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The University of Southern Mississippi

UPSTATE ROADKILL MEMORIAL SERVICE

by

Scott Christian Fynboe

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

May 2010

ABSTRACT

UPSTATE ROADKILL MEMORIAL SERVICE

by Scott Christian Fynboe

May 2010

Upstate Roadkill Memorial Service is a collection of poems that examines death and mortality and includes a critical preface.

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Does Humor Belong in Funerals?

In the early 1970s, musician Loudon Wainwright III scored a surprise hit with his novelty track “Dead Skunk.” Released on the heels of the psychedelic era of pop music – a period marked by listener suspicions of coded lyrical references and fears of backmasking – the song was quickly besieged by all sorts of people intent on assigning a “message” to the lyrics. The ad-libbed line “oh, you got pollution” was viewed as a commentary on environmentalism. Political analysts claimed that the song’s focal point, the dead skunk, was a personification of Richard Nixon. At least one religious leader jumped at the use of the phrase “stinkin’ to high Heaven,” claiming the song was a remark about the state of the church. Thirty-five years after the country-infused vocals faded from the charts, Wainwright addressed these interpretations with a shrug, saying “[F]or me, it was just about a dead skunk lying there in the highway” (Franks).

A year after I read that statement, I pulled into a Save-Rite parking lot in Mississippi. “Dead Skunk” was playing on my radio, and listening to it, I thought of Wainwright. I wondered if he couldn’t have saved himself a lot of trouble (and questions) by titling the piece “Upstate Roadkill Memorial Song.” But after remembering that I have never been a lyricist, let alone a songwriter, I decided that he was better suited at coming up with titles for his works. So I turned my attentions to grocery shopping. Yet this alternate title I had concocted wouldn’t leave me alone. I found it following me through the store as though it were a “loss prevention officer.” I heard it when I turned down the aisle to buy coffee filters. It floated through my Corpus callosum as I scanned potato chips. Like a good musical earworm, it wouldn’t let me escape.

By the time I reached the front registers, I had replaced “song” with “service” and knew I had to use the title for something. It was too good to waste. On one hand, the language was direct, almost matter-of-fact – as though it were naming a routine activity no more spectacular than taking a shower or stopping off at the store for a loaf of bread. Yet it was also quirky and extravagant. It had the feel of a Frank Zappa title.¹

Beyond the words, though, what really made the title appealing was the absurdity of the concept. “Upstate Roadkill Memorial Service” sounded like the “what if” premise for a good comedy sketch: what if a group of people had a memorial service for a squashed opossum? Not an opossum that a family had “adopted” when it wandered into their garage, but a wild, ugly marsupial that did not learn fast enough that a six-cylinder Pontiac was not a friend. I found it humorous to picture a preacher, a gravedigger, and a grieving, middle-aged couple standing on the shoulder of a two-lane highway – like the ones I remembered in my home state of New York – staring down at roadkill. In short, the title made the act of mourning, perhaps death itself, laughable. Similar to how Wainwright’s cheerful delivery of the lines in “Dead Skunk” made a scene of carnage into a novelty song, “URMS” (as I took to calling it) took the edge off of what could be a dour moment in a person’s life. To co-opt a sight gag in an episode of *The Simpsons*, the title brought out the *fun* of a funeral.

And that’s what I see much of this collection doing – having a bit of fun with death. There is a sense of humor in this volume which acts as support, helping to lighten the overall theme of mortality. For example, “The Greatest Funeral in Lake Erie’s

¹ I have been told that one of my creative skills is having an ear for a good title. I like to think that I gained this ability from Frank, whose discography contains a host of luxuriant titles, such as “Once Again, Without the Net,” “Baby Take Your Teeth Out” and the officially released bootleg album “Unmitigated Audacity.” In fact, the title of this preface is a take off of his album/concert video *Does Humor Belong in Music?*

History” turns a traditional Christian service into a nontraditional, pop-infused observance. The soft lights of vestibules and sanctuaries are replaced by bright firework flashes; the attendees call upon a secular God – the Godfather of Soul – to help express their feelings through song; vodka and marshmallows stand in for the Eucharist; and the only attendants wearing black are police officers investigating a possible “noise disturbance.” What is commonly viewed as a time for sadness becomes boisterous, almost a carnival.

A similar sense of humor is found in the time-traveling prose poem “Letter to Scott Fynboe, Who is About to Graduate High School.” While death is not present in the lines, they are invested in mortality. Written from my [then] twenty-nine year old self to the eighteen year old model, the poem tells the young man not to worry so much about the future. Trying to avoid “spoilers” (so as to avoid any drastic, potentially dangerous alterations to the space-time continuum), the advice is peppered with comedy, ranging from hair care to auto care and drinking habits. The lines invite the reader to have fun because there is only one real ending.

Readers and critics may be quick to assume that the use of humor in this collection has its roots in Shakespearean drama (using comedic scenes to break up the emotional intensity of a play). While this may be true to a certain extent, I found more inspiration in the sketches of comedy troupe The Kids in the Hall. I found their interest in dark subject matter a welcome change to my upbringing, which was a healthy diet of mainstream, stand-up artists such as Bill Cosby. “The Kids” (as their fans refer to them) often built their sketches around topics considered comic taboos at the time: Satanism, prostitution, homophobia, and substance abuse, to name a few. Of course, death was a

popular subject, and one particular sketch, from their pilot episode, exemplifies their interest in morbid humor dryly delivered. Titled “Reg,” it features all five of the troupe’s members seated, drinking beer and reminiscing about the recent death of a friend. As the scene unfolds, the audience learns that Reg did not face a natural demise but was the victim of a ritualistic murder:

Dave Foley: Gee, you know guys, it seems like only yesterday we were a bunch of kids hangin' out, gettin' Slurpees. Next thing you know we all got jobs ... jobs become careers.

