"Robert Frost Blues"

Gregory Arthur Weiss

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“ROBERT FROST BLUES”

by

Gregory Arthur Weiss

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

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May 2012
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Abstract of a Dissertation
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ABSTRACT

ROBERT FROST BLUES

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*Robert Frost Blues* collectively argues, stylistically and thematically, that apprehending the world is difficult. If one is able to know the world to some degree, the efficacy of that knowledge will be significantly affected by whether other people agree that that apprehension of the world is correct. But beyond that, *Robert Frost Blues*, with its casual sestinas and villanelles, colloquial language, found language, prose poems, dialogues, and iambic narratives, implicitly argues that the most important aspect of knowing the world is not the form that knowledge fits into or the literary devices it employs. Instead apprehending the world requires both solitary reflection and human interaction, with human interaction outweighing solitary reflection.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A Field Guide to *Robert Frost Blues*

*Robert Frost Blues* consists of three sections, each with its own style and themes: “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe,” “*In the Aeroplane Over the Sea,*” and “Weather and Technology.” The poems in “Serious Reflections” often invoke sestinas and villanelles, but play pretty fast and loose with the forms. One result of these poems’ casual respect for the sestina and villanelle is the cyclical repetition, within many poems, of both language and themes. Most of “Serious Reflections” poems are concerned with the process of knowing/understanding the world. “*In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*” is primarily comprised of prose poems that feature large amounts of found language. Most of the poems examine the relationship between Neutral Milk Hotel’s 1998 alternative rock album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, that album’s cultural resonances, and sentimentality. Finally, the poems in “Weather and Technology” resemble those in “Serious Reflections” in often taking the form of a series of assertions. In “Serious Reflections,” the relationship between those assertions is almost always non-narrative; in “Weather and Technology,” it’s often narrative. And again like “Serious Reflections,” the poems in “Weather and Technology” are concerned with the process of knowing/understanding the world, with a particular focus on political thinking. The three sections are united by their focus on the process of apprehending the world. All three sections reflect on the difficulty of accurate apprehension, and counsel humility and humor in response. As *Robert Frost Blues* progresses the poems become more narrative, and their speaker, the “I,” becomes less oracular and more human.
Over and over, the poems in “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe” invoke the processes of thinking and knowing. Here are a number of examples:

I need long days to think of things… (opening phrase, “Incorrect Measurement Blues”)

Sometimes I don’t know what to do. (first line, “Blues for Guitar Bains”)

I lean back in my leatherette swivel-chair and think (first line, “Icechest Blues”)

It’s hard to know how to handle things. (in last line, “The May or May Not Blues,” echoing the earlier poem “It’s Hard to Know”)

Clearly, these examples—with the exception of the line from “Icechest Blues”—figure thought and particularly knowledge as difficult to achieve, despite the speaker’s best efforts. For instance, from “It’s Hard to Know”:

My cat slides between the chain rings of two bikes leaning on each other as I try to true one front tire for an hour…
I wouldn’t true the wheel if I didn’t want to, but stars aren’t lint in the cape of night and God is a tax you don’t levy.

The second and third lines of this passage enact the speaker’s efforts to know the world—“as I try to true/one front tire for an hour.” The futility of those efforts is carried in the fifth and sixth lines—“but stars aren’t lint in the cape/of night and God is a tax you don’t levy.” “The Explanations” covers much the same territory. The first fifteen lines consist of the explanations of the poem’s title. (The poem never makes clear what exactly is being explained.) The variety and number of explanations indicate the importance the poem’s speaker attaches to finding an explanation. The insufficiency of these explanations, as well as the futility of their even being attempted, enters the poem in the
last two words of the fifteenth line (the penultimate) in the figure of Cal Worthington.
Worthington’s role in the last two lines of “The Explanations” is similar to that of God in
“It’s Hard to Know.” God is “a tax you don’t levy,” and Cal Worthington closes “The
Explanations” by saying, “Sometimes things happen, nothing can be done.” There is a
shrugging, impotent, fatalistic quality to both endings.

The most common speaker in “Serious Reflections” is attempting to apprehend, to
know the world, but with little success. This raises the related questions of, first, how
exactly the speaker is attempting to apprehend the world, and, then why those methods
are failing. The methodology of these poems’ speaker, in relation to apprehending the
world, is contrapuntal. Most obviously, the speaker interacts with the world, and the
reader, with a casualness that often includes vulgarity. One example, from “Goldfish
Blues,” will stand for many: “Nobody in Hattiesburg gives a fuck about the Parthenon.”
It’s the phrase “gives a fuck” that makes the line casual, as I’m using the word, because
of the cursing but more importantly because of the use of colloquialism. (The phrase
“gives a fuck” doesn’t make literal sense.) That syntactical casualness is balanced,
however, by the casual use of received poetic forms, most notably the sestina and
villanelle. As an example, here’s “March 20, 2009” in its entirety:

No sun, shadow, or green umbrella, I turn thirty in five days.
Nothing hums and the leaves are dancing Coke cans because solitude is a sin,
the days of tender youth are gone as Old Yeller, burns absorb and give off energy.
I turn thirty in five days in the equality of shade, a cog.
The couple in the house down the block holler through my earplugs
and the brown needles in the driveway cracks insult the sun.
I crack my toes in the Sinai’s warm grease:
nothing hums and solitude is a sin, a sin.
It’s quiet now, mist briskets the air with frogs.
I feel flappable as hell, but only five days till I eat Popeye’s and drink whiskey.
Despite my earplugs I’m listening to my through-the-wall neighbor get busy
as the tide in a rainwater pool on a beautiful morning the train to New Orleans
blows through, the fern on the sill splayed in the sun, nothing hums, and the leaves are dancing Coke cans because solitude is a sin that, like everything, abounds in March somewhere, like me.

The lists of quick, casual clauses, often separated by commas, with no narrative connection, give the poem a hurtling quality which makes the reader work to catch up. This propulsiveness is present in the second and third lines of the above passage, but is exemplified in the five lines, punctuated as a sentence, which finish the poem. The long, unpunctuated “Despite my earplugs I’m listening to my through-the-wall neighbor get busy/as the tide in a rainwater pool on a beautiful morning the train to New Orleans/blows through…” threatens to break the poem’s back in relation to pace, but the return of the formal structure in the penultimate line, which echoes the poem’s second line, bears the weight.

The stylistic relationship between the casual syntax and more formal poetic structure is mirrored in the speaker’s attitude in regards to knowing the world. His attitude is wry and pranksterish but also, at the same time, serious and reflective. Two activities that are often considered incompatible—playing pranks and reflective thought—are merged. The casualness of the poems’ diction is mirrored in the pranksterish, humorous aspect of their speaker’s attitude; the formality of their structure is mirrored in the serious, reflective aspect of their speaker’s attitude. This combination of casual humorousness with serious formalism permeates “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe,” and sometimes makes it difficult to tell whether individual assertions or poems as wholes are meant to be read as jokes, serious reflections, or both.

This indeterminacy, this vagueness of intention is exemplified in the section’s title. The poems are labeled “serious reflections,” and so they are—“March 20, 2009,” for example,
is very much about the difficult affirmation of getting older. But at the same time, nobody seriously uses the phrase “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe” just as nobody seriously says, even though it’s true, that “the days of tender youth are gone as Old Yeller,” as the speaker of “March 20, 2009” does.

The poems in “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe” are casual, jokey, serious reflections, as are many of the poems in the other two sections of Robert Frost Blues. But while “Serious Reflections” is more prolix in regards to both language and, particularly, allusions than the following two sections, its poems are most notable for what they lack: narrative and characters. “Serious Reflections” poems are anti-narrative due primarily to their use of repetition, which often gives the impression that the poems keep starting over. “Poem for Chris Brown After His Arrest,” which functions as a dramatic monologue, is an example:

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
Theo’s dyslexic on The Cosby Show
as I eat kelp from the pigeonless, flopping waves.
Mercy’s fast as a pectoral slab and endurance presumes me.
Dots all over the place.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
I’ve imposed food-sanctions until the swabs
resume working: passive mutiny’s born a full-grown Yosemite Sam, the endpoint of negative capability.
Coffee drips into the agar roar.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
A tiger shark jumps into my breakfast
lobster bisque. It’s ruined! The sun’s
my dad, wind pronounces my skin.
Like Merle Haggard, the highway’s my home.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
Dawn, bales of chicken wire, the Statue of Liberty,
vine-veined fence, charcoal, water lapping softly.
It’s scary to think that I’ll be there by morning.
The sky’s blue, the water’s blue.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
Another island another gas meter,
I land a whale the raft can’t hold.
Ambergris’s just blubber without capital.
God, if you have immunity, blow.

