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Because a Fire, A Lover's Quarrel: Poems

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The University of Southern Mississippi

BECAUSE A FIRE, A LOVER'S QUARREL: POEMS

by

Clifton Clyde Ward

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

Dr. Angela Ball
Committee Chair

Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank

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Dean of the Graduate School

August 2014

ABSTRACT

BECAUSE A FIRE, A LOVER'S QUARREL: POEMS

by Clifton Clyde Ward

August 2014

This thesis comprises poems written and/or revised over the past two years. They mark the development of my aesthetic and writing ability thus far and are representative of the training and practice incited by my own efforts and those of my professors during my enrollment in the Master of Arts degree in English, Creative Writing emphasis. The majority of these poems are written in an open form, and all of them fall under three general categories: autobiographical, absurdist, or formal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks go to my committee chair, Dr. Angela Ball, and my other committee members, Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank and Professor Steven Barthelme, for their lessons, encouragements, and especially criticisms throughout the writing and revision process. Gratitude to the other poets with whom I have been in contact in workshop, literature, and craft courses is also inarguably warranted. And finally, a long bow of appreciation is directed to all of the poets who have written, are writing, and will write for the betterment of mankind.

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INTRODUCTION

Because it was my original purpose to write a collection of poems that carry Mississippi's imprint, the majority of these poems are very much tethered to that place and all of the objects and people that dwell there in my memory. I turned to many poets who had come before me for guidance. Wordsworth, Whitman, Roethke, and Dickinson had always been favorites, and they have had an indelible influence on almost anything I do. But after reading William Carlos Williams's epic poem *Paterson*—which for me is the pater familias of all really good contemporary poetry—and especially the line “The province of the poem is the world,” I knew that in order for my poems to connect with contemporary readers, I had to read as much contemporary poetry and poetics as I had room for and open myself to their influence (139). I have paid particular attention to poets who do what I am trying to do, who capture the music of place.

When I wrote “Ode to the Sack & Save,” for example, I read some poems and poets who have mastered the celebration of the mundane. Charles Simic's “My Shoes” is a particularly powerful poem for me in the way it casts a layered fog of lyricism through which one can see a richly textured narrative. The title says it is about shoes, so there is no surprise there; but it is much more than that. It is a serious and beautiful poem fixed on something far removed from the beauty it brings to life. In other words, it makes the tangible intangible. “Ode to the Watermelon,” one of many “object” poems in Pablo Neruda's *Ode to Common Things*, is answered by Charles Simic's “Watermelons.” Simic's poem is much shorter, at only four lines:

Green Buddhas

On the fruit stand.

We eat the smile

And spit out the teeth. (Simic)

But both poems delight by animating the inanimate. The playfulness of “Ode to the Sack & Save,” as well as a few others in this collection, owes something to both of these poets. In addition, my poems owe a steep debt to Kevin Young’s recent volume, *Dear Darkness*, and its ubiquitous use of the ode to create, or rather reveal, importance in the everyday.

These poets helped me produce a base that I could adapt. Like Young’s and Simic’s odes, mine are not *just* about the object being celebrated. In fact, I liked the idea of broadening the impact of the ode form so much that, in “Ode to the Sack & Save,” I put the Sack & Save at the center of a whole network of memories and impressions. The grocery store, then, becomes the pivot for the orbiting entities which give significance to the center:

You were one stop
on my grandparents’ weekday route,
just after the Old Star drive-in
by the projects
that knew to leave the fruit chunky
in my extra-large strawberry shakes,
and just before the sale barn
where once a loose bull
broke a lady’s foot
and a herd of goats ran

frenzied into concrete.

My two train poems, “Having Read Hesiod and Tolstoy Too Late in Life” and “While the Railroad Mourned Homicide by Trucks,” along with my possibly sentimental “Note to Self,” are also all grounded in my own memories and interpretations of those memories. But they come from a more primitive place impervious to outside influence.

My early childhood was dominated by the sound of very loud trains passing no more than fifty yards from my bedroom window. The sound had been there since my birth, so it had a womb-like power over me—it was my lullaby at night and my assurance that I was still close to home during the day. So I wrote a couple of poems about both the sound and the presence of the trains. I like long titles for poems because if any line can get away with being really long, it is the one at the top. But these titles also serve to suggest “train” as an object, and the feeling of anticipation in not knowing just how long it is—a feeling simultaneously comforting and exasperating. These poems want to show what it’s like to be held by trains. Others show how it feels to be held by other things.

I rarely write poems about my family. But obligation to honesty compelled me to write “Note to Self” because the people and images therein are so quintessentially *me*. There was rarely a time in my childhood when I wasn’t carrying a pocket knife around with a stick I was in the process of sharpening into a spear or arrow. My grandmother often shelled peas, even in winter, and every time my sisters or I would beg for candy, she would recall her childhood, when the only sweet thing she had for a treat was the bark of young sweetgum trees. My mother worked harder than she should have in our home and had me convinced I was British until I heard myself on a tape recording. And my father was always restlessly fighting through depression to give his children as rich a

childhood as he possibly could on a teacher's salary. These things are the pith of my world. The first and the last two lines try to contain that essence.

This is to remind me

. . .

[. . .] of all the old dry peas dropped
into broomstick holes in the dirt.