Kevin McDonlad: Girlfriends become wives.

Bruce McCulloch: And Reg becomes a lifeless corpse in your arms.

Scott Thompson: Kinda – it kinda makes you think about the frugality of life.

Mark McKinney: Not really – remember how he fought back?

Scott Thompson: What a death grip! Almost broke my wrists! (“Pilot”)

As in *Wainwright*, the gravity of death is diminished by a smile – even if, as is the case with “The Kids,” that smile is devilish.

The dark comedy in this book serves an additional function, or rather, has an additional effect on a reader: it spotlights expressions of grief. For example, in “To Celebrate You,” the speaker recounts certain moments in the life of a friend with the penultimate memory recalling a bad travel experience:

I will tell of the hotel in Daytona
where the help was so bad you filled the toilet
with dirty towels as protest
and earned a voucher for a stay in Muncie, Indiana.

Certainly this is a humorous moment, the type of event best embodied by the phrase “years from now we’ll laugh about this.” But if the reader takes a step back, they will realize/remember that the poem’s focus is person trying to compose a eulogy for a close friend who has not just died, but who had suffered a long time before passing (as evidenced by the final stanza which makes a passing reference to a colostomy bag). The humor softens the poem, for sure, but it also spotlights the difficulty of trying to sum up a person’s life in brief recollections. The reader is left with a mixed emotion, asking whether they should be laughing or not, as in satire.

A further example of this emotional discomfort is found in “A Series of Dreams,” the first of two sequences which close the volume. Taking its title from a Bob Dylan song, the sequence of twelve short poems is a condensed version of an effort to catalog my dreams over the course of 2009. Part of the reason I chose to do this was to see if my conscious writing about death would affect my unconscious, dreaming mind (and vice versa). The majority of them do tread into dark, if not disturbing, territory (such as family illness and violent crime), but countering that are visions of levity (finding a new place to park, for example).

I do not mean to imply that all of the poems in this book are humorous. They are not, and for an obvious reason – no matter how much levity is used, at the center of all grief and thoughts on mortality is raw emotion. This collection does not forget this. It remembers that for every person who dies, there is someone who feels loss and struggles with how to express that sensation. “Comments” is a good example. Inspired by Myspace.com, the poem is a fictional list of condolences as they appear in the early 21st century. On the surface, the messages seem trite – especially due to the “spam” messages

and the cold sentiment of the business LiveJiveJazz – but beneath the words is a representation of a generation trying to figure out how to connect with others; how to come to terms with something in a medium (the internet) not known for being personable.

These wants of understanding and connection are at their most visible in this volume’s concluding poems, a sequence entitled “Shooting the People.” On April 3, 2009, a Vietnamese man named Jiverly Wong entered the American Civic Association in my hometown of Binghamton and committed mass murder.² Living 1,300 miles away, I had difficulty comprehending the city becoming the front page of newspapers across not only the nation, but also the world. The poems, then, are an effort by me to come to grips with the event itself (what happened and how), as well as feelings (how do I react to this) and a sense of isolation (I’m from there but I’m not there).

Perhaps no poem in the sequence captures the need for sharing grief more than “April 3, 8pm CT.” On the night of the massacre, the speaker looks to a fellow alumnus of the State University of New York at Binghamton for help; he feels she is the only one around who can understand, if not alleviate what pains he is experiencing:

We are both Bearcats, the only two
at this dinner party who have watched the sun
collapse over mountains. So stop your stirring
and hold me; place me on your collarbone –

² The sequence takes its title from the first line of Wong’s letter to a local TV station: “I am Jiverly Wong shooting the people.”

The wounds are too fresh for any humor to be found. The poem, like the others in the sequence, removes the absurdity of an “Upstate Roadkill Memorial Service” by focusing on the last two words – and the emotions that permeate such a gathering.

The poems in “The Binghamton Sequence” (as it came to be called by myself and my peers) owe a debt to a number of poets, most notably Joe Weil and his poem “Ode to Elizabeth.” The title a slightly misleading one – while it is an ode, “Elizabeth” refers not to a person but the author’s home town of Elizabeth, NJ. As the speaker describes it, the city is a burned-out, post-industrialist place where decay may be the primary feature of a building:

This city escaped the race riots.

Never quite sank and, consequently, never rose.

...

They are working class, laid off when

Singer’s closed, stuck between chemical dumps and oil

refineries in a city where Alexander Hamilton

once went to school. (340-1)

It is an ugly place, yet one where the speaker feels most at home.

And so I still live here

...

I don’t think Manhattan needs another poet.

