of Vienna?
Note: what is obscured. What is behind him, drawing nearer.

Paranoia, hopelessness.
These things define film noir.
A generation working at night.
Even in the company of others,
the "hero" perpetually alone.

Note the hero and heroine: bisected
by the looming shadow of Orson Wells. Angular, sinister, darkness personified.

THREE IMAGES FROM "THE THIRD MAN"

Noir always happens in a city,
this one Vienna.

Man against the cityscape, silhouette against grey, emphasizing the hero –
although
"hero" doesn't typically apply—

The looming shadow of Orson Wells bisects the couple. Angular, sinister,
darkness personified.

(Tercet Version)

TRAVEL FOR AGOROPHOBICS

Not that that's of any import,
a post card from Nepal arrives
on Thursday, a Sherpa on the front

"Wish you were here" on the back
might as well be a picture of earth,
maybe an artist's rendering of hell.

In a sat-phone call from base camp
she tells me padding your obituary
is the only way to live.

From my vantage point on the couch
I realize I'm not as excited
about entropy as I used to be

In the alleyway three floors down
a cat urinates on a transient wearing a
Vail, Colorado sweatshirt and ski hat.

I step away from the window
Turn up the space heater,
Turn on the Discovery Channel.

THIS ISN'T ABOUT HANDS

NoOne's Gallery, no one's at last.
I press my nose, eyes to the window
a cupful of echoes, warmth, voices.

Olde Towne Coffee, empty gazebo
where Vanessa wouldn't look at me
as I sat next to Martha,

where the cop asked politely
before manhandling the hippy kid
with the outstanding warrants,

where the three of us—two lesbians
and a poet—held court
on caffeinated afternoons.

For no reason at all, I think of legs,
the milky white ones growing out
of a pair of cut-offs walking away

carrying a blonde's torso as she
bisects the crowd in a photo
on the Miracle Strip.

A FAREWELL TO OLD SOLITUDES (A GHAZAL)

Farewell morning chill and a cat in the windowsill
as rain pours into the gutter, old solitude.

Walking streets at midnight, late on laundry night
change jangling in a holey pocket, old solitude.

Solitary patron, foreign film, theater's late run,
couple three rows back, giggling old solitude.

A table for one, collected works of John Donne,
Din of a café's ambient soundtrack, old solitude.

Farewell to the parties, old friends' sympathies,
So sorry you two didn't hit it off, old solitude.

To non-ringing phones, absent the lavender tones
of your voice on the other end, old solitudes.

YAMATO'S

There' s a Japanese Steak House
on fifteenth Street called Yamato's.
It's named after royalty, one Prince Yamato.

He is credited as being the first Ninja,
he was also a cross-dresser, but
that was likely a means to an end.

Prince Yamato had bandits operating
in the mountains near his kingdom,
robbing travelers in a narrow pass.

The story goes that he dressed
as a woman, and journeyed to
the mountain. When the
bandits attacked, he drew his sword.

So much for the bandits.

There was a waitress named Myuki
who worked at Yamato's. I used to
flirt with her.
But that was a long time ago.

That was before I heard the story.

PAULI'S AT THE END

On the last night of the world,
we dress in our finest.
She wears a little black dress,
I a dinner jacket, tuxedo shirt
open at the throat.

At Pauli's on the square,
we toast life and love, and
what the impeccably dressed
waiter calls 'the coming great
adventure!'

The consummate professional,
he declines to join us, his last customers
but laughs appreciatively when we tell him
add a substantial number of zeros to the tip.

Later, when the owner and his wife
invite us to the roof for Tiramisu
that explodes joyously on our tongues,
this same waiter says how fortunate
that it will be night on our side of the world,

"The show," he says "will be spectacular!"

Down in the streets below,
the sirens have stopped,
there is a peaceful silence
broken gradually by a lone voice
singing Frank Sinatra's "Summer Wind"

As the sky begins to glow,
the stars blink out one by one
the moon turns red and disappears
she kisses my neck, and whispers
"Forever,"

I can't help but go out laughing.

LOST RADIO WAVES

I wanna hear you again,
Just like the first time.
Your voice tickling my
the inside of my mind.

Border blaster stations
in Del Rio, Texas played on
barbed wire fences, dental work,
reaching as far as Russia.

You're out there, somewhere.

According to the first law
of thermodynamics,
energy cannot be destroyed
ergo—

that voice is still out there
somewhere, expanding,
reaching— somewhere
beyond the Van Allen Belt,

if England could pick up
KLEE TV three years
after they signed off
for the last time, then

maybe they're dancing to ToTo
on some landscape unimagined.
Some place past our stars
the hits of '77 and your clear voice

wrapping around someone's heart and soul
like it did around mine.
Love sick pre-adolescent whose life you
had no idea you were wrecking.

THE HEREAFTER

I suppose it's another
here after **this** *here*, but
what if not?

Suppose we're still *here*
after.

We keep sipping our coffee,
Hoping for business to pick up,
Failing to notice
the funeral black or
our loved ones calling us

on disconnected lines, trying
desperately to find us

even though we've gone nowhere.

LOST RADIO WAVES PART II

Now on a lost radio wave, heading someplace
beyond Pluto, maybe reaching forever outward
off the bounce of the horizon,
long gone, centuries past
I am coming for you.

Once the grooves have worn smooth on
that last record, the last magnetic tape
has yielded its particles to space,
whatever passes for whatever's left

that part of us in wave after radio wave—

just maybe our signals will cross.
on an old line from a ToTo song,
"Hold the Line, Love isn't always on time."

NOTES

1 **quiff:** a slut or cheap prostitute. *I saw Leroy in the club last night with some quiff on his arm.*

2 (See also: “What Waits Below” starring Timothy Bottoms, see also the indie-film “Like Moles, Like Rats,” later re-titled “20 Years After.” Same basic theme as “The Ravagers,” can’t really account for the quality, I’ve never saw the finished product. But, it was made by a bunch of local folks.)

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