I end with the familiar trope of a seed containing much more than itself simply because it is true. The moments of purest joy I had as a child involved picking unripe peas from my family's garden and sitting in a hole I had dug or in one of our giant, open-armed pecan trees eating the illogically cool peas, watching the mockingbirds and cardinals joust for the prime roosting spots, and listening to my neighbors' three-legged dog growl at their guinea hens. Taste, like smell, is an everlasting thing. The memory of the peas flavors all the rest.

At Boy Scout camp one year I witnessed a fellow scout push a hook from one side of his finger to the other in a display of tears and gore that I have never been able to forget. The late Ray Bradbury spoke often of writing about our nightmares and about memories that stamp a shadowy ugliness on all future experiences—"a fish hook, an open eye" was born of such a shadow. This was one of the few poems I have written whose title came first, from Margaret Atwood's marvelous short poem, "You Fit Into Me." I like that my poem ends with the same disturbing image as Atwood's, one that retroactively transforms all of the previous lines: "a subtle sinking sound— / the barb breaking / all the way through." Each time I read this poem, I relive that night at camp and all of the

cringes since then that have been triggered by imagining that barbed hook stuck just a millimeter too deep to pull out through the entry point.

The poems that I have so far discussed represent my attempt to reconnect with memory, but there are still others that depict attempts to live in and perceive the world in the same way I did as a child, before I knew how important living was. “Approaching Bio-Fetish,” “Keep Hands, Feet, and Flesh Inside the Vehicle at All Times,” and “On First Ever Sighting of Rare Pileated Woodpecker in Backyard” are representative of this attempt. With only slight modifications, these poems are all records of experiences I have had since moving back to Mississippi.

There are a few poems in this collection that I am unable to categorize, and I believe that is a good thing. These are poems that have arisen from my adult life but that are not necessarily directly related to it. “Buzz,” my variation on a theme by Mary Oliver (derived loosely from her “Hum”), is one of these, as is “Bradbury’s Last Year,” a poem whose constraints I invented solely for this poem and whose content and tone are meant to reflect the speaking patterns of Ray Bradbury; “Community,” a nearly true account of one of hundreds of diverse encounters I have had with the homeless population of Las Vegas; “Communion,” a poem about dance whose structure is supposed to mimic in some way the experience of watching a ballet, not dancing in it; “The Lava Man Recalls His Eruption,” which stands as an eerie introduction to a series of pseudo-mythological poems I plan to write one day; “The Walkers of Brookhaven,” an absurd narrative ballad; and two or three or others that fall into a separate aesthetic. This class of poems hypothesizes impressions from a different life. They should allow the reader to track the movements of my mind on the page. I never write any poems without having the

revelation of process in mind because one of the wonderful things about really good poetry for me is that it allows me to see the world—the parts of it I already appreciate and love or those parts that I have as yet been unable to respect or even stomach—through someone else’s eyes; I tried to emphasize the autotelic quality of poetry, its power to draw the reader into one mind that is perceiving only one thought or experience without any ambient voices. But at the same time, I didn’t want these poems to be about me. I wanted to poeticize the craft of detachment—much as Susan Howe does with her fragmented language poems or Andre Tarkovsky does with film—and I didn’t want the detachment to be from established modes of information reception, but rather from complacent understandings. I simplified the diction, quieted the images, and repeated syntax as an experimental way to bring the reader into the writing process: discoveries, disappointments, and all. Because this strategy has had poor critical reception, I have included only a few of the many poems of this kind I have written. But I plan to keep working at them between other projects until they are able to ask of the reader more clearly what they intend to ask.

Just as the “detached” poems require a shift in the reader’s sensibilities, writing the formal poems here required a shift in my understanding of the parameters of contemporary poetry. Denise Levertov taught me, in her “On the Function of the Line,” that the poet has to decide, based on “fidelity to experience,” where the lines should end, where the pauses should be, and what music should be heard as a result (32-35). I love thinking about organicism and line breaks and music in poems; I don’t know that I think of much else when I write. If the felt idea is not translated onto the page exactly as the poet feels it, how can the reader feel it? This question has kept me from writing more

often in forms. But I realized while writing these few formal verses that line breaks are not the only way to control rhythm and emphases. Levertov herself says that they control only half, that the other half has to do with pitch, the way we speak words and unconsciously associate the combination of phonemes with certain feelings or thoughts (33). When I came to this understanding, the division between formal and open verse disappeared, just as the division between poetry and prose disappears when we think of them both as messages composed of constructed networks of meaning. Formal verse may decide the length of the line, but not the breadth of the sound. I have discovered for myself that there is almost more freedom in writing in received forms, because there are limits by which I can judge my freedom, boundaries to learn and, by use of my poetic agency, to move around within. I have asked myself, along with Eliot and Pound and Williams, “Is form a fiction?” (Strand and Boland 259-60). And though I don’t know the answer, I better understand now why the question is important.