While figures from Merle Haggard to Chryssipus parade through “Serious Reflections,” often more than one to a poem, they function as either synecdoches or pieces of facts. In the second stanza, “Chris Brown”’s speaker uncharacteristically tells the reader explicitly that Yosemite Sam, for instance, is a synecdoche for “the endpoint of negative capability.” The poem’s second line—“Theo’s dyslexic on The Cosby Show”—is an example of an allusion as part of a statement of fact. The speaker of the poems in “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe” collectively argues that knowing the world is very difficult, but that making the effort to do so is necessary. A sense of humor is requisite to reflection and knowledge, and also goes a long way when they fail. But the speaker of “Serious Reflections”’ poems is unable to apprehend the world because he keeps starting over at the same place, keeps repeating himself. The poems in “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe” are reflections on the nature of failed reflection, which results in recitations of discrete, received facts. The first line of “The May or May Not Blues” is an example: “Chryssipus is dead of laughter after watching his drunk donkey attempt to eat figs.” But the poem’s last line bemoans the limits, in relation to apprehending the world, of a notion of knowledge which privileges the factoid: “It’s hard to know how to handle things. The donkey drank two bowls of wine.”
The most common speaker of the poems in “‘In the Aeroplane Over the Sea’” shares the same humorous-serious perspective as the most common speaker in “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe,” but applies that perspective not to the process of apprehending the world but to In the Aeroplane Over the Sea, a 1998 alternative rock album by Neutral Milk Hotel which is thematically concerned with the life, death, and rebirth of Anne Frank. The result is poems that are far more narrative stylistically, and feature fewer allusions and more characters who interact with the speaker’s “I.” The speaker in the poems in “Serious Reflections on the Nature of the Universe” takes abstract speculation as his primary means of apprehending the world and comes away with disconnected facts. The speaker in “In the Aeroplane Over the Sea,” in contrast, observes a cultural artifact that motivates him to apprehend the world sentimentally\(^1\). The speaker’s mixed attitude towards experiencing the world sentimentally, and in turn towards In the Aeroplane Over the Sea and his enjoyment of it, is expressed in the James Baldwin quotation that serves as an epigraph to “’In the Aeroplane Over the Sea’,” in which Baldwin eviscerates sentimentalists.

“‘In the Aeroplane Over the Sea’” begins with “Q;” a collage of Google search results for “whatever happened to jeff mangum?” “Q;” demotes “Serious Reflections” discrete facts in favor of presenting discourse, human interaction. The speaker’s desire for human interaction, rather than the recitation of facts, motivates the extensive found language in “‘Aeroplane’.” The found-language poems in “‘Aeroplane’” are unusual

\(^1\) Sentimentalism, as used in this Introduction, is a mode of apprehending the world which privileges feeling and emotion—and particularly those of sympathy and pity—over logic and rationality.

\(^2\) Jeff Mangum, who figures prominently in “‘Aeroplane’,” was Neutral Milk Hotel’s singer/songwriter. After Aeroplane and the ensuing tour to promote it, Mangum didn’t release any new music or perform in public for thirteen years. He just concluded a small tour of the East Coast, on which he played songs off of Aeroplane, as well as Neutral Milk Hotel’s first album, On Avery Island.
within *Robert Frost Blues* in that their speaker doesn’t figure as an “I,” and indeed
doesn’t speak that much, as he often cedes the vast majority of poems to their found-
language source material. “At the Beginning,” which follows “Q:,” is an example; here it
is in its entirety:

In the *Pitchfork* interview,
Mangum gave his own explanation
for why he stopped writing:
"I guess I had this idea
that if we all created our dream
we could live happily ever after.
So when so many of our dreams
had come true and yet I still saw
that so many of my friends
were in a lot of pain... I saw their pain
from a different perspective
and realized that I can't
just sing my way out
of all this suffering. I realized that
I wanted to take a deeper look
at life in order to become
kind of a truly healing force
in people's everyday lives."

Of the month of recording
and cohabitation that produced
*In the Aeroplane Over the Sea,*
Carter notes, “None of us
were professional musicians
on any level, except Jeremy.
Scotty learned to play the trump
so fast and beautifully, with no teacher,
no experience, no nothing, just
because he... understood the goal
and everybody believed in it."

The speaker is not an explicit “I,” and only functions in the poem as an introducer of the
two quotations. The speaker is similarly muted in “Park Slope” and “Say What You
Willomay, Hope Shows!”, two other poems in “*Aeroplane*” comprised primarily of
found language. But while there is no explicit “I” in these poems, they foreground human
interaction through the lack of manipulation of their source materials. The quotations in “At the Beginning” have been lineated and minimally elided, but Mangum and Carter’s language and sentiments are being represented sincerely, without ironization, which allows forces largely outside of the poem’s speaker to interact with both the speaker and the reader. By way of contrast, if the speaker of “At the Beginning” had ironized Mangum and Carter’s quotations, he would have taken possession of them, and the poem would no longer have constituted a human interaction between the speaker, Mangum, and Carter, but instead an intra-speaker performance, a dramatic monologue like “Poem for Chris Brown After His Arrest.”

The poems in “‘Aeroplane’” in which the speaker appears as an “I” are largely short narratives of interpersonal interactions between the “I” and others—Nicole in “Strangely Invigorating”; Caleb, “Watson’s fourteen year-old son,” in “In the Beginning”; and Natalie, Ivorie, Jeremy, and Vixon in the “World Lit” poems. These interpersonal narratives contrast strongly with “Serious Reflections” repetitive, non-narrative poems, delivered by an oracular “I” who doesn’t interact with other “I”s. As an example of a poem from “‘Aeroplane’” depicting the speaker’s “I” interacting with another “I,” here is the prose poem “In the Beginning”:

“Why,” implores Caleb, Watson’s fourteen year-old son, “did he stop making albums?” The flicker of the laundry-scented candle backlights its $4.99 TJ Maxx price-tag. I tell him I don’t know why. When the CD ends, we walk down the block and pick up an extraordinary amount of fried chicken and crinkle fries from some metallic Chinese restaurant. We eat in front of Singin’ in the Rain, and Caleb begins to cry when Gene Kelly sings:

Moses he knowses his toeses aren’t roses,  
As Moses supposes his toeses to be!
Echoing the speaker of many of “Serious Reflections” poems, the speaker of “In the Beginning” notes the difficulty of knowing the world—“I tell him I don’t know why.” But rather than asserting that difficulty, as the speaker of “Serious Reflections” “Blues for Guitar Bains” does—“Sometimes I don’t know what to do”—“In the Beginning”’s speaker admits to the difficulty of knowing the world, rather than asserting it, and then commiserates with Caleb over that difficulty. The speaker’s “I” also commiserates with another character, Natalie, over the difficulty of apprehending the world in “World Lit,” reporting “I tell her that sometimes/ you can’t avoid listening and she agrees.” Perhaps not surprisingly for a section concerned with sentimentality, both “In the Beginning” and “World Lit” are mildly self-aggrandizing tales of commiseration. But the righteousness of commiseration, the bedrock of sentimentalism, is also mocked throughout “‘In the Aeroplane Over the Sea’.” “Spectacular Moments in Sweet Catharsis” is an example:

At a Thursday matinee of Titanic back in 1997, Elisabeth and I held each other and sobbed so profusely for so long that the woman behind asked if we were OK.

After a successful visit on the drive to New York, hot, stoned, silent tears on the basement couch in front of Sportscenter.

This is the wallowing, less ennobling side of commiseration. But are the sentimentalist’s wet eyes, as James Baldwin writes, always “the signal of secret and violent inhumanity?” In “For Jeff Mangum,” the final poem of the section, the speaker states otherwise. In the
final two lines, recalling crying to “Zeppelin’s ‘When the Levee Breaks,’” he says, “Remembering that makes me feel/ a little bit stupid but mainly great.”

Between “Serious Reflections” and “‘Aeroplane,’” the poems’ speaker has retained his humorous-serious posture towards apprehending the world, but has shifted his methods in regards to effecting that apprehension. In “Serious Reflections,” he reflects on the nature of reflection; in “‘Aeroplane,’” he interacts with others. He often experiences those interactions sentimentally. The increased interaction, in “‘Aeroplane,’” of the speaker’s “I” with other “I”’s is intertwined with the increasingly incarnate nature of the speaker’s “I,” as well as the poems’ increased narrativity. None of the poems in “‘Aeroplane’” continually start over like “Poem for Chris Brown After His Arrest.” “‘Aeroplane’”’s poems, whether based on found language or composed of narratives fashioned by a flesh-and-blood “I,” are rooted not in reflection, but human interaction. That interaction often takes the form of sentimentalism. The speaker of these poems takes the attitude that sentimentality is a deeply flawed means of apprehension, but that it meets a need for him in interacting with other “I”’s.