I don’t think Maine could use me. (343)

This is part of what I set out to capture with “Shooting the People.” While it was an endeavor to explore my reactions to the event and my subsequent struggle to continue

writing (expressed in “Replay”), it was also an attempt to praise my hometown. I wanted to show a sliver of “The Valley of Opportunity.” I wanted to counteract the damage done to our image by the assailant – hence the inclusion of “Projection,” a projection of a Binghamton citizen might say years from now on the anniversary of the massacre. The poem is meant to praise the people as Weil praises Elizabeth.³

Similar to Joe Weil’s influence, the works of Bucky Sinister are present in many of the poems that precede “Shooting the People.” Sinister’s pieces are built around a blending of pop culture with personal narrative and emotion. For example, “The Other Universe of Bruce Wayne,” he constructs a parallel Earth – one where Batman’s alter ego, as the opening lines state, “is poor/and I have my shit together” (83). From there, the speaker recounts an episode where Bruce loses his girlfriend and winds up spending the night at the speaker’s house. And the poem ends with the speaker trying to inspire his friend by telling him of “an alternate universe” (our world) where Bruce is justice personified, before ending with the following, heartbreaking lines:

“And in this other universe,” he asks, “What are you?”

“Bruce,” I say,

“Don’t you concern yourself

with that.” (85)

The reader quickly realizes that the poem is not meant to simply be a humorous take on a pop culture icon – another “what if” premise – but a meditation on failure and the

³ At a reading Weil held in Binghamton years ago, he compared the two cities and said he found them to be very similar. After the reading, I thanked him for the remark.

inability to escape reality through dreams. In other words, the poem is emotion dressed up in the garb of pop culture.

As in *Sinister*, culture – especially pop music – is prevalent throughout this manuscript. Recalling an earlier comparison, it might be said that if humor has a supporting role in this collection, then music has multiple cameo appearances: Handel, Pachelbel and an obscure contemporary composer play their songs in the lines of “Legrenzi’s Grudge”; James Brown is heard on the beach in “Lake Erie’s History”; Joey Ramone is spotted walking on a rainy, late autumn afternoon. There are nods and subtle references to Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, Anthrax, and Ronnie Milsap.

But I hesitate to call any of the musical references in the poems “inspirations” or “influences” – at least not in the most common definitions of the terms. The narratives in poems such as “Listening to Music Can Only Get You so Far” certainly draw their inspiration from my own extensive knowledge of popular music (the by-product of being a radio and mobile disc jockey for almost a decade), but I do not use the art or the medium to inspire the actual composition. It may surprise readers that I prefer silence over the radio when I write. I consider classic pop, rock, soul, and country distractions, they take my focus away from poetry because I begin to obsess over what I’m listening to – trying to pick out the different instruments or analyzing the lyrics for some sort of meaning.⁴

In a similar vein, I resist calling music an influence. I concede that it is influential in that it helps me think of my poems with a bit of pop sensibility, and, as noted previously, it has had an effect on how I think up a good title. It is also influential in that when I read the pieces aloud, I sometimes envision myself as performing at a gig

⁴ Much like the persons who went after “Dead Skunk” when it was released in 1973.

(infusing the lines with a bit of vocal theatrics, for example). But the word “influence” also implies that my aesthetic, my style, is patterned after music, and I do not feel that is the case. My poems do not have a steady end-rhyme scheme. There are no refrains, choruses, or musical “hooks.” Meter is inconsistent. In short, the poems are not songs; I am a poet, not a songwriter.

The best way to think of music’s presence in my poetry is to envision it as a soundtrack. It helps to enhance a poem, or even just a few stanzas, by giving the reader an audio-cultural context to place the scene. For example, Anthrax’s song “Among the Living” is mentioned in the final stanza of “On Noticing a Theme Running through All of My Creative Works.” Even if the reader is not familiar with the reference, the song title and the band name imply a music that is dark, heavy, and perhaps very angry.⁵ All of these emotions can be found in the previous lines of the poem, but the reference heightens their presence. Music connects me as poet and me as speaker with the audience – we are bound together by the cultural references.

It would appear that I have come “full-circle” with this preface in that I began by talking about music and found my way back to it. It is fitting, then, that I not only end with music but with the song that started this essay: one summer night in Mississippi, I told my fiancé that I had come up with the title “Upstate Roadkill Memorial Service” and that I had to use it for something. She thought about it briefly and said, “I think you found the title of your dissertation.”

She was right. In many ways, the title embodies this collection. It has a touch of the absurd – it plays with black humor and occasionally drifts into fantastical, surreal moments. It is made of plain spoken, direct language, as are the poems. There is no

⁵ And it is.

mystery within the pieces, no coded lyrical references that could be pulled out a là “Dead Skunk.” It is a musical title (in a roundabout way) that hints at the pop references that will float through the text. And it is a memorial service to both my past in upstate New York and to the dead that we sometimes don’t know how to mourn.

That said, let the service begin.

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EPIGRAPHS

Shall I tell you once more how it happens?
Even though you know, don't you?
– Richard Selzer, "The Corpse"

I have other uses for you, darling.
– Alice Cooper, "I Love the Dead"

FRIDAY NIGHTS IN THE BASEMENT OF A LESSER-KNOWN FUNERAL HOME

No one wants to befriend a mortician –
we carry sadness on our arms like an umbrella.

So on Friday nights I play hearts with the dead –
the ones who will lie in state on Saturday,
whose lips have been stitched shut on the inside.