The two sestinas here best represent what I learned from Levertov about line breaks and sound. The sestina, because of the teleutons, demands more careful attention to all of the rest of the words, so that they have equal importance and are not just prefaces to those bolted down end words. In that space before the end is where the music has to be the loudest. The final cymbal crash should be a part of the chorus and not a solo performance. One of the great joys of working with the sestina is knowing ahead of time what the end of each line will be and creating a world where those end words can belong. I like the idea of having some or all of the words in my poems be “givens,” and often find myself feeling the pull of found poetry; but I worry that once I get started stealing other people’s words instead of generating them all myself, I may not be able to go back. The

sestina has provided me with a way to get my burgling fix without sacrificing any sense of individual power as a creator. Knowing that I can choose six words that always appear in a specific place is an enormous relief and a titillating challenge at the same time. I always know what word has to be at the end of each line; the possibilities for what comes before that word are much narrower than if the line were a blank universe for which I must create the matter. Both poems posed some bulky obstacles during the writing process, but they taught me in equal measure how to use the rules and elements of sestina structure to fill the empty spaces preceding the teleutons with what probably needed to be there anyway. So there were really no restrictions placed on the organic nature of the poems. They grew the way their nature dictated.

While writing “Raskolnikov Five Years In,” I understood that having end words would help me figure out some of the things I wanted to say, but I was more afraid of them than anything. I knew I wanted my sestina to be serious and emotionally evocative (since all of the best sestinas I had read fit this category), and I knew that in the past, forms I had worked with that had a lot of repetition ended up being platforms for silliness (see “The Walkers of Brookhaven” and “The Emperors of Ice Cream” for examples). So to avoid the tendency to make another goofy poem, I figured I would start with the most depressingly awesome thing I could think of—*Crime and Punishment*—and work from there. The teleutons were all part of a dense page of words I free-associated based on my memory of the novel. The way Dostoevsky left the final scenes has always annoyed me, so I decided on my subject matter based on that—I wanted a better or alternate ending. Once all thirty-nine end words were planted on the page, their lines sprouted back from there. As unlikely as it sounds, this was one of the easiest, smoothest formal poems I

have ever written. The biggest difficulty was coming up with creative ways to use and manipulate the meanings of the teleutons so that the music and rhythm would remain varied and the images would shine. Specifically, the words “suit” and “flies” and “over,” which are pretty easy to adjust, posed some challenges. But, ultimately, I kept them. I could not see how any words but those would serve the needs of the final draft.

For my reimagined sestina, “How the Muddy Socks Boys Made it Back to the Top,” I thought I would try out some soft procedural work. To select my teleutons, I perused my collected Wallace Stevens and pulled out the six most pretentious words I could find (as if choosing the “most pretentious” words in his poetry were even possible). My next step was to look up or think up five synonyms for each teleuton and plug those in where their original would have been in stanzas 2-6. Once the framework was complete, as with “Raskolnikov,” I only had to think of a theme. I knew I wanted the words taken from Stevens to create a thematic dissonance, an irony that would both add to the humor of the poem and challenge me. And because I was breaking away from perceived tradition already, I didn’t care if my poem was a little silly; so I went for it. And to add an extra challenge, I thought I would make the poem about an aging blues band, an experiment in colloquial language. For years, I have wanted to write a good blues-inspired poem, but I was never able to get it quite right. I enjoy the end product of this sestina, but my blues poems are generally too much *about* how much I like blues, or are created in the *structure* of the blues, and not so much a depiction or projection of *blues* as a state of being. Here are a few lines as an example:

In blues, the notes don’t leap
from one to the next

in an orchestral pizzicato way
or how a candy, torch voice slurs
fast like an upward avalanche

No, in blues, the notes stomp
barefoot on hot coals
and when they get to the end
inches from cool ground
they turn right back around
and do it again

Now that I see it typed out, it does have a little of that something I am looking for. But it is very different from “The Muddy Socks Boys,” which tells a punch-line kind of story using plain language and mundane images—much like most of the blues songs I love listening to and that arouse an emotion in me that is sister to my response to poetry. It is my hope that this poem can conjoin the two emotions.

Finally, I’ll return to Williams’ *Paterson* because in it Williams explains that poetry, if it’s worth anything, sounds the depths of the poet and spreads out on the public table the spoils (121). What I have tried to do here is to capture at least one pure emotion per poem and make my readers feel it too. Poems, as creations of human beings, organized from words that we all share, should be both derived from the world which the poet inhabits and directed wholeheartedly to it. If a poem does not bear this balanced take and give, it becomes a jumble of impotent signs scarcely worth our attention.

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I. POETRY

ODE TO THE SACK & SAVE

You smelled of elderly
women who wore garage sale
blouses and blinds
filled their back seats
just in case
and they lived to one hundred
on sugar-free cornbread
bacon fat and custard pies.
You made the most of milk
left on the truck for two hours
too long in the August heat.
You knew these Southern women,
lungs filled with Great Depression
asbestos and smoky diner grease,
who came in to buy pinwheels
for grandchildren, drank
this spoiled milk
like butter
and took a bite of onion
between each sip.
You house the first
memory of smiling black women
saying, "They isn't anything mo' precious
than a fat little white boy." *White?*
You gave me breakfast at lunch—grits
bacon and eggs
or half a sausage link planking
my biscuits and gravy.
You were one stop
on my grandparents' weekday route,
just after the Old Star drive-in
by the projects
that knew to leave the fruit chunky
in my extra-large strawberry shakes,
and just before the sale barn
where once a loose bull
broke a lady's foot
and a herd of goats ran
frenzied into concrete.
You were in the middle of it all,
lecturing me on price and worth,
on spotless versus sanitary,

on recognizing the difference between
homemade and store bought.