“Serious Reflections” reflects on the difficult nature of reflecting. “‘Aeroplane’” reflects on the 1998 Neutral Milk Hotel album In the Aeroplane Over the Sea, and its poems end up espousing an ideology of sentimentalism, though not without reservations. “Weather and Technology,” the third section of Robert Frost Blues, uses the subjects of its title as lenses through which to analyze various approaches to apprehending the world, particularly politically. Stylistically, this third section is distinguished from the first two
by its variety, and especially its use of dialogues and a Frost-ian brand of iambic narrative verse.

In relation to the gender politics of a number of the poems in *North of Boston* (1914), Frost—who figures prominently in “Weather and Technology”—famously said, “You don’t have to deserve your mother’s love. You have to deserve your father’s. He’s more particular. The father is always a Republican towards his son, and his mother’s always a Democrat.” But the poems of which Frost was speaking, such as “The Death of the Hired Man,” make no mention of politics, in the explicit sense of Republicans and Democrats, but rather contrast different ways of thinking, of knowing the world. The Robert Frost-Granville Hicks dialogues in “Weather and Technology” do the same thing. The opening poem of the section, “The Consequences of This Afternoon’s Storm,” is an example:

Robert Frost and Granville Hicks stand on the stoop. Frost says, “This is Nature.”
Hicks says, “What, exactly?”
“The storm.”
“Lots of people,” says Hicks, “are sleeping on the sidewalk, or worse. Is that Nature?”
“This is Nature.”
“What? The trees, the rain?”
“Exactly,” says Frost.
“I wouldn’t ever want to sleep on the sidewalk and I assume you wouldn’t either, and that has nothing to do with trees or rain.”
“Then we should find someplace better.”

Although “The Consequences of This Afternoon’s Storm” doesn’t utilize found language, it resembles the found-language poems in “‘Aeroplane’” in its non-ironic relating of Robert Frost and Granville Hicks’ sentiments, and in its depiction of an interpersonal interaction. This poem, with its very muted “I,” is immediately followed by “Jealous of Winter,” whose oracular “I” is wholly alone in the poem:
My sorry I’s
cut to no
flowers no birds
in the context
of eternity
I can’t really
articulate it

This poem is followed by “Technology,” which resembles “Serious Reflections”

“Icechest Blues” in its end-stopped lines, related to one another by a meandering,
whimsical/mordant logic. Here are the first ten lines of the twenty-line poem:

The World Lit student Seth writes I hate that the world’s so mean.
Peripheral nerves throughout his body malfunction simultaneously.
A girl holds the door while another neither rushes nor lingers
in retracting her roller-bag and clops four stairs and through.
It’s 53 °, foggy, cloudy, lightly breezy on February 18 in Hattiesburg.
The Russian poet Akhmatova writes Fog lies on the white road.
Do you know what that means on a deeper level?
I turn on the green desklamp so I can see the keyboard.
Akhmatova’s etched face unnerves from the cover of her Selected.
Seth writes I wanted to find the good of me.

And “Weather Report,” a ghazal, comes two pages after “Technology.” But what’s new
in “Weather and Technology,” besides the variety of stylistic approaches, are the iambic
narratives in which the “I” is much more character than oracle. The first section of
“Technology,” the three-page narrative of the 24 days it took the speaker to get the water
and electric turned on in his rental house, is an example:

May 3, 2011
The water and electric don’t work,
air motionless atop the uninflated
air mattress, grease, dirt, and other
harassed but never evicted. Out on
the stoop to escape the stifle I read
Keith Richards’ autobiography, Life,
by Virgen de Guadalupe candlelight
until Nicole gets home and we gobble
french fries, suck down milkshakes,
sip whiskey and beer. I ride her bike to Chevron to fill the tires so she can get to work tomorrow as mosquitoes drive her inside. When the guy from the city shows up at four the next day to install the water meter, I can taste the water, feel the relief of itchy balls, and nearly cry when the taps still run dry though I hear it under the kitchen floor. No water! I call, but he and his truck are gone when I reach the door.

The allusions and reflections of many of “Serious Reflections” poems are missing from “Technology,” which is comprised of a list of actions, common in everyday life, which logically follow one another. The other poems in “Weather and Technology” either follow in the varied stylistic footsteps of “The Consequences of This Afternoon’s Storm,” “Jealous of Winter,” Icechest Blues,” or the “Technology”’s, or combine them. “Warm Night,” which closes Robert Frost Blues with a narrative on the nature of repetition, and features the cyclical linguistic repetition which marks “Serious Reflections” but in the service of a narrative, is an example of previously disparate styles converging.

But while “Weather and Technology” is more stylistically varied than “Serious Reflections” and “‘Aeroplane,’” it resembles them in its concern with different means of apprehending the world. Expanding on the notion, represented in all three sections of Robert Frost Blues, that apprehending the world is difficult, “The Consequences of This Afternoon’s Storm” depicts the gap between Frost and Hicks’ apprehensions of “Nature.” “Three Days Before the Storm,” which follows by a few pages, depicts the gap between Frost and Hicks’ apprehension of human nature:

“If we killed all the assholes,” said Robert Frost, “there wouldn’t be very many people left.”
“I disagree,” said Granville Hicks with conviction, “just all the assholes would be gone.”

As a whole, Robert Frost Blues argues that apprehending the world is difficult, and that even if you’re able to apprehend it, others might apprehend it very differently. The form of that argument changes as the manuscript progresses. The poems in “Serious Reflections” represent failed apprehension, feature repetition stylistically, and are spoken by an oracular “I.” The poems in the following two sections still feature oracle-ness and repetition, but are primarily narratives of interpersonal interaction between the speaker’s more flesh-and-blood “I” and another “I.” But at the end of “Warm Night,” the speaker, whether oracular or flesh-and-blood, is still having great difficulty apprehending the world, and convincing others that they should apprehend the world the same way as him.

Still, over the course of Robert Frost Blues, the speaker has moved from having difficulty apprehending the world to convincing others to share his apprehension, which assumes that he has at least a working apprehension of the world, one worth copying. (Or believes he does.) That increased apprehension is concomitant with his increased belief in “I”-based narrative, privileging human interactions over discrete facts.

Robert Frost Blues collectively argues, stylistically and thematically, that apprehending the world is difficult. If one is able to know the world to some degree, the efficacy of that knowledge will be significantly affected by whether other people agree that that apprehension of the world is correct. But beyond that, Robert Frost Blues, with its casual sestinas and villanelles, colloquial language, found language, prose poems, dialogues, and iambic narratives, implicitly argues that the most important aspect of knowing the world is not the form that knowledge fits into or the literary devices it
employs. Instead, apprehending the world requires both solitary reflection and human interaction, with human interaction outweighing solitary reflection.
CHAPTER II

SERIOUS REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

POEM FOR CHRIS BROWN AFTER HIS ARREST

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
Theo’s dyslexic on The Cosby Show
as I eat kelp from the pigeonless, flopping waves.
Mercy’s fast as a pectoral slab and endurance presumes me.
  Dots all over the place.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
I’ve imposed food-sanctions until the swabs
resume working: passive mutiny’s born a full-grown
Yosemite Sam, the endpoint of negative capability.
  Coffee drips into the agar roar.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
A tiger shark jumps into my breakfast
lobster bisque. It’s ruined! The sun’s
my dad, wind pronounces my skin.
  Like Merle Haggard, the highway’s my home.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
Dawn, bales of chicken wire, the Statue of Liberty,
vine-veined fence, charcoal, water lapping softly.
It’s scary to think that I’ll be there by morning.
  The sky’s blue, the water’s blue.

I’m crossing the ocean today on a raft.
Another island another gas meter,
I land a whale the raft can’t hold.
Ambergris’s just blubber without capital.
  God, if you have immunity, blow.
INCORRECT MEASUREMENT BLUES

I need long days to think of things: the dry sound of the rain on the zinc,
ants up and down across my jowls, water moving away from itself
like a form of communicability,

and a rooster on a shrimper in the Gulf watches the light crawl across his toes
as the vase of wilted yellow flowers, nonworking laptop, Kingsford charcoal,
microwave, nonworking dryer, cactus, and ceiling fan all escape
into and from storms of community.