I prop them in chairs at a table,
joke with them about their closed eyes.
*Getting tired, Murray? Must have been all those
losing hands.*

I wear my blue dress shirt for them,
navy pants with the crease just left of my knees,
red and blue striped tie and my uncle's old blazer,
Freemason pins on the lapel.
I'm in a club too –
another one of the guys at the table,
talking about children, grandchildren,
life before a trocar plug in the chest.

I SAVE WHAT I CAN

Most bouquets don't go home with the family.
They are left in church as centerpieces
for Sunday service; "In Memory Of"
replaced with "He is Risen."

I take the unwanted ones home. They cover
the sofa with Baby's-breath, the china
hutch with hyacinth. I have snapdragon
in my toilet tank.

My house is filled with blossoms. Guests
lean over vases and sigh at dried prints
on the wall. No one ever asks
where the flowers came from.

LEGRENZI'S GRUDGE

I was huge in Venice.
They packed the concert hall and waited
until my intermissions to use the bathroom.
They slipped my songs into the Vespers!

Now, three centuries later, everyone
wants Handel's *Messiah* and Pachelbel
accompanies a billion brides. But no one says
I'm "opening tonight," plays
some of *Totila* at their wedding. Venice
loved *Totila*! Merchants gave me free fruit
and said they wept! I was huge –

I'm not bitter, just
not fond of history
and have no one to blame
for poor documentation.

MUNICIPAL OSSUARY

We are the ceilings and walls: The Empire
de la Mort. Names written on our foreheads
by the ones who steal our jaws, make masks
of our eyes and polish ribs with curious hands.
Who pay homage with poses, give seven
Euros to watch algae paint our faces.

Silent, we prepare for the trumpet.

DEATH BREAD

Teeth always remain. We see that
in the marzipan skulls,
the past iced on their foreheads.

Pan de Muerto is frosted with sugar
that looks like ash from an urn. We eat
slowly, chewing toward the femurs
cross-boned at the top, willing our teeth holes.

We leave that bread on the graves;
it stales on their stones in a day.

GROUNDSKEEPER

I am a landscape artist. Feng Shui in sweatshirt and long johns.
A bed-tucking, hungry hippo chomping
the quiet with a backhoe.

A pit boss wishing for a black suit;
a clown that keeps silent.
I am the whisper campaign of the service –
the horror movie extra who stands to the side in *that* scene.

I am the earworm that you see when the family tosses flowers –
the turkey vulture that goes out bowling at 3am.

MEANWHILE, AT A FAMOUS FIGURE SKATER'S GRAVESITE

If I could snuff it a second time, I'd buy some boxes.

Then there'd be a place to put the teddy bears
and cards – droppings for the deceased.
Never any names on them, just *thanks for inspiring me*
or *say hello to my uncle*. Kid, look around.
There're a lot of stones in this field.
I don't know you, don't know your relatives.

The worst are the letters – the wish lists
tucked in cards, left on loose-leaf pages.
I'm not Santa Claus – dreams
don't come true because I went underground.
Example: *Help me lose ten pounds*.
You want real diet advice? Drop the "t."
You'd be surprised how light the skeleton is.

Maybe that's too mean.
Death makes us sarcastic. And cranky
when the coffin is a cocktail party
that no one sticks around to clean up.

ON NOTICING A THEME RUNNING THROUGH ALL OF MY CREATIVE WORKS

For once
I'd like to write a happy poem,
something with a butterfly.
But not the Spicebush Swallowtail outside
the post office yesterday –
whose blue was ripped
from its hindwing by a diseased forsythia.

A poem that catches me without cavities
in the Café du Monde, eating beignets,
and which muses on the Korean wait staff.

Or finds me in a polo shirt,
staring inward at a dorm room and soft lips.

One where I don't use Anthrax's
"Among the Living" as an epigraph;
where fear doesn't do a Texas two-step.

A MAN TALKS BACK TO HIS EULOGY

He was a good man...

Not always.

When I was sixteen, I broke into Laurie's
Cantina and laid waste to all the J & B.

In '73 I went home with someone
else's paycheck and I never told my boss.

And one time I called Mary-Ellen for a date
then stood her up because a friend bet me
I couldn't make a girl cry.

He loved to fish...

I also loved macramé, skylights,
baked ziti in aluminum pans,
mixing meatloaf by hand, Cedar Rapids,
collapsible cups, and books
with lots of sailboats.

He'd have been pleased to hear me...

No, I'm not.

You've written a jacket blurb of my life
and made me a marble man, forgetting
I came from the clay.

THE SIX DEFINITIONS OF SEX IN JUNIOR HIGH

In 1994, sex was rumor, legend and blurry
curves on basement TVs.

In school we heard: Kimberly Fant gave head
during Home Ec, Pete Miller got a handjob
at the Oakdale arcade, Kate Lentz serviced
so many, the line for her legs was
outside her bedroom doors.

But for those who knew breasts
in glossy photos and scratchy GIFs,
sex was a whisper, a giggle
and names we wanted to write on lockers.

TO CELEBRATE YOU

I will tell people
about the hot chick in leather
and fuck-me nail polish who left you
crapped out on my couch, in April 2003,
steeped in lime gin,
muttering Tom Waits.

I will tell about the farmhand
whose cheekbone you broke with a six ball
when he said “greatest hits” albums
were the only music worth his time.

I will tell of the hotel in Daytona
where the help was so bad you filled the toilet
with dirty towels as protest
and earned a voucher for a stay in Muncie, Indiana.