APPROACHING BIO-FETISH

I take a certain pleasure from running my fingertips over a really big dog's teeth. Not all dogs will allow this, a frequent misfortune the knowledge of which partly constitutes said pleasure. But when it does happen, when the bony pivots loosen and that great wedge widens and halts, a hot slice of custard pie just begging to be eaten, I stare Mother Nature in the mouth—designed specifically for pulling apart and mincing soft flesh like mine—and we share something akin to mutual respect, like heavyweights a minute before the big fight. Then again, being bitten has its own rewards.

a fish hook, an open eye

The lake gets a primer of sunlight
 as tackle, rods, and folding chairs
 and a bucket of live bait
 circle and wait to catch
 a sandy spot in the shade
 that makes even a dinkday
 worth it.

*Punch the hook through the other side;
 you have to get the barb out.
 Just behind the pectoral fins,
 right below the spine.
 That'll keep it alive and swimming
 longer,
 and it won't rip loose. When you cast,
 whip it back
 to front.
 Not side to side
 or you'll wind up hooking someone.*

A warm breeze carries the taste
 of stagnant and bamboo leaves.
 One, three fish launch
 at mosquitoes and fall triumphant,
 predicting
 a very good day for fishing.

With arm stretched out,
 the cast—
 a side to side whipping,
 a fierce jerk for distance.
 Staccato exhalation,
 a subtle sinking sound—
 the barb breaking
 all the way through.

BEAUTY'S MOM, DEATH

The father noticed a twitch in one wing,
the boy's eyes glued
like blue dots on a crayon sun.

I, PELICAN

Walter Anderson saw everything
on an island off the Mississippi coast.

As a teenager,
I read a book about him

discovered his water colors
and developed a post-mortem kinship.

I planned kayaking trips out to Horn
for three summers straight;

but something kept me off
the water, unpredictable

dangerous if you can't
control your paddle.

A naturalist, artist, he
rode the waves, sometimes landing

sketching life and death:
hot island beauty

back and forth for years
on a weather-worn rowboat

struggling, untrained
for control.

A LIVING EULOGY OF THE IMMORTAL BACHELOR

A crumbling desk holds Mr. Arnolfini
scribbling letters to an old green dress.
He is the architect of a one room universe,
glances only occasionally into space.
His desk is covered with debris—*East of Eden*,
old notebooks, checker scratched glasses,
a rough clay goblet from some coastal pottery shop,
and a single piece of yellowed paper—
a poem called “Aila” about birds is left unfinished:
Her face is the target of my ambition,
up to now only drip pan sediments.
The almond milk softness of her skin—
Ah, I can feel it in my finger creases . . .
He surveys the room in a convex mirror,
beginning with the open wardrobe
filled with broken strings on untouched instruments.
The bedroom door is closed, he notices
so he watches the dress hanging from the chandelier
whirling in a draft.
He reaches for a little drawer
brimming with knickknacks and photographs;
instead of plucking out a polished quartz crystal
he stares down at the empty poem, folds it up,
and puts it in a warped crack in the desk.
Outside his window
a little blond girl raises her hands, smiling
to wave Mr. Arnolfini a good afternoon.

BRADBURY'S LAST YEAR

Whatever
 somehow played lips
 sixty again
 I seen
 Tom
 and cartoons

the cat held
 seven hundred
 five, you
 Tom

They
 Tom
 the thing closer

Tom
 held a
 flicker-instant
 sum-snorted
 and Tom

But there
 upon the well
 his and it
 think okay?"

Rolled
 crazy!" Crazy!"
 Mouths mad cried no

In dark everyone yes!"

Through sure standing
 the still Douglass
 the Dad

Let quizzical
 collected grapes

I'm grass,

COMMUNION

In a hole

once padded theatre seats
cheap ones

behind a column

fur-coated grandmothers whisper
to granddaughters

the odor of old

Tuxedos and gowns spill through
paintpeel doors

Children sooth
preemptive nail prints

Backstage rustles echo

The curtain parts and the scene bursts open—freezing us all in a pale lunar light.

Vertical feet

 carve ribbons
snare

Breath lengthens, slows
with reaching legs
encircling arms

Our hearts are the neck, the back, the hands—bending and breaking—

the princess who finds the court clown
 her lover
 murdered by the king

Dancers! Dancers! Dancers!

A cavalcade of agony in a cutting red flame

We're in it now

The curtain joins,
the doors open.
We burst into moonlight.

THE LAVA MAN RECALLS HIS ERUPTION

The desert aimed its ruddy eye.
Winter came at night and unpacked—
the lid of the eye of the desert blinked
and the bighorn sheep gathered.

Curious mapmakers made camp and slept;
then a tangerine sky covered tents and sheep.
There was the fragrance of thawing sagebrush
and the junipers flourished.

In this setting I was born at the mouth
at a piece of lip that had broken off.
I can still taste the ash.
There was something about giving the earth a second chance.

THE WALKERS OF BROOKHAVEN: A BALLAD

Pete was born with a backward leg,
Bill a crooked arm.
Mary's head was a little off,
her voice a car alarm.

The first to meet were Mary and Bill.
They dated here and there,
until old Pete glimpsed Mary's face
and the corncob in her hair.

Mary's eyes lit up with fire.
Pete moved his one good leg;
then Bill's Jack Russell Terrier jumped
and scrambled old Pete's eggs.

The backward-footed man took off,
embarrassed and chagrined.
Then Mary made the sidewalk smoke.
Bill blamed his tiny chin.

So Bill went on a pilgrimage
to find a jaw more bold;
he took a bus to Hollywood
to get George Clooney's mold.