The days go beyond me like a buoy: mosquitoes in the ruins of the highschool
string up and on along the walls, and the trains blow through at all hours,
episodes of continuity

like chicken soup simmering, leafless trees, a lake in a field of dead grass—
a trust in foreignness—and my cat, Bob, spayed but still full of desire,
a description of a performance, number out of the universe,
curse of immunity.
Sometimes I don’t know what to do.
The potatoes float around in the water
when I stir them. Is it fair
that I’m not ambidextrous or tall?
I didn’t ask to be an abacus
and you don’t know the trouble I’ve seen.
I’m watching Everybody Loves Raymond in Racine,
Wisconsin: a tomato plant withers in the dew
on the grass covering Crispus Attucks
and the water
from his skull hits me first because I’m tall.
That’s not fair,
but luck’s the dew on a flower
too tropical for Racine,
she only shines on atolls.
In the crux of the water,
potato and tomato do-si-do
and cantaloupe attacks;
Is it fair that I’m ambidextrous?
Well of course it’s fair
cantaloupe, fair has nothing to do
with it, but water
starves and legume toasts the scene:
Short, in-between, tall,
Short, in-between, tall!
Here, here! I didn’t ask to be an abacus!
Boards cover the windows
of the house on the corner whose State Fair
Champion portland-roses glisten
with sun and hose-water,
sun and oil in the curb-water,
sweat on the harlequin stained-red petals,
ambidextrous “Have You Seen
Her” on 93.1. I, albatross,
alight on the lawn who, fair,
shares me with her dew
until I’m a waterfall throttling that dodo
Atticus Finch like an obscene fare.
GOLDFISH BLUES

Brown leaves and dried-out pods dab at the erupted sidewalk in front of the ruins. The water-heater kettle-drums the only tune he knows—it’s a nice one, but songs get rote like everything else, without exception. Time is nothing to total resignation. Prince, Tupac, and two other faces—James Brown and Madonna?—mural the walls, forlorn since the roof’s ascension or dissolution, and clouds hang like land over the canyon. Nobody in Hattiesburg gives a fuck about the Parthenon but Herculaneum is a horseradish on the city bus, a French-pressed carcass on a pimply, sunburned cross, like bronzed baby-Keds, our face in the lava, the rote air, but there’s a chance, however slim—that’s chance. Two-liters in the weeds, there’s a sanctuary in piss, and I’ll run away from all of this. Tupac’s young and all eyes and cheeks, like Bambi sniffing a patch of forest grass.
ICECHEST BLUES

I lean back in my leatherette swivel-chair and think,
Why do I feel like I need to interact with other people?
Life, how and what is it?
The marsupials will hold the marsupials.
The tide is mean, stupid, and weak.
I am my profoundly ignorant thing.
Why do I fight with my neck?
What are some of the properties of life?
Snails traject on their respective sides of the asphalt.
Sunsets and the oceanic depths both deserve their own channel.
Life can make me sad.
I’m morally and aesthetically offended by Bud Light’s slogan of “Superior Drinkability.”
I’m the star and Nielsen viewer of a dramedy, *The Love War*, something for everybody.
The lot next-door is bleak and neutral.
How is there something rather than nothing?
How is a lot bleak and neutral?
Why is it raining?
It’s difficult not to be an individual.
The marsupials will catch the marsupials.
The sun’s back out,
and when the breeze through the window cools my bald head
life is an old red brick on a plastic chair.
I always say that.
In “What Goes On,” Stephen Dunn tells the story of a woman who cheats on her husband, who then takes her in when she’s diagnosed with cancer. Dunn tells it very differently than I just did. I like it better his way but see it mine, like driving at night before I got glasses. The man as saint. Ten years ago I dated a girl, pretty, who couldn’t see for shit but wouldn’t get glasses because this was how she knew the world. Last week my dentist, Dr. Mott, prescribed me a dam for my teeth grinding but I don’t wear it. This morning Dr. Mott and my dad were in a fender-bender and my dad called him a chiseler. He must have been very upset to be talking like that. I should call him but probably won’t. Is Stephen Dunn a sap? Is his poem intended as a joke? I don’t want to get old, but some of these oldsters seem so calm, like Native American TV secretaries or green-shaded desk lamps. The wife lives, they get back together, seem happy. I should email my sister about Thanksgiving. Dr. Mott drives a brand-new, bright yellow Corvette.
IT’S BAD

May I stay well and ever better,
may I never be anything besides what I am
and ever better, if only more and more
amelioratively over a greater and greater time.
A cat can look at a king and that king
can still look at that cat again anyway,
but it doesn’t matter. There’s more
than one way of living in water,
and living in water’s different than living
in air. Many creatures burrow from birds,
waves, and sun, but some burrowers
venture out to eat what waves bring.
IN ONE VERY MEAN WOMAN’S HOUSE

There’s a cat in the oven.
There’s a cat in the closet.
Her sighing is like her fucking breathing.
There’s no film noir.
Atlanta and I don’t like it here,
there are no ridiculous knee-braces.
But my ass-cheeks still respond to the toilet seat.
I don’t remember when the lights come on.
The train blows through my beer.
The laundromats scream a lot of the time.
Bob, my inside cat, has an outside mate.
He’s a dead vine in a pot on his windowsill.
Dozens of sharks, most with claspers.
I’m crushing cans.
She tells the children that they’ll die if they don’t tattle
as the washers and dryers whirring and thump.
There are two ripening tomatoes in the raised bed.
The doghouses are made from 100% recycled cats.
My first tomato this season was scrumptious despite the 40% it lost to bruising.
The stairs and days run endless laps up and down each other.
Time is water through a colander,
the roach up and down the wall of the sink.
She smiles and laughs most of the time and allows me the sun, for free.
Fuck her. The train blows through the trees.
There’s no film noir.
It’s dull in a beautiful, beautiful way, beautiful in a dull, dull way.
Pipes and spigots outflank the water.
Her rubbing alcohol doesn’t kill the poison ivy on my inserts.
The ruins are undergoing renovation.
Nothing ever washes over me.
The prisons and babies are named after each other.
IT’S HARD TO KNOW

Sunny stoop, thrushes diving the lawn,
gray sedan down Main. Now a white coupe.
Now yesterday's dirt on the faux-glass table.
A brick stains the plastic chair with wet leaves.
My cat slides between the chain rings of two
bikes leaning on each other as I try to true
one front tire for an hour. Next time
I won't slurp spaghetti and forget my capo,
but will saunter with dignity across the Negev
like a black goat who can't pay his water bill
or find a well. The train blows on to Slidell
like Shakespeare, never spelling his name
the same way twice through glorious, terrible
nostrils. Rain drips from eaves, a car revs,
a catbird plink tut-tuts from the fire-escape.
I wouldn't true the wheel if I didn't want to,
but stars aren't lint in the cape
of night and God is a tax you don't levy.
My cat crawls into the gears of our trundle
bed, out with a mouse, nearly in two:
he kills succulence but only consumes
Purina. The black goat tolls his copper
bell and Shakespeare shakes in his hobnails
because no matter how hard you believe
thirst doesn't oxidize to love.
But now the twines and leaves
of spaghetti and banana trees anticipate
March storms that smack, cry, and cleave,
now the coupes cantillate down Main
and the sundial tells my cat to wake up.
THE TEMPTATION TO PUT IT ONTO THINGS OR PERSONS

A few of us enjoy pain
but I avoid it when I can
because theoretical laughter
and metaphorical shakedowns
always end up fronts
for complete forgiveness.
The sun howls down
donkeys in hang-gliders,
True Light’s old schoolbus
picks up two oldsters,
the leaves and I rattle each other
over lying beneath banyan
or lantana. Planes alleyoop
from Muir to Liston
till Columbus sights a crater
bigger than the Grand Canyon,
a saguaro bobbing between
New York and London
inventing the aircraft-carrier
in a letter home: Every cactus
helps his older brother drown.
THE KUMQUAT THEORY OF HATTIESBURG

The telescope reached out to the moon, where sounds travel farther and faster, and said, “My lenses change shape to focus on objects both near and far away.”

The moon said, “You are you to me.”
Some drunk girl kicked over the telescope and shattered it.

I sat on the stoop and said, “Stoop, you are you to me. Forever.”
He smiled.
The little girls chanted and hopped on the sidewalk.

After the telescope died the moon and driveway started slowly slaloming each other, but after many years the moon told the driveway, “Drive, your cracks are showing.”

The driveway was just happy that they had had so many good years together, and told the moon so.
Many years after that, on a random Valentine’s Day, the driveway and moon sent each other all of their respective forms of identification—birth certificates, social-security cards, licenses—with cards that read on the inside, “You are you to me.” Neither of them knew how to take it.

The stoop and I were having a conversation about our emotional and intellectual relationships over glasses of Dewars and cans of Bud Light when we realized that the train hadn’t come through in years and years, like a vast shotgun.

After a few minutes, I said, “I’m not so sure about Johnny Dupree.”
The stoop was thinking about the tomato on the sill.

As the jimson-weed by the driveway tricked some fly into pollinating her, the fly said, “You’re not bad at yourself, honey.”
The eavesdropping driveway appeared to flinch.
“I’m expressing a feast!” shouted the fly.
Two men chitchatted and smoked on the Hattiesburg American loading dock.