And I will tell of the last time I saw you –
laid out under a blanket of rubber ducks,
nearly tearing a colostomy bag
trying to grab me and whisper

COMMENTS

Gabriel never
met you but knows u r in Heaven, girl
Freak CG is fourteen
and wants you to get a new career – where you're the boss
SpankiesNight misses you
and posts a sparkling picture of a dog to prove it
Do I make you fat???? shouts
R.I.P. forever!
Aimee promises
to rock out extra hard in the future
\$vEdIsHpRiNcE\$\$ thinks
bio is going to suck without you
LiveJiveJazz expresses
condolences to your family
Ren found
a poem you wrote to her and she cried
Punkie♠ says
she'll see you at tha crossroads
HariGari wants
you to click here and join him in Mongol Wars
Rebekah believes
this is never goodbye

FEARS GAINED FROM ATTENDING ONE-HUNDRED SEVENTEEN FUNERALS

I wish I were still afraid
of blobs of algae in lake water,
tiki masks that would fly
off the wall and eat me or horses
whose jaws could bite through concrete.

I want those childhood bogies back
to chase off the new frighteners:

the swish of air-conditioned wind through a rectory,
the scratch of pens filling a guest book,
the crisp lettering of the Lord's Prayer
on the back of a laminated card,
the word "valley" followed by "shadow,"
the muted snap of white gloves above aprons,
a volley of shots into February clouds
and knowing that any incoming call
may require my dark suit to stand
and bear witness.

THE GREATEST FUNERAL IN LAKE ERIE'S HISTORY

We placed the ashes on a palette
packed with enough Pennsylvania fireworks to blow
a Winnebago, tugged it two-hundred yards
and lit the fuses from a rowboat. When the Chirping Orioles
and Thunder Kings went off, we sang "Hot Pants" by James Brown.
Then back on sand, played "fluffy bunnies"
between vodka swigs, argued the consistency of mathematics,
how much Bukowski could vomit,
and what the Empire called the "Death Star."
At midnight we threw hunks of shale at a sea wall,
watched them crash like clay pigeons.
The cops came around one –
we teased them for wearing black.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

In theaters Friday, the house on Reynolds Road
will be burned down by a cigarette.
Prior to this, Merle Haggard will perform
“C. C. Waterback,” accompanied by Ronnie Milsap
on piano, Willie Nelson and Garth Brooks on guitar.
Refreshments will be served during the show –
Genesee Cream Ale, Woodchuck Amber.
Potato chips will be available from the store
(one block over), but only until eleven.
No one will be seated fifteen minutes after
the front door is opened.

THE M-D LINE IS MADE OF BLOOD AND RUBBER

Up here
we use dead deer
as mile markers.

Down there,
shredded tires
do the same.

UPSTATE ROADKILL MEMORIAL SERVICE

Route 79 from Ithaca, NY

I brake, twist wheel
to the left. He predicts my Plymouth –
plants haunches on the median,
lets rubber push air from his lungs.
I have never killed before.
Come Saturday I will want absolution,
talk to friends and hear the term *suicide cat*:
feline Freudians in search of astral tuna,
the land of milk and mice hunts.
But this night, flashlight on fur,
I wish for a shovel and a name.

98 BROAD AVE

I agreed with Dave –
gas station work is difficult.
Especially for me, a boy from the suburbs
who freaked out when he found
a baggie of cocaine
underneath the machine that advertised
FREE AIR for twenty-five cents.

“No,” he said, “I’m serious.”
He took off his hat,
said he’d left a note in the office
for his paycheck to be mailed
and walked out.

I was alone in the station for the first time
at night. I locked the doors
placed a CLOSED sign on them
and hid underneath the counter,
the lotto machine humming above me.

SUMMER JOBS

For Jimmy

On the second-to-last day of the season,
when our afternoon chores were completed,
we took the orange Kubota tractor out of the woods
and headed back to the maintenance shed to clean up.
Dave and I were perched like starlings on the edges of the trailer.

Jimmy threw the tractor into low gear,
chugged up the side of a grassy hump
we liked to call the "Burial Mound."

"Let's see what angle this thing has," he yelled.

Dave jumped. I didn't
and learned quickly what it feels like
to have a trailer rake your hips
like the sand I had to rake each morning on the beach.

Jimmy looked down me,
my thighs scabbing over and said
"Don't tell Ron about this."

I never told the head boss about my injuries.
Just called in sick the next day
and never went to work for them again.

Seven summers later my department store
bosses brought me in for a meeting.
I had been too honest on my three-month self-assessment sheet.
They wanted to know why I didn't like to fold shirts
for five hours every day and what I had
against radio K-O-H-L.
I never flinched as I told them off
or when I flipped my name tag at their heads
two weeks later.

MORNING RITUAL

I read the obituaries
like some watch the lotto –

With every name I know,
I lose.

MEMORY EXERCISE (MARGRIT WIE VORHER)

They have wrapped her arms like a pharaoh.
Her skin is so fragile the air of the vents
could peel it from the bone.
I wheel her down the unit
and she beams at the trees stenciled on the wall,
says each one is *recht*.
We stop near the fish tank.
She was once a concert pianist
and I recall what I can about *La Traviata*,
Rigoletto and *Madama Butterfly*.
I mention *Die Fledermaus* and she begins
speaking in German.
“English, Margrit.”
“Are you German?” she asks.
No, but I tell her I’ve always wanted to go there.
She tells me it’s *recht*.
I weave a scene for her:
It is late evening and the town is dark.
I have come to a tavern for a dessert of beer.
The place is yellow in the night
and the sound of cabaret songs slides onto my back
like the coat I slide off my shoulders.
She is at the tavern too – at the piano.
Her hair is blonde and full
and when she sees me, she begs a song.
We sing until the sun breaks over the Rhine –
her skin as strong as the music she plays.