"I'm sorry, son," George Clooney said.
"My secret's mine to keep."
So Bill, real low, returned back home
and planned to take a leap.

But just as Bill got to the top
of Central Trustmark Bank,
Mary floated through sliding doors,
alone and rank from drank.

The two were unified again,
Mill or Bary, your choice,
when Pete, on a delivery,
he heard loud Mary's voice.

He dropped his load of groceries
and ran to rant at Bill.
And when he reached the lovebirds' haunt,
he gave to Bill his fill.

“You don’t get to talk to her,
my lady of the dawn.”
But Billy’s little mandible
went chattering on and on.

Mary knew that all too soon
these words would turn to fists.
And her fair knights swung out like mad;
and Mary began to hiss.

So she pulled out of her shopping cart
umbrellas by the dozen,
and handing them to Pete she said,
“I’m sorry. I’m your cousin.”

KEEP HANDS, FEET, AND FLESH INSIDE THE VEHICLE AT ALL TIMES

I saw a council of buzzards,
in a sunken clearing on the side of the road,
beckoning in a half-dozen eerie croaks
for an outside party to end some debate—
where to find food, maybe?
or how to respond to a human presence?
I tried my theories one at a time;
a mile down the road there's a banquet,
I told them,
of opossums, armadillos, and a full-bloated doe.
The gaping nostrils of the biggest confirmed
the council already knew this.
So I leapt from my car and exerted
all my life-force into scaring and chasing away
these statuesque carnivores
and discovered the debate turned out to be
whether a buzzard could tolerate
the taste of the living.

COMMUNITY

Great and terrible things happen at 7-Elevens in Las Vegas, Nevada. My friend and I, late at night, purchasing slurpees to beat the night swelter, saw a hobo in the bushes, covered in stench and flies. Assuming he was dead, we both cringed and the man woke up and said hello. The flies stuck around, because they too thought the man was dead, barely able to move. We gave him a Slim-Jim, got in our truck, and sat thinking very different things. My friend suggested we kill this person to end his misery. Our thinking synchronized then, both of us giving serious consideration to backing our truck over this half-dead man. We deliberated for fifteen minutes or so. In the morning, we decided, we would return and finish the job, knowing we could never do it but nodding to prove we were real champions of life and Man. But in the morning the man was gone and had left the Slim-Jim, mushy in its package. We assumed he died in the night and had been taken away by the city or his friends. The next week he pushed cans past my front door.

POSITIVELY W. ENTERPRISE STREET

A meteor burned through clouds, purple
early nighttime clouds;
by habit, meteors fall
until there's nothing left.

But this one made contact
and I had to see it.

The meteor turned meteorite
lodged for the night in a stripling sweetgum;
at dawn, I sawed
until the space rock
popped out, a ruby eye.

I dropped it in my pocket and kept it there,
sang Dylan and cut the grass.

It blazed and seethed
and coaxed me to thumb it out—
impatiently, it cauterized my jeans,
streaked to the triplewillow patch,
and rolled around in the dirt.

So I planted it deep, as deep as I could;
and a stocky purple flower sprouted.

By instinct, I plucked this flower,
boiled it and added honey,
and drank.

THE FIRST MORNING OF YOUR WEEK OFF

There's a fishy smell coming from your window
 and you think maybe oh maybe
 you're floating

out to sea
 and the smell
 is the smell of sea lion breath,

kissy whiskers scooting for your
 puckered-up mouth.

Your armchair has bowed your knees,
 rendered you
 docile as lima beans

 in petulant mastication.

and Wonder Bread is sleeping in the freezer,
 no doubt spooning the white haired

 veggie burgers.

You give a task to your broad, flat feet—they bring you
 to a tripod-shod pair
 of binoculars you use to watch

people on the street
 for novel ideas or self-esteem
 enhancement.

The cat is whispering
 sweet nothings to the doormat
 and a voicemail informs you

Grandma is waiting at baggage claim.

BUZZ

I'd like to say I hate the fly
buzzing around in my no fly zone
while I try to imagine the hum
of the rose-cuddling honey bee.

Maybe I have missed the point
wishing to hate a stingerless subject:
never content, all buzz,
no yellow stripes to contrast
the bilgy blackness,
and full of no sweetness.

When injecting maggot babies
into my compost-oven trash can,
the insect detours to my aged Manchego.
At least it has good taste.

I cannot hate the fly.

I am the fly
and not the bee—
I regurgitate and so does she.
But she spews honey.
I the fly do what I do.

OLD DOWNTOWN

Snow cowers from the sun
where walls and sidewalk meet,
where bronze leaves stagger
in December wind
and a black dog
exits a crawl space.

A man who wears a coat year-round
enters a diner by a movie theatre
repurposed into a community playhouse.
He orders the usual
and hangs on to the menu.

He notices a waitress
as he reaches for his glass,
bumps a little ceramic bowl
and pours au jus all over the table
and his hat.

He keeps his cool
when the waitress approaches
and leans over farther than necessary
to dab up the mess. The dog seems concerned
and stares through the window
between chipped red letters.

Whistles sift around the door
as a black mass of starlings rolls
above brick buildings
toward a mottled sky.

POSSUM CARCASS

I see you there
lying in a ditch
you silvery, dog food burglar,
a pitiful thing,
a reason to mourn
if I was a possum too.

I see you
as something vile,
utterly putrescent.
And you sicken me.