The moon and driveway listened to the horn section of the highschool marching band on a brisk October night. They had both always enjoyed music, and horn section music more than most other types. The driveway hoped that a fog would roll in.
Johnny Dupree hoped, in vain, that I would change my mind, while I hoped that the stoop and I wouldn’t end up like that telescope. Everybody hopes for a little something, if only occasionally.
MARCH 20, 2009

for Ann McNair

No sun, shadow, or green umbrella, I turn thirty in five days. Nothing hums and the leaves are dancing Coke cans because solitude is a sin, the days of tender youth are gone as Old Yeller, burns absorb and give off energy. I turn thirty in five days in the equality of shade, a cog. The couple in the house down the block holler through my earplugs and the brown needles in the driveway cracks insult the sun. I crack my toes in the Sinai’s warm grease: nothing hums and solitude is a sin, a sin. It’s quiet now, mist briskets the air with frogs. I feel flappable as hell, but only five days till I eat Popeye’s and drink whiskey. Despite my earplugs I’m listening to my through-the-wall neighbor get busy as the tide in a rainwater pool on a beautiful morning the train to New Orleans blows through, the fern on the sill splayed in the sun, nothing hums, and the leaves are dancing Coke cans because solitude is a sin that, like everything, abounds in March somewhere, like me.
THE MAY OR MAY NOT BLUES

Chrysippus is dead of laughter after watching his drunk donkey attempt to eat figs. How bored would you have to be to laugh that hard? I laugh a lot each year I deliver pizza, but his eyeless partial marble bust in the Louvre looks dour and infers more. As he gasped for breath, Chrysippus realized that Iamblichus was right, that "magnitude one" was a contradiction in terms and trains could exist. Shadows smoked cigarettes, got coffees, took ten-minute naps. Because the donkey doesn't use his tongue for words, he can't lift it up to the roof of his mouth. What if every tree in the orchard blooms, bears fruit? What is it like to live in the Louvre? The partial marble bust's left eyebrow is cocked like Eartha Kitt's as I walk across the lawn. It's hard to know how to handle things. The donkey drank two bowls of wine.
THANK YOU

At some point there’s nothing to do but be happy. This isn’t an ode to happiness. It doesn’t mean many people, including myself, aren’t guilty of horrible things, or that many others aren’t guilty of things horrible beyond our imagination. In fact, it doesn’t mean anything at all. But it goes beyond giving up, beyond “fuck it.” Walking to get coffee a very skinny, spectral figure with a moustache leans out a first-story window and tells me that I’m perfect for the movie that he’s filming, right here out on Royal. They give me the backstory and tell me where to stand, what to say, and I realize that they’re making a biopic of me. My acting debut scored me an Oscar, which was the least I deserved.
My fat’s more self-motivated than every book besides *Don Quixote*, but neither of them caught John Law, who sold me flowers for my flowers and fled down the block under steel-wool clouds across the Channel. Chops braise, a lot of perfume walks by at the BP, and my grievance is not political. All I do all day is watch the ferns flutter in the wind and mutter, “What’s done is done…” Unlike me, Sir Isaac Newton wasn’t just talking. Did you know that he was the first person to ever write a poem about summer? I’m working on a patent that I can’t tell you about except that it’s going to be great because motivation is the only thing that exists in the world, much less matters. I don’t even know what Sophia Loren looks like, much less John Law, though have heard that Law eats only quinoa and walnuts for the sake of his enormous arms and that he’s trying to be stronger than Time. Chop-broth thickens, a large man swings out the fitting-room doors at Mervyn’s. I lied; I, like you, know what Sophia Loren has always looked like, but, criminally, have never met her: as Newton told me and a bunch of other saps, “The fluttering fern is the gist of it.” I thought that was deep and impressive; now I just tell myself that nothing is ever done. The Viceroy signs all the peasants into prisoners and the prisoners into slaves, a little girl stares at me riding past on my bike. I stand up on the pedals, but my land is still fake and the mail-order typewriter too tiny to type on.
CASSAVA, TAPIOCA, YUCA, MANIOC...

On our honeymoon in Vietnam the thirteen-hour time difference has me not sleeping except for nod-offs. At 3:36 one night, just for something to do, I sit on the toilet drinking weasel-shit coffee and reading a poem by David Huddle:

In Cu Chi, Vietnam
I heard tapes somebody's
sister sent of wild thing,
I think I love you.

A few minutes later I stab myself while removing the pit from an avocado. Over the next hour the sun climbs from the water and shrimpers motor into the Gulf.
POEM FOR RIHANNA AFTER CHRIS BROWN’S ARREST

Bright sun over the ruins of the high school
slices the Japanese boxwood outside my window.
Certain songs make you remember dinners
of beer and ice cream and more for dessert.
Ambivalent alloy-notes tune into cuckoos,
dead fireflies, and bound roots. My tongue-tip
is a train whistling to Tippecanoe, and life
is my hand holding a jellyfish in yours.
Weeding is an ocean if you do it or not,
pit-mines are holes on the ground.
Comparisons are always half-ridiculous
but love is a blowfish sometimes, on a plate.
Silence becomes you, gun underneath the lantana.
You’re calm on the lam. Loneliness is for leisure,
poison-ivy for nothing, but rashes carry their antidotes
sometimes: sun rubs knots up the ribs of the blinds
while blowfish steal signs and effortlessly win.
Shadows on the table blanch but recover:
holes are everything, timing is everything,
a truck reverse-beeps from the *Hattiesburg American.*
We’re churchbell-less after a storm names itself,
camellia-pods in driveway dirt-rills, mop against
the house, Japanese boxwood in a half-crouch.
Who hasn’t been down? I’ve been a brick buried
under the Marianas Trench, waiting out the storm
on a couch in Laurel, where love is a City Hall/
gas-station/general-store freckle. Certain songs
make night blatant—knots steam from the table
into the redoubt air, an older woman limps
down my block, ice cubes scratch in their sleep,
warm air breaks across a spiked leaf, the glass
table scuttles light onto the driveway until the grass
behind the boardinghouse recants how it treated
Dumbo before he flew—and sometimes every telephone
conversation is the same bland blind taste-test
in the hail, even the horseradishes beg for death.
But vinegar exorcises your sole of the toxic quills,
half-eggshells spooning in the day-old coffee grounds,
bright sun behind the crane behind the ruins.
RIP VAN WINKLE TESTIFIES IN REGARDS TO BELL BICYCLE HELMETS

Like the ocean in a Corona commercial or goat-sausage stew bubbling, the white pail of cigarette butts on the glass table shifts back and forth in its sleep. Unlike the pail, after 31 years I still don’t know how to sleep, or not sleep, when brass and zydeco bands are warming up just past my door. My Martian life has never heard of me but I tantrum until she says she’ll be my Plato always and I knock the pail off the table, buy a contraband sleepmask from my twin as a shadow rolls across the stucco. Our parents walk to the cul-de-sac, destroy the rocketship.

.
Like a baby panting, 
forgetting for a moment 
how to breathe, the sun 
is a little bit brighter 
every morning:
that is a moose that used 
to be a dinosaur, that is 
an alligator with horns.

A cat scratches behind 
his right ear, it’s going 
to rain. You put your head 
next to your sister’s head, 
you’ll have the same dream. 
Cry until you stop, take 
your daughter’s name.
SUNDAY AFTERNOON TESTIMONY

The faux-canvas lawn chairs were out in the alley setting off fireworks, the ivied trunk down the block was starfishing for the sky before the rainstorm, and every single thing leaned on each other like each class mark on a report card when that beautiful housecat ambled across my yard. I should’ve just ran, permanently, but I couldn’t raise an arm, much less the interest, and so just kept scratching my calf with my other foot like a stork and watching the faux-canvas lawn chairs out in the alley setting off fireworks. A sledgehammer at the construction site down the block was hitting steel in lukewarm faucet drips and then a man screamed like a cork pops and every single thing leaned on each other like each class mark. A cardinal flew off from my hibiscus tree. We didn’t think there was any harm in the faux-canvas lawn chairs out in the alley setting off fireworks and the sparkly ribbons breezing down from a branch like New York as the train blew through and the churchbells tolled one: it was Purim and we were all leaning on each other, like marks.

It began to pour. When the housecat flew back across the yard, puddles embarked on the driveway, ivy up the trunk. It was the height of boredom, which is why the faux-canvas lawn chairs were out in the alley setting off fireworks just as every single thing leaned on each other like each class mark.
VASE OF YELLOW FLOWERS BLUES

When Raylawni showed Nicole and I the house on Melrose, across from the ruins of the highschool, she asked me what I was studying at USM. Poetry. She said that she liked Nikki Giovanni, what did I think? When I said I'd never read anything, both she and Nicole were shocked.

A couple weeks before our wedding, Nicole asked me if I wanted to put a different love poem on each table. She emailed me Giovanni’s “That’s The Way I Feel” and I, in a panic, located Charles Simics’ “Love-Flea.” We didn’t end up putting poems on the tables, but Nicole had already Amazoned Giovanni’s Love Poems. I couldn’t sleep last night and read it, many months after purchase, and this morning told Nicole that I'd really enjoyed it, that I hadn’t realized that Nikki Giovanni was funny.