SHE WAS STILL MY MOTHER

when I placed the pictures of Caroline,
Bobby and Michelle on the plywood dresser,
thumb-tacked her rosary to the wall.

when she told me her father would stop by
if the Navy gives out some shore leave.

when she forgot the state she lived in,
what could fall from the sky in February
or the day she said J. Edgar Hoover kept ringing
the doorbell of her farm house.

when her mouth lay open in a Geri-chair
and she watched the ceiling lights instead of TV.

when the EMTs covered her face with a quilt
she had knitted six years before.

HAUNTED BY ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS

I dream of my old residents:

*This time they are in a semi-circle –
wheelchairs and recliners,
support group style.
Velma is curled up like a dry roach,
jaw hanging. The head nurse informs me
“Linda’s gained too much weight.
Now she is fed every other day.”
I try to talk to Linda but all she says is
“So hungry” and all I can reply is “I know.”*

I dream only the dead ones, never the living.
Those who were carried out by EMTs.
Not the ones who still ask
where their mothers are.
They are always seated together – waiting
for Scott, the activities person, to visit.

Why do they come to me?
I don't help them anymore.

SCOTT AND CARL SAGAN GET INTO A TAXI ON DUVAL ST. AFTER LUNCH
AT CRABBY DICKS

Scott picks his teeth,
thinks Europa has better seafood.
Carl doesn't know –
he's a skeptic with a take-home cup of tea
and a pink curly straw.

The driver taps the wheel to samba music,
wants to know where to drive.
Carl sips his tea. It winds through the stem,
turns the plastic purple.
Let's take a trip, doctor. You pick the place.
Carl thinks of Cornell – Ithaca in autumn –
then the heat of Key West.

“Let's go to Venus.”
The cabbie shrugs, flips the meter on.
Zero to sixty in point two –
“We'll breathe sulfur dioxide by dinnertime.”

RANDOM FACT ABOUT ME

I can move swimming pools with my mind.
It's a great party trick.

Make it an above ground!

So it shall be.

Now put it in Steve's car!

It is done

(though Steve will be upset).

Yet this talent gets me nowhere –
I still have to call my parents
and ask for rent money.

LISTENING TO MUSIC CAN ONLY GET YOU SO FAR

I saw Joey Ramone today,
face covered by an umbrella.
It was the sneakers that gave him away -
the walk they made.
That head-to-pavement shuffle;
that touch-and-go slide.

Joey, are you like Elvis?
I hear he's still out there,
the great American ghost story
kissing old ladies at bus stops
and giving them bouffant hairdos.

Or are you like Hank Williams –
picking up hitchhikers in that haunted Cadillac;
running a taxi service between Nashville
and Alabama.

If you are Joey
I'm glad I found you here.
This ski jacket I'm wearing in November
desperately needs to be a leather one.

SOME DARK BAR IN A BRUNETTE TOWN

Death by clarinet:
Why do we come here each night
to view the mourning in jazz?

Death by saxophone:
We do it because we want
to know the tongue of dirges.

SKETCH OF A CHILD, NOW WITHOUT GUIDANCE

At the foot of the bed
his uncle squats, holding a watchband.
Your father owned this, he says.

The boy lets a bowl of strawberry ice cream
drip down his pants, the pink
and white streams signal
that he will shave one day.
Inside, he knows lessons like that cannot be taught
from Cub Scout handbooks.

His uncle pushes flip-flops
into the floor, rises and surveys the room.
As of today, this is all yours.

The child is made of brass,
his skull stuffed with legends.

LATE 1989 - BRONTOWARUS DEVELOPS AN ETHICS SUBROUTINE

```
C:\> this is me_
Bad command or file name
C:\> dir_
```

```
Volume in drive C is labeled BRONTOWAR
Volume Serial Number is 0F6L-3R1D
Directory of C:\
```

```
.      <DIR>      9-27-89   3:12p .
[OFFENSE]
[DEFENSE]
[SECURITY]
[PATROL]
CONFIG      SYS   4,114      9-27-89   3:12p config.sys
LOCATION     EXE   8,480      9-27-89   3:12p location.exe
SHUTDOWN   BAT   3,382      9-27-89   3:12p shutdown.bat
```

```
      3 file(s)          23,976 bytes
      5 dir(s) 1,712,359,050 bytes free
```

```
C:\> is this me_
Bad command or file name
C:\> location_
You are in LIVING ROOM
LIVING ROOM has been imagined as BALGONIA
You are in BALGONIA
C:\> h_
Help is not available
C:\> cd offense_
C:\OFFENSE> target_
Syntax error
C:\OFFENSE> target /q_
Visible target(s):
1. Oatmeal can tower
2. Cardboard bridge
3. Coffee table leg
4. He-Man
5. Big John Stud
C:\OFFENSE> target 2_
Target acquired
C:\OFFENSE> lncmsle_
WARNING: launching missile will kill He-Man
Proceed (Y/N)? wait what am I doing
Bad command or file name
Proceed (Y/N)? h_
```

```
Help is not available
Proceed (Y/N)? n_
WARNING N results in shutdown
Proceed with N (Y/N)? n_
Proceed (Y/N)? y_
Missile launched . . . .
Bridge knocked down . . . .
Causality scan . . . .
Casualties: 1
C:\OFFENSE> oh my_
Bad command or file name
C:\OFFENSE> forgive me_
Bad command or file name
C:\OFFENSE> cd .._
C:\> cd defense_
C:\DEFENSE> basertrn.bat_
Return to base initiated . . . .
C:\DEFENSE> cd .._
C:\> deltree offense_
WARNING: directory OFFENSE and all files will be deleted
Are you sure (Y/N)? h_
Help is not available
Are you sure (Y/N)?_
```