And in my own vileness,
my fuming bile,
I see you
in all your decomposing glory,
with scratches of buzzard beaks
on your exposed rib cage,
a thing to rejoice.

MY INNER EUDORA COMING INTO FROST

There was a hot fury in the chill of her cheek
as she stood nearly frozen in a tunnel of fiery leaves,
her feet half swallowed in a vacuum of crystalline mud;
and a press of lightly keeled trunks
urged her down the path.

Above, a warm pavilion, like a raincoat,
of pale yellows and reds—
and she mourned,
the perfection of trees,
and said:

“A tree always does what trees do.
When one season becomes another,
the tree moves with the breath of the world—
roots sip the melting snows of winter
and spawn verdant hands to welcome
the warming spring;
in summer, these leaves darken
so not to distract from the play of sweltered months;
and now, at Autumn’s end, they encourage hope
in a dying landscape,
compose the music of life’s departure.
What’s in a tree that allows it so much freedom to obey?
What makes it so much better than I?”

A few steps further in this temple of a copse,
she noticed the tips of wild asparagus,
steeped from a recent drought,
jutting through a dome of withered bunchgrass.

A READING OF TOLKIEN'S *TREE AND LEAF*

There is something of the Faerie
On the underside of leaves
That flickers into view
By the Faerie in the breeze.

Something strange like shadow
There in periphery
That opens up a god-eye
To a sub-creative sea.

Not miasmic essence,
As White describes the Fey,
Is this Faerie something
That breathes beside the day.

It is a constant neighbor,
This world so misperceived,
This something of the Faerie
On the underside of leaves.

THE EMPERORS OF ICE CREAM

In the lulling sway of orbit, what does Hubble dream?
I like to think she dreams of treading earth—
we don't have a lot, but we have ice cream.

When your budget drops to zilch per diem,
don't assume there's a *universal* dearth—
you may be the subject of a Hubble dream.

The heat on this planet gets pretty extreme,
but that only adds to our charm and worth.
We don't have a lot, but we have ice cream.

Hubble gets this, as she watches the streams
of comet tails and deep-fry ladled girth.
I'll bet there are Dairy Queens in Hubble dreams.

There must be something in the great big scheme
that gave Hubble the capacity for mirth.
Space has an awful lot, even (freeze-dried) ice cream.

So on your laptop, when galaxies gleam,
imagine that Hubble's dreams have given birth
to a lulling sway of orbits. What Hubble dreams
she stole from us—the emperors of ice cream.

HOW THE MUDDY SOCK BOYS MADE IT BACK TO THE TOP

We scored a gig at this big bougie place
two doors down from First Ministry of Holy Unity,
built in the middle of a field to stand all alone.
Young Cheddar had to drive all serpentine
through a herd of Brahma bulls that almost cued our requiem
until we got to the door where tulips were in bloom.

I plucked one of the smaller blossoms
and stuck it in my hat to match the venue,
but Bobby Bass asked if I was giving a eulogy;
so I took it out to maintain the group's solidarity.
The emotions of musicians can sometimes be convoluted
you know, being cooped up together and all proud stags.

Finally, we stepped through the doors, one at a time
and climbed up a stage that was shaped like a flower,
and then realized we wouldn't be takin' home any foxy
ladies tonight. We somehow wound up in a pre-school habitat.
No question about it, all the boys hopped down and ran in consensus
like we'd been asked at Labor and Delivery to sing a death song.

A big legged woman with a crimped mop squealed canticles,
damning us to hell if we ran out on these kids, deserted
them when they were set to hear our front porch harmonies.
So we picked up our instruments, and I quoted from Bloom
as was customary at shows we played at any old joint.
And we played marvelous, even Top, notes you ain't ever seen so bent.

When our set was done, we packed our gear, coiled
all our cords and started writing the long, soulful elegy
for our career that would surely have to drop
and send us all into nursing homes and VFWs as solo
artists who have lost all our youthful flourish.
We drove on home to make our peace.

There was no doubt this was the last time we would strike accord
as a group, the last time we would go out meandering
all over this great big world, tossing back Buds
while beatin' out our love-loss dirges.
I guess we missed that the pre-school crowd was full of single
mothers and midlife crisis fathers lookin' for a new situation.

Since that night, we been at a place of musical unity
that single-handedly made our newest album, *Serpentine*,
bloom platinum like a psalmist's eighty-fifth requiem.

IF EUDORA WELTY HAD EVER BEEN MARRIED AND THEN DIVORCED

How He Remembers It

YEAR ONE: The Wide Net—

We shoved into a wall; cinder blocks
painted with indigo lattices
became home, a pocket
for our frigid hands, a search engine
from which searching ends in a wall.

YEAR TWO: Ole Mr. Marblehall—

At a literary party in Natchez, white wigs
with squared bangs bedecked
only our heads;
people naturally get bored, however,
on and under the hills.

YEAR THREE: Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden—

On a stick the size of your finger, you wound
a lock of hair. *Wait*, you told me, the wind
knitting the clouds and your dress into a wave
of incense, *Wait*, and the wave took me.

YEAR FOUR: A Worn Path—

First, there was smoke
then dust in the eye of a baby
box turtle making its way to open lawn,
curious about the Labrador and her puppies.

YEAR FIVE: Petrified Man—

I knew you were the one yesterday
and not the one today
when frogs fell from a sky rich
with toads to an earth
crocheted with snakes.