“Yeah,” Nicole said, “she's a little bit mean.”

Yellow flowers out on the compost heap, vase in the kitchen sink, the side of my face on Nicole's chest and shoulder, the nandina leaves in the cold bright breeze, and it's never snowed like this in Hattiesburg before. A car comes down the block and goes around the corner, past the highschool undergoing arson renovation for the second time.
THE EXPLANATIONS

The baby wasp crawls across the tapestry, ant up the wall, fly on my left temple, the sugar-moth brushes his teeth before drinking orange juice. The little black snake lands on six leaves by the stoop where the mama wasp sleeps, a mite flies into her trachea while the ant gorges her ankle. The sugar-moth opens the fridge onto Cal Worthington selling Jeeps at Cerritos Auto Square as a crow bounces off the showroom window. The sun shines through him like a page from a magazine as he flies over the ant walking in the dirt along the house behind the dealership. Another ant barrels down the face of the middle step. The mama wasp wakes up and tries to look like a wasp just waiting for the job to be offered, the tick on the wall shaking in the breeze, but screams when the snake falls out of the curtains and into her lap. Cal Worthington says, “Sometimes things happen, nothing can be done.”
CHAPTER III

“IN THE AEROPLANE OVER THE SEA”

Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity.

--James Baldwin

**Q:** Is Jeff Mangum a conservative christian, or is his faith more progressive?

**A:** I believe his faith is more progressive then conservative. ChaCha!!

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**Q:** What has Jeff mangum been up to since neutral milk hotel?

**A:** Jeff Magnum is currently just chilling in the studio, writing new songs and spending time with his family.

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**Q:** What ever
In the *Pitchfork* interview, Mangum gave his own explanation for why he stopped writing:
"I guess I had this idea that if we all created our dream we could live happily ever after. So when so many of our dreams had come true and yet I still saw that so many of my friends were in a lot of pain... I saw their pain from a different perspective and realized that I can't just sing my way out of all this suffering. I realized that I wanted to take a deeper look at life in order to become kind of a truly healing force in people's everyday lives."

Of the month of recording and cohabitation that produced *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, Carter notes, “None of us were professional musicians on any level, except Jeremy. Scotty learned to play the trumpet so fast and beautifully, with no teacher, no experience, no nothing, just because he... understood the goal and everybody believed in it."
STRANGELY INVIGORATING

When Nicole’s not around, I cry almost every time that I listen to *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*. I’m not asking for sensitivity awards—I put it on when I want to cry, like rubbing jalapeno oil on my eyeballs. I sobbed on the train up to Chicago, and today folding laundry couldn’t sing along:

*It’s so sad to see the world agree that they’d rather see their faces fill with flies...*

The legend is that Mangum read *The Diary of Anne Frank* shortly before the recording session and arrived on the first day with new lyrics to the existing melodies. True or not, once the seed of Anne Frank has been planted you can’t hear the lyrics any other way.

Nicole introduced me to *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, and I associate it with moving from Portland to New York and falling in love with her.
“Why,” implores Caleb, Watson’s fourteen year-old son, “did he stop making albums?” The flicker of the laundry-scented candle backlights its $4.99 TJ Maxx price-tag. I tell him I don’t know why. When the CD ends, we walk down the block and pick up an extraordinary amount of fried chicken and crinkle fries from some metallic Chinese restaurant. We eat in front of Singin’ in the Rain, and Caleb begins to cry when Gene Kelly sings:

Moses he knowses his toeses aren’t roses,
As Moses supposes his toeses to be!
WORLD LIT

Natalie’s fiancée, via Skype, asks her what she’s reading for English so she tells him about Griffis’ “Have you seen Jeff Mangum?” She and his platoon watch each other listen to the album on his laptop and “nobody talks, it’s weird.” She’ll still be a twist in his brain eight years later, the first time he saw someone cook with real garlic (for guacamole), he’ll never abandon every last fear like that again. The album finishes and neither has much to say, so they log off and Natalie stumbles outside to look at the garden, listen to the sirens and train. She tells me all this as explanation for listening to the album, which I’d asked them not to. I tell her that sometimes you can’t avoid listening and she agrees. In a poem for class, “Rubber Room,” she says that she “felt crazy before she met him,” but in eight years that real garlic and guacamole are two of the only cities he can name, their radio station that would play single keys for hours at a stretch.
Over the course of the summer I learned that a couple of my professors had lied to my face, but couldn’t do anything about it. Meanwhile, the Monday after we read Griffis’ article we listened to *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*. When it was over I asked what they thought.

“Can’t sing,” said Ivorie.

Murmurs of agreement.

“You’d want,” said Jeremy, “to be in a good mood when you began listening.”

More murmurs.

“Do you remember,” said Vixon, “in the article where Mangum says he doesn’t want for this album to have any sounds that have ever been on any other album?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he did it.”
LISTENING TO NEUTRAL MILK HOTEL
on my couch, 127 Melrose

Wish I could make it a dress
and wear, or a bed to sleep in.
SPECTACULAR MOMENTS IN SWEET CATHARSIS

At a Thursday matinee of *Titanic* back in 1997, Elisabeth and I held each other and sobbed so profusely for so long that the woman behind asked if we were OK.

After a successful visit on the drive to New York, hot, stoned, silent tears on the basement couch in front of *Sportscenter*. 
PARK SLOPE

*NME* called 33 1/3 “a brilliant series of pocket-sized books focusing on a classic album. Each one a work of real love.” Nicole was introduced to Neutral Milk Hotel by her roommate Neil. He was 31 to her 23, and she was lucky to have him as a mentor. He told her about living in Prague and reading *Ulysses* aloud with his girlfriend, and that the 7th Avenue Barnes & Noble was always sold out of the Neutral Milk Hotel 33 1/3. Nicole and I tried to read *Ulysses* while we were driving across the country, but could only muster the interest in Kansas, forty pages worth.

The Amazon Product Description of the Neutral Milk 33 1/3 reads:

Of all the recordings to emerge from the Athens-via-Denver collective called Elephant 6, Neutral Milk Hotel’s second album is the one that has worked its way under the most skins. *Magnet* named it the best album of the 1990s, and *Creative Loafing* recently devoted a cover story to one fan’s quest to understand why band leader Jeff Mangum dropped out of sight soon after *Aeroplane*’s release… The music is like nothing else in the 90s indie underground: a psychedelic brass band, its members self-taught, forging polychromatic washes of mood and tribute. The songs stick to one narrow key, the images repeat and circle back, and to listen is to be absorbed into a singular, heart-rending vision.

According to the album’s liner notes Laura Carter plays zanzithiphone. *Wikipedia*:

The zanzithophone is the name given to an electronic MIDI saxophone. It produces a piercing, unearthly nasal tone. This instrument is most notably used by The Elephant 6 Recording Company, based in Athens, Georgia. It looks like a whitish clarinet/saxophone hybrid and can be played as such, or with the "Casio system," which alters the fingering and allows for up to four octaves to be played.

Julian Koster on, among other things,

the Wandering Genie, a type of organ formerly manufactured by Lowrey, used on the album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*

and Michelle Anderson

on the uilleann pipes, originally the Union pipes,
now the characteristic national bagpipe of Ireland. The uilleann pipes’ bag’s inflated with a small bellows strapped around the waist and right arm, which allows pipers to converse or sing while playing. The uilleann pipes are known for their sweet tone and wide range of notes—the chanter ranges two full octaves, sharps and flats.

Customers Who Bought This Item (the Neutral Milk 33 \( \frac{1}{3} \)) Also Bought the 33 \( \frac{1}{3} \) s for the Pixies’ *Doolittle*, Elliot Smith’s *XO*, David Bowie’s *Low*, and Radiohead’s *OK Computer*. More Amazon.com Search Results include a 33 \( \frac{1}{3} \) entitled *Celine Dion’s Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*. The Editorial Reviewers fall all over themselves:

A wide-ranging book, one predicated on the possibility that what repels us may say more about us than what attracts... insightful, engaging, unexpectedly moving.

An important study—not just of Dion and pop music but also of the changing nature of criticism in the popular realm.

a rigorous, very funny meditation on what happens when you realize there's more to life than being hip, and begin to grapple with what that "more" might be.
In *Walt Whitman’s America*, David S. Reynolds writes:
“Signs of crisis or trauma lurked in many places in the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*. These editions contain what may be called negative centers, both in the editions as a whole and in individual poems. Related to society and politics, these negative moments reflected Whitman’s fear that the American experiment was an utter failure. Related to Whitman’s private life, they resonated with family difficulties, metaphysical angst, and, it would seem, struggles with his sexual orientation. The fact that the final effect of his poems was triumphantly affirmative shows how successful he was in garnering all his cultural and creative resources to challenge the negative and imaginatively overcome it… Poetry just might help restore the togetherness politics and society had destroyed.”