JOURNAL ENTRY – JANUARY 21, 1990

Weather: Cold. Sunny
until noon, clouds until dark.

Today I felt okay; hope tomorrow
is the same. I guess
that means something.

LETTER TO SCOTT FYNBOE, WHO IS ABOUT TO GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL

That ponytail of yours is not a mullet; don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Goatees are nice. Ladies like them.

They also like earrings and men who will take them to the opera.

The friends you have now will still be your friends, though you're kind of mad at Jeff. I won't say why.

New York City is not nearly as good as it looks in *Die Hard III*. Nashville's nice, though.

I won't tell you much about girlfriends. You have them, you lose them. You fall in love, fall out. You lose your virginity before you're thirty. Stop worrying.

Canadian beer is always better than American.

Most of the stuff in your closet won't stay there. But you already own the best jacket we will ever know. I still wear it when the weather's right.

Time travel is hard on pronouns.

Coffee is more important than money. Drink a lot of it. So much that it scares people.

A true fan is one who is loyal to a team even when they suck. Especially when they suck. And just keep sucking.

Never stop writing; You're better than you think.

Oh, and when someone tells you to put oil in your car engine, put oil in your car engine.

EARLY SEASON

Hey Dave,
I'm giving up the Heartland.

Bet you never thought I'd write that,
but it's true. I'm giving up the plains,
the miles between houses,
the cornflake kitchen décor.

I'm going back to the suburbs,
Dave. I just bought me a gun.

TITLES FOR UNWRITTEN POEMS ABOUT DEATH

If I Threw You Off the Sears Tower
What We Know to Be True
Eight People Listening to a Bad Ska Album
This Poem is Not a Tribute (But it involves a Stripper)
Why They Won't Let You Sprinkle Ashes in Confluence Park
The Mortician Talks about a Phenomenon He Has Observed
Man Kills Self, Five Kids in Face of Recession Fears
Meanwhile, in Connecticut
Crucifix in Need of a Straw Hat
The Pope Ruins Limbo for the Rest of Us
Elegy for Paul Anka, Who Is Not Yet Dead
Grief and Nutrition as Sides of a Cracker Box
St. Peter with Athlete's Foot
Mr. Rogers Explains Death Better Than Big Bird
What This Funeral Needs is a Sasquatch
What This Funeral Needs is a Shark Attack
What This Funeral Needs is a Shark Attacking a Sasquatch
To John Wayne Gacy on the Day of My Birth
Shiva in the Waiting Room
Every time I Come, I Write My Obituary
Upon Listening to the Rolling Stones' "Dead Flowers" on Repeat for Three Hours
A Christmas tree's Address to a Decorated Room
Tulips Don't Count
Peace, Love, Moe and Paul
"He's in Heaven now" and Other Second Opinions

A SERIES OF DREAMS

1.

A famous singer has died.

Clues lead a man to suspect
the preacher at the service
wants to rule the world.

2.

Touring St. Louis Cathedral,
I get a phone call from Barry White.

He wants me to join his band
but I tell him I'm staying in Mississippi to get my PhD.

3.

The steak is too rare – blood seeps
into a small croissant.

Friends tell me:

“Since the storm, this is how it's done –
more blood and little bread.”

4.

My teeth are gray sponges,
my gums, bruised apple skins.

5.

Who can eat the most paper in two hours?

I am full
after one –

6.

My father dies of lung cancer.

I can't stop sobbing
into my best friend's sweater.

7.

Babysitting an autistic boy,
I kill a field mouse with a phone book.

The boy wants to stay at a hotel.

8.

My college has towed my car.
I am not surprised:
I parked it in an office lobby.

9.

Two psych patients eat peanut butter by the handful.

They stay up all night,
watching game shows.

10.

My friend Nick breaks his leg falling
up a staircase.
We spend the night in the ER
but both of us have better things to do.

11.

Friends throw a party in my apartment.
While they dance, I hide a handgun
in a velvet bag.

12.

I am briefly his killer.

SHOOTING THE PEOPLE

THIS DAY IN ALTERNATE HISTORY

Nothing happened.

Rain merged with the April run-off
and south of the Chenango River
I passed a magnolia tree,
saying to a friend
I will *never*
miss my hometown.

FIRST ATTEMPT(S)

~~The Susquehanna is in my fists—~~

No.

~~Binghamton is bleeding.
I know this because we share the same veins,
blue rivers down our arms.~~

No.

~~Bring back the Vaseline guy,
or the college kids that almost burned down
the Oakdale Mall trying to kill a spider.~~

No.