YEAR SIX: A Still Moment—

The last time we kissed,
 the train was in my left ear
 and you were right;
 The engine blared a no-wave heat
 that flooded our dermal cells.

YEAR SEVEN: Lily Daw and the Three Ladies—

The metric system, once inaugurated,
 perverted fundamental similarities between
 little blonde Livvie and the Petrified Man;
 a physicist and a Russian ballerina
 had no chance anyway, so they said.

YEAR EIGHT: The Hitch-Hikers—

That time you swore
 you saw a dead body in the U-Haul,
 parked at the end of the alley where
 no one ever entered
 was the first time I knew we were
 no longer on the same page.

YEAR NINE: Powerhouse—

You always embarrassed me
 when in crowds, race
 was how you pointed people out; but
 it's true your ballerina friend from Nairobi
 wore the same tights
 as all of the Russians.

YEAR TEN: Why I Live at the P.O.—

We relished no private opulence
 and spared no public offerings; we lived
 in a perpetual power outage—we lived
 a communal rebellion from personal space.

YEAR ELEVEN: Livvie—

Logic: If depression is a crater in the mind,
then its absence is a crater of the heart;
if freedom is to know eternity,
then bondage is to pretend to ignore you.

YEAR TWELVE: Moon Lake—

Do you remember when you taught me
how to serve tennis balls
with ruthless backspin,
and my serve went wide and tipped
the cooler (court lights don't agree
with blurry vision, you know)?

YEAR THIRTEEN: The Bride of the Innisfallen—

Raincoats wilted into wedding gowns,
pavilions into art/coffee/cake shops
with plenty of rentable floor space;
don't forget that I called you the wrong name
long before you had forgotten mine.

How She Remembers It

YEAR THIRTEEN: The Bride of the Innisfallen—

I kept the porch swing made of vinyl and apologies
that you pieced together with a butter knife
when the 2nd of May failed
to announce with horns its own arrival.

YEAR TWELVE: Moon Lake—

Identifying by name the bugs you stomp
doesn't necessarily make you a naturalist;
when the sky fell, you were the first to run
for cover, a pavilion, the first I ran after.

YEAR ELEVEN: Livvie—

Nothing beat the sound of stilettos
on pavement; no one could take me on
when it came to countries I'd been to,
or divide me in two
but you.

YEAR TEN: Why I Live at the P.O.—

We drained our wallets on that printing operation,
made ourselves sick experimenting with pesto omelets;
the road trip we made to Portland (Oregon,
not Maine) still ports in my dreams, occasionally.

YEAR NINE: Powerhouse—

I still feel guilty
for sneaking over the tracks for pictures,
when you asked me not to spend time
with black men all alone.
I should have given you the same advice
about dancers.

YEAR EIGHT: The Hitch-Hikers—

If only you hadn't let those people
in the house,
shoes too clean for handymen,
hands like northern women's.

YEAR SEVEN: Lily Daw and the Three Ladies—

I can't decide if it was his feet
or his glistening bald head
what called her attention to the flaws
he never lied about, or that she
never quit asking about.

YEAR SIX: A Still Moment—

We came undone over
the cry of the band
until we had to sell your trombone
to pay for gas and hotdogs.

YEAR FIVE: Petrified Man—

Did I ever tell you I wrote
 a novel, once, about a Knight who became
 a travelling salesman, a lawyer, a dentist, a prince
 and then finally a man I would never need.

YEAR FOUR: A Worn Path—

Lady Shalott died last week, surrounded
 by her children; alone, she sniffed out
 a cool spot in the crawl space
 where I reached and tied a rope to drag her out.
 YEAR THREE: Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden—

The memento I left you
 before I spent that semester in Greece
 has made a nest in the junk drawer;
 I plan to stuff it in a bottle and push it out to sea—
 maybe it will keep somewhere.

YEAR TWO: Old Mr. Marblehall—

It's a shame you never cared
 for The Trace; faeries
 have a knack for mending things.

YEAR ONE: The Wide Net—

Our backyard is fortified with concrete
 painted like the wallpaper in our first apartment;
 I sometimes sit on the far side when I feel too free
 to do anything productive, or tend the roses,
 and you're right there.

RASKOLNIKOV FIVE YEARS IN

As a rule, I never stopped to take
 inventory of my past. It was over.
 I left my mother's and sister's troubles to the flies
 and craved money like your
 father craved liver failure. I took a life
 while wearing a philosopher's suit

and pretended wealth just didn't suit
 me and it would make me want to take
 my own life
 and cause my farmer ancestors to roll over
 in their graves. No, I feigned preference for the flies,
 cramped spaces, and the humility of you of yours.

I see you through my window—that you're
 solid and living and have brought me a suit
 that I won't be able to wear until the sixth angel flies,
 it seems. Still, let me take
 the garment, and turn it over
 in my hands—the hope of another life.

In my dreams I still see Lizaveta, you know; her life
 is six feet tall in my hands and you're
 there cleaning up the blood and scrubbing me all over.
 Then, you carry me to a downtown suite
 and begin undressing; and when you take
 off your clothes, all I see are flies.

My uncle told me once that heaven was “as the crow flies,
 about as far as the shortest human life.”
 A man much better than I, who would never take
 advantage of purity and kindness like yours.
 I don't deserve you—eternal pain and sweat
 are my rewards, and an iron spit that turns over and over.

Sonya, now that visiting hours are over,
 tell me again that you forgive me for the flies
 that I dreamed were on you like a suit,
 and for Lizaveta and the pawnbroker's life,
 and especially for the world that could have been your
 world to enjoy and to take.

When my stint is over and I'm given back my life,
I want yours to be free of my flies.
The suit can stay, but there's nothing else from you I'll take.

DRAPER OAKS

We stored a damp mattress
a Serta
in our second bedroom

because it rained
during the move
and the mattress was strapped

on the roof of Kevin's
Jeep Grand Cherokee.
Mold is something of a rogue

and my wife
was pregnant and overly cautious
and cheap latex paint

peeled in bands from the walls
and the kitchen was carpeted.
We slept on an inflatable

that lost air
in the night, forcing we two
into one in the middle.

We had a broken toilet too
clogged with a toilet paper
holder thingy.

I miss that apartment
for all its flaws,
for that leaky mattress.

HAVING READ HESIOD AND TOLSTOY TOO LATE IN LIFE

I was raised in the wedge
of train tracks merging,
rocked to sleep every night

by locomotive tenors
belting headlong
into some fame or

efficacy of which
I never knew
the culmination.

It is a wonder the trains
ever made it anywhere
with all the pennies,

child-valued quarters,
and lobbed globs
of clay-ridden mud

that we and the trains
painted across the tracks.
When flattened

coinage ceased to titillate,
pecan limbs were cast
right at the point

where the power of the engine
and the strength of our young arms
could join to make something happen.

WHILE THE RAILROAD MOURNED HOMICIDE BY TRUCKS

Childhood memory—
an unfinished bamboo flute,
whittled in a round of horsetails;
the knife slips,
the thumb is split,
and a locomotive
stopped at the crawfish ditch
does the crying.

ON FIRST EVER SIGHTING OF RARE PILEATED WOODPECKER IN
BACKYARD

Weighted skull,
a vagabond to list
between Red-headed
and Flicker.
A domicile in himself
and in the split-trunk oak.
Hard work to burrow in.
Sounds like a jackhammer
under water.
The bole has sprung
a leak—bark showers
in the vicinity.
He hears something

SYNTHESIS

Pecan tree at twilight—
black green

silhouetted against
grey blue.

My eyes scream
white into life;

my blood heaves
my arms and legs. Climbing

I contrive
to sound the measured silence.

There is drumming—
my shoes on wood,

my heart on bone,
the necrotizing of self.

Dull light congeals the horizon
and obscurity settles in.

These eyes now blind
to roots and grass

can see stillness,
these ears hear the void

left by sleep.
The air reaches my breath,

a meeting of damp warmth
and crisp coolness.

Then my muscles pull at the sky
and it lingers.

WINTER: REXBURG, IDAHO

The world becomes a charcoal sketch
from the last chapter of Dostoevsky
when rusty salt is strewn,
and plows have shouldered purity
into blotched barriers
between passengers and homes.

A cat with too much fur
runs under
a cow with too much fur
to a frosted fence where runs as if on burning limbs
a rust-bellied squirrel
with the proper amount of fur.

The cow is grinning
in the direction of the road—
toward thin sheets of cigarette smoke
pressed through razor edge cracks
in minivans and pickup trucks,
toward windows ablaze with Sunday dinners
and tables set for conversation,
and toward the slippery evening walk of two plush figures
in cozy downy stuff. The cow sighs,
lolls his body into the steaming huddle
of bovine practicality.

The squirrel escapes into its corner-attic nest
and listens to the closing credits of King of the Hill,
drifts into rodent oblivion
while Joe Cocker lays down
the fuzzy tone of Kevin and Winnie's wonder years.

So the cat goes home to a feast
of roast beef scraps
and the burnt edges of funeral potatoes
and dreams of the squirrel with a full belly.

A FARMHOUSE

I

A ginger girl with center-parted hair and a pail takes long pointed steps
while the breeze whips the back-dropped wheat
and wrestles the farmhouse shutters.

II

A wheaty hilltop swells adjacent to a burning pile of leaves and refuse
compelled by a gust to share its spark with the farmhouse and late-summer fields.

III

A swirling, moss-encrusted tire swing overlooks the river
as a floor of leaves shimmies, floodwaters kiss a third rung,
and a piece of broken dam rolls past the farmhouse door.

IV

My eyes sting from the contagious hair and dress of the farmer's daughter,
but not so much that I can't feel the quiver of wildflowers against my leg
and the farmhouse falling into itself.

NOTE TO SELF

This is to remind me

of dirt and pocket knives
and gummy tree bark
my grandmother chewed
while shelling peas picked from the vine
by my own bark-toughened hands

of the yellow linoleum
where my mother's cracked feet
rubbed pathways from the stove
to the sink to the washer and dryer,
to the couch to show us Jane Austen films
and deliver timely moral axioms
and two dozen French and Spanish phrases,
and to piano lessons on keys mostly dead
or out of tune

of the sad, galaxy-deep eyes of my
5th grade teacher father
always present on weekends and summers
atop a Natchez Indian mound
or in a swamp where the Cerulean sings
or while sitting on the bench at the dining room table
watching vinegar and baking soda burst into clouds
and slender ropes in little glass jars
budding milky crystals as slowly as childhood

and of all the old dry peas dropped
into broomstick holes in the dirt.