“There’s just such a crumbling, tragic element to *Aeroplane*,” Carter tells Griffis. “But the descriptions of tragedy are beautiful, and then it’s like overcoming that.” Griffis adds: “It’s not just overcoming, it’s finding optimism within tragedy.” Later, Griffis writes: “Other lyrics hinted at what friends discreetly termed Mangum’s ‘chaotic’ childhood: ‘Your mom would stick a fork right into Daddy’s shoulder, and your dad would throw the garbage all across the floor… Your mom would sink until she was no longer speaking,
and Dad would dream of all
the different ways to die, each one
a little more than he could dare to try.””

Here are the lyrics that Griffis
elides in the above quotation:
“As we would lay and learn
what each others’ bodies were for.
This is the room one afternoon
I knew I could love you, and from
above you how I sank
into your soul, into that secret
place where no one dares to go.”

“Sounds pretty bad on that record,
doesn’t it?” says James Mangum,
Jeff’s dad and a retired economics
professor. “His mother and I didn’t get
along, and we divorced when Jeff was 14.
But the kids never got caught in between
us as far as our fighting was concerned.
They always just came No. 1,
no matter how badly we fought.
But some of it was autobiographical.
Some of it, I don’t understand.
The way I interpreted the record,
he was on my side, but sympathetic.”
WHY DOES THE BEGINNING MATTER?

The child: Why’d he stop making albums? fetching it with full hands. How could I answer the child?

Maybe it’s like how the stalker knows the threat stalkers pose stalkee, or how the sun fools petunia.

Or that Adirondack chair, button-up across her tits. Is it her fault? Her negative attitude? I pat down Colombo but he’s clean, so I tell the child I guess the album’s like you, the vegetation’s produced babe. He knows I’m fetching shit with full hands, so we listen to it again, re-read the liner notes:

I lie, but I’d have told him if I’d known, would’ve told myself. But each petunia requires 1,000 bees.
CHRISTMAS GIFT EXCHANGE

My sister’s boyfriend Geoff emails Nicole, what should I get Greg?
—*In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* on vinyl.
What about Bob Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited*?
—No, Greg has all the Dylan he needs.
What about the Beatles’ *Abbey Road*?
—Greg really has all the Beatles he needs.
FOR JEFF MANGUM

I cry at TV and movies all the time and occasionally even talk radio, but *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* is the only piece of music I can remember crying to even once.

In his State of the Union speech last night, President Obama said that we, as Americans, have to “win the future.” I’m telling myself that it’s branding, that while he seems kind of hokey he’s not that hokey, but still feel stupid remembering my tears while viewing and reading his speeches, watching Charlie Rose interview his biographers, and now recall numerous instances of crying to Zeppelin’s “When the Levee Breaks.” Remembering that makes me feel a little bit stupid but mainly great.
CHAPTER IV
WEATHER AND TECHNOLOGY
THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS AFTERNOON’S STORM

Robert Frost and Granville Hicks stand on the stoop. Frost says, “This is Nature.”
Hicks says, “What, exactly?”
“The storm.”
“Lots of people,” says Hicks, “are sleeping on the sidewalk, or worse. Is that Nature?”
“This is Nature.”
“What? The trees, the rain?”
“Exactly,” says Frost.
“I wouldn’t ever want to sleep on the sidewalk and I assume you wouldn’t either, and
that has nothing to do with trees or rain.”
“Then we should find someplace better.”
JEALOUS OF WINTER

My sorry I’s
cut to no
flowers no birds
in the context
of eternity
I can’t really
articulate it
The World Lit student Seth writes *I hate that the world’s so mean.* Peripheral nerves throughout his body malfunction simultaneously. A girl holds the door while another neither rushes nor lingers in retracting her roller-bag and clops four stairs and through. It’s 53 °, foggy, cloudy, lightly breezy on February 18 in Hattiesburg. The Russian poet Akhmatova writes *Fog lies on the white road.* Do you know what that means on a deeper level? I turn on the green desklamp so I can see the keyboard. Akhmatova’s etched face unnerves from the cover of her *Selected.* Seth writes *I wanted to find the good of me.* Determining the where and how long of pain. I have no idea whatsoever what’s going on anywhere in Nebraska. The literature professor Watson said that Lincoln was pleasant. *Whatever it’s worth* written a million times in Seth. I taught him to set a second alarm so that you can sleep. Nicole sings and laughs to someone on the phone, coughs. After the Anastasia impersonator jumps off the bridge into the lake, her childhood acquaintance Melnik writes *Coarser mouth, leaner face, bigger nose.* Seth titles *I’m Here, I’m Queer, I’m Getting Use To It.* I write *Used—it’s a Southern accent thing,* and a happy face. The forecast for tomorrow is 76 °, foggy, cloudy, lightly breezy.
WEATHER REPORT

The middle-aged brunette with long arms sitting on a sunny balcony has closed the fly zone over Tripoli in anticipation of mercenaries.

The man in front of the Dartmouth backdrop who resembles Michael Caine must admit, he may be naïve but he’s never heard of mercenaries in Libya. Naïve and a little distant due to his longstanding amnesia, he shrugs with horrified exhilaration at the image of the mercenaries 40,000 feet up, unaware of the middle-aged brunette with long arms, one asking another a question, be honest, mercenary to mercenary.

I would’ve lied too. The middle-aged man with a face for a mountain stands at a lectern and wishes that the mercenaries weren’t necessary, but external forces have created conditions which give him no choice. While the other pundits talk Dartmouth shrugs like a squirrel with rabies.

The mercenaries shoulder their bags, walk down the stairs to the runway: one imitates Nixon, another Jim Morrison, eighty degrees in February and the air is rich to the point of gagging, richer even than all the weather reporters you’ve ever encountered, mercenary in its diplomatic immunity.
LUCKILY, EVERYTHING GOOD’S ON THE HIGHWAY

I order coffee, water, Greek omelette, bacon, toast, vividly fantasize about the waitress as I pick at the Oregonian, leave a message on Nicole’s voicemail, spy on the other patrons and cabbies pulling out of the garage across the street in the rain. The front page is full of a former governor’s affair with his thirteen year-old babysitter thirty years ago, and in sports Blazers keep getting arrested for marijuana possession. I read the labels on the ketchup and jam, she brings my coffee, an Israeli tank runs over a girl from Evergreen. I look at the pictures of old cars on the walls and think about Elisabeth who I didn’t fuck last night. Rain turns to mist, the thirteen bus goes by, a nineteen year-old lowers himself into the lions’ pit at the Oregon Zoo.
When Nicole’s mood shades our flat
I am, for a time, born and raised English.
A light headache as it begins to get dark,
Stevie Smith reads a poem on the BBC
ridiculing the new Common Prayer Book
as I read a story about how fame changed
Marc Bolan of T-Rex into a primadonna.
I laugh at Smith’s poem, Little Marvel peas
twine up three sticks in the heathy brick air,
and when I arrive at Idlewild Nicole hauls
my three suitcases up the baggage-claim
steps to get at my lips. Who can blame her?
Billions of volcanoes spurt lava into the air and down their sides as the rain blows, the explosion the loudest sound we’ve ever heard, rivers, lakes, streams, oceans, and creeks as far as the eye can see. The reason for this great expenditure is unknown, but if we’re going next door let’s go all the way, if we’re going down the block let’s get the fuck out of here because the fire’s a hunger homing for our souls. A city writhes out to the dry forest, eats its timber raw and vomits and shits on the 5:15 home, sprints from the train with the other accidental tourists in search of a place to stop, sit, and eventually fall asleep.

Dan, a regional head of sales for FedEx, exchanges a look and nod of appreciation for the lava’s beauty with the city while the hamlet leans on my Eos Airlines middle manager shoulder. Because it’s below freezing we’re getting dumber in our sleep—white-winged ant, for instance, asks lobster and crab how the island got its name as lava grabs them to death and on down, smelling overwhelmingly of tequila. The necessity of the volcanoes is horrifying but such is life: we sit under a shit tree in a desolate valley and dingily rest, billions of catfish leap around in the hamlet’s hundred lakes, and rain augments the fire until the island bursts to pieces.
My neighbor A.C. and his wife, whom I’ve never met, are having a party, cars line our usually empty street. Our landlord Raylawni’s in Trinidad for two months, and between Nicole and I and A.C. and his wife, she left them in charge—extra keys, her contact information. We’ve lived here for three years and they just moved in over the summer, but I think it’s because they’re oldsters, like her. The only other A.C. I’ve met was A.C. Green, great rebounder and defender for the Lakers in the 1980s who publicly claimed to be a virgin until his marriage, at 39. Like his dad, who he was named after, Green’s A.C. doesn’t stand for anything, as is the case with K.C. Jones, who played with the Celtics in the 1960s and coached them against Green in the 1980s. The day before Game 2 of the 1986 NBA Finals, my dad and I run into Green in the parking lot of the home of the Lakers, the Fabulous Forum, and ask him for tickets, which he politely refuses. His teammates would send groupies to his room to tempt him but he’d recite the Bible, calm as K.C. Jones was inconsolable on the bench even when the Celtics were ahead by thirty. Green holds the NBA record for consecutive games played with 1,192 despite sleeping two hours a night due to singultus, from which he recently recovered. The cars gone, lights out, music low, A.C. smokes on his porch. It’s 85 º in Trinidad.
THREE DAYS BEFORE THE STORM

“If we killed all the assholes,” said Robert Frost, “there wouldn’t be very many people left.”

“I disagree,” said Granville Hicks with conviction, “just all the assholes would be gone.”
In her essay “From Debris to Diamonds” Ahmadiome writes, “Memphis is where my mama husband father stood.” I’d never heard anyone use “stood” in that sense. She also writes that since Katrina “some people are doing better, some worst” a couple months before This American Life seconds her report that the storm affects different people differently. The night before Gustav at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art I cry at a piece which I still love but only remember involves two-liter plastic bottles. Then Nicole, Liz, Tom, and I drink and dine at Galatoire’s, Ahmadiome and Ivorie the only other table, arguing the order of the adjectives in a sentence. When Ahmadiome de-paragraphs her essay the ten-foot, to-scale toothpick Empire State Building flies into the museum’s sky, and our waiter Shelly walks out and says that everything’s on the house for everyone. All the two-liters begin to cry for no reason.
WHEN

Yesterday I was walking through fields
but today won’t let me in though I disciple

and I can’t smell and tonight’s potatoes
with butter, salt, and pepper only aroma,

let’s dance to “I Just Can’t Get Enough,”
“That’s Why I Love You So,” “Bring It On

Home to Me,” teach me to play the saw
and I’ll instruct you on time management.

Morning ducks into her shell. Let’s lie on
the beach and share headphones, let’s get

two slices of pizza and two beers apiece
after your shift, shopping carts rattling in

the parking lot while the moon dreams a hot,
hot tangent of noon, breezy, can’t control it.
INAUGURATION

People will try and spread lies on you.
Not for good but for a moment, the whole country’s together.
The sense of a man wandering in his own means.
Fog coils from the sea.
This song has the sound of freshly brewed coffee drifting through the morning air.
A somewhat form of beauty.
The high notes just sing in a moving away.
I chose this song because it’s nothing special to the ear, it’s very mellow but nevertheless beautiful because of its lack of excitement.
GUILT

Instead of saying “Thank you for renting me your condo over the summer” the meteorologist aggressively apologizes. I know she’s a meteorologist because she keeps bitching about how apparently God has decreed that weather and sports must always be talked about for precisely the same amount of time on the evening news, what do weather and sports have so deeply in common that they should always be talked about for exactly the same amount of time? I don’t know what the meteorologist is sorry about but I too often uber-apologize for no reason, like the couple next door who tell each other they’re sorry for being sorry a few times a week—I am too but what a thing for your neighbor to hear! The meteorologist says, “I fear people think I’m anti-sports, which I’m not. Just pro-weather.”
May 3, 2011
The water and electric don't work, air motionless atop the uninflated air mattress, grease, dirt, and other harassed but never evicted. Out on the stoop to escape the stifte I read Keith Richards' autobiography, Life, by Virgen de Guadalupe candlelight until Nicole gets home and we gobble french fries, suck down milkshakes, sip whiskey and beer. I ride her bike to Chevron to fill the tires so she can get to work tomorrow as mosquitoes drive her inside. When the guy from the city shows up at four the next day to install the water meter, I can taste the water, feel the relief of itchy balls, and nearly cry when the taps still run dry though I hear it under the kitchen floor. No water! I call, but he and his truck are gone when I reach the door.

May 13, 2011
Water for a week but still no electric. Cold showers—cold sharing's no fun—then walk down Royal into a postcard of a black vested troubadour and dark haired beauty harmonizing “Bring It On Home To Me.” He played guitar, she saw, and Nicole and I slowdanced. Last night we applied our bug spray and ate shrimp and catfish pobos out on the stoop, then Nicole went to sleep and I read Saul Bellow's letters by street light. But most of the time we act like nightvisionless cats, Virgen de Guadalupe candles: not enough wick for our wax.

May 18, 2011
I asked the barista, who I later learned was named David, if he knew of any apartments for rent. When we met up with him later that day Nicole laughed
and said, “Of course you made friends.” Like me David's white, tall, bald, skinny, works in a coffeeshop, and wears plaid shirts. When we moved in and learned there was no electric, so no air mattress, we walked next door to his apartment to ask if we could inflate it there, but he, as a favor, offered us an uncomfortable twin instead which I felt obliged to take. Now, three weeks later, he's moving to San Francisco in a week, and has sold his regular mattress and needs the twin back. We inflate the air mattress but I'd left the cork at home, it crumples before I get back, but the second try's a success. David says, “I've seen you on the hood of your car, reading under the streetlight. Please read here—we have a couch, lamp.”

May 19, 2011
An autocall from Entergy informs me that the lights will be lit on Monday, May 22. I text Nicole, who replies “Amazing news! I can hardly believe it.” On the bus home I read Doug Brantley's Editor's Welcome to the April 2011 Where New Orleans: “During the dark months after Hurricane Katrina, the slightest breeze would knock out the electricity along my block, where Troy 'Trombone Shorty' Andrews was temporarily living as well, sending already weary residents into full meltdown mode. One such evening, amid heated complaints spilling from blackened open windows, the sweet notes of 'To Miss New Orleans' rose from Andrews' apartment and echoed down the street. Suddenly jeers turned to tears then cheers: 'Play it, Shorty! Play it!'”

Competent plumbers are coming tomorrow to begin the process, which involves a city permit, of turning the gas on, which will allow us to cook and clean ourselves with hot water, which will in turn allow Nicole and I to once again fuck! (Feeling unclean turns her off.) I don't want to bother David
so try to reinflate the mattress with a bike pump, but the result is total deflation. I walk next door and David lets me in, shouts, “It's beer o’ clock!” The electric pump hums loudly, like a swarm of bees. We have a beer and David tells me how he just finished the story he'd been working on about a man born in a small village in Ireland in 1741 who slowly learns that he's immortal, and thus unable to love. On my way out I ask him how you end a story about immortality so he emails it to me, says “Just a first draft!”

May 27, 2011
My sister Jenny's twenty-seventh birthday was May 9 but I didn't call her till the tenth. Nicole's old boss Rich's ninety year-old mom died on the twelfth but the card's still sitting on the black desk the previous tenants left behind: “To express/ our sincere sympathy/ to you and your family/ and to let you know/ we are thinking of you.” “The best part,” said Nicole, “is how it asserts the sincerity of its sympathy.” Troy, the electrician, just came by—at 6:30 PM on a Friday—and fixed the hot water heater. (It's electric, not gas.) He told me to turn on the hot water in the sink, but it was still cold. Then he put his hand under the stream, said “It's hot!” And it was. I clapped his shoulder, told him that if I knew him better I'd hug him. He laugh-shouted: “No more cold showers!”
TOMORROW’S IN THE BONE

The girl sings a song about a skiff boarded and taken by a drunk sea lioness. When the sailors finally killed her they finished their rum, then lifted lions onto the aft decks in search of more. Captain Glenston knew nothing about anything when the sea lion cops arrived. The end.

The man with the audiorecorder asks her to do it again and she does. The lioness kills the sailors, finishes their rum, and the sea lion cops beat her down. Next time, she tithes 1/3. The man with the audiorecorder leaves it in his Crown Victoria outside the bar in the girl’s county. He wonders about Captain Glenston, how the rum tasted. Was it French?

After tithing the lioness heads home to some crag in the Indian Ocean where she lies, hopefully, in the sun.
The masses ply themselves with love, the cemetery and time pass the ball back and forth like always, except now time throws it through the office window, waking the guard on the couch. People, mainly individual men, dot the grounds, lying or sitting next to their brothers. The guard considers asking them if they saw anything, but instead lies down and listens to the masses discuss the Mets’ dismality on WFAN. It’s difficult, says one caller, to root for a team that spends massively to produce shit, at least the Yankees are good. Time, cemetery, their ball between the file cabinet and wall, and guard all laugh but the guard doesn’t hear his fellows as the men on the grounds don’t hear the guard. Time and the cemetery listen to the same songs, play the same songs on the piano, and dance to the same songs over and over, the wind begins to sun the window and gauzy orange curtains, and the men gather their things, if any, and walk out to the street. The guard looks forward to bacon, eggs, toast, and beer for dinner with his daughters before his wife’s father picks them up for school. Then he’ll lay down on the pullout, change into someone else for a bit.