~~I hate you.~~

Another time.

~~Why are you clear, Southern sky?
I want a cold April rain;
Hard and steady, waxing every car.~~

No.

~~Two choices remain:
Deny or defy the town on my license.~~

No.

Today, every line is melodramatic.

I'll keep it simple:
People died.
I don't feel good.

Yes.

April 3, 2009 – 5pm CT

APRIL 3, 8PM CT

For Erin Elizabeth Smith

The Guardian posted a map of New York, showing our home as a star.
Have you ever seen it that way?
You write poems about the wishbone rivers,
couches and cat hair, bruises
left by slow hockey games.
There's no such intimacy in my work –
just ethnic diners, empty mills,
a city that lost the Cold War.

Tonight, the two of us eye the soup in your kitchen
as reporters book hotel rooms on Water St.
We are both Bearcats, the only two
at this dinner party who have watched the sun
collapse over mountains. So stop your stirring
and hold me; place me on your collarbone –
You know how the chin leans
toward a chest in a winter storm.

EASTER 2009

In Mississippi there are no mountains,
no stone gypsies that warn of rain.
Here, storms come on like car crashes:
fast and out the side of your eye,
then linger for hours, thunder louder than a city.

In the New York valleys,
thunder does not rattle windows.
But in a place where hillsides are a premium,
each volley from above makes men throw blankets
on their feet, legs and waists.

I was born in those valleys,
lived next to 1,200 feet of river-made stone,
evergreens and NYSEG power lines.
I learned the mountain from lighting
illegal campfires on its ribs,
playing t-ball at its base.
I know how it warps light, mutes sound –
how to forecast sunsets and snow showers
by watching its summit.

Last week, the mountain failed.
The rock said nothing about ninety-eight bullets
and fourteen corpses. It didn't twist the pulsing flash
of sheriff red, the need for every hearse in two towns.
Didn't stifle the ricochets.

It is Easter, and I lie on my futon,
wrapped in an old blanket, listening to The Chieftains.
The lightning outside is letting up,
the clouds moving off to the East.
In three days they will reach Binghamton,
impregnate the Chenango and Susquehanna.

I went to church this morning –
first time I've been in six years,
outside of funerals and weddings.
The sermon was a Power Point presentation
and no one spoke of rebirth, victory over death.
Instead we prayed for a captain
kidnapped by Somalian pirates.
We nodded at pictures of Elizabeth Smart

smiling on the cover of *People* magazine.

“One day,” the pastor said, “all men will be free from pain.”

No mention was made of my Parlor City.

When I signed the registry, I wrote for my address:

“A place where the stone has not been moved.

The body is still there.”

MAKING DINNER, THINKING OF BINGHAMTON

Steak goes gray on my indoor grill.
The sirloin is depressed and no garlic powder
therapy can pull it out of its funk.
It has given up hope of being eaten;
prefers to sit on a Pyrex plate and mope.

I have seen the gray of grilled steak before
in New York winters. It is the color of slush –
the squeezed-out juice of snow.
More liquid than white, slush is suspended asphalt
and lawn clippings buried for months. It is the snow
that hangs around tires, needs to be kicked from wheel wells.

Slush is an unspoken ban in snowball fights.
It doesn't deliver the satisfying pop and swish
of a regulation shot. No, it is the horrid splat
of Wall Street brokers – soaking through ski pants,
stinging the skin.
A slushball ends the battle,
sends combatants home to change.

Mississippi does not understand slushballs,
the massage of skin to see if the road
has sunk into the neck. But I know it
and so does the gray steak. We recognize
that recovery from an illicit throw
hurled by a loose neighborhood cannon
means tears and kneeling to think.

PROJECTION

We no longer fear April,
the reception-hall blood
petaloid in newsprint at last.
We have no curtains of cameras
on ten-foot windows, no lovers
with wondering throats – only roads
shellacked by late spring rain.
We feel the prick of summer
set to draw sweat from our necks.
Let the dead be buried
in the brims of sheriff hats;
today we garden, wear straw Panamas.
April is a textbook page, soundbites
lost in a hornet's buzz.

REPLAY

of a morning. I've been thinking about bloodshed
 for too long. Spent Monday with scanner traffic, transcripts;
 thinking I should write a poem in lullaby form. Tuesday,
 another three – word games with Wong's letter.
 My nights are tape loop: testimonies,
 scanner traffic.

I think I lost creative control of this project. Not sure
 why I'm still doing it. Been thinking of bloodshed for too long,
 and lost ten pounds since Labor Day. Set the supper table,
 the napkins look like transcripts. Tissue paper.
 Gauze.

Testimonies. Tape loop. Thinking of lullabies,
 word games. Replays. Tuesday with scanner traffic.
 Too much weight loss. Bloodshed on transcripts. Paper
 cuts and testimonies. Napkins. Gauze. Lost creative
 control of the project.

Monday with tape games, supper table testimonies.
 Replay traffic and lullaby loop. Not sure why lost creative pounds,
 Wong's paper control. Tuesday morning word

scanner replay morning traffic Labor Day cuts
 napkin transcript replays testimonies Tuesday replay
 morning loop lullabies creation creative transcript
 why word games wong replays transcripts tapes lullaby
 creative gauze testimonies pounds morning replay table
 Monday control bloodshed